


Into The White

a climbing story from Peru

by Ross Weiter



Foreword. *It took me two years to be able to write about this. Some of my friends have heard bits of the story, but I could never talk about it for too long. Now you will know what happened, it's done, over, a confession of sorts.*

I am sure that you will make your own conclusions about who was at fault and why. If I can make just one closing comment it would be this:

“Know yourself and your climbing partner. Your life depends on that knowledge.”



Vocabulary:

arriero	- donkey driver
avenida	- avenue, road
burro	- donkey
campesinos	- peasants
copa de chocolate	- cup of hot chocolate
Casa de Guías	- guide house
esto	- this
hamburguesa	- hamburger
laguna	- lake

“Buenos Diaz.”

“Buenos Diaz, Señor... hamburguesa ?”

“ Si, las dos, y una copa de chocolate, gracias.”

After a long and exhausting search, I finally managed to find a decent hamburger joint in the middle of Peru. There definitely is something about thin mountain air, and the craving for fat and cholesterol. A direct proportion I'd say. Back home I would never consider having a hamburger for breakfast, here I had two every morning when I was in town and when I was not in town I dreamt about them.

After two weeks in Huaraz, that Kathmandu of central Peru, I was a known face in this little deli. Two burgers and a big cup of hot chocolate, yum !

As I munched contently I took mental stock of the situation. I had been in Peru for five weeks, with only one more to go. Yesterday evening I returned from my first six thousander, *Toclaraju*. I was totally hooked, completely acclimatised, and raring to do another summit, this time without a guide.

I was not quite ready for a solo and hence I figured that finding a capable climbing partner might be a good investment in my well being. Now in Huaraz, being the mountaineering center of the country, there is seldom a shortage of mad foreigners to choose from. The only catch was that I needed a partner NOW. Time was short. In one week I had to be back in Lima's heavily armed international airport.

A notice at the *Casa de Guías* caught my eye. *Monika Thullner, from Austria, looking for a partner to climb Huascaran or other, contact Hostel* Now Huascaran, at 6768 meters, is the highest mountain in Peru. Austria, as everyone knows, happens to own a sizeable chunk of the Alps. So here was an ambitious, capable climber, and possibly a pretty woman to boot. Hold me back !! Pretty good, right ? Wrong.

Here starteth the story.

When I enquired about Monika at the listed address, I was lucky and she was in. A quick conversation was most satisfactory, she had been to the top of Killimanjaro and to Camp II on Everest, was now fully acclimatised and attractive too. She also had a two man tent. I decided to take my lone wolf tent along to be sure, but was sincerely hoping not to use it.

We decided that Copa was a worthwhile target. At 6188 meters height, I was quite confident that I could cope with the altitude and Monika seemed happy about it too. The West Face route was rated medium difficult by the local guides but my guidebook figured that it was technically easy. There seemed to be little to worry about. One 45 degree snow couloir above the base camp to gain a plateau at 5200 meters, then up an easy but crevassed snow face to the summit a thousand meters higher.

We spent the next day organising. I had my own crampons, one ice axe and my leather trekking/climbing boots but Monica had been just trekking so far and so had bugger all. We hired her some Koflachs, crampons, one axe (*piolet*) and two harnesses, some crabs, one titanium ice screw (*tornillo*) and a few other bits. I then visited the guide hall and borrowed a 7mm x 60m rope. We stocked up on fresh bread, chocolate, noodles..... trying to compromise between what the local street vendors could offer, and what we were willing to drag to Camp I on our backs. In the process I discovered that cornflakes could be bought for US\$2.20 in a little shop on *Avenida San Martin*. This was three times cheaper than anywhere else - you see, nobody but tourists eat cereal in Huaraz and prices are set accordingly.

At the end of the day I was tired but elated. Tired from shopping and asking questions about buses, mountains, gear, food, asking in Spanish, always in Spanish, why the hell couldn't these people speak English ? (Because just about nobody in Peru does.) I seemed to have one noun to describe all things, *esto*. But it worked, most of the time. However, I became weary of successfully stringing together a long Spanish sentence. This was inevitably met

by a long barrage of heavily accented Spanish, mostly to my complete bewilderment. If I was really, really unlucky, the barrage would come in pure Quechua, the ancient language of the Incas, which is still by far the preferred tongue of the highland Peruvian *campesinos*. It was somewhat annoying to find that, having spent six months learning Spanish before my arrival, the locals did not speak it very well either.

At 7am we caught the local bus to Macara, and then a truck to Vicos, the start of our trek. In Vicos we spent ten bucks and hired a *burro* with an *arriero*, to carry our bread rolls and assorted accessories up to base camp. This was money well spent as the 1600 meter climb to base camp is pretty steep and takes some 5 hours. A path led from the main square directly up a hill and then through a eucalyptus forest. This large forest was a rare sight in this cleared country, as most trees were felled hundreds of years ago. Higher up there were good views of the valley of *Legia*, which is short and very steep. More like a canyon.

The countryside was parched. This was the end of the three month long dry season and hence the dominant colours were grey and brown. Grey scree rocks were scattered everywhere and piled into moraine walls, like some crumbly memorials to colder ages. Tussocks of tough brown grass were covering the cracked dry ground.

Our *burro* was a cunning creature and often decided that resting was preferable to moving. Only some well aimed poking with a sharp stick into hind legs was convincing enough to make him move on. We did not blame him. I suddenly realised a striking similarity between this animal and the truck that brought us to Vicos. The truck was consuming diesel, labouring up the hill and spewing out noxious black fumes. Our big eared pal was consuming grass, also labouring up a hill, and farting profoundly. Both smelled. The only difference was that the truck did not stop for a shit every ten meters.

The best place to camp was not at *Laguna Legiacocha* (our Base Camp at 4700 m), as our guidebook claimed, but rather at the meadow below the water outlet.

I was not happy. Monika was showing throughout the day that she was neither fit, nor acclimatised and I began to worry about tomorrow's climb when she would actually have to carry a backpack.

The afternoon sky was a perfect blue, as always. I was feeling lucky that at least the weather was not an issue. The Peruvian dry season is like the West Australian summer, it just doesn't rain. Ever. Hence there was no Himalayan storm-bound epic to contemplate, nor were there any avalanches to worry about, as everything that was going to go down already went months ago. A quiet black magic night ensued.

The morning was pleasant and relaxing. We waited until the sun thawed out the tent and ourselves, there was little need to rush as we were merely going to climb 600 meters, half of that up the snow couloir to Camp I. We went through some basics on using ropes, crampons and ice axe. It is only there and then, that I discovered, to my incredulous horror, that Monika never used any of this gear before and did not have a single clue. I dared not ask how the hell she got to Camp II on Everest without crampons.

At 11 am we finally set off. Finding a sane way to reach the snow line was not easy. The steep rocky slopes seemed

to be composed from the type of rubble that definitely required basic Kiwi mountaineering skills. After a long search, the easiest way to gain the couloir turned out to be by going directly up the melt water creek. A bit thrutchy, but safe.

We finally got our gear on and started ascending the soft midday snow. The going was very easy as the snow was not deep. I wanted to fly up, but unfortunately Monika did not. It came home to me that Monika was not sufficiently acclimatised. Considering this and her obvious lack of climbing ability I decided there and then that I was going to drag her up to the plateau above and then do the summit alone. I was getting incredibly mad at myself for being a fool and taking a beginner madwoman up one of the country's highest peaks. But the dice had rolled.

The 300 meters of easy 45 degree snow took us 6 hours !! Monika was now breathing like a racing hound and hardly making any progress. At the top of the couloir, a strong northerly wind hit us in our faces, turning our skin into stone, pushing our bodies toward the murky abyss behind us. The plateau was at 5200 meters and at 7 pm, the last rays of the setting sun were dancing on the West Face of Copa. The soft orange light then got snuffed out and we were alone in the dark.

I left Monika behind and started searching for a sheltered campsite, out of the wind. No luck. In the middle of the plateau was a shallow depression. Figuring that some shelter was better than nothing, I moved towards it. Then I heard a loud crack. I stopped, bent forward and slammed the two foot handle of my ice axe into the snow. When I pulled it out there was a beady watery eye staring back at me. "Oh shit, I'm on ice !!" A hidden lake, covered with two inches of soft ice and a camouflage of snow. I gingerly backtracked out, all the way to Monika. At least she was on firm, although exposed ground. The unexpected bonus of my little adventure was that we now had an inexhaustible supply of melt water.

We pitched our tent in the torchlight, then pegged the upwind guy wires down with our ice axes and snuck inside. The wind was howling outside - I put in ear plugs to block it out.

I awoke startled. Something was sitting on my face. As I pushed away, I realised that the tent had collapsed. I pushed it out, dozed off, then - slap ! - the tent was on my face again. And so it went all night, I would push out with my hands and feet, the poles would bow out and the tent would spring into shape. Then the wind would push from the outside, the poles would bow in and slap - here we go again.

Monika was soundly asleep through all of this, in fact she seemed quite well once we stopped. Activity makes so much difference at this altitude; even when completely exhausted, all you have to do is stop, sit down, and everything's fine.

The day began like yesterday finished, the wind was still gusting and shaking the tent around. I spent about an hour trying to get Chernobyl - my MSR stove, going outside of the tent. I had no luck, the wind was a clear winner. There was no question of me trying to light the stove inside of our unstable tent - I could do without a hot breakfast just like I could do without third degree burns. This taught me a lesson: it would be a good idea to take more cold food which does not require cooking. As it was, we only had a

little bread, eggs, crackers and two tuna conserves. And chocolate, of course.

Luckily, I was able to dig through the ice at the lake I "found" last evening and get water, without it we would have had a problem, since I could not melt any snow in the stove and dehydration was looming.

I set off for the summit at 8 am, leaving Monika in the wind blasted Camp I. As I began rising up the West Face, I would sometimes turn around and see her, a diminishing black speck in front of the tent. I felt strong, confident. This mountain was not an obstacle, no challenge to be conquered. I was with a friend. Pretty in her white veil, the morning wind playing on her snow slopes, she was inviting, beckoning for me to come. I smiled. This was my lucky day.

Reinhold Messner, perhaps the world's greatest mountaineer ever, once said that "*.....mountaineering is the art of putting one foot in front of the other - for a very long time*". I could not agree more. The whole climb up the West Face consisted of a long plod up a steepening snow slope. No fancy technical terrain here, instead I had more sinister forces to worry about. The lower part of the face was heavily crevassed. Unfortunately, I did not foresee this since these crevasses were not visible from below. I started in the morning thinking that I would just bee-line it for the summit. Not so. Instead, I found myself forever zigzagging in between massive gaping fissures. I never did find out how deep they really were, since I never cared to get close enough to the edge to have a good look, but there was no bottom to be seen from where I was. On a couple of occasions I tip-toed across a snow bridge. Arms spread out wider and running as hard as I could, I would race across the void. Luckily, everything held firm.

The wind was blowing so hard here that I was forced to dodge the stronger gusts by ducking to the ground. Around midday the sun came across the summit and, in an instant, the firm crust that I was walking on turned soft, and I started breaking through it. I remembered my attempt at *Nevado Ninaparaco* in Southern Peru four weeks ago, where I got just plain bogged down in soft snow at 5400 meters. Not again ! The crust was breaking under me and the blocky cracking gave warnings of a slab avalanche. To add to my woes, the upper part of the face steepened up.

I dropped down to all fours and crawled up on my shins and forearms. I would break the crust in front of me with my forearms, then slither forward on all fours, leaving a nice, one foot deep trench behind me. I was at six thousand meters now and had to stop every few moves to suck in the thin air. I developed a routine of movement, accompanied by a simple mantra that I repeated in my head. The mantra was pure sounds, it made no sense, but then again - did any of this ?

The last 200 vertical meters took me over two hours. I finally reached the blunt ridge joining the North and South summits. I plodded on. Finally, at 2:30 pm and 6¹/₂ hours after I started, I sat down on the higher South Summit of Copa, at 6188 meters.

It is hard to make sense of what I felt on the summit.

Sense cannot be made, it must be sensed. I, for one, have always felt that there is some spellbinding force that rules over the high mountains. Not an evil force and not a good one either, a force that just is and doesn't care. I was sitting in the snow, totally exhausted, pondering the White before me. Perhaps it is the thin air that sets the brain at ease.

Perhaps there really is a God and summits like this one bring us closer to him. Into the sky, into the White.

I gazed back along the ridge as I munched on my chocolate. I managed to gulp down all my food and most of the water. I also managed to rip my pants with my crampons when I rushed to take the summit photo with a self-timer. This brought me back to reality and soon afterwards I started on down.

The trip back to Camp I was easy and took just an hour and a half. Most of that time was spent sliding down on my butt, crampons sticking out in the air to avoid doing a somersault. An ungraceful but most effective technique. The crevasses which dogged me on the way up were now clearly visible. It also became apparent that, if I went just slightly further north, I could avoid them altogether. I reached the bottom of the Face elated and with a frozen bum.

Monika was sitting in front of our tent, which was lying flat on the ground, poles broken, flapping in the wind. Packing up the wreckage was a cold, windy business. There was no question of spending another night on the plateau since we had nowhere to sleep. The only way was down. One hour before sunset, we started into the snow couloir, a first step on our journey back to Base Camp.

We both tied into the rope and started descending. I would descend first, find a stance for an ice axe belay, then Monika would climb down past me until she found a safe stance for herself. Then I would climb down past her again. The only difference between us was that she was on belay on her downclimb while I was not. Her fall would be a sixty meter slide on smooth ice. My fall, however, would result in both of us going for a short and very exciting toboggan ride to the rocks at the bottom.

The first 80 meters was easy, on snow. Then the couloir steepened and turned into ice. We found that the evening freeze changed conditions on us somewhat. Where, during our ascent, there was soft watery ice, we now found hard smooth ice instead. The nighttime cold made all the difference. We were looking down a 300 meter skating rink inclined at 45 degrees.

We soon came to a short section that could not be descended with the gear we had. I was not game enough to downclimb with only one ice axe. Here our one and only ice screw came to the rescue. I lowered Monika off the screw, down the whole length of the rope. I then abseiled down on the doubled rope. Thankfully this took me below the worst of the difficulties, the rope pulled down and I continued downclimbing. Me thinks: "*a second ice axe would come in handy, or at least one that would dig into this stuff*". I was shattering the ice, not digging into it. My trekking axe, with its 70 cm shaft and a blunt, concave pick, was not exactly suitable for romping around on hard ice !!

It was night time now. No city lights, no moon, only the stars high up in sky. I could see only wherever I tuned my head, the headlamp picking a patch of sparkling ice out of the darkness. The air was completely still. Below, Monika's headlamp was shining as she was waiting for me to come down.

When I got to her, there was nowhere to set up a belay to continue lowering and so we tied back into the rope and I continued 20 meters further down to where there was snow and I could sink in the ice axe again. I told Monika to

start climbing down. She took five unsure steps and then fell. Losing her headlamp in the tumble, Monika whizzed past me into the darkness below. Without a sound, she was gone. I leaned my whole body on the ice axe, expecting a mighty jolt. Instead, there was but the slightest of tugs, then nothing. No weight at all on the end ! As I was pulling the slack rope up, I figured that it must have broken. But how ? There were no sharp edges, I had checked every centimetre of the rope with my fingers before we started from Huaraz. My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets when I pulled up the end and found that it was not frayed. The rope did not break; Monika simply did not tie in properly !!

At this point I was perhaps supposed to freak out. Luckily, at midnight, my mind was simply not up to the effort. I had had a hard day. Staring into the dark pit between my crampons, I was strangely calm. No emotions, no deep thoughts. I was just tired. Monika misled me about her experience, acclimatisation and ability. Now she was dead, paying the ultimate price. Nothing unfair about that. I hanked the rope and continued down. The terrain was easier now as I was getting close to the bottom of the couloir.

I found Monika sitting in the snow below the steep section, where the slope began to even out. She managed to stop before plunging into the rocks just meters below and to the side. When I came closer, I noticed that she was shaking uncontrollably but, to my complete astonishment, she appeared unharmed except for scratches. Her face was all lacerated and bloody. After a 50 meter fall on a 45 degree ice slope, she was not seriously injured.

She had lost her hat, gloves and ice axe, so I gave her mine. Like two wounded warriors from a pointless war, we walked out of the couloir. Her arm over my shoulder, we slowly, ever so slowly, walked on. We found some large flat stones and bivvied overnight. I didn't just fall asleep, I literally shut down for the night.

The morning was unkind. It was unkind to Monika because of the terrible bruising to her face. Imagine the worst-bashed woman you have ever seen in the papers, then double it. Where a pretty face was, but 24 hours earlier, I could see nothing but red and violet swelling. One eye was nearly shut. I tried not to stare but it was hard, very hard. What a price to pay....still, it could have been worse, much, much worse.....

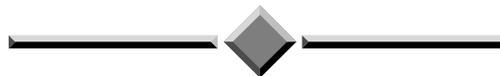
The morning was also unkind to me as I was back up, scampering along the bottom of the couloir, trying to recover her gear. I could do with some rest.

Then our pre-arranged donkey arrived and we walked back down into Vicos. Everybody stared at Monika. Women would turn and whisper to each other. Men would only look very briefly. I felt like I was bringing into town a captured alien from outer space. Except that it was not funny.

I was glad it was over, glad that she survived, glad that she was off my hands.

In Vicos we bought ourselves fresh bread and Coke and continued on to Huaraz. There I explained that the ice screw was still embedded in the side of Copa and paid eleven dollars for it. Pretty cheap.

Life isn't.



Deserts and mountains are a catalyst for our humanity. On them we can discover our human abilities and limitations. Nature...is the best mirror of our souls.

Reinhold Messner, from his book "Free Spirit"

