



# team bivy

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## Bolivia climbing, July 2006

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### *Trip report by Sid Wiesner*

Inspired by Bill Brose's stories, a group of us decided to spend some time in Peru and Bolivia to climb a few mountains. Originally, our goal was to climb 3 mountains in 17 days in the Cordillera Blanca with a group of six. But life catches up sometimes, and the group size dwindled until only Brian Wolovich and I were left. He is a teacher, and I have no shame asking for extended vacations from work, so we figured why not go for 6 weeks instead. Before we could have second thoughts, we bought the tickets and were off!

We flew into Lima, Peru, and I just have to say that Lima is a place you enjoy leaving most. With pollution coating your lungs and car horns that never stop honking, you are not sad to leave. We quickly headed south for some altitude, and found ourselves in the beautiful city of Arequipa. Here, we found some great vegetarian dining ([Govindas! \[1\]](#)) and had our fill. Then on to the Colca Canyon, a remote gorge that is reputed to be the world's deepest (yes, deep, but I suspect that the Peruvians are also good marketers), and also for the huge condors flying through the skies.

### Colca Canyon



[1]

We arrived late to [Cabanaconde \[2\]](#) (10,000 ft elevation) on the lip of the canyon. As we vainly searched for the trailhead, I stepped in the village sewer system. My only pair of shoes, and man did I smell! Resigned to whatever fate brought us, we settled into the town for the evening, and soon found ourselves in the midst of a lot of drunks and large festival, watching bands and dancers and bullfights. The effects of altitude at 10,000 ft were obvious to us already, so we only had two beers with the locals, and then tried to get some sleep. That was a useless gesture, and I spent most of the night tossing and turning, trying to block out the sounds of singing, trumpets blaring, and the occasional

gunshots. They finally stopped at 3 AM, only to resume the festivities three hours later. Arg!

The next day, we descended and hiked through the desert canyon. It was great to be camping again, and we were self-sufficient with our heavy packs and camping gear. Inside the canyon, there is a desert oasis and hot springs, and for a small fee, you can camp and really enjoy life. After a long day in the desert sun, it was extremely refreshing to dive into a icy pool of clear water. We did this for two days, and on the third, we woke very early (alpine hike start - nothing better) and climbed out of the canyon tired, but feeling great and ready for whatever was next.



[2]

So we headed for the Bolivian border, and Lake Titicaca. This border crossing was more interesting than most, but we got through and entered into the time warp that is Bolivia. Life is tranquila, hermano, and moves at its own rhythm.

## **Bolivia**

In La Paz (12,000 ft elevation), we immediately got sick with stomach problems. This lasted a week and it was a fun time for all. The week was characterized best by periods of idleness, where we read many books and checked our email far too often, and then frantic bursts of energy as we shoved and pushed and ran to get the bathroom. Ahh, the joys of Bolivia.

After a short while, I was feeling better, and although Brian was still feeling dodgy, we decided it was now or never to get into the mountains in Bolivia. So we picked up some good maps (Calle Sagarnaga has great stuff -- just walk around a bit), hired a driver, and set off for the Condiriri group. Our driver was a retired captain of the La Paz police force, so he knew nearly everyone we passed, whether it was tollbooth attendants, traffic cops, or tire salesmans. Those he didn't know, he called brother or sister without fail. His love for life, and this being his first time (and ours) into these mountains, made this a great beginning to this adventure. Undeterred by flat tires, wrong turns, very dusty and bumpy roads, and backtracking, we finally reached the end of the road and the start of our hike. He helped find two mules for our gear, and then said he'd be back in 5 days to get us.

The Condiriri valley (15,500 ft) where we camped was incredible! We found a great camping spot with rock walls, and even some rock tables for our kitchen, and we settled back into camp life. After just a day and a half, we were both feeling much better. I think this was in large part due to us cooking food and washing our hands. Bolivian restaurants might be a little dirtier than we thought, but nonetheless, we were feeling much better.



[2]

Another night of rest and we decided it was time for a climb.

## **Pyramide Blanca**

We woke at 1 AM for our alpine start. Breakfast was a hot one to fuel us, and we hit the trail at 2 AM. It was pitch black out, and the stars were brighter than any I remember seeing in so long. Perhaps an effect of being at higher altitude, or perhaps just luck, but there were countless shooting stars while we made the hour hike from base camp through the valley to the base of the glacier.

When we reached the glacier, we put on our crampons, helmets, and harnesses, and started up the icy skeleton of the glacier unroped. The footing was good, and we soon fell into a rhythm -- crunch, crunch, crunch of our feet on the ice. We continued up and up until the ice crevasses started getting bigger, and the glacier flattened out. Time to rope up and have a snack. Warmed up from the first section, we continued up at a good pace, and both of us seemed to feel very good despite the altitude. It slowly got lighter, and we could see the headlamps from a few other groups as they made their way up the ice slopes behind us.

This was my first time seeing larger crevasses (they may have been there on Rainier, but I could not see them!), and it was quite scary. I remember moving very gingerly when we got close to one, and then I'd try to get past it as soon as I could. I soon realized that the ones I was scared about early on were the **small ones** when we arrived at one that could easily hold the entire 3-story apartment building that I live in! Dawn was soon here, and we'd been on the move for five and a half hours now. We started looking for a good place to traverse over to the base of the large rock face that is Pyramide Blanca.

We tried one route, and soon reached a 10 foot gap and a very deep crevasse. So backtrack, and try again, this time Brian in the lead. He tried a higher route, and we hit the same problem. 300 feet in, and a dead end. As the area became brighter, it was unbelievable to see the crazy scenery and crevasses that surrounded us. The pictures really do no justice to how I felt -- just awed at how immense it all was. Half of me wanted to go down, and half wanted to push on to see if I could find a way through the maze.

Time was ticking, and we had already spent an hour and a half trying to find a way through the crevasses. We spotted one more possible line lower than us. This meant losing some altitude, and since it was hard work to get where we were, we hesitated about the decision for a couple minutes. Then finally, we decided that this was the last shot opportunity. If it went, it went. If not, we were going back to camp. So down it was, and then as we made the traverse, we realized that the route we chose was right onto a humongous collapsed snow bridge. This meant descending down with the walls of the glacier towering above us before we climbed out and onto the other side. It was not that steep, but it was scary not knowing how sure the footing was, or if it would collapse further.

I led very slowly, probing each step, really worried that this was a very stupid idea. Brian kept the rope very tight, and we were watching very closely. The footing seemed good though. No hollow spots, and the ground seemed firm. We crept through the icy walls out to the other side, and breathed a huge sigh of relief. The rest of the route opened up before us, and we pushed hard to make up for lost time. The last 500 vertical feet was the hardest, steep, unrelenting, and my calves felt the burn.



[2]

But finally we were there. We plopped down on the scree rock, whooped it up, and refueled. The summit was a little higher than us, but there was a lot of scree between us and it, and we were happy enough where we were. The sun was coming up over the ridge, and we had a peek at some of the other beautiful mountains in the area. And Brian pointed out one that we had heard other people talking about but not seen a picture of yet -- Pequeno Alpamayo. Incredible!

We felt great, and just knew that we wanted to make an attempt on another mountain if we had the time, and Pequeno Alpamayo sure looked a good one. After half an hour, we decided to head down before the sun had too much time to heat up the glacier. We found an easier way back through the crevasse maze, and made great time cruising down the snow part of the glacier. We unroped again when we reached the lower ice section of the glacier, and burned through that area. The footing was a little less secure with a couple hours of sun, but no problems and it felt great to finally reach dirt and rock and take off my crampons. Camp to camp was 12 hours, but we could have been 2 hours less if we had found a better route from the getgo.

That day, we rested in the sun, and ate a ton of food. We decided to take a rest day the next day, and knew that we had only one more chance for a climb. We decided to wake up early again, and try to climb and be back in camp by 1 PM so we could pack and be out in town to catch our ride into La Paz at 3 PM.

### **Pequeno Alpamayo**

We woke at midnight, choked down breakfast, packed, and hit the trail by 12:45. I had some excess energy, and kept the pace a little fast all the way to the glacier, getting there at 1:30. Sweating a little, we pulled off layers, threw on crampons and axes, and started up the icy first section of the glacier. The approach was nearly the same as that to Pyramide Blanca, except this time we continued straight up to the ridge instead of traversing. We continued our good pace, but when we stopped to rope up when the glacier turned from ice to snow, a guide and his client passed us. We followed their headlamps for a while, content with the pace and really enjoying being there again.

Slowly, everything started to light up, and we let the guide move a little faster so we could find our own way. We crossed one large snowbridge, and then soon arrived at the ridge. Brian led up to the right up a very scary snow face that cracked and groaned under our weight. We soon made it up the steep part to the summit of this smaller peak, and Brian continued along the snow ridge until it turned

to rock. Here was some tricky downclimbing, and we moved carefully since we did not have any rock pro. We made sure to take advantage of as much natural pro that we could find, horns, huge boulders, and all that fun. The holds were good, so it was not too much trouble, but the potential fall was quite scary and we were both careful not to slip.



[2]

At the bottom, Brian continued across the ridge and we had a fantastic view of the mountain. The normal route follows the left side of the ridge all the way to the summit.



[2]

Brian led into a snow bowl, and there was a steep section of snow and ice above us. While he pounded in a snow picket, I shook out my arms, grabbed my glacier axe, and then I got to lead a great pitch of snow and ice (70 degrees?) at over 17,000 ft. Ooouch -- feeling the burn there. At times, my calves really did feel on fire, and I was sweating like mad. But the feet were pretty good, as long as my calves did not burn out. And after a swing or two, the glacier axe would settle in nicely and I would move higher. The exposure was fantastic, and the ridge to my right dropped off a few thousand feet. A fall here would probably be okay though since I would fall to the left into a snow bowl and lose a lot of momentum, allowing Brian to catch me on the snow stake.



[2]

But like hell I was thinking about falling. Up and up, and finally I reached a piece of fixed pro (my first piece!) about 150 ft above the anchor, clipped it, breathed a sign of relief, and continued a little farther up until things leveled out. Twenty feet later, I placed an ice screw, clipped it, and called off belay. I set up an anchor, and let my heart settle while belaying Brian to the top. When he reached me, my legs were feeling very stiff, so he moved past me to solid footing, and then brought me up on

belay while they loosened back up.

We unroped, dropped our packs, and continued up the 40 degree slopes to the summit and wow did it feel great! What a climb -- the best I have ever done. It combined glacier travel, crevasses, scary snow, rock climbing, and a pitch of ice and snow at high altitude. I really felt that this climb more than any had pulled everything together for us and it felt absolutely wonderful. But as they say, this was only halfway because we still had to get down. And now a few groups were below us on their way up, and it would be nice to get out of there before it got too crowded.



[2]

So we downclimbed, and traversed, and then climbed back up the rocks. And then down the sketchy snow face again and descending to the ridgeline at the top of the glacier. And once we crossed over the snow bridge of the big crevasse, we started yelling and whistling because we knew that all the hard parts were behind us. And again, I felt absolutely wonderful and knew that this is the very reason I had made this trip.

And then we headed into Peru... [2]. if you are interested, there are a lot more pictures of Bolivia in the gallery. [2]

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**Links:**

[1] [http://www.happycow.net/south\\_america/peru/arequipa/](http://www.happycow.net/south_america/peru/arequipa/)

[2] [http://www.world66.com/southamerica/peru/colca\\_canyon/cabanaconde](http://www.world66.com/southamerica/peru/colca_canyon/cabanaconde)