

The Peace

LIFE AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN
BOLIVIA'S CORDILLERA REAL MOUNTAINS

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As I hike, with the monotonous crunching of our crampons penetrating the frozen snow, my mind, thoughts, and breathing transform into a trance-like state. On this enormous mountain with so much open space, all is focused on each step, the next few feet. I look up and see two climbers sliding right by me, short roped to each other, just 1,200 feet from the summit. The sight is surreal, almost like a dream. This is a strange place to be glesading. Then the thought suddenly changes to the reality that I am watching two humans fall to their death.

This is a trip consisting of three friends—Giulia Monego, David Rosenbarger and myself—going to Bolivia, a faraway and exotic ski destination, with no objectives, no support from sponsors or magazines, no movie to make, and no photos to take. Simply, three skiers looking for adventure in mountains unknown to any of us. A destination not prominent to the world of skiing and even less popular when it comes to finding information about the conditions.

The three of us have skied little together—basically a run down the North Face of the Aiguille du Midi and one other fun day in Chamonix. We shared the incredible highs the mountains can give you, the catalyst that strengthens relationships and makes a friend you have known for a short period seem like someone you have known forever. Only now we are embarking on a three-week journey sure to have its bumps and turns along the way, and guaranteed to solidify or halt any friendship.

Our base camp was the city of La Paz, the world's highest metropolitan area at 11,913 feet and situated at the base of several 6,000-meter peaks, which dominate the views of 2.3 million inhabitants. Here we spent days roaming the streets, acclimating, embracing the culture, and taking care of logistics with the local mountain outfitters.

It was easy to blend in and disappear into the chaos of the city, then head into the mountains for days in search of adventure and tranquility. This was our usual routine, with unexpected hiccups along the way, such as the 36-hour bed-ridden battle after eating bad chicken. The three of us only had the energy to go from our beds to the baño. Even making it to the toilet wasn't a guarantee.

Three weeks into our adventure, finally feeling strong and acclimated after several successful ski descents in the Cordillera Real Mountains and spending most of our time at altitudes between 5,000 and 6,000 meters, we set our sights on Illimani. With a summit elevation of 6,400 meters, the incredible beauty of Illimani dominates the view from La Paz, and would set personal records for the highest point and tallest mountain from which any of us have skied.

Then came the drastic turn.

In disbelief, 1,200 feet from the summit, we watch the two climbers fall right by us. With no hesitation and few words, the three of us start descending their path. By some incredible luck, they fell into the backside of a crevasse, which stopped them from sliding 5,000 feet to their death.

One climber escaped relatively unscathed with only a head injury, but is knocked senseless and incapable of dealing with the situation. The other climber screams in agony, the spikes of her crampon only inches from her face. She has two broken legs, a femur and a tib/fib. Fortunately, we saw the accident happen or this lucky girl would have met her fate in that crevasse.

We are able to combine our resources, build a rescue sled, and get her out of the crevassed area, which is an intense and laborious effort. Eventually, two climbing guides show up and we safely lower her several thousand feet down the steep and exposed upper mountain to our high base camp. As the sun is setting, 11 porters from the village below arrive at the camp and carry her down the rest of the mountain. Twenty-three hours later, she finally gets to the hospital.

The next day we are back in the chaos of La Paz and visit the hospital. We are happy to see that our new friend is doing well and the doctor is optimistic she will make a full recovery.

We came to Bolivia looking for adventure—the unknown journey you make into the mountains. We are selfish to the extent that it's our personal ambitions that fuel our drive to climb and ski, to push ourselves to the edge of a high consequence sport. More than a sport, though, skiing has molded and shaped our lives, taken us to incredible places, given us experiences that will be embedded into our minds forever. The friends you make along the way are far from superficial. You depend on each other, share experiences that can and life faster than we know it, or enrich it to a state of ecstasy that most people will never experience.



LA PAZ, BOLIVIA

The world's highest metropolitan city with an elevation of 11,800 to 13,450 feet, La Paz is located in the valley of the Andes and is surrounded by several popular 6,000-meter peaks. Illimani, at 6,438 meters (seen here), is the largest and dominates the view from most locations in La Paz. The other main peaks you can see from the city are Huayana Potosi (6,088 meters) and Illampu (6,368 meters). With their close proximity to a major city, these peaks provide easy access and, in turn, are popular in the mountaineering community.

From the high plains of El Alto, you look down into the crater of La Paz with its highly congested buildings and houses. The city has a monochromatic look to it, as most buildings are built with a similar brick-style construction.

Bolivia is one of the least developed countries in South America. Most of its residents are indigenous people. Many are farmers who make the daily trip from the high plains to the densely populated city to sell their goods.



EXPEDITION AND BASE CAMP

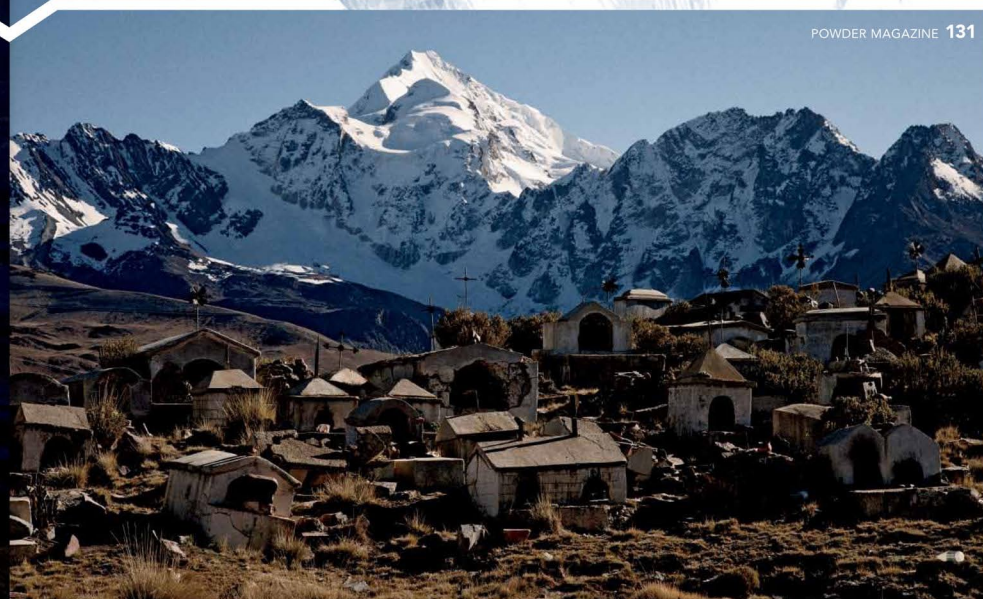
The mountains of Bolivia are incredibly majestic with most of the snow residing on the upper elevations. Most approaches and base camps start in the valleys below where you will have the mandatory long approach by foot. From here, it can take several hours traveling through the valleys and beautiful tundra before reaching the glacier.

It was an all-day adventure to get from La Paz to the base camp of Illimani. The following day was spent hiking to our upper camp on the edge of the snow line. It was a two-day approach to get to snow.

Donkeys are commonplace for carrying heavy loads and if you need help getting further into the mountains, you can hire the

local indigenous porters to carry it on foot.

Something we would use to walk along a sandy beach, this is the typical footwear of Bolivian porters, who walk deep into the mountains across talus and variable terrain, carrying heavy loads with basic sandals on their feet.



HUYANA POTOSI

These were our first turns in Bolivia, where we climbed and skied the headwall lower down and lookers left in the photo above. Huyana Potosi was one of the most obvious ski objectives with a popular climbing route on the east face called the "French Direct." As noted from a climbing guidebook, this 1,000-foot face started at an elevation just shy of 20,000 feet and supposedly had a pitch of 55 degrees. We later learned the monsoon season had passed two months prior to our arrival, so soft winter snow was not likely in the cards for us since it had not snowed in 60 days.

PEQUEÑO ALPAMAYO

Due to the absence of information about skiing in these mountains, we relied on a climbing guidebook from 1999 for most of our beta. In the guidebook, all the photos were shot during the climbing season when the snow turns to ice. So we had to hope when we saw them in person they would be covered in snow. Not to mention the drastic decline the glaciers have had the past 10 years.

This photo was taken on the south face of Pequeño Alpamayo, an 800-foot face with a 55-degree pitch. A popular climbing route with its pyramid shape and easy access from La Paz, the objective didn't make for a good ski with a firm thin ice layer, which was great for going up, but by no means skiable.

HUYANA POTOSI

After realizing all the slopes in Bolivia are steep and firm and having firsthand experiences on south-facing slopes, which received no direct sunlight, we were optimistic that the east face of Huyana Potosi might be skiable. Our intuitions were correct, and the snow was soft enough to make a successful descent down the "French Direct," the highlight of the trip. Here, Dave Rosenbarger enjoys the soft snow.



**EAST FACE OF HUAYANA
POTOSI: FRENCH DIRECT**

Italian Giulia Monego displays her cool composure on the upper face.



EAST FACE OF HUAYANA POTOSI: FRENCH DIRECT

The classic knife-edge ridge at the top of the French Direct where the east and west faces merge as one. Exhausted after hours of climbing and now standing just shy of 20,000 feet,

it was time to switch to ski mode and refocus our thoughts. Rosenbarger focuses on a left-hander amongst Potosi seracs.

ILLIMANI

One of the most beautiful mountains in all of South America, this glaciated massif appears to have three summits. We originally planned to ski the steep triangle face on the left, but after getting to the base of the glacier we realized just getting to the slope would be incredibly difficult. After weighing all our options, we concluded the odds were not in our favor of a successful descent. So we opted for the more probable regular route, which would bring us to the true summit out of the frame on the right. ❄️

