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Cordillera Blanca, Peru -- bad weather bug

By sid

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Trip report by Sid Wiesner

After a great time climbing in the Condiriri Valley in Bolivia [0], we did the normal touristy things, visiting Machu Picchu (unbelievable!) and spending time in Cuzco. Then we spent some time in the jungle before heading north to Huaraz to get back into the mountains.



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Our sights were aimed at 2 peaks -- Yanapaccha for acclimation and Chopicalqui as a high altitude peak that would be a great capper for the trip. We arrived at Huaraz after a 7 hour overnight bus, and quickly found a great breakfast spot called Cafe Andino, where the owner Chris gave us some beta on conditions. Things looked okay at the moment, but there had been some accidents in the previous weeks, so he told us to be careful.

We relaxed in Huaraz for a few days, and then headed up to Laguna Churup (4,450 m) for a great acclimation hike. We left early in the morning, caught a combi up into a small town, and then hiked for about 4 hours to get to the Lake. The views from there were stunning, and we both felt pretty strong. Also, there is some great rock alongside the trail for fun bouldering.

Back in town, we started shopping and packing. The grocery stores are quite good, and we easily found white gas (bencina blanca) in the hardware stores (ferreterias). We packed and planned on going for 7 days, and were hoping to attempt both peaks during that time frame. That might be a little aggressive, but we were running out of time for our trip.

Our packs were heavy -- I would estimate close to 70 lbs. We took public transportation to just past the Llanganuco lakes to Cebollapampa. This spot is also the starting point for trips to Pisco, so there is a lot of traffic. We camped the night there, then woke early and started hiking up the valley.



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After 2 miles or so of flat hiking, we reached the end of the valley and saw some beautiful waterfalls. Now our ascent began. Whew -- the packs were hurting. Perhaps we should have packed a little lighter. When we were on the trail, the packs were manageable, but as soon as we had to leave the trail (it continued on to Laguna 69), the going got very tough. There were no real visible trails, and we stopped frequently to catch our breath. We may not be as acclimated as we thought. After bushwacking for 1500 ft, we were drenched in sweat and exhausted. The altitude was really hurting, and it had taken us most of the day to get to this point. The weather was changing as well, so we found a flat spot on the top of one of the hills, cleared all the cowshit out of the way, and set up camp.

The next morning, we woke and continued up. We both only had 1 liter of water left, so we conserved as much as we could until we could find or boil more. We continued climbing through the scrub and brush. The slope had lots of rocks and was tricky footing, especially with the heavy packs. Nearing the top of the hills, we traversed right and found a clear stream. We eagerly drank our fill, and then refilled our bottles. A little snow was coming down now, and the mountain was covered in clouds one minute, and then cleared up soon after. We stepped up the pace, crossing large boulder fields. There were cairns now, and the going was much easier. We soon located a big flat rock with small rock walls built up around it, and decided that this was camp.



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Brian's stomach was starting to act up, and he was trying hard to remain hydrated. Soon after, I started feel pretty bad myself - probably altitude related. I laid down and tried to suffer in silence. We agreed that we should really try for the summit the next day, and set our alarms with the hopes that we'd feel better in the morning.

Several times in the night, we woke to the sounds of rockfall. One time we watch the sparks the falling rock made as it got closer and closer to our tent. But it stopped before it reached us, and we went back to sleep. Sometime later in the night, I woke and heard "Discoteque disco!" I woke Brian quickly and we opened the tent flap to find a man with a flashing red headlamp bouncing in place near our tent. He was a local guide, and was waiting on his obviously hurting and unacclimated Italian client. So he danced while he waited. It was 4:20 in the morning.

He asked if we were going up, and we told him we were both still feeling sick, so we'd probably wait

another day. He told us that a storm was coming in, and if we wanted to go up, we should go today. Despite what our guidebook said, he said it was only a four hour ascent. So we decided to sleep a little longer and see if we felt any better.

A few hours later, we woke and still felt like shit. It was snowing lightly, and visibility had really dropped. We decided retreating was the best option, so we had a quick breakfast and repacked camp. And then back down the hills we had struggled just the day before to climb. Going down was easier, but we still did not much in the way of a trail. We made good time, and were back in Cebollapampa around noon. We decided that with the weather coming in and how we were feeling, there was little chance of getting far on Chopicalqui. So with tails between our legs, we headed back to Huaraz.



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It rained and snowed every day for the next 4 days of our trip, so no chance to get back into the mountains. Our last day in Huaraz, things looked like they were improving, but alas, we had planes to catch. But we'll be back!

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