

Aconcagua Expedition Trip Report

Aconcagua is the highest mountain in the world outside of the Himalayas. It straddles the border between Argentina and Chile and stands 22,834 feet high. It is the second highest of the Seven Summits (after Mount Everest) and is an exhausting but thoroughly rewarding climb. I climbed Aconcagua in January of 2001.

People

Guide: Kyle, Bozeman, Montana

Team Members: Henrik, Denmark; Gordon, Canada; me (Tom), Houston, Texas

Others: Greg and Doug, Colorado Springs, Colorado

Beginnings

The idea of climbing Aconcagua came to me entirely by chance.

During the winter of 1998 while browsing at a local bookshop I stumbled across "The Seven Summits," Rick Ridgeway's account of Dick Bass and Frank Wells's attempt to be the first men to summit the highest peak on each of the seven continents. I was absolutely captivated by the book. Not only is it a great adventure story but the protagonists, Wells and Bass, were actually older than me when they began their quest. As one scant weeks away from his fiftieth birthday, the thought of a pair of old duffers doing something so magnificently extravagant resonated powerfully. I wanted to learn more about climbing.



Seven Summits

I got my first chance that summer while on vacation with the family in Estes Park, Colorado. We were there for a three-week series of horse shows involving Germaine, my eldest daughter, then eighteen, and her two horse-crazy fifteen year-old sisters, Maggie and Amanda. My wife, Cathy, and the girls loved nothing better than to hang about the horses and show grounds for hours on end. For them, the actual competition was the icing on a cake that was delicious with or without icing. I, on the other hand, enjoyed being there for the events but was a fish out of water in the between-times. Hiking seemed a good way to fill the between-times and I was in the right place for it.

Estes Park is about two hours outside of Denver. It is at the doorstep of Rocky Mountain National Park, surely one of the most scenic wilderness areas in the country. It is a hiker's and climber's dream come true. Before going to Estes Park I owned neither hiking shoes nor backpack. I bought both at local outlet stores and jumped right in. I found the hiking exhilarating. It was wonderful to tackle long routes and be on my feet for hours at a time. Being a veteran runner, I was used to taking my exercise in short, hard dollops of thirty-five minutes or so. The concept of doing miles at a brisk I-can-do-this-forever pace was entirely new to me. I absolutely loved it.



Longs Peak...view of the “Diamond”

My fledgling interest in climbing was supercharged by two events. First, Germaine and I took a rock-climbing lesson with a local guide. Second, she and I started thinking about doing Longs Peak, the mountain that hangs over Estes Park and which, at 14,255', is one of the highest peaks in the continental United States. Climbing Longs seemed a natural extension of the hiking I'd been doing. I'd read that the standard route up it required no technical skill, just a good amount of endurance and moderate boulder hopping and scrambling abilities. Armed with a half-page summary of the route from a guidebook, we set out from the trailhead at 4:55 am on July 27, 1998 and started our upward journey. It took us four and a half hours to reach the top.



The Narrows

The guidebook stressed that you had to be absolutely certain of your "mental ability" before tackling Longs Peak. When I first read that I had no idea what it meant. I thought that being fit was all you needed. On the mountain, the meaning became clear. As a rank novice, I had never before experienced "exposure," that gut-grabbing circumstance when you literally place yourself on the edge and know with absolute certainty that *slipping here would be a bad thing*. While the trip up Longs is about as straightforward as it gets for climbers with any amount of experience, I found the "Narrows" part of the route positively daunting. The Narrows is sort of a catwalk with a rock wall on one side and a big drop and a lot of air on the other. As we approached it, my mind shouted "Yikes!" and I mentally cataloged the six good reasons why we should

call it a day. Before I could impart this wisdom to Germaine, she forged ahead without a second glance. She was soon safely on the other side looking quizzically back at me. "What's the hold up, Dad?" I dutifully threaded my way across in her wake.

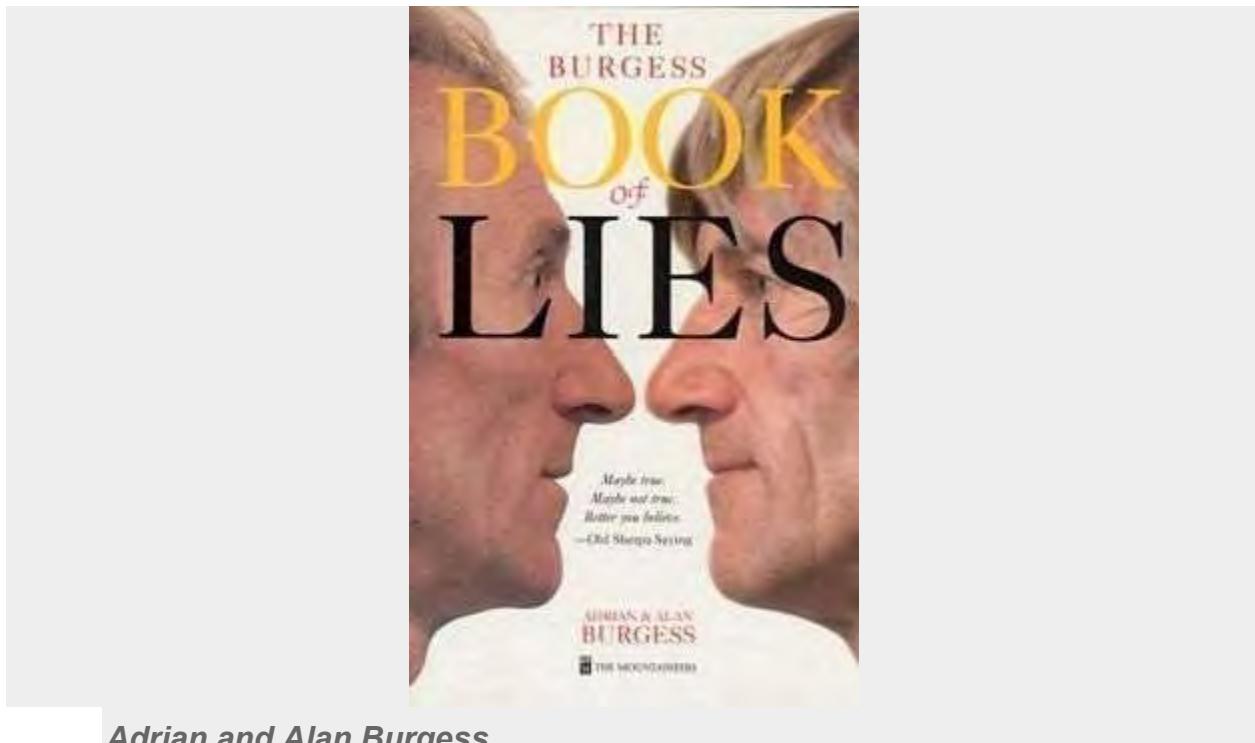
Reaching the summit of Longs was a wonderful experience for both of us. After two weeks at 6700' in Estes Park we were reasonably well acclimatized and felt no discomfort at over 14,000'. We both felt great about being equal to the physical challenge of seven and a half miles and 4,855 vertical feet and were delighted to be able to look up at the mountain afterwards from town and be able to say, "I've been there." The hook was set.

Germaine and I climbed together the next two summers on successively harder objectives in Peru and Bolivia. After the Bolivia trip, I was on fire to try Aconcagua. The only downside was that Germaine could not accompany me. Lying as it does at 32 degrees south latitude (roughly the same distance south of the equator as Houston is north), climbing season on Aconcagua coincides with the Austral summer of December through February. As a college student, Germaine could not get away so I planned the trip for myself alone.

I quickly found that anyone desiring to climb Aconcagua with an organized group has lots of options. There are at least a dozen guide companies that include it in their catalogs. Apart from price considerations, your main choice involves deciding what route you'd like to take. There is the Normal Route, which attacks the mountain from west to east, the Polish Glacier Route that goes east to west and the Falso de Los Polacos Route that uses the Polish Glacier approach but finishes on the Normal Route. Curiously, I found that no guide company offers the Polish Glacier as its primary objective. Rather, you sign on for the Falso Route and elect the Polish Glacier as an option. Effectively, you get two bites at the apple: you go up with the main contingent on the Falso and then hang around to do the Glacier the day after. A popular variation of the Falso Route involves a full traverse of the mountain. In this, you approach from the east using the Plaza Argentina base camp and descend the western side through the Plaza de Mulas base camp. Ultimately, I chose Salt Lake City-based Camp5 Expeditions as my guide company because 1) I wanted to try the Polish Glacier and they offered it as an option, 2) their Falso traverse route sounded like fun, 3) Germaine and I had climbed with Camp5 in Peru and were happy with that experience, 4) their

price was terrific, and 5) in speaking with the owner of the company, Alan Burgess, I was impressed with his candor.

Burgess is one of the legends of the climbing world. He is one of the true British hard men from climbing's Golden Age and has even had the dubious distinction of having Jon Krakauer chronicle his exploits. Krakauer's story, *The Burgess Boys*, appears in his "Eiger Dreams" collection. It makes Burgess and his twin brother, Adrian, out to be wild men without peer, veritable Visgoths of the climbing world. Whether true or not, the story cements a place for the Burgesses in popular climbing lore. For me, it provided an interesting backdrop to my conversation with Alan, the substance of which was that I was dreaming if I thought that I could make it up the Polish Glacier. Alan described the route as a brute that not many clients would be wise to tackle. He said that in his experience virtually none succeeded. Personally, I found it refreshing to hear such a grim assessment coming from one whose financial interests would have been better served by giving me a load of happy-talk about how cripples and old ladies do the Glacier every day. Based on all of this, I was happy to throw in my lot with Camp5.



Adrian and Alan Burgess

I made the commitment to do Aconcagua in the fall of 2000. There are times in life when you have a sense of having reached a major milestone. This was one of them. Ever

since reading "The Seven Summits" Aconcagua lurked in the back of my mind. Whenever I thought about climbing I always turned to Aconcagua and rated it "just right." In my simple way of cataloging things, Denali was "too cold," Kilimanjaro "too easy," Elbrus "too low," Vinson "too remote," Everest "too everything," and Kuskiusko "downright silly." My Goldilocks-like "just right" verdict for Aconcagua had three drivers. One, it is a huge physical test. Two, it is technically easy. Three, it is a really big mountain. Attendant to Three, I was captivated by the idea of its being the highest piece of real estate in the Western Hemisphere. Crass or not, I regarded Aconcagua as a prize. I wanted to climb it and tell the tale afterwards. This was not in the least diminished by the fact that I knew with certainty that no non-climber would give a hoot (it would be regarded as the same sort of vaguely freakish stunt as running a marathon or swimming the English Channel) and any "real" climber would dismiss it as a strictly minor league event. No matter, just as beauty is in the eye of the beholder, everyone gets to define his own prizes. Mine was Aconcagua.

What follows is my day to day record of the journey there and back.

Thursday, January 4 and Friday, January 5

Travelling from Houston to Aconcagua is somewhat involved. After an intermediary stop in Miami I took an overnight flight to Santiago, Chile and had to wait a couple of hours there for the onward flight to Mendoza, Argentina, my final destination.

At the Santiago airport, you could clearly see that this is the portal to Aconcagua. The place was loaded with folks in hiking gear and I chatted with several of them. One turned out to be Doug, a Coloradan who we'd see much more of by and by. Another was a really nice fellow from Florida, about my age, who wound up having a tough time of it on the mountain. Pretty much everybody had the same hopeful but hunted look about them. Certainly, that's precisely where I was at.

The trip from Santiago to Mendoza was just a quick 50-minute puddle-jump. The plane flew over the Andes and we were treated to some great views. Once in Mendoza, the immigrations and customs formalities were quick and painless. Much to my relief, my bags, which I hadn't seen since Houston, were waiting for me as soon as I exited passport control.

I grabbed a cab and headed out for the Hotel Nutibara. The cab ride took about 25 minutes and only cost me \$12. Upon stepping outside, I learned this about Mendoza: it is hot!

Getting my room at the Nutibara was quick and efficient. The hotel itself is simple but respectable looking. It is located on Avenida Mitre a couple of blocks south of Plaza Independencia and about the same distance north of Avenida Colon, which seems to be pretty much the main drag of the town. The location is great because Plaza Independencia is truly scenic and pleasant and Avenida Colon has supermarkets, shops and a McDonald's.



Hotel Nutibara, Mendoza

Shortly after getting into my room, which was small but clean and equipped with satellite TV, the guide showed up. Kyle comes from Bozeman, Montana and is a junior at the University of Montana. He's on the 6-year plan. It turns out that this is his second trip guiding for Camp5. He just finished his first, climbing some Mexican volcanoes, shortly before coming to Argentina. He's also been to Peru and knows the Cordillera Blanca pretty well. He is completely fluent in Spanish, a big plus.

Kyle has never been to Aconcagua and is looking forward to climbing it as much as I am. My impression on first meeting him was that he'll be a good climber. He is very

small, perhaps 5'4" and 130 pounds. The term "high strength-to-weight" comes to mind, much in the same way as it does with those tiny yet blindingly fast African runners.



Our guide, Klye

According to Kyle, besides me there are only two others signed up to go on this trip. A contingent of three clients and one guide sounds great to me. Kyle said that one client, Henrik, was already in Mendoza and that the other, Gordon, was arriving at 8:40 pm that evening. Henrik is in the room right next to mine and he dropped in while Kyle and I were talking. He's a Dane, probably in his mid-to-late 20's and is very personable. He has been bumming around the mountains, mostly in Canada, for the last eight months. He says that this is his last trip before his money runs out! Back in Denmark he was a youth counselor. He got sick of living a conventional life, dumped his girlfriend, sold his house, furniture, car and dog(!) and headed for the mountains. He's been skiing, climbing and having fun ever since. If he does well on Aconcagua, he says he'd like to try Cho Oyu.

After we all chatted, Kyle and Henrik headed off for the local Wal-Mart to buy food for the trip and I went out to explore the city. On the ride from the airport, I passed the Wal-Mart. I was amazed to see such a thoroughly American outpost in far-off Argentina. The walk around Mendoza was very enjoyable. It is a pleasant city with tree lined and canopied streets everywhere. The shade provides welcome relief from the heat. It was well into the 90°s. I spent a good hour and a half walking around. I checked my altimeter and pegged Mendoza at 2,430' above sea level.

The nicest feature of the town is Plaza Independencia, a lovely park with fountains, shady trees and nicely kept lawns. There were lots of people about, even in the early afternoon heat. While I was walking around, the shops started closing down for the afternoon siesta. Siesta time is from 1 pm to 5 pm. It seems a bit anachronistic in these days of wall-to-wall air conditioning but is an embedded part of the local culture.



Plaza Independencia

Later in the day the final member of our team arrived in Mendoza. I met Gordon briefly. He's quite tall (about 6'3") and quite old (age 64!) for this sort of thing. He really looks very fit. I'm a bit disconcerted to find myself a relative youngster compared to him.

After the long flight, Gordon wanted to rest so Kyle, Henrik and I headed out for dinner. We walked through Plaza Independencia, which was alive with merchants selling handicrafts from open-air booths, and went east on Peatonal Sarimiento, a very pleasant pedestrian mall. There we had a dinner of passable pasta and excellent cold

beer at an outdoor café. We finally go back to the hotel at about 11 pm. It was fun to chat with the guys. Turns out that Henrik is actually 30. Older than I guessed.

I've got problems though. I have a cold or flu and it is really enervating me. I feel weak as a puppy, feverish and exhausted. My taste buds have pretty much departed the scene. This is my worst nightmare. I just hope I'll be able to shake it before we have to do any of the really hard stuff. Per my calendar, we get our first summit bid two weeks from today!

Saturday, January 6

This was my first wake-up in Mendoza and it really feels good to be in Argentina with the prospect of a free day to explore the city. Last night we arranged to meet for breakfast at 9 am. The plan was to discuss the climb, get to know each other a bit and go off to get climbing permits.

The free continental breakfast at the Nutibara was great and we all showed up on time. Hence, we went off to get our permits before the morning was half over. Kyle had scouted the place and led us right to where we needed to go. It was only a couple of blocks beyond the pedestrian mall where we ate the night before. Once at the Aconcagua National Park headquarters, the paperwork was simple. We checked the box indicating our intention to do the Falso route and paid the \$160 per head climbing fee. I was impressed with Kyle's Spanish language skills and overall level of organization on this small outing. I'm glad he had the bases covered.

We walked back to the hotel and I did a gear check with Kyle. I made the fateful decision to leave my hiking boots behind and use running shoes until the time when plastics are necessary. My equipment was in fine shape.

We did some further talking about routes and it turns out that Henrik wants to do the Polish Glacier too. And, he's paid in advance for it! Kyle knew nothing about the Polish Glacier option. Camp5 has done a pretty lamentable job of bringing Kyle up to speed. While discussing the Polish Glacier possibility during the gear check, Kyle indicated that he hadn't even brought a harness with him. Nor a second ice tool. However, I had some spare webbing and he took it with the intention of fabricating a harness out of it.

Kyle would like to do the Glacier route. In talking about it, the biggest question mark was Gordon. Henrik and I agreed that it would be great if we could skip the traverse to the Normal Route (Falso de Los Polacos) entirely and just head up the Glacier. We'll see what Gordon thinks.

Another change that Kyle proposed that I'm less excited about is that of descending the mountain by the same route we approached it on. Thus, instead of coming up the Vacas Valley and descending via the Horcones Valley through Plaza de Mulas, we'd go through Plaza Argentina and the Vacas both ways. Kyle's logic was that if we kept Plaza Argentina as our base camp, we could cache part of our gear there for the duration. If we didn't do this, we'd have to take more stuff up the mountain. I was looking forward to seeing both sides of Aconcagua but have to admit that Kyle's plan is less fussy. I'll go along with the change.

After the gear check and discussions, I packed my bags for the climb. Since we will have the luxury of mules to carry the big bags to base camp, I can afford to take some optional items along. However, I purposely loaded my big pack up with some heavy gear. I want to toughen-up by carrying a good deal of weight on the trek in. I feel that with all the training I've done carrying big loads, this will put me on welcome and familiar ground.

Packing done, I set out for an afternoon's worth of exploring Mendoza. Once again, it was Houston-summertime-hot. It felt most pleasant, particularly with the bitterly cold conditions on the mountain in immediate prospect. It was wonderful to savor the warmth and store up memories to think about while up amidst the ice and snow. My walk was a long one of over two hours. I don't know whether these hot-hot conditions are typical but the genius of a city plan that provides shady overhanging trees was apparent. With the bright sun, you really felt the heat when you got to a stretch without this protection.



Shady Mendoza street

There is a large hospital a mile or so east of the hotel. As I always feel when passing hospitals, I'm lucky to be as healthy as I am. The hospital is six or eight stories high and looks clean and capable. It was probably built 30 or 40 years ago and clearly is not fully air-conditioned. Even so, if there is a mishap on the mountain, this looks like a place where the level of care would be good.

When time rolled round for dinner, I went off with Gordon. Kyle and Henrik are both on a budget and they plan on cooking up something at the hotel. The dinner with Gordon was fine. He's from British Columbia in western Canada and designs water slides for a living. He has his own company. He sort of fell into the specialty (which sure seems like a pretty narrow one to me!) and is successful doing what he does. He is an engineer by background. He has little climbing experience but is an avid hiker. To my eye he looks extremely fit. I think that he will do well on the mountain and I'll have to hustle to keep up with him.

Our conversation over dinner was not exactly rollicking but it flowed okay. Gordon is a bit of an oddball in that it seems to take him a minute to compose responses to any questions that come his way. No harm, just odd. He is a Seventh Day Adventist and mentioned last night that he wanted to seek out others of that faith to celebrate the Sabbath. Saturday is their day of worship. True to his plan, he found a group of co-

religionists and he spent a good part of the day with them. He said that the locals were very welcoming to him. How nice for him to find a home away from home so readily.

I tried to get Gordon to buy into the idea of doing the Polish Glacier instead of the Falso. He was non-committal. He is concerned about how he'll do because of his lack of experience. However, there is reason to hope that he'll get with the program. I would absolutely love to climb the mountain once by my desired route and be done with it. I honestly do not know whether I'll be able to do back-to-back summits.

We ate at the same place as yesterday. Gordon opted for a vegetarian pizza and I had a pasta dish. I learned that Seventh Day Adventists do not drink and generally (or maybe it was just Gordon) avoided meat. To my gigantic regret, I could not taste a thing.

Losing my sense of taste is always lousy but, on a more serious level, I'm genuinely concerned that I've had the bad luck to come down with a cold now. The timing could not be much worse since we start the trek in tomorrow. I feel rotten but am glad that I have three days of hiking in front of me to shake the bug. If only I can be quickly done with this cold!

Sunday, January 7

As prearranged, we met downstairs for breakfast at 6:30 am. I woke up at around 5 am and took a leisurely shower and shave. I felt a bit wistful about leaving the comforts of the hotel for such a long stretch of time as we had before us.

Proving once again the benefits of a small group, everyone was right on time, organized and ready to go exactly when planned. The bus driver was also on time and by 7:15 am we were checked out of the hotel, loaded on the bus and underway.

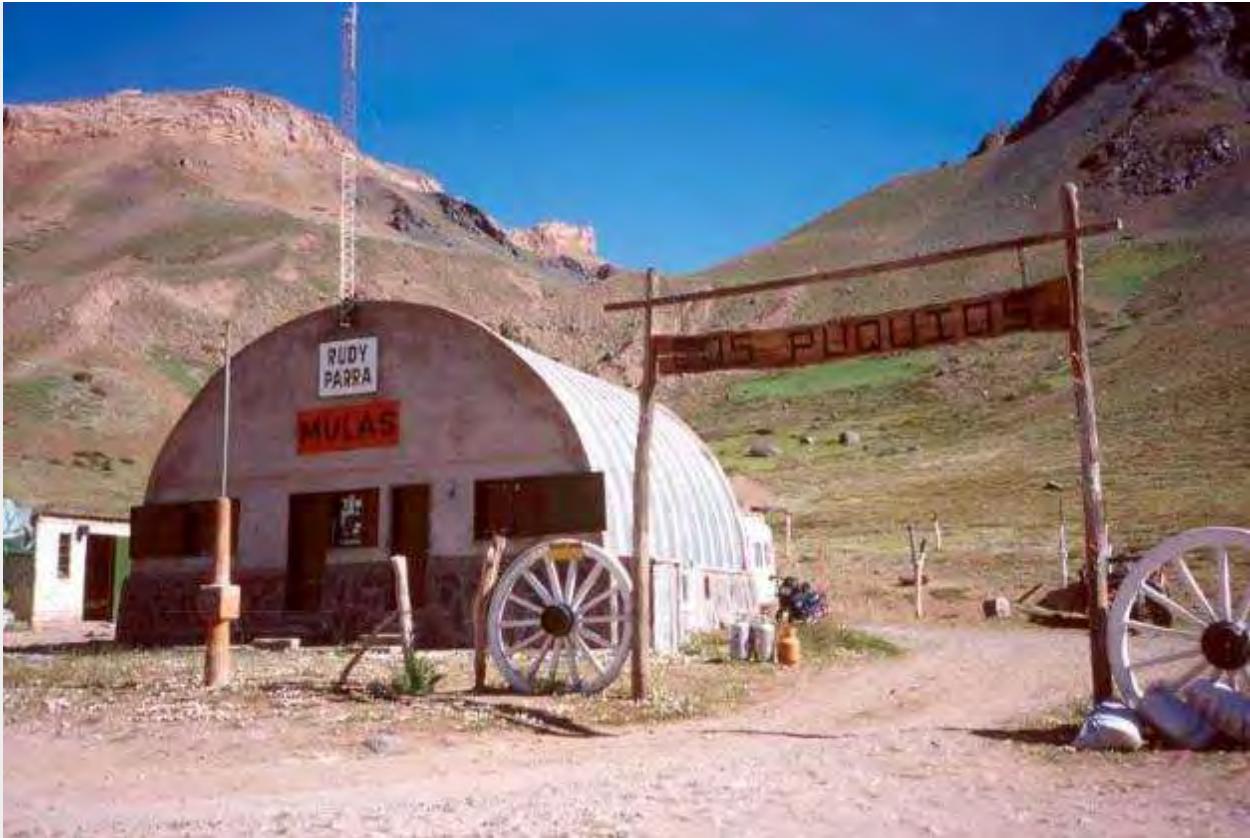
The ride to the mountains was on fine roads every inch of the way. We headed west out of Mendoza towards the Andes and passed numerous vineyards. Evidently, Mendoza is in the heart of Argentina's wine country.



Wine region outside Mendoza

While chatting, Kyle related the story of how, the night before, he had almost burned the hotel down. He said that he spilled some fuel on the floor of his bathroom while trying to transfer it from one container to another. Because it had a noxious odor, he said he thought that he'd just light it and let it burn away. He flicked his lighter on and "Whoosh!" the bathroom exploded in a flash of flame and he was knocked back into the hallway. His eyebrows and leg hair were singed and, for a while, flames spouted from the drain in the floor of the bathroom. For a moment, he thought that the trip would be over before it started. He admitted that he was lucky no real harm was done. This was a funny story but it does nothing to reinforce my confidence in Kyle's ability as a guide.

While the roads were first rate, the country became increasingly rugged as we went along. Not surprisingly, the road paralleled a river flowing east out of the highlands. There was evidence of a railroad line that pre-dated the highway. Now abandoned, it was probably one of Juan Peron's public works projects. It was an impressive one, at that. We arrived at the muleteer's place after about two and a half hours of driving. The trip to Rudy Parra's mule depot was about 100 miles door to door. At Rudy's we unloaded our stuff and the bags the mules would tote were weighed. The mule fee is based on weight. Prior to leaving for the trailhead, I made one last, wistful visit to the indoor plumbing and we soon were piled back in the bus for the 10-minute drive to the trailhead.



Rudy Parra's mule depot

It was exciting to finally be underway with the climb. Unlike the others, who let the mules carry everything except light day-packs, I carried about 40 pounds. Back in the hotel, I judged this to be a very easy load. Boy, was I wrong! I was absolutely naïve about how two things would affect my performance: altitude and my cold.



Gordon, Kyle, Henrik, Tom at Rudy's

On paper, the trek to Las Leñas campsite seemed like a piece of cake. It was billed as a 4-hour event, covering just 7 miles. I knew that the trailhead was at 7,628' and that Las Leñas was at about 8,900'. However, it never dawned on me that this would be at all hard. I regarded 7 miles as nothing and fully expected that we'd pull into camp in way less than 4 hours. Piece of cake.

I felt fine for about 3 hours but really began to fade after that. The trail was much more difficult than I expected. It is strewn with rocks and my running shoes and feet took a real beating. It was a mistake to leave the hiking boots back at the hotel. I banged my toes with appalling regularity. The rough ground made mincemeat of my sneakers. After 3 hours, I became the weakling of the group. Worse still, we made much slower progress than I would have imagined possible. Hour followed upon hour and the anticipated sub-4 hour walk in the park turned into a 6 hour 22 minute marathon.



Henrik, Gordon and Tom on trail to Las Leñas

By the time we reached Las Leñas, my cold and the altitude were really killing me. I felt wholly without vim and could not wait to be done. I recalled that while waiting for a taxi at the airport, another guide raised his eyebrows when I told him that we were planning to go directly to Las Leñas from Mendoza. More commonly, expeditions plan an overnight at Penitentes for acclimatization purposes. It is absolutely certain that I would have benefited from this approach. Frankly, we all would have. I'm unhappy that Camp5's game plan missed the boat in this regard.

The length of the trek and my increasing discomfort put me in an awful mood. My mind was absolutely jam-packed with negative thoughts. I was consumed with my own futility and embarrassed about having to struggle to stay with the others. Moreover, I was absolutely dissatisfied with Kyle. For no good reason he got separated from Henrik, Gordon and me and we lost the trail while trying to track him down. This was both a waste of energy for us and a dereliction of duty by him. Low marks for Kyle on day one of the trek in.

At Las Leñas, my problems were compounded by the fact that when we arrived, the mules were still en route and we had to wait around in the increasing cold inadequately dressed in our light hiking clothes. By the time the mules arrived, I was totally shot. As soon as the bags were unloaded, Kyle suggested that I get into my down parka and relax. This was a wonderfully good idea. One of the rangers at the campsite let me sit in his stone shelter and gave me some warm tea. I got to practice my rotten Spanish and he his rotten English. The others set up the two big tents and Kyle's small one. I jumped into a tent and my sleeping bag at first opportunity. Getting into the bag helped immeasurably but I honestly thought that I'd have to go back down to Mendoza in the morning. I could not eat, was dehydrated and felt thoroughly miserable.

But, the night was reasonably comfortable. I warmed up and slept like an exhausted person should. I recognized that my biggest problem was mental. I was overwhelmed by a sense of waste and failure. I visualized myself trekking back alone to the trailhead and trying to arrange passage back to Mendoza. Awful.

To help drive the bad thoughts away, I worked on hydration. As per my usual pattern, I failed to drink enough during the hike. As a result, my nighttime pee was cloudy and dark. I drank as much as I could and this helped a lot. It also helped to reflect that even if I had been perfectly healthy, coming up 6,500' in one day from Mendoza and doing a multi-hour trek over difficult terrain would have taken its toll. My weakness should not have come as a shock and I resolved to take it one day at a time starting tomorrow.

Monday, January 8

I felt shaky but human this morning. After sleeping late (until about 8 am), I worked hard at getting more liquid and food down. Breakfast was horrible, warm Musceli. It seems that the food on this trip will not be up to the same standard that I've enjoyed on previous trips.

The day dawned clear and sunny but it was chilly because the valley stayed in shadows until mid-morning. Before starting out, I took some weight out of my pack and stashed it in the duffel for the mule to carry. I was encouraged that this would allow me to go better. It also helped that I was well tanked-up with water and had some food inside me. By the time we started, I felt considerably better. I was apprehensive but hopeful.

It was fascinating to see the muleteers load their animals. These guys know what they are doing. For the uncooperative ones, the drivers put their own jackets around the mules' heads. This calms the animals down for loading. Each mule carries a considerable burden, probably 100-120 pounds apiece. One thing is certain; the mules are well acclimatized and strong.



Muleteers at work

We left a little before the mules did. I wore a fleece jacket and gloves to ward off the chill. About 10 minutes from camp we crossed a bridge over the stream that paralleled our route. I was immensely grateful that we did not have to ford the stream. The Rio de Las Vacas wasn't particularly wide at that point but it looked freezing cold and ran in a torrent. The bridge was a bit of civilization that we were all happy to be able to take advantage of. Our timing was impeccable. A plaque at one end of the bridge indicated that it had just been dedicated a couple of weeks before.



Bridge at Las Leñas

Like yesterday, our route up the Vacas Valley ran due north. For most of the way we just followed the valley floor alongside the river. To my great relief, the going was much easier today. The trail is less littered with stones and there are long stretches of flat and rolling terrain that I was able to motor along on. It felt good to use the trekking poles and move with better speed. However, speed is a relative thing. In my pre-trip imagining, I thought that my usual 15-minute per mile pace might deteriorate to 30 minutes. I never reckoned that it could possibly deteriorate to one mile per hour. If someone had told me a week ago that it would take us over six hours to hike to Las Leñas, I would have considered him crazy. Belief meets reality! Naturally, a component to my depression yesterday was that I misjudged what I was in for and was taken aback by the reality of what it was.

Even on the easier ground, my running shoes proved not up to the job. However, my heart really went out to a guy whose hiking boots fell apart on the trail to Las Leñas. He was wearing plastics for the duration. Ugh! The guy was the Floridian with the Alpine Ascents International group that I had chatted with before at the airport in Santiago. He

stopped by to say hello at camp last evening and related his sad tale. Apparently, the sole separated from one of his trusty, well-broken-in Vasque boots and there was nothing he could do to save them. His "make the best of things" attitude impressed me, particularly since I was wallowing in self-pity at the time due to my own problems. Still, the sight of him clumping around camp in his red plastics was a cautionary one.

Our destination for the second day was Casa de Piedra. It is 8 miles distant from Las Leñas and at 10,500'. The modest vertical gain of 1,600' is helpful from an acclimatization perspective. Also, we knew that at Casa de Piedra, we'd be treated to our first glimpse of Aconcagua. Per the map, Casa de Piedra marked the end of our journey up the Vacas Valley. There we would begin our westward hike up the Relinchos Valley.



Tom on trail to Casa de Piedra

The guidebooks predict a time of 6 hours from Las Leñas to Casa de Piedra. It took us 6 hours 10 minutes. I feel that my health has improved somewhat and that a degree of acclimatization is setting in. I know that I am not out of the woods but at least today I did

not feel like the weak sister of the group. Today, Gordon had that role. Also, all of us were considerably faster than Doug and his partner, Greg. Doug and Greg are fellow Nutibara denizens that we had met at the hotel. Their schedule coincided with ours and we met them on several occasions along the trail both yesterday and today. They are a cheerful pair and Doug never stops talking. He's a gadget junkie. He showed us a picture of his baby daughter on his Palm Pilot, the solar panel he uses to keep the Palm charged, his heartbeat monitor Suunto watch, his GPS, etc., etc. Anyway, they are very slow and made us seem quick by comparison. I'm a little boggled by their go-slow approach. Acclimatization should not be a problem because both of them are from Colorado Springs and have prepared by doing lots of hiking at altitude. They even took the precaution of overnighting at Penitentes. Doug's rationale seems to be that the slower they go, the higher they'll be able to get. He told us that he had failed on the mountain a couple of years ago because his partner on that trip baited him into going too fast. The memory was clearly painful and he does not want a repeat.



Doug with gadgets

The trek to Casa de Piedra involves a lot of sameness in terms of the terrain. There are no particular physical obstacles and the valley floor consists of a rocky plain well vegetated with tough, scrubby bushes. Everything is exceedingly dry. The riverbed is quite wide in places but the river itself doesn't ever amount to much. Because the valley was more open today than yesterday, it was possible to pick out distant landmarks and judge progress by the time it took to reach them. As was yesterday's, today's progress was slow. When you are not walking on sidewalks, a mile is a long way to go. The landmarks came and went, but always slower than expected.

We made regular water, rest and food stops during the day. Lunch was soup, cooked up on the camp stove, a Snickers and a Power Bar. It was better than breakfast in any event. Since we tended to string out while on the trail and not converse much, the stops gave us an opportunity to chat. My impressions of Henrik as affable and entertaining, Kyle as elfin, and Gordon as odd were reinforced. Physically, Henrik seems quite fit. He likes to lead and spent a good deal of time well in front. He has done short-course triathlons. I followed him and Gordon me. Kyle kept station with Gordon from the rear. I was grateful for Gordon's remark that I "looked much stronger today than yesterday." True and Amen!

The campsite at Casa de Piedra is wonderful. True to its name, it boasts an old stone structure built onto the side of a large boulder that the park rangers still use for shelter. However, the spectacular part is the view of Aconcagua. From the campsite, Aconcagua is a straight shot westwards across the broad Vacas Valley. It appears above a notch in the Relinchos Valley and looks magnificent. The entire upper part of the mountain is visible, dominated by the Polish Glacier. It looks so remote from here! Each of us did the math. We stood at 10,500' and the summit is at 22,834'. That's two and a third vertical miles to the top. I'm unable to think about this. It is unhelpful to try. Consistent with my philosophy of one day at a time, all I want to think about is getting to Plaza Argentina base camp. If I can do that, I'll be a winner.

Upon arriving in camp, I was able to contribute to camp chores. After ducking out yesterday, that in itself is gratifying. Henrik seems to be the star outdoorsman. He's good with the tents, knows how to tie knots and is comfortable with the camp stove and cooking duties. Gordon also seems competent in these endeavors.

I know that my biggest job is to get well as soon as possible. I've got to work on getting more food and water down. I made progress along these lines at dinner tonight. We had an excellent pasta meal and I ate plenty. Henrik eats like a horse and put us all to shame. He must have a tapeworm. I'm stuffed, it is now 8:10 pm, and I'm off to bed. Just as yesterday, I've got a three-man Mountain HardWear tent all to myself. (I'm in quarantine!) Henrik and Gordon are sharing the other Mountain HardWear and Kyle is by himself in his small Bibler. Right now, my dominant feeling is one of relief that I made it this far. I'm so glad that I was well enough this morning to avoid going down.

Tuesday, January 9

I'm at base camp now and am grateful beyond words to be here.

The trek from Casa de Piedra to base camp was by far the most rigorous of the trip. It took 8 hours 9 minutes and we gained 3,400 vertical feet. It is the longest 7 miles I have ever experienced and, I honestly believe is the hardest day in the mountains I've ever had.

We awoke at 5:30 am and got underway at 7:15 am. The day promised fine weather but the sun was still hours away from being high enough to reach us directly. It was uncomfortably chilly. A pair of German climbers left camp a half-hour before us and resolutely plunged into the system of streams that bars entry to the Relinchos Valley. Just watching was painfully cold. We were luckier. Exercising his language skills the night before, Kyle had arranged for a mule driver to ferry us across. This assist was truly heaven-sent. While riding the mule was terrifying, it sure beat getting soaked in the freezing water. In places, the water was a good three feet deep. Good mule!



Hitching a ride

Directly opposite our campsite is the v-shaped notch that marks the start of the Relinchos. The trail moves relentlessly upward from the flat, wet floor of the Vacas towards the distant base camp. Our Promised Land! The journey is due west and was straightforward for about 45 minutes. At that point, the trail disappeared. After some futile blind alley chasing, we concluded that we'd have to cross the stream whose course we were following. This came as a rude shock. We thought that we'd dodged that bullet.

The crossing was no fun. I stripped off my pants and underwear (nice to be on an all-male expedition) and went across barefoot. The technique modeled by Kyle was to unbuckle the pack so that it could come off easily if you slipped and to wade across using one trekking pole for support. Thankfully, this worked well. The water was cold but the real worry was its speed. It would have been easy to get knocked over. Each of us was happy to make it in one piece. By the time we were on the other side, the sun was high enough to help us dry out quickly. Henrik generously loaned me his towel to help this along. Inevitably, our bare feet got gritty and we were stuck with that minor annoyance for the rest of the day.



Henrik crosses, Tom watches

We ground on up and down mostly on pretty good mule trails. On a couple of occasions mule trains passed us. It was absolutely remarkable to see how nimbly they negotiated the difficult terrain. The mule drivers are very talented riders. I cannot imagine how they

stayed mounted on the steep and tricky sections. Their style was to get a half dozen or so started and whistle, shout, beat and berate them to keep them moving. They did this mostly from behind but occasionally rode forward to encourage them over washouts and the like. This is not a job I could do. Compared with our snail-like progress, the mule trains fairly flew along. We quickly learned to jump off the trail when we heard one coming.



Get out of the way...quickly!

After about three hours we stopped to replenish our water supply from one of the many streams flowing from high above.

The land we traveled over was harsh. The first half of the Relinchos Valley is narrow and steep. We toiled up and down and my view was limited to the three paces in front of my feet. Tunnel vision takes over when I'm plodding along like this. The views might be great, the scenery spectacular but all I have eyes for is the next few feet of trail. It's a pity, but all the natural beauty in the world is lost on me in these circumstances. It's just the work that matters; and the need to overcome the body's reluctance to keep laboring

on; and the need to avoid questioning thought. Why am I doing this? What am I doing here? Much better to zone out and not think too far beyond the next few steps. The questions don't have convincing answers so tuning out is a good defense mechanism.

In one place, we faced a perfectly daunting climb. Looking ahead, it seemed that the valley ended in a wall. On closer inspection, it dawned on us that there was nowhere to go but up the damned thing. On the faraway heights we perceived specks that turned out to be mules switch-backing their way to the top. For me, it was just one foot in front of the other. I've got little sense of how long it took but I remember finally getting to the top and being disappointed that the thing was no more than a big step. I had expected the world to fall away on both sides. It didn't. The view back toward the east was terrific. Through the distant haze you could see all the way down the valley to Casa de Piedra. However, in front, the ground continued to rise without much letup.

Not long after surmounting the step we stopped for lunch. It was 11:30 am and we were 4 hours 15 minutes into the trek. Distance-wise we had made very slow progress and I think everyone was a little depressed about this. Our lunch spot was pleasant. It was right beside the stream system that marked the valley floor and had some pretty grassy areas. At this point the valley opens up and becomes less confining. It was cheering to see a group of climbers coming down from the mountain. Surprisingly, the traffic coming down had been exceedingly light during our trek in. We were anxious to hear a report on conditions up above. Unfortunately, they couldn't tell us much. They said that they were there on a support trek for a group of friends. One of the guys said that he had climbed to camp 1 to get a taste for the mountain but that he hadn't wanted to climb further. Given the absolutely enormous amount of work it had taken me to get this far, I thought it bizarre that someone would do a support trek with no ambitions of climbing Aconcagua. However, the party looked fit, beautifully equipped and capable so I took them at their word. Different strokes.

I was appalled when the main item on the lunch menu turned out to be little tins of pate that Kyle and Henrik picked up at Wal-Mart. We also had some dry-as-a-bone crackers and awful looking beef jerky. The pate made my stomach do flips and nothing else looked appetizing either. I had another Snickers bar and tried to force down part of a Power Bar. True to form, Henrik gobbled up everything in sight and clamored for more. Kyle and Gordon held their own. Gordon even made up a drink with some powdered

milk that Kyle had. Horrible. I knew that I should have eaten more but I just didn't have the will to force much down. It is bad news when you know you are making a mistake but decide to make it anyway. I paid later.

After lunch, we continued to grind onwards. It was hard, hard work. Since none of us had ever been to the mountain, we had little sense of how far we had gone or how long we had to go before reaching base camp. We were all worn thin. Gordon especially was hurting. While I was capable of a reasonable one-foot-in-front-of-the-other pace, there was nothing remotely enjoyable about it. How different from the fun time I thought the trek would be! I felt distinctly out of it. Part of the problem was that it was impossible to tell what was the main cause of my weakness. It could have been my cold, the altitude or both. In any event I definitely felt off.



Approaching base camp

We bumped into Doug and Greg along the route a couple of times. They seemed every bit as wrecked as we were. At a stop we made together sometime after lunch, Doug unlimbered his GPS and gave us the disheartening news that we were still a couple of

miles and 1,000 vertical feet below base camp. With my newfound respect for miles, this seemed like an absolutely gigantic distance. It was odd to find the experience of the last two days confirming the seriousness of the remaining distance while years of running and hiking experience dismissed it as trivial.



Almost there

Finishing the trek was a trial. I walked with Henrik while Kyle stayed behind to nurse Gordon along. As we approached camp, the valley opened up still more before ending at the foot of the mountains. The character of the land changed and its vegetation began to vanish. Solitary boulders sitting alone on the hard dirt plain became our progress-points. Finally, we rounded the shoulder of a hill and saw a wooden sign pointing toward base camp and advertising burgers, soda and beer. A few minutes later we toiled up a slope and base camp came into view. Deliverance!

After over 8 hours in the hinterlands, it was hugely cheering to see climbers' tents and the seasonal structures used by the park police, mule companies and various outfitters. Just seeing bright colors once again was great. I felt like I had made it back to

civilization. I was inexpressibly grateful to be here and to have a rest day tomorrow to look forward to.



Plaza Argentina base camp

Henrik had the name of Rudy Parra's representative at base camp and we made for his tent. The guy, Daniel Lopez, came out to greet us and welcomed us into his aluminum-framed tent. There he sat us down on white plastic backyard chairs and served us sweet tea. That was so nice. It felt wonderful to be at rest, inside and out of the wind. I have never been so happy to sit on a plastic lawn chair in my life. Daniel entertained us with photo albums of his climbing trips. The inside of his tent was decorated with prayer flags from the Himalayas.



Daniel Lopez's oasis of comfort

Kyle and Gordon arrived about 35 minutes after us. They too were treated to tea and rest. Kyle had carried Gordon's pack for the last couple of hours and Gordon looked thoroughly spent. No matter. I have infinitely more respect for Aconcagua now than I ever did before. Anyone capable of making it to base camp is an athletic hero in my book. Good for Gordon for making it. Good for me and good for all of us.

However, rest time could not last forever. Setting up the tents proved to be a real chore because it was quite windy. It was hard work anchoring them down with rocks and pegs but within a couple of hours we were all set and I was inside. We also commandeered a kitchen area with a rock windbreak around it and set up housekeeping there. Henrik plunged right into the cooking duties and I was impressed by his willingness to pitch in and do things. He seems more of a guide than a client when it comes to this sort of work.

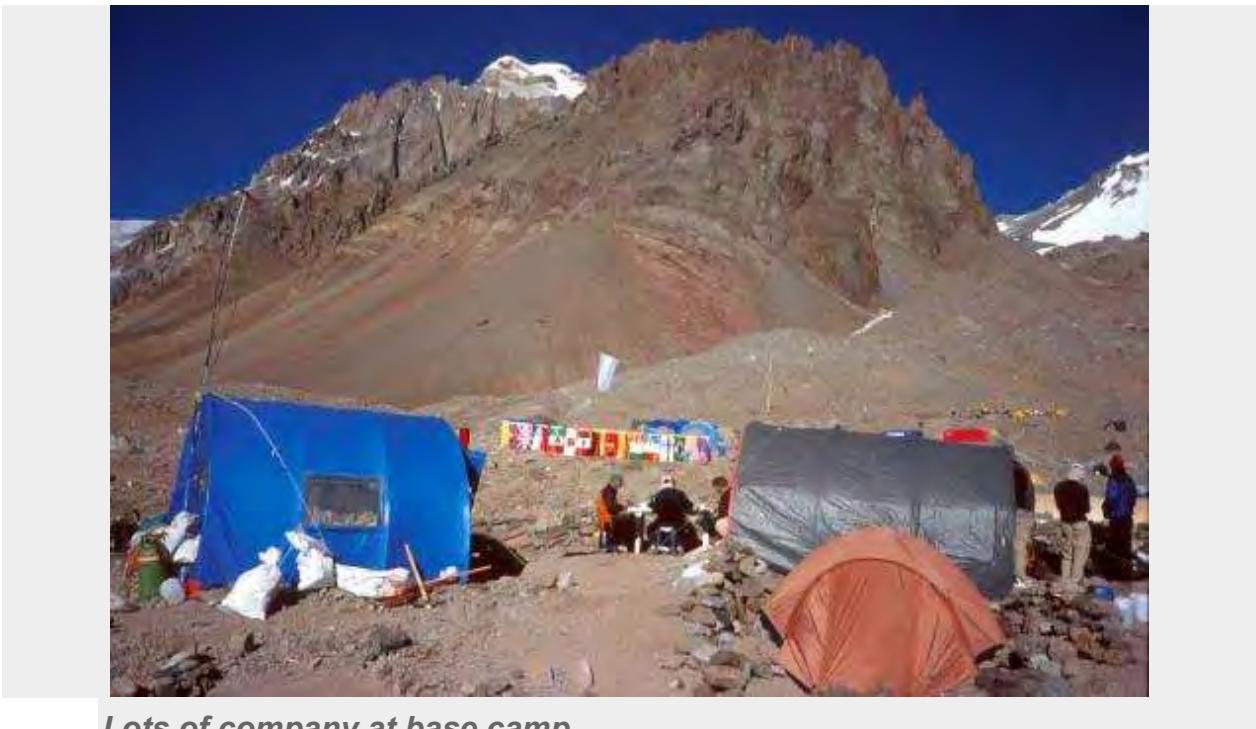
It is now about 6:30 pm and that's the recap of the day. I had some hot water and ramen noodle soup for dinner and am now down for the night. Once again, as Typhoid Mary,

I've got the luxury of my own tent. I'm glad to have made it this far. My mantra is "one day at a time" and tomorrow is a day of rest.

Wednesday, January 10

I was up every hour peeing in minuscule amounts but overall was pretty comfortable last night. Along these lines, one of the first things I found out this morning is that the privies here are reasonably okay. They are tent-like affairs erected over laboriously dug holes and are enclosed on all sides but the top.

We had a lazy morning punctuated by a lousy pancake breakfast. The food on this trip continues to be singularly unappetizing. Maybe it is a blessing that I can't taste anything. Also, it takes forever sitting outside to prepare and eat the meal. I miss not having a cook tent, tables and stools. It is cold and uncomfortable sitting around on rocks and eating outside. Moreover, with no porters and cooks around we've all got to share the food preparation chores. My job is to fetch water. There is a stream a couple of hundred yards from our camp. Although base camp is at only 13,900', getting water is breathless work. Having to pitch in with the clean-up is no picnic either. This is anything but a luxury trip.



Lots of company at base camp

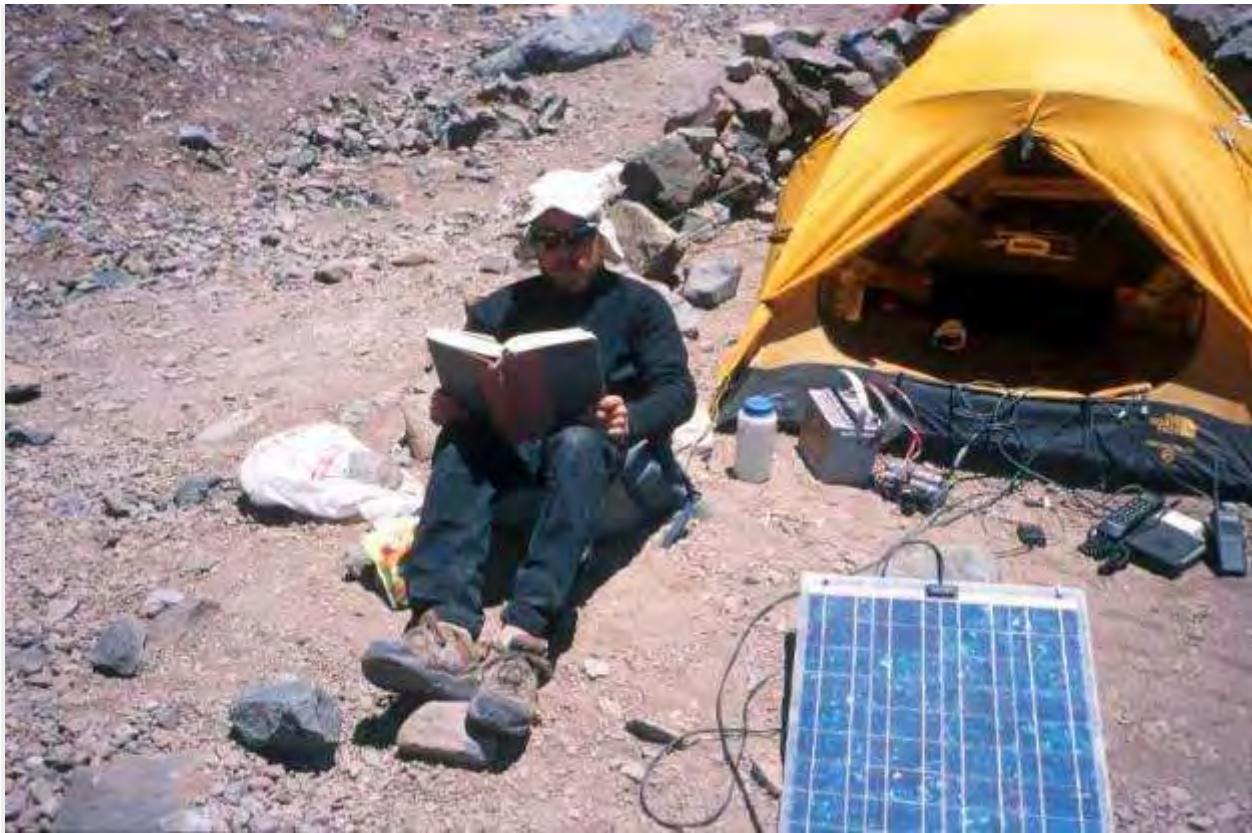
All things considered, base camp is a fairly squalid place. The best thing it has going for it is that this altitude, the water is still in liquid form and is readily obtainable from the stream. Despite the fact that everyone is pretty good about packing their garbage out, a certain amount of flotsam is always rolling around in the wind. And, you can't do much to dress up the toilets. A lot of people create a lot of waste. I'd estimate that there are at least 75 people here right now. I can only imagine what it must be like on the much busier Plaza de Mulas side of the mountain.

The view from here is somewhat limited. You can make out the beginning of the route up to camp 1 but the camp itself is hidden by Aconcagua's shoulder. The Polish Glacier and upper part of the mountain appear in the hazy distance far above the shoulder. The buttresses that lead to Amhegino dominate the north and the path west. There is ragged snow on the lower portions of the buttresses. The higher reaches are too rocky and steep to retain much snow. Looking around, mostly what you focus on is the collection of tents that the camp is there to support. After having experienced plenty of wilderness, it's nice to see people and an ebb and flow of human activity.

The big news of the morning is that Gordon has decided to go down. He feels unwell and not fit enough to go on. He'll do the climb to camp 1 with us tomorrow but won't carry a load. This will get him higher than he's ever been and give him a legitimate taste for the mountain. Naturally, he's disappointed. However, he seems resigned to his fate and is happy to have an early option to get out. While the details aren't all worked out, we'll probably leave him day after tomorrow (Friday) and he'll depart in the company of another group Saturday or Sunday. Since I know exactly how it feels to be ill and out of sorts, I can empathize with Gordon. He needed to be at his very best and his body just didn't cooperate. It is tough when it happens when you're 53. It must be a whole lot tougher when you're 64.

It is now 1:52 pm and I've just finished organizing my tent. It is lots more habitable now than before and I'm freed from the guilt of being alone in a three-man tent that looked like three men were occupying it. It pleases me to be as neat as a pin. Bless Kyle's little heart, I'm looking a lot neater myself. He brought me some hot water to wash and shave with this morning. It felt great to scrape off three days worth of accumulated grunge and beard. Being clean and organized has me in good spirits. I'm actually looking forward to

the climb to camp 1 tomorrow. I'll be fully loaded and this will tell me lots about my state of health and fitness. The cold feels much better today so the signs are positive.



Kyle at base camp

We've been in the company of Doug and Greg quite a bit lately. Henrik has dubbed them the "Twins." Doug, the non-stop talker, said something yesterday that hit home with me. He said that he has to be careful not to give himself a reason to go down. He was talking about missing his baby daughter but it is absolutely clear to me that that's exactly where I'm at as well. In spite of my cold, the altitude and the tough terrain, this is more of a mental challenge than a physical one. I think that if I can just stay positive and do one day at a time, I'll be a success on this mountain, whether I manage to get up it or not. It is important to break the experience down into bite size bits as it unfolds. At this point, I can't begin to think beyond camp 1. As for the summit, it's still ridiculously distant; more of an abstraction than a tangible reality. I'm happy to leave it so for the time being.

Oh boy, am I having an exciting day! It's now 5 pm and time for me to figure out what to bring up and what to cache at base camp. The things that will go up are in three categories: stuff I'll wear, stuff I'll dump at camp 1 on tomorrow's carry, and stuff I'll bring when we actually move to camp 1. Whatever is left gets cached here for the duration.

There, it's now 6 pm and I've just finished packing and sorting. All systems are "go" for the climb to camp 1 tomorrow. I'll say nothing about what passed for dinner tonight: only that the tradition of wretched food was not abandoned this evening.

Thursday, January 11

Wow! What a day this has been!

We got up at about 8 am and left for camp 1 at 9:30 am. My pack felt heavy because besides my own gear I had to carry a share of the food and equipment we'll use up above. It was exciting to get underway and, per the guidebooks, the vertical gain we were in for was a modest 1,600'. The books predicted 4 hours 30 minutes from base camp to camp 1. After a full day's rest, this seemed quite reasonable, even with the fairly heavy pack.

We all left camp together but quickly strung out with Henrik and me in the front and Kyle in the back with Gordon. Prior to leaving, arrangements had been firmed up for Gordon's departure. He'd be doing the two-day trek out with our muleteers. He'd leave on Saturday morning. The trip to camp 1 was to be Gordon's swan song on the mountain.



Gordon above base camp

Taking a leaf from Doug's book, I decided to put off the time when I donned plastic boots. Chewed up as they are from the trek in, I opted for running shoes as the more foot-friendly alternative. Since crampons are not called for on the route and the weather is comfortably warm, I was happy for the opportunity to avoid the plastics.

The route up is difficult but only contains two heart-pounding sections. The first one comes about an hour out of base camp and consists of a steep, crumbling bluff made out of disintegrated rock. Lodged in the disintegrated rock are larger stones that you try to get a foothold on. The thing is an absolute mess. It is impossible to climb it elegantly and because it crumbles into a new mess each time a climber is on it, you really have no proven route to the top to follow. Consequently, you have to improvise your way up and accept a great deal of backsliding. In many ways, it is like climbing a big hill of dirt. It is incredibly unpleasant going. I'd go anaerobic for a few steps, try to stabilize myself on a rock until my pulse stopped pounding, and then repeat the process over and over again. The trekking poles were often in the way of my scrabbling upward progress but were useful in minimizing backsliding. They were also useful things to lean over and

rest on as I gulped for air between spasms of upward movement. Getting to the top of the bluff probably only took 30 minutes; however, it was a long 30 minutes.



No firm ground here

After this section, things got considerably easier for an hour or so. The route flattened out some and took on an upwardly rolling character. For the most part, it was not difficult to figure out which way to go. There are many cairns that point the way and the only time when you get lost is when the cairns point towards a section that is now in collapse. The route changes from week to week because the mountain is constantly moving. While I thought that I was climbing on the mountain itself, in fact, the route is glacier with just an insulating crust of demolished rock. This becomes clear as the route progresses because there are numerous points where walls have given way revealing a cake-slice of ice with just a thin layer of pulverized rock as the icing on top. More unsettlingly, you pass a couple of places where crevasses yawn to inky depths. It would be death to blunder into one of these. I wonder whether they give any warning before opening up?



Greg and Doug on easy ground

I traveled with Henrik up the bluff and for some little way beyond. He then took a break and I pressed on without him. We passed the Twins, Doug and Greg, and a few other climbers. It was encouraging to be faster than others. Of course, Doug and Greg were just sticking to their game plan of slow, purposeful progress. Not long after I finally decided to take a break, Henrik appeared and a few minutes after that, Kyle.

We went on together and Kyle gave us the scoop on why Gordon wasn't with him. He said that Gordon struggled from the very beginning of the climb. He persevered for about an hour but made very slow progress. With the tents still in sight, he made the decision to abandon the attempt. He clearly made the sensible decision. Kyle said that at the rate they were moving they would have never finished the climb. Unencumbered by Gordon, who went back down to base camp by himself, Kyle picked up the pace and was easily able to catch us up.



Tom entering penitentes

At the place where Kyle met Henrik and me, the route got considerably steeper and climbers could either choose a path through a field of penitentes or one over loose rocks and shale. Neither one looked very palatable. We stayed to the left on the rocks for as long as possible. It was hard, disheartening work because of the constant backsliding. Finally we reached the promontory that lead to camp 1. It was depressing to look up the promontory and contemplate what it would take to get on top of it. This is the second major obstacle of the route. It is much, much more serious than the bluff we ascended earlier in the day.



The penitentes field

At that point, we made the wise decision to have lunch. I needed a break. Although I felt physically okay, my mind was once again consumed by doubts. This mainly took the form of the questions, "What am I doing here?" and "Why am I putting myself through all this?" Fixed in my mind was the thought, "I'm having no fun doing this." and its corollary, "This ought to be fun." I thought about Gordon with real envy. He had a ticket off the mountain. He would soon be back in the lazy tropical heat of Mendoza. He would not have to eat rotten food or suffer any longer. Boy, did that sound good. Lucky Gordon!

Our lunch spot was equipped with a beautiful view. We could see a good distance back down the Relinchos Valley and all the way to the mountains that formed the eastern wall of the Vacas Valley. It was all blurred by haze but beckoned as The Way Out. While eating lunch I unburdened myself to my teammates. I told them that I was having no fun on this trip. I said that my mental game was shot and that I didn't know whether I had the mental toughness to finish the climb. I said that I was considering going down with Gordon.



View down Relinchos Valley on route to Camp 1

To their eternal credit, both Kyle and Henrik had the same sensible response. Nobody has "fun" climbing Aconcagua. It is horrible, grinding work and is only worthwhile as a personal accomplishment to look back on one, five and twenty years later. They both dismissed my "fun" expectation as dim-witted. Their goal was to climb the mountain. The goal is worth doing in its own right. It is a job that a good worker will do to the best of his ability. The payback is pride, not something so evanescent as fun.

There are times in life when everything becomes more clear. This was one of them. It was the best moment of the trip because after those five minutes of conversation, I decided to climb the mountain.

Thus refreshed, we went on to tackle the promontory. After a few minutes, the rocky road petered out and we were forced into the penitentes. Penitentes are tough to go through. They involve a lot of up and down motion, are slippery and present you with ample opportunities for hanging up packs and poles. We were fortunate in that others had gone before us and blazed a route. Of course, this gave us the awkwardness of

trying to follow other climbers' footprints. There must be a natural law that prescribes that the other guy's stride must unfailingly be different from yours. I alternately felt that I was tracking a giant or a dwarf. Not helping things was the fact that the sun was high in the sky and the snow was becoming increasingly slushy.

After the penitentes, we entered a long, steep snow ramp. This too had been traveled before us and we either kicked our own steps or followed in the ready-made ones. It was dreadful, heart-hammering work. It took about an hour to reach the rocky outcrop that marked the top of the promontory. It was incredibly wonderful to come level with it. From below, it had looked almost unreachably distant. Henrik scrambled up first and Kyle and I made it a few minutes later. Within minutes, the tents of camp 1 came into view. It was awesome to be there.

We picked out a tent site and unloaded the gear that we wanted to dump in a big duffel bag. Then we just lazed around in the sun for a couple of hours trying to acclimatize. It was nice to savor the accomplishment of being there. As a bonus, the camp is actually much higher than the books say it is. It is listed at 15,500' but the consensus of our altimeters had it at 16,120'. I'm absolutely delighted because this means that the journey to camp 2 will be less rigorous than expected. I have been concerned about the 3,700 vertical foot gain to camp 2 from the outset. Knocking that number down to 3,080' is cause for rejoicing. Moreover, from camp 1 you have an excellent view of the first half of the route to camp 2. It does not look bad, just a long zigzagging pull to the top of the col that connects Amhegino to Aconcagua.

Doug and Greg pulled in about an hour after us. They got a tent site near ours and we hung out together. Doug and I explored for water together and found a great collection point. There was no problem about getting liquid water. Even at over 16,000' the sun was pleasantly warm. Doug was happy because by making it to camp 1 he equaled his high point on his previous attempt at the mountain. All of us were cheered by the good weather. We met several people who made it to the top and, apart from a storm three days before, they said that conditions were excellent. We remembered that from Casa de Piedra we saw lenticular clouds over the summit. Probably they were associated with that storm.

I felt good enough at 16,120' to wish that we could have immediately moved there. However, I am amazed at how easy it was to descend to base camp. Henrik distinguished himself as the downhill king by rocketing ahead of Kyle and me. Kyle might have been able to go equally fast but he did his duty and stayed with me. In all events, the trip down went like a flash. An hour and a half was all it took. It was astonishing to effortlessly plunge down the slopes that had cost so much effort on the way up.

This was a great day. It took me 4 hours 21 minutes to get to camp 1. For the first time I beat the predicted time in the guidebook. A good sign. I worked hard and was reasonably strong today. I got over my mental problem and decided to climb the mountain. My health seems to have largely returned. On the basis of today, I think that I do have an outside shot of getting to the top. Based on the view I got of the route to camp 2, I am convinced that I can make it to 19,200'. One day at a time.

Upon arriving at base camp, I treated Henrik to a \$5.00 Coke at Daniel Lopez's place. What luxury to sit on those plastic lawn chairs and sip a Coke! Henrik too is very happy about how the day went. At 7 hours and 53 minutes top to bottom, it definitely was a good effort. Now we've got to repeat it tomorrow!

Here's the late-breaking news on Gordon. After we returned from the climb, Kyle took Gordon to the medical tent here at base camp. He thought that the doctor there might be able to give him some medicine to help on the trip out. The doctor examined him and found that Gordon has pneumonia! No wonder he's been dragging for the past few days. In any event, the diagnosis entitles Gordon to a magic carpet ride off the mountain. It seems that the \$160 climbing fee covers an unadvertised bonus, free helicopter evacuation back to civilization. Great deal! I spoke with Gordon and he's extremely happy. It is a huge comfort for him to have a gold-plated legitimate excuse for his inability to perform. And an indisputably good reason to get back to the comforts of civilization. The fact that he'll be effortlessly whisked off the mountain is the icing on the cake. If weather permits, the helicopter will come in at 8 am tomorrow.

Friday, January 12

Well, it's noon and I'm not where I thought I'd be.

We struck tents after breakfast and packed our gear for the move to camp 1. We wanted to wait to see Gordon off before starting the climb. Unfortunately, there were all sorts of delays. The helicopter was late and Gordon was bumped by another more seriously ill climber. Because it was uncertain whether the copter would come back for another trip, Henrik and I said our good-byes and started up the hill at 10:30 am. Unhappily, Henrik only lasted 20 minutes.

Ever since breakfast Henrik complained that he was feeling awful. He said that he had thrown up during the night and was feverish. He was genuinely bitter about having been trapped in a tent "with a sick man" for the last 5 nights. He visited the doctor and got a variety of pills. However, they had no immediate palliative effect. He looked decidedly green around the gills when we saddled up and struck out for camp 1. I think that his decision to try was inspired by 1) embarrassment at the thought of holding us back and 2) youthful confidence in his body's ability to overcome its setback. In any event, 20 minutes on the trail out of camp were all it took to get him to see the writing on the wall. We came back down, reclaimed our tent sites and erected the tents. We were officially done for the day and Henrik immediately went to earth, now solo, in his tent.

I have to admit that having an unplanned day of rest isn't the worst thing that can happen. When strapping on my pack for the climb I was horrified by its weight. Also, the Twins are taking a rest day today so there's no shame in our hanging about as well. I'm very grateful that Henrik called it quits early in the day. He truly looked rotten and I don't think that he could have toughed it out to the top. Better to quit early than after a couple of hours of effort. That would have been agonizing.

The arrival of the helicopter provided lots of excitement. It is a beautiful machine with a fully enclosed body. I had been expecting one of those spidery M.A.S.H.-type copters with the bubble canopy. We saw its first flight in from the high point of our aborted climb out of camp. It was fascinating to see it come in from below us and land well below our feet. By the time Henrik and I arrived back in camp Gordon was stressed with worry that the wind would pick up and prevent the chopper from making a second trip. Having just missed out on the first flight he was eager for his turn. Given the vagaries of mountain weather, he was on pins and needles until it finally set down. He and a couple of others piled aboard, the copter lifted, wheeled down-valley and was gone. It was a beautiful day for flying.



Gordon being evacuated

Despite my newfound resolve to climb the mountain, I am jealous of Gordon's easy escape. As I write this I'm simultaneously happy and sad. I should be an hour and a half into the trek to camp 1 and that much closer to the goal. On the other hand, a day of rest and relaxation will be a treat. Maybe this is a good thing. In all events, I'm looking forward to reading my book, "White Shark," by Peter Benchley.

It is now 4:07 pm. This is the depressing time because if we had done the climb today we'd now be at camp 1 and looking forward to a day off tomorrow. Would that it were so! Apart from that, I've had a pretty good day. It has been blazingly warm in my tent and I've enjoyed lolling around in my long underwear. I finished my book. It was nonsensical but entertaining. Some day I'll reread it and will doubtless feel nostalgia for today. On the practical side, I've had a lot of water and am working on getting more food inside me. I know that I'm eating far too little up here. It is just that the food is so horrible. For breakfast this morning I forced down a bowl of warm polenta (corn grain) with brown sugar. Awful.

Saturday, January 13

It is now 4 pm, a little over 24 hours after yesterday's "depressing time." We are here in camp 1 and in good form. We've even got the tent up already.

We left base camp at 10:15 am and the journey up took 4 hours 17 minutes. Henrik rebounded nicely from death's door. It is remarkable the difference a day makes when you are young and strong. We are all pleased with our pace.

It is amazing, but the route changed markedly in the couple of day's interval since Thursday. There are more frequent and dramatic evidences of collapse on the upwardly rolling section beyond the bluff. Clearly, the glacier is decaying under the heat of the sun. Moreover, the long snow staircase up the promontory has pretty much disappeared entirely. Because of this we had to deal with its underlayment, a thoroughly disagreeable melange of pulverized rock, shale and scree. I followed Kyle closely as he went up this and benefited from his choice of foot placements. It was brutally tough work with a pounding heart all the way. However, the knowledge of where the camp was and a sense of how far we had to go made this trip up easier than the first one.



Camp 1

Our tent site is agreeable. It is not far from our water source, has a ready-made stone wind barrier and is a short climb away from the latrine area. We were careful to nail the tent down well.

Right now it's not windy but we expect a lot of wind tonight. I'm happy and proud to be here. It feels great to be comfortably ensconced in the tent with nothing more strenuous to do than to write in my journal. Adding to my sense of well-being is a plan that I discussed with Kyle yesterday. I argued that we should move directly from camp 1 to camp 2 without an intermediate carry. I'm still dreading back-to-back carries to Camp 2 and am convinced that it will be easier to attempt it in one push. Kyle has discussed this with some other guides and the plan has been pronounced feasible. Thus, if things go as intended, we'll rest tomorrow and move up to camp 2 on Monday. Tuesday will be a rest day at camp 2. I'm absolutely thrilled with this plan. I think it will give me my best shot at a strong summit attempt.

Another possibility that has just been bruited is that of doing the Polish Direct route from camp 2 instead of the Falso! The reason is that we've spoken with a number of climbers who have summited and they report that conditions on the Direct are outstanding. "Styrofoam snow" is the term used. Climbing the Polish Direct would be mind-boggling, if we can do it safely. It is genuinely thrilling to just think about it. I would absolutely love to disprove Alan Burgess's assessment that "no way" would any mere client be able to do that route.

All in all, I'm in high spirits. I performed well today and I feel good at 16,120'. Although I'm the weakest member of our small team, I'm holding my own. I'm not far off Henrik's pace and that's pretty darn good. I love our new plan of attack. It doesn't hurt that tomorrow is a rest day. This will be great for acclimatization purposes and will allow me plenty of time to recover from today's exertions.

Sunday, January 14

The news this morning is that the Twins are no more. Doug came by at 8:30 am and announced that he was calling it quits and going home. Poor non-stop-talkative-Doug. He said that he was having trouble breathing, sleeping and has an upset stomach. He really wants to get home to his baby daughter. I think that he is happy to have an excuse to leave. It might be that he's manufactured that excuse, just like he said he'd have to be careful not to. Who knows? In talking with him, he spoke convincingly about his physical problems. On the bright side, he noted that he did better on this trip than the one two years ago. This time he overnighted at camp 1 rather than just doing a

carry. Too bad, I'll miss Doug's chatter and good humor. He has been a fine companion. While he's now faced with a long and lonely trek out, I think he'll do it with a light heart. Home is where he most wants to be. Of course, this leaves Greg high and dry as a solo climber. A crisis? Not at all! Greg immediately declared his intention of pressing on. My impression is that Greg is a bit amused by Doug's discomfiture. I think he feels surer of his chances without Doug than with him.

The weather today is much more iffy than it has been. We awoke to partly cloudy skies rather than crystal blue. On the good side, the wind we expected last night never materialized. Living conditions in the tent are perfectly fine. I am on one side, Henrik the other and Kyle in between. I'm glad that Kyle is small.

It's now 6 pm and the day has slipped away in light conversation. Kyle has done a lot of tent hopping and Henrik likes to be outside. Not me, I'm a tent person! It is not terribly cold outside but is far from pleasant. The snow is falling in little white balls. They look like individual balls of styrofoam. The snow has stuck and now covers the entire slope behind us leading to the top of the Amhegino col. I'm glad that we are not climbing today. We are all hoping that this does not signal a change to predominantly stormy conditions. Aconcagua is famous for its bad weather. Perhaps we were lulled into a false sense of security by the perfect weather of the last few days. Before today, the last snow we saw was when we were first setting up tents at base camp.



Evening at Camp 1, Amhegino Col on left

I am once again annoyed with Kyle. Yesterday I thought it settled that we would move in a lightning strike for camp 2. Today, that plan is off. Kyle has had second thoughts about the acclimatization aspects of a direct move to 19,200'. He's polled the other guides at camp 1 and most recommend a go-slow approach. Also, Henrik does not want to chance a direct move. He says that he's still feeling a little ill and needs more time. While he has Diamox with him, the doctor who treated him the day before yesterday told him not to take it. Apparently, it would interfere with the medicine Henrik is taking for his illness.

I understand all of this and know that the consensus right answer is "go slow." However, I'm disappointed because the best answer for me is "go direct." Maybe it is a function of my age but I'm worried that I won't be able to go hard two days running. The only upside is that I'll get a chance to find out.

Monday, January 15

Today we did the carry I was hoping to avoid. The good news is that I made it to camp 2 in good form and in well under the predicted 5-hour time. The bad news is that I've got to repeat the performance tomorrow. I'm confident that I can.

The first part of the trip consisted of getting to the top of the col. This wasn't half bad. I caught up to a line of climbers and simply tagged along at their slow pace. We just zigzagged our way up the col and I went past when they took a break. They were an interesting bunch. I learned that a Mom, Dad, a couple of young adult kids and other relatives were trying to climb Aconcagua together. They were on their way to a move to camp 2 a day ahead of us. Impressive!

Conditions en route to the col were good. The snow wasn't deep and was quickly brushed aside by the foot traffic. Kyle, Henrik, Greg and I all went at our own pace since route finding wasn't an issue. I outdistanced Henrik and Kyle me. Above the col the terrain became steeper and looser. Watching me from above, Kyle wrote a message for me in the snow: "Tom, go slow!" Frankly, by the time I reached it, the ground had gotten so loose that I had no alternative but to go very slow indeed. Two steps forward, one step back became the order of the day. It was a mixture of just plain hard and horrible. I am no good at all in these conditions. On solid ground, I can cruise along with the best.

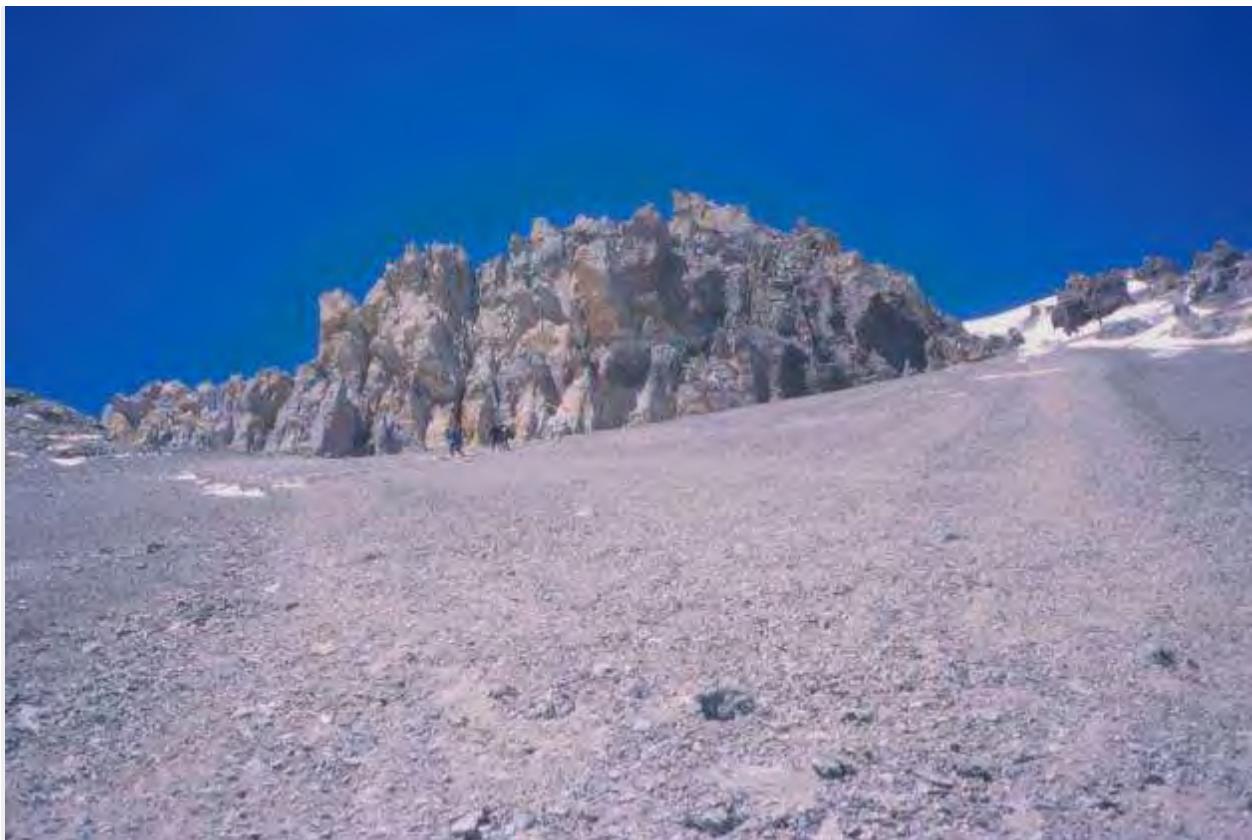
On the loose stuff I struggle. I felt like I was lunging forward in breathless spasms rather than methodically climbing.



Above the Col on way to Camp 2

About 2 hours 30 minutes out from camp Henrik passed me. After three hours without a break I stopped for rest. While I rested, even Greg motored by. Perched on my rock on a mountain that seemed to be disintegrating under my feet, I consulted my altimeter and learned that I had roughly another 1000 vertical feet left to go. This was a depressing prospect. However, after 20 minutes of R&R, I was ready to proceed. The slope led upward towards some rocky outcrops and shortly after setting out, I came upon Kyle. Mercifully, my altimeter must have been off because we pulled into camp less than an hour after I ended my break. The last 45 minutes was mainly a traverse. My heart fairly leapt at the sight of the tents at camp 2. While I was last to arrive, my time of 4 hours and 13 minutes was fantastic. Kyle really blitzed up. He said that he made the trip in only three hours.

Upon meeting Kyle at the head of the final traverse, he offered to carry my pack. I told him that I was fine and wasn't looking for help. He insisted that I let him carry the pack. He ventured that I didn't look good and that the next piece of trail was slippery and exposed.



Approaching traverse to Camp 2

I was bemused because I really did feel fine but let him take the pack anyway. On principle, I felt obliged to go along with his judgment. "Guide knows best" sums up my philosophy. However, it was tested because the traverse was routine and uncomplicated. I took my pack back well before reaching camp. All in all, it was a very odd incident.

At camp 2 we picked out a tent site and then had a great lunch of sausage and cheese. This might have been my favorite meal of the trip. It was cold and a light snow fell on us. We were all comfortable because we had our down jackets with us. I continue to regard my Feathered Friends jacket as the ultimate expression of the jacket-makers' art. I'm absolutely confident in its ability to keep me snug and warm.

Because the weather was dicey we didn't linger topside for much more than an hour. We dumped our loads and bugged out. The descent was blindingly quick. I am not the fastest descender in the world but it took me only 53 minutes to reach our tent at camp 1. Along the way, it dawned on me why the trail is such an unconsolidated mess. It is the descenders that screw things up for the ascenders. Plunge stepping down absolutely pulverizes the trail. It turns it into a misbegotten hash just a little to the good side of sand.

I'm happy with my performance. I'm overjoyed that the climb is not as severe as I feared. It was a hard effort, but one that I'm confident that I can repeat tomorrow. Kyle, Henrik and Greg are also looking strong. They'll run back up tomorrow with no problems. It's now 4 pm and all I want to do is lie down in my bag and rest for a while. I've earned a nap.

Tuesday, January 16

Oh, happy day! We are now settled in at camp 2 and life is good. Upon starting out, I was a little apprehensive because of the 3,000' plus vertical gain, heavy packs and residual tiredness from yesterday. In the event, I was just fine. I'm delighted to record that everybody in our little band is holding up quite well.



Our tent at Camp 2

The trip up took 4 hours 53 minutes, which was great because we took one long and two shorter breaks along the way. I raced to the top of Amhegino col first but, unlike yesterday, cooled my jets there while the others made their way up. I wanted to discipline myself by taking more and longer breaks. I recognized that my three-hour non-stop climb yesterday was foolish. The col was a great place to rest. The sun felt warm when you got out of the wind and the view down the far-off Relinchos Valley was terrific. I ate a Power Bar and sipped the warm water of my CamelBak. Contentment! Kyle was genuinely shocked to see me waiting for Henrik and him. The break stretched out for another half-hour and we chatted with a group from Rochester, New York. I agreed with their leader that neither Houston nor Rochester is the climbing Mecca of the world.

The Rochester group had had some setbacks. One of their members got sick at camp 2 and the three others had to evacuate him to base camp at night. They made good progress until they hit the long interval between the promontory and the bluff. There the trail became confusing without cairns as visible reference points. They blundered

around in the dark for a long time before finding their way down. One of them commented that it would have been priceless to see a GPS track of their blind wanderings. I thought it pretty impressive that they were able to get themselves organized for another attempt.

I feared that the footing would be looser today than yesterday because the snow was mostly gone and there was nothing to hold things together. Actually, it seemed better. I also felt that the efficiency of my moves was better. I stuck with Kyle on the difficult section above the col and got several tips from him that proved helpful. As with the second trip to camp 1, the second to camp 2 seemed shorter because I had a sense of how far we had to go. The combination of more rest stops, more food, more water and experience on the route made the trip far nicer.

About an hour from the top, it clouded up and it snowed while we put up our tent, got water, cooked and settled in. The tent site proved less agreeable today than yesterday. Yesterday everything was frozen. Today things had thawed out and our area became so wet that we had to pave a couple of square yards of it with stones. At 19,200', doing that was no picnic. We battened down the tent as securely as possible. The wind had left us unscathed so far but we knew that this couldn't last forever.

It is now 5 pm and I am happy to be in the tent. I'm also pretty well stuffed because we feasted on sausage and cheese in pasta. It was spectacularly heavy but a great way to pack in needed calories.

During dinner, we discussed what comes next. Kyle threw me a curve ball by arguing strongly for a summit bid from here rather than an intermediary move to White Rocks or Independencia. This takes me aback because yesterday we discussed skipping White Rocks in favor of Independencia. I thought this a great idea because White Rocks is just 200' higher than where we are at the Polish Glacier's toe. While it is three hours closer to the summit than camp 2, I never quite saw the logic of camping at White Rocks. Perhaps the best rationalization is that it's near the Normal Route and if you're going to traverse the mountain, it is convenient. Naturally, it was already decided that we would not descend via the Normal Route. In my view, camping at Independencia would be a brilliant tactic. Independencia is at just under 21,000'. Camping there would break the

remaining part of the ascent into two 1,800' pieces. While I'm not confident of my ability to do one 3,600' push to the summit, I'm sure I can do two 1,800' days.



Overlooking Amhegino from Camp 2

Naturally, one thing that tempers my desire to insist on the conservative route is that I'd like to know whether I'm physically capable of a gigantic summit day. Young and strong as they are Kyle and Henrik have every right to believe that they'll be able to gut it out to the top. Greg is willing to do whatever we choose to do. I'll sleep on this.



Greg shooting Amhegino

Meanwhile, I'm counting my blessings. I'm here and I'm reasonably healthy. I am absolutely certain to set a new personal best. Whatever else happens, I've already got a respectable tale to tell and I will finally get to 20,000'. Those are good thoughts to sleep on. Add one more good thought: tomorrow's a rest day!

Wednesday, January 17

It's 11 am on our rest day and all is not well. Kyle has been suffering with morning headaches for the past couple of days. He awoke with a crushing one today. Henrik is also having problems. He's got a headache and his fever has returned. Touch wood, I'm feeling great.

The night was very cold and windy. It was noisy in the tent because of the constant buffeting. Sleep was fitful for all of us. Kyle is showing his mettle in spite of his problems. He's hurting but he keeps on working. He cooks, organizes and frequently ventures outside to talk with other climbers and guides. I admire his toughness. I know

that if I was suffering from a headache I'd just want to stay put in my sleeping bag. Henrik too is functioning. He's just less ebullient than before. Like Kyle, he continues to enjoy spending time outside the tent. I'm the homebody of the group. I'm absolutely content to stay tucked away in the tent for hours at a time. Even though the view from up here is fantastic, I'm not interested in bundling up to partake of it.

We discussed plans for the summit this morning. We're talking about an attempt, weather permitting, as early as tomorrow morning. From a practical viewpoint, given the mandatory early wake up, that means tonight! This is not best from an acclimatization view but it may be necessary to give Henrik any shot at all. He's worried that he'll just continue to get worse at 19,200'. "Eight hours of pain," that's how Henrik characterizes what needs to be endured in order to get to the top. I think that I'll be able to do the eight hours. I know that I'll get a new altitude record. But, that doesn't count. I really want to get to the summit. Now that I'm this close, the summit is finally real to me. Nine days ago when we first laid eyes on the mountain from Casa de Piedra, the summit was unthinkably distant. Now it's only 3,600 vertical feet away.

We have abandoned the thought of a Polish Glacier attempt. The reality is that we are lamentably ill equipped. We don't have a proper climbing rope, Kyle doesn't have a harness and none of us has a second ice tool. Further, we have heard that conditions on the Glacier have deteriorated. The ice is treacherous up top and very few teams are attempting the route. Interestingly, the Germans who we met at Casa de Piedra have positioned themselves at the toe and will give the route a try tomorrow. They look impressively strong. As for us, even if we did have the equipment, based on today's medical report, neither Henrik nor Kyle is enthusiastic. Health-wise I feel able but our lack of equipment can't be overlooked. For safety reasons I'd opt for the Falso even if the Glacier route were in great shape. It's too bad because our camp is positioned just underneath the Glacier and from here it looks tantalizingly close to the top. By comparison, our route up seems long and circuitous. It looks like I'll have to settle for seeing Piedra Bandera rather than touching it.

I'm back in the tent at 2 pm and I've just done a water run. On sunny afternoons melting occurs and there is a chance to get liquid water. So far today, we've melted ice. It was hard work filling the bottles and lugging them around. I had the Platypus all filled and was filling a bunch of Nalgene bottles when the Platypus toppled over. Arrraugh! Back to

square one. Fortunately, it is sunny outside and there is not too much wind. Not bad at all for 19,200' but it's infinitely nicer in the tent. While doing the water run, I thanked my lucky stars for the thousandth time that I had my down booties along with me. They are my footwear of choice whenever I have to go out for short around-camp jaunts. They're wonderfully warm and are a snap to put on and get off. I've used them so much that their soles are getting positively tattered. I'm afraid that my affection for them will be their ruination; the rocky ground of our campsites is more than the fragile booties were designed for. Kyle and Henrik are making do with their plastic boot liners and eye the booties enviously.



Greg tending to cut fingers with Super-Glue

Thursday, January 18

An absolutely brutal night has given way to a bright morning. The cold of the night was intense and frightening. It snowed yesterday through the late afternoon and evening. The wind forced snow into the tent, making everything unpleasantly moist. To avoid this and to ward off the increasing cold we closed up all the openings of the tent. This helped keep us warm but compounded the wetness problem because our own breath

caused a rime of ice to form everywhere inside the tent. With the wind gusting to tremendous speeds and the tent rattling violently all night long, icy particles rained down on us. It was literally snowing inside the tent. It was awful, our worst night of the trip. The conditions mercifully precluded any thought of a summit attempt.

I could not get warm enough because all the moisture compromised my down bag. Yet, I was warm enough that I didn't want to get up and put on more clothes. Pick your evil. It was so cold that my pee bottle, which mercifully just lasted the night, was partly frozen in the morning. Now, that's cold! However, with the rising of the sun, things got much nicer. The winds began to abate at around 4 am and, had we left for the summit at 5 am, we would have had a good climbing day. Nonetheless, I'm glad that we are waiting until tomorrow morning for our bid. My plan is to organize my gear today, try to rest up, and pray that I have the strength to endure the long trip to the top. We are all in the same boat in this regard. Naturally, we'll need a lot of help from the weather.

It is now 11 am and I've just finished breakfast. It takes a long time to chip ice and melt enough for drinks and hot cereal. I had a couple of packages of Doug's grits. As far as grits go they were fine. Too bad we've already gobbled up all of the flavored oatmeal packets he gave us. Kyle remains the head chef but at least I've learned how to use the camp stove and can help with the cooking duties. Henrik is an enthusiastic assistant chef. He continues to eat gigantic quantities of everything. This is a winning strategy that I wish I could gin up the will to emulate. Part of the reason for our slow start this morning is that Kyle woke with another miserable headache. I've been giving him Advils to help out but relief does not come quickly. I continue to be impressed with his cheerfulness and work ethic. He's a good kid.

One absolutely wonderful bit of news is that Henrik has abandoned the idea of climbing Amhegino after doing Aconcagua. He first suggested that we try it while we were at camp 1. Despite his iffy health, he's continued to court the idea. He has been emboldened by the fact that camp 2 overlooks Amhegino and, from here, you can easily scout a feasible route to the top. My attitude has been "no way!" from the start. I have no desire to climb Amhegino. However, I said that if Kyle and he wanted to do it, I'd support them from a camp on the col. I think that Henrik's decision to bag the attempt is great because it means that we'll be able to get down a day earlier than otherwise. Kyle also seems quietly relieved about this.

I've assessed my physical condition and have no significant complaints. I'm cautiously optimistic about my chances of getting to the top. Lots of other people have done so and I know that I'm pretty strong. I need to stay focused and highly motivated. Also, I'll need to model on Kyle and take plenty of rest breaks. This is all incredibly exciting and nerve-wracking. I'm praying that I do well.

Meanwhile, dinner tonight should be a nice diversion. Kyle was able to snag a load of freeze-dried meals from some Canadians who have summited and are on their way down. Although I still can't taste a thing, I'm thrilled about a change in our diet. There is absolutely no way that it can't be better than the glop we've been eating lately.

Friday, January 19

This has been the hardest day in the mountains that I have ever had but, I SUMMITTED ACONCAGUA!

The day started with a wake up at 2:30am. We spent a long time melting enough ice to last us the entire day and had a light oatmeal breakfast. I had done most of my packing the night before so all I had to do was to dress and try to stay warm. It was very cold in the tent and I was buoyed by the fact that Greg and Henrik had given me hand and foot warmers to use. The foot warmers are adhesive-backed and go directly on the socks. The hand warmers are like little rosin sacks. Sitting in the freezing tent, I was pretty sure that a little bit of chemical warmth wouldn't go amiss.

We went outside at 4 am and started moving at 4:15 am. As soon as I swung my pack on I realized that its straps were too tight for my heavy clothing. I'd never before used the big pack with my down jacket on. Because the straps were pinned into position, I couldn't correct the problem until we made our first stop an hour later. There was no way I was going to take off my gloves to remove the safety pins right away. This was a small but disconcerting error. A much worse problem that happened almost immediately upon my going outdoors was that the feed line on my CamelBak froze, never to recover for the rest of the outing. Once again, the mistake was mine. I was so keyed up that I did not think to blow the water out of the line before leaving the tent. The cold was so absolutely brutal that the line froze solid in seconds.

The night was black and I have never experienced such cold. Even with the hand and foot warmers, sensation left almost immediately. I felt that my feet would be okay but for the first half-hour of the route, my hands really scared me. I actually began to prepare myself for aborting my climb. I did not want to return home maimed and was ready to turn back if the effort of climbing didn't bring feeling back into my hands. Happily, after 30 minutes of work my hands began to tingle and I knew that I'd be all right.



Henrik, Kyle, Tom on route to top

We crossed over two separate snowfields along the Falso route and donned crampons and unlimbered the ice axe for both. They were easy, no more than gently upward traverses. In the first snowfield I discovered that I had made yet another mistake when my right crampon came loose. Because the terrain was easy, it was no big deal and easy to fix. However, my mind reeled at the stupidity of the thing. Under other circumstances this could have been deadly. I flashed back to the moment when I put the crampon on and remembered that the strap did not look quite right. However, I was hurrying to minimize the time my gloves were off and ignored it. I was also preoccupied with adjusting the fit of my backpack. Little mistakes create bigger ones.



Independencia Hut

After the snowfields the going was uneventful until we reached the Independencia hut. The trails were good. Greg began the climb with us but we soon outdistanced him. Kyle, Henrik and I traveled together, a relative rarity on this trip. We even stopped for a group photo shortly after dawn. Kyle seemed to be his old self but was hurting on the inside. Some of the Canadians' freeze-dried food had disagreed with him and he admitted that he was feeling queasy and unwell. I gave him my container of Advils and we all hoped for the best.

Reaching Independencia was a significant milestone for me. After seeing pictures of it in the guidebook I was thrilled to be able to experience it in person. The hut is in ruins and never was much to look at to start with, but sitting as it does at 20,997', I was ecstatic to be level with it. From Independencia you can see the Normal Route as it snakes its way up from below. By this time, the morning was bright and sunny. Down on the Normal Route there was a riot of colors on the move up toward us. Each colorful dot marked a parka-clad climber hopeful for the summit. It really was a wonderful sight.

At this point in the climb I was feeling great. I was warm enough and had lots of energy. I was mentally strong because I had already bagged a new personal-best altitude record. My only concern was hydration and my damned CamelBak. I was hopeful that

the sun would thaw it out but it was as stiff as ever. It was awkward to remove my backpack and drink by unscrewing the lid to its bladder. Consequently, I was drinking far too little and didn't have a good plan to fix the problem. My solution? Plow on and ignore it.



Henrik and Tom near Cresta de Viento

After a break at Independencia we made our way up to the Cresta de Viento. True to its name, the wind was stiff. It was very cold in the shadow of the mountain. I put my hood up and my glacier glasses were soon fogged with ice. The Cresta de Viento led us on to the beginning of the Gran Acarreo. We quickly learned that getting to Independencia is a stroll in the park compared with everything that comes after it. From perfectly nice trails the footing deteriorated into a shattered disaster zone of loose rock, crushed rock and any other kind of rock that Mother Nature could think of to make progress unpleasant. We quickly resumed the two-steps-forward-one-step-back scenario of the other day. Then we hit the Canaleta and things got much worse.

The Canaleta is the curving slope that guards the summit. It is horrible beyond words. You move from scree trail to scree trail hoping to find one with relatively firmer footing. Mostly you toil upward and slide back. The experience is thoroughly disheartening. Despite its apparent solidity and the fortress-like aspect it presents from afar, Aconcagua is a crumbling heap of rocks. Climbing it is hateful work. Since there are a thousand ways to the top, it was futile for our group to try to climb together. It was every man for himself and good luck finding a patch of firm ground.

On the plus side, and this is the only one, Aconcagua is a popular mountain and we always had plenty of company while laboring up the 1,300 vertical feet of the Canaleta. It is true that misery loves company. I drew great solace from not being alone here. It was very important for me to watch others suffering yet not giving up. I thought of all the work I had invested to put myself where I was and felt positive that my preparation was as good as anyone's. This was a powerful thought. Nobody else seemed to be quitting and I wasn't going to play the wimp.

I looked up toward the summit every few minutes and got used to the fact that it never seemed to get any closer. I was on autopilot. I just kept on with the one foot in front of the other routine and concentrated on the next two steps. For a long while, I followed a fellow who looked, if anything, in worse shape than me. Pain was written on his every feature. Whoever was following me must have thought that I looked like a wreck as well. Progress was ridiculously slow and every step difficult. Occasionally, I could see Henrik above me. He wasn't terribly far away but at these altitudes, a little way up seems unreachably distant. After goodness-knows-how-long of this plodding, it occurred to me that people in front of me were disappearing over the top of a big pile of rocks that was just ahead. In my addled condition, it took a while to register that nothing lay above that final rock-pile. With a drumming heart, I wove and scrambled up the final fifty feet and was there. At 1:53 pm, I finally stood on the summit. The only emotion I felt was relief.

You could hold a convention on Aconcagua's summit. It is gigantic. The north summit is more of a plateau than the top of a pyramid. It looks like some accommodating giant had hacked the pointy part of the pyramid off, leaving a roughly level rooftop for apostles to collapse on. It is a good seventy-five by one hundred and fifty feet in dimension. Off to one end there is a ridge that connects to the lower south summit of

the mountain. The south face is plainly visible, steep, snowy and beautiful. Only the truly committed need apply.

The weather up topside was perfect. While there was a distant haze on the horizon, looking up you saw the deep blue of the upper atmosphere. It wasn't windy and anyone who chose to could stay there comfortably for hours. I have no recollection of how cold it was up there.

Immediately upon arriving on this hallowed ground, I collapsed in a grateful heap. It felt so wonderful to sit down and rest for a while. Henrik, who had arrived a good 30 minutes before me, came over and offered happy congratulations. Moments later, Kyle came over the top and joined us. After 30 seconds of smiles and attaboys, Kyle sat down, took off his pack, rolled over on his side and puked. Welcome to Aconcagua, Kyle! Never mind, he quickly rallied and rooted in his pack for his "special surprise." He came out with three El Cheapo cigars and we importuned someone to take our picture. I can't wait to see what the pictures will look like. I remember that I had a frozen icicle of snot dangling from my nose but insufficient willpower to swipe it away. It just didn't seem important at the time. As for the cigar, I never took it out of its wrapper. Ironman Henrik actually tried to light his!

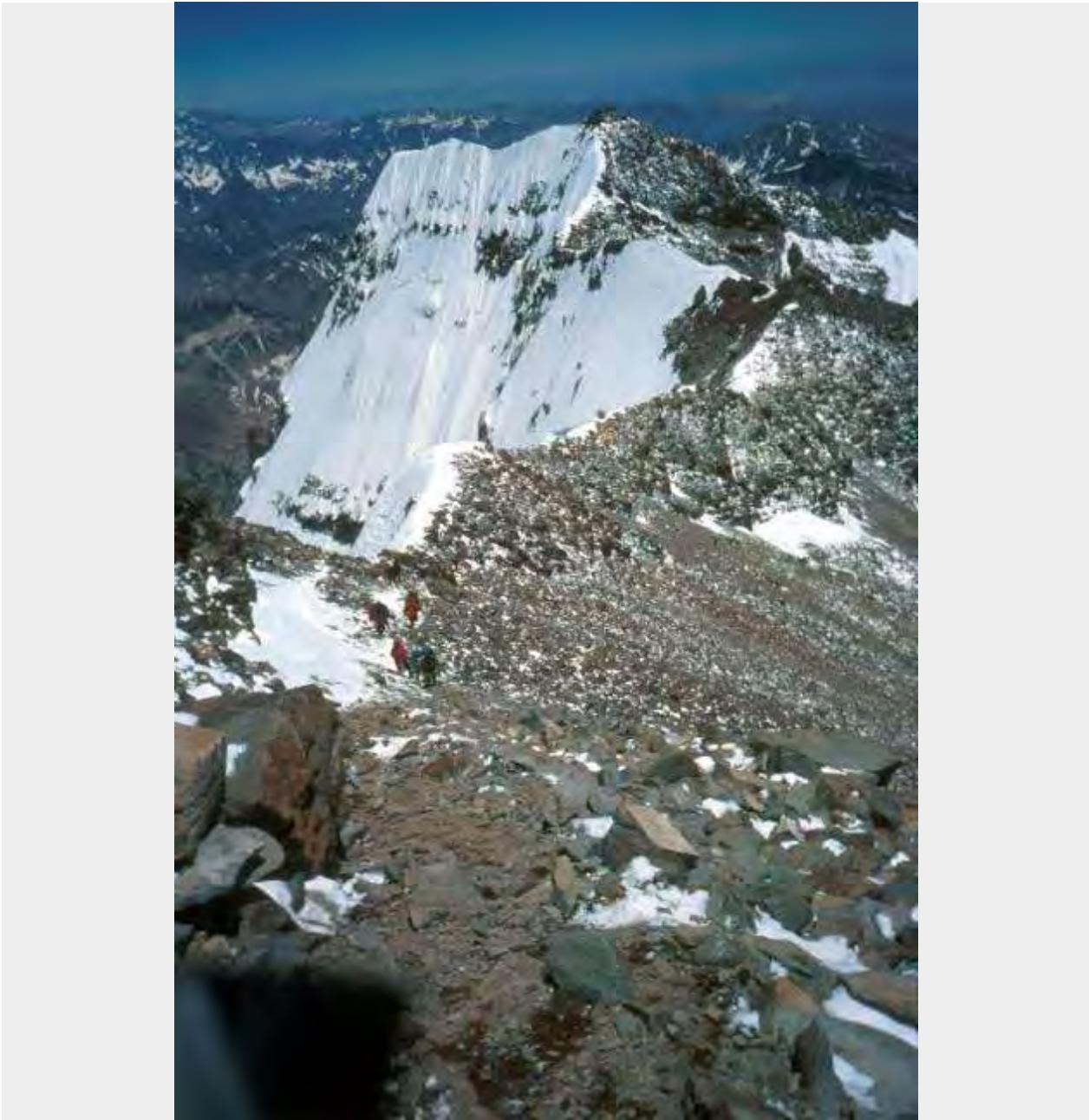


Cigar shot: Henrik, Kyle, Tom

I can't say that I devoted much attention to the views all around me. Exhaustion made me somewhat indifferent to the scenery. However, I did remember to look towards the west and try to see the Pacific Ocean seventy miles away. I convinced myself that the bluish blur on the horizon was the Pacific and was satisfied with that. Doing a slow 360-degree pirouette, I was gratified to see that, indeed, nothing was higher. For the first time in hours, I checked my Suunto altimeter-watch and logged the altitude for posterity.

I also fulfilled my ambition of touching the aluminum cross that sits on the summit. I had thought of the cross many times in the past months and it was a genuine thrill to do so. My only small disappointment was that the cross that's there now is different from the one shown in the books. It is a modest affair (remember, somebody had to carry it up) all festooned with commemorative ribbons and offerings. Its base is fairly littered with junk. Nonetheless, by touching it I felt distinctly that a life's ambition had been satisfied. I will take that happy memory to my grave.

After the cigar shot and some perfunctory chatter, we agreed that the time had come to bug out. I don't know if Kyle and I were on the summit for a half-hour. Apart from throwing up, Kyle looked fine and was customarily impish. However, he did share that he was feeling dehydrated and not at his best. Apparently, an upset stomach had plagued him all the way up and he had several episodes of vomiting. He's a tough guy to have persevered.



Aconcagua's daunting South Face

For me, the descent was the really hard part. I was thoroughly spent by the approximately 10-hour trip up and going down through the treacherous conditions of the Canaleta was almost more than I could do. I had neither eaten nor drunk enough all day and this absolutely killed my descender muscles. My leg muscles felt like Jell-O and I repeatedly had to stop for rest. I would take five steps and collapse on my butt to recover. Even when I could plainly see Independencia in the distance below me, I despaired of reaching it. I was completely at the end of my physical tether. Kyle stayed with me and gave encouragement. Henrik preceded us at his usual breakneck pace. He was in fine fettle despite the long day. It was a deliverance to finally reach Independencia. I knew that the hardest part of the trip down was now behind me. However, when I reached it I had nothing left. I honestly felt that I might have to bivouac there for the night. This frightened me because I was inadequately prepared for the cold that would surely come. It seemed so stupid for my body to peter out this close to the finish line.



Climbers on the descent

The weary shreds of intellect I had left rationalized my sorry condition as the product of too little food and water. Where there is a reason, there's a fix. I hauled out my NutriGrains and a half-eaten Power Bar and chowed down. I finished the rest of my water. After this and half an hour's rest I surveyed the next hour or so of route in front of me and decided that I could do it. My Lazarus-like recovery didn't leave me feeling fit as a fiddle but at least I could push forward without sitting down every five steps. The increased firmness of the footing contributed mightily to my confidence. I gratefully put the thought of a bivouac from my mind. The rest of the trip down passed in a painful haze. I remember hitting the snowfields and Kyle helping me with my crampons. Henrik eventually got frustrated with traveling in the company of such a dragging anchor as me and went ahead to finish the route alone. I don't blame him.

We reached the tents at 6:15 pm, 14-hours after starting out. I was grateful beyond words to have made it back to the starting point. Our friends from Rochester gave us hot water and some sliced ham. The tent looked better than anything I had ever seen, a veritable Taj Mahal of civilized comfort. As I write this, my entire being is suffused with a feeling of contentment. It is wonderful to be safe, warm and stationary. I am indescribably happy to have succeeded in climbing this thing. Now I can begin to contemplate escape from the mountain and the manifold pleasures of the world away from these slopes.

Both Henrik and I declined dinner. Bless his heart, Kyle declared that his stomach was feeling better and he had another go at the Canadians' freeze dried stuff. We've seen Greg and he was also successful. He arrived in camp about 90-minutes after us. It is lovely to luxuriate in our cozy sleeping bags. We are all going to bed early tonight. The pain is over and life is good!



Final night at Camp 2

Saturday, January 20

This was break-camp and walk down day, our goal, base camp.

We slept until 9 am and didn't start the descent until about noon. At the outset I was worried. My pack was enormous and legs still rubbery. However, by taking it slow I made it to camp 1 in an hour and a half. The journey was not pleasant for me. It was painfully reminiscent of the Gran Acarreo. We rested at camp 1 for a full hour, enjoying the sun and thicker air. During the break, Henrik ragged on Kyle over an incident that happened yesterday. Apparently, while we were on the Canaleta, Kyle told Henrik he was looking bad and insisted on carrying his pack for him! Henrik immediately told Kyle to go screw himself. He now teased Kyle for his presumption. It was a funny story. Good for Henrik in showing more gumption than I did in similar circumstances!



Heavily laden, Kyle sets off for Base Camp

The long rest at camp 1 did me a world of good. I savored the warmth of the sun on my skin and for the thousandth time thanked heaven for the fabulous weather that's been with us on this trip. While I felt rejuvenated by the rest, the remainder of the journey to base camp was hard. My legs are plain spent and the heavy plastic boots are no pleasure to walk downhill in. We finally reached base camp 4 hours 41 minutes after leaving camp 2. It was thrilling to come round the bend and see the colorful tent city. As

on the day of our arrival eleven days earlier, Daniel Lopez ushered us into his large tent and gave us hot tea. Once again, it was delightful to sit in those white plastic garden chairs!

It is now 7:30 pm, our tents are up and the good news is that we can take light packs to Las Leñas. There the mules will meet us with our heavy gear. We had banked on having to carry tents, sleeping bags and food before being reunited with the rest of our gear at Rudy Parra's. This is infinitely nicer. We'll be in Mendoza in two day's time.

I've taken stock of my physical condition and am happy that nothing is seriously amiss. My right big toe has a big blister and is tender. Less of a problem are blackened big and pinkie toenails on my left foot. I'll lose those nails by and by. My taste buds remain on indefinite leave but I'm used to that by now. It feels absolutely lovely to have a fresh set of clothes on. Dinner is cooking and I am hugely grateful to have the mountain behind me and just the trek out to contend with.

The trek out won't be easy. It is 15 tough miles to Las Leñas. I just hope that my right toe will bear up for the journey. Meanwhile, I'm oh-so-happy to be this close to escape from the mountain. Life is good!

Sunday, January 21

What a day! Things started out on a high note with a breakfast, courtesy of Camp5, served by Daniel. We had scrambled eggs, hash browns and coffee. Everything was absolutely delicious. Daniel brought his plastic table and chairs outside and we ate under azure skies and the now-friendly hulking mass of the mountain. Fortunately, my taste buds even checked in for a rare public appearance. But, the delicious food was only half of it. Breakfast was made even better because we were surrounded by some new arrivals from who were clearly envious of our success. We told our war stories to an avidly appreciative audience and it was plain that each of them dreamed of occupying our lucky shoes. Sweet!



Henrik, Tom, Daniel, Greg, Kyle at victory breakfast

Our trio plus Greg left base camp at about 10 am. My heart was light and I was inexpressibly happy to be going down in triumph. It felt great to be back in my running shoes and to wear my featherweight pack. The trip to Casa de Piedra took about 4

hours 20 minutes. This was about four hours quicker than what we did on the hike up. We forded the river multiple times. Each crossing was tension-filled but worked out fine. I have to say that I was glad to put the precipitous Relinchos Valley behind me. Given the milder terrain of the Vacas Valley, I thought that the trek from Casa de Piedra to Las Leñas would be a cakewalk.



Greg fighting current at head of Relinchos Valley

Wrong! I found the going very difficult. It was loaded with opportunities for sprained ankles. My sneakers took a relentless beating and so too my toes. It seemed positively endless. By the time we hit camp, 8 hours 44 minutes had elapsed and it was nearly 7 pm. This was one long, difficult and tiring trip. For the most part, Henrik led the way. He seemed oddly intent on trying to prove how strong he is, walking far out in front of us. Strange because he had nothing to prove to any of us.

Because of his habitual slowness, I thought that I was stronger than Greg but no way. He just keeps going and going. He let slip along the way that when he was 20 years old he was the sixth ranked 400m runner in the world! He had been a legitimate Olympic

hopeful. He is good company and a nice person. He's 37 years old and said that he hopes to do the Seven Summits by the time he is 40. Hidden depths. One down and six to go.



Crossing bridge upstream from Las Leñas

A bit of rivalry seemed to surface between Henrik and Kyle today on the trail. Henrik was better at choosing the right route and Kyle seemingly retaliated by taking a shortcut that brought him even with Henrik. He dumped Greg and me to get this important piece of business done. It may be that our group dynamic is falling apart a bit because we don't need each other as much anymore. I don't think it unfair to say that Henrik is a child. He's a guy whose style is to do what he wants when he wants. He's very entertaining company though and was a good teammate when it mattered. Shallow or not, he is a better mountain-man than me.

It's now 9 pm, the tents are up and I've enjoyed the last of the Canadians' freeze-dried. Tonight it was a packet of Mexican mush that I shared with Kyle. It was pretty good. I'm looking forward to a good night's sleep. Greg and Henrik are having a pizza at the Las

Leñas food tent. That sounds pretty good but I prefer rest. I'll share a tent with Henrik tonight. Both Greg and Kyle have opted to forego tents and just sleep under the stars.

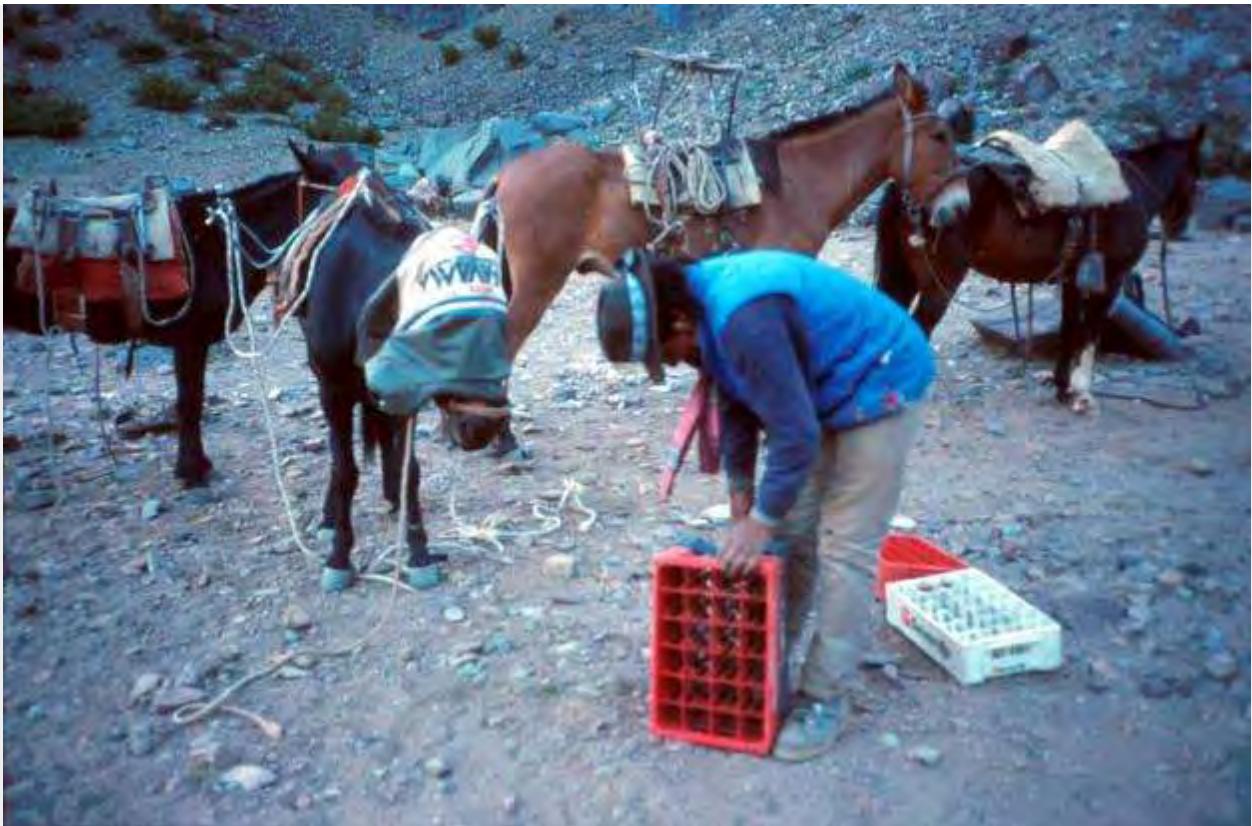
God willing, this will be our last night in the tent. I am hugely looking forward to morning and finishing the last 7 miles of the hike. It should take roughly three and a half hours and the bus should be waiting for us at noon. We'll probably have a brief stop at Rudy Parra's and then be off for Mendoza. Personally, I just can't wait to step aboard that mini-bus. This has been another remarkable and exhausting day. To cover 15 miles over difficult terrain is no mean feat. Once again, I'm impressed by my resilience and ability to keep going. I think I did a good job today. I kept up, stayed injury-free and maintained good spirits. Whenever I stop to reflect on what I've done on this trip, I glow with satisfaction. I vividly remember a fellow who was on the way down when we pulled into Las Leñas two weeks ago. He said that he had been on the summit two days before. Now, so had I.

We'll be back to civilization tomorrow. I'm so excited I don't know whether I'll be able to sleep.

Monday, January 22

Thank heaven, it is now over.

I slept poorly last night. Despite lots of Carmex, applied as frequently as I could manage, my lips are in horrible shape. They burned all night long and kept me awake. I need to be much more careful about sun protection in the future. Finally, 8 am rolled around and we began to prepare for the final leg of the march out. The muleteers did their thing, I had a quick breakfast of hot water and we moved out at 9:30 am.



Muleteers on last day of hike out

By recent standards the trek was short but it seemed interminable to me. Henrik and I were in the lead. Try as I might to savor the experience, to revel in my good health and to imprint the images of the route that I missed in my black depression on the way in, I couldn't. I just wanted out. My heart wasn't in it when we tarried to look at lizards and other odd bits of fauna. However, it was entertaining to greet climbers on the way up and bathe in their admiring attention. As usual, the route became somewhat confusing. I took the low road and Henrik the high one. It turned out to be a push.

However, the psychological advantage of the low road was that down near the river, the hand of man became more apparent. It was cheering to see an irrigation culvert following the river as it wove its course down the valley. The technology was strictly Paleolithic but it worked and required the regular presence of people to maintain and benefit from it. This is a long way of saying that it meant that we were getting closer to the road. At just about 3 hours into the trek I spied the road and some commercial buildings. Scruffy as they were, it was absolutely wonderful to see them! Fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the road and the climb was officially over.

At our final group rest stop, Kyle asked me to call Rudy Parra when I arrived at the trailhead. Logically enough, nobody was scheduled to be at the trailhead patiently waiting for us to arrive. While Henrik held down the fort waiting for the others, I moseyed a couple of hundred yards down the road to a truck stop to find a pay phone. I called Rudy and used my best pidgin Spanish to plead for pickup. The message was understood. I bought a few Cokes and walked back to the trailhead. It was positively sybaritic to savor the cold Coke. The others were all there by the time I got back. They loved the cold drinks as well. We immediately saddled up and walked back down to the truck stop. The van pulled up virtually at the second we arrived. Great timing!

The mini-bus was already loaded with our gear and at 1:30 pm we stepped aboard. I will never forget how wonderful it felt to have all the work done and to be on easy street. All of us dozed off and on during the two-hour ride to Mendoza. It was fabulous to see colors, trees and grasslands again. The ride was totally relaxing and unbelievably comfortable. What a joy it was to sit on the van's upholstered seats!

A couple of weeks in the mountains sharpen your appreciation for so many simple things. Maybe the biggest benefit of a trip like this is that you flush away your indifference to common comforts and value them at their true worth. It is wonderful to discover yourself relishing things that you've taken for granted for years. Suddenly, everything about life is more interesting.

The ride passed quickly. Before long we rolled past the Wal-Mart and were entertained by a cyclist pounding hard down an on-ramp to catch up with a truck. In proper "Breaking Away" fashion, he managed to latch on and thunder along in the draft. Good man! In any event, we arrived at the Nutibara's door in what seemed like no time at all. Once inside, we drew rooms and were ensconced in air-conditioned comfort within minutes.



Mendoza handicrafts merchant

Before doing anything else, I called home. It was a relief to find that everything is okay at home. I gave the 10-minute summary of my mountaineering triumph, reveled in my well-deserved adulation and next headed for the shower. I was filthy beyond description. The runnels of water coming off my body were black. The Nutibara's plumbing may never recover. I brushed my teeth, thus ending a lifetime-best hiatus from oral hygiene, and took a stab at shaving. Alas, my beard was way beyond the capacity of my little Good News shaver.

Finally clean, I changed into fresh clothes (another moment of simple joy!) and stepped out at 4:30 pm. I found a barbershop and had my first-ever professional shave. It took 45 minutes and was great. I proudly imparted to the barber that I was just back from the summit of Aconcagua. He had little English and I little Spanish. He probably thought that I was some kind of crackpot. Thrifty me, the whole affair only cost \$10, including tip.

After the shave, I savored walking on the even ground and tropical heat of Mendoza. I spent considerable time searching for a tee shirt but finally landed one that I liked.

Having worked assiduously at this and mindful of my need to stay hydrated, I plopped down at a sidewalk café and had an enormous bottle of beer. Disappointingly, my taste buds remained on strike.

My next stop was the Nutibara where I lazed around until 9 pm when we all met downstairs to go out for dinner. On Henrik's recommendation, we went to the Las Tinajas Restaurant, an eat-until-you-drop buffet. It was a perfect choice. We all lost a lot weight on the mountain and the time was ripe to start packing the calories in. We were at the right place for that particular task and ate gigantically. My taste vaguely returned for the meal and I was thrilled. Good food, good beer, good company. It was a happy evening. As a way of saying "thanks" to the guys for all of their support, I picked up the dinner tab (\$51!) and Greg left the tip. With all this rich food, I'll probably be up all night.

Tuesday, January 23

I shouldn't make predictions. I was right. I was up pretty much all night long following our food binge. No matter, it was worth it.

The first order of business today was to get down to the airline's offices and try to book an earlier flight out of here. I arrived at 9 am and was hopeful of getting out today but the best they could do was tomorrow. I'm stuck here until then. I'm disappointed that I can't get out tonight. However, since I've already missed our 30th wedding anniversary, I suppose an extra day won't matter much. Wednesday sure beats Friday, anyway.

An unexpected pleasure here at the Nutibara is that it has a pool. I spent a couple of hours this afternoon just lazing around on a lounge chair. It was like old home week. Not only did Greg, Kyle and Henrik show up but our friends from Rochester as well. It was fun to reminisce about the trials of recent days. The Rochester group, after all its tribulations, also succeeded in getting on top of the mountain.

Kyle talked about linking up with some other climbers and doing more climbing. Henrik was making plans to go to Santiago to try to meet women. He has also arranged to move out of the hotel and into cheaper digs. At \$65 per day, the Nutibara is straining his budget. It was interesting to see Henrik poolside in a bathing suit. He's very fit looking

but I was surprised how physically small he is. He is probably about 5'8" and 150 pounds. On the mountain his strength made him seem much bigger.

Wednesday, January 24

At last, today I begin the journey home. On the health front, things are looking up. My lips and face are noticeably better today. My feet look like a mess but don't trouble me. However, I'm back in the zero-taste zone and I'm thoroughly sick of not being able to take advantage of all the good food that is available here. When we got back from the mountain, we all immediately jumped on the scale in the hotel lobby to see how much we'd lost. My toll was 15 pounds, so I've got a lot of ground to make up. It would help if I could taste things.

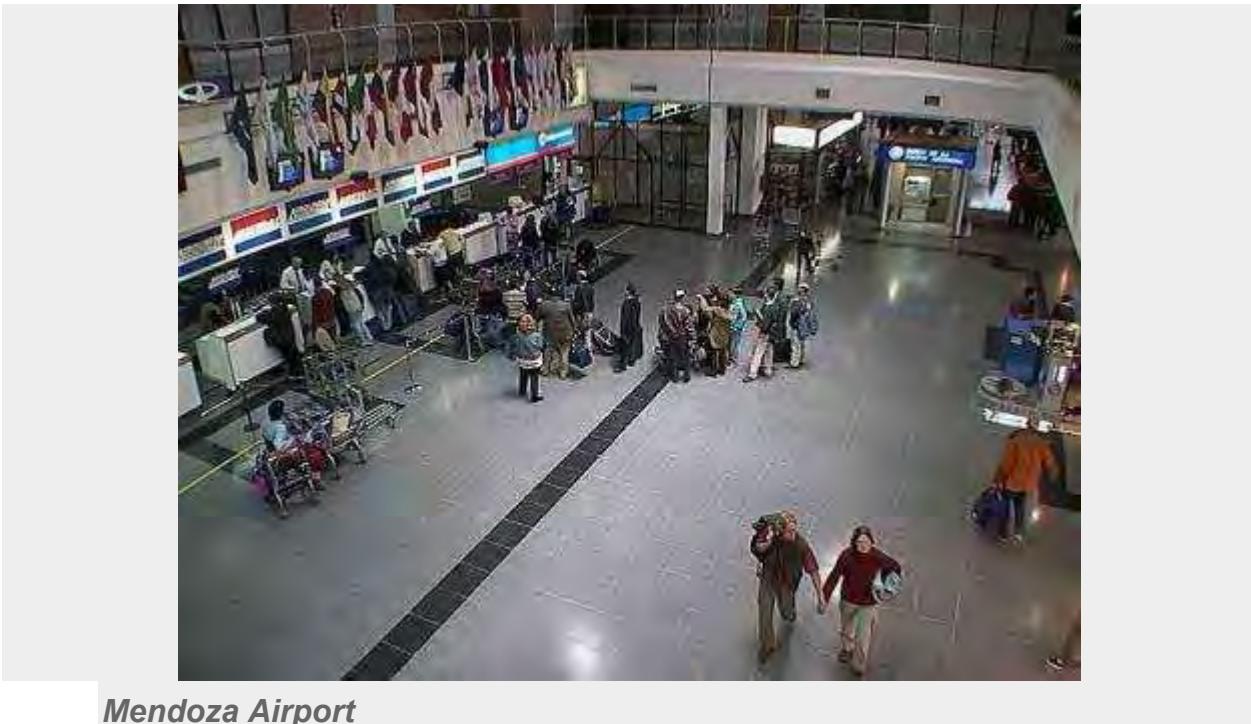
I took a multi-hour walk around Mendoza after breakfast today. I really like this town. I enjoy the heat and the ever-present relief that the canopy of trees provides. What a brilliant city plan! I once again walked by the hospital, this time secure in the knowledge that I wouldn't be visiting it for repairs. I found a lovely small park and spent over an hour there in the cool shade, watching the world go by. It was a place that I almost assuredly would never visit again but was precious for the peace it brought to me.

One of the collateral benefits of climbing mountains is that you get to go to interesting places. You see things that you'd otherwise miss. Mendoza has many parks and this was a minor one. But, I'm eternally grateful that I spent that time in that place. It gave me yet another very personal memory that I'll be able to call up from time to time and remember with uncomplicated pleasure. Climbing isn't all about mountains.

After the sojourn at the pool, I gave Kyle a note of thanks and a \$300 tip. When all was said and done, Kyle did an outstanding job on the mountain. He was great company besides. I hope that my tip somewhat compensates for the fact that he got nothing from Gordon and can expect little from impecunious Henrik.

I left for the airport at 5 pm. That's 3 hours 45 minutes before flight time and the airport is less than a half-hour from the hotel. As a habitual practitioner of last-minute airport arrivals, going this early was massively out of character for me. A lifetime-best for punctuality. I was just dying to get underway! In any event, the wisdom of my early

arrival became somewhat less convincing after my eighteenth lap of the terminal. Mendoza Airport isn't bad as small airports go but since, 1) I wasn't hungry, and 2) didn't feel like buying anything, its charms faded quickly.



Mendoza Airport

After a couple of hours of pushing a luggage trolley around, the airport began to fill up and get noisy. Before long, it was stuffed to the rafters with citizens there to welcome the arrival of a politician. The crowd was friendly and enthusiastic; all age groups and social strata seemed to be represented. The guy's plane arrived at about 7 pm. Surprisingly, he made no speech. He just waved from a balcony overlooking the terminal floor, everyone went nuts, and that was that. They do things differently down here.

I chatted with lots of other climbers at the airport. We all agreed that Aconcagua was a wonderful experience to be finished with. I passionately maintained that no power on earth could ever get me back here for a second go. Virtually everyone was of similar mind. While on the mountain, no one could affirmatively answer the question, "Are we having fun yet?" I spent a long time with a young fellow from Colorado who was in the Alpine Ascents International group. I first met him at Santiago it seems like an eternity ago. He was successful but had mixed feelings about the AAI guides. He said that their

attitude towards clients was more inclined towards "leave 'em behind" than "what can I do to help you succeed." A number of good guys fell by the wayside. Among these was that nice Floridian who had bad luck with his hiking boots approaching Las Leñas. I was genuinely sorry he didn't make it. Particularly so since he dropped out after getting all the way to Independencia.

The flight from Mendoza to Santiago was wonderful. Despite the 8:45 pm departure, it was still light outside. We flew over the Andes just to the south of Aconcagua. I had a window seat. I got a magnificent view of the mountain and had the surreal experience of eating ice cream and a chocolate chip cookie as we floated by. I am so happy to be done with this mountain. Munching on a cookie in perfect comfort as I took my (hopefully) last look at Aconcagua was absolutely delightful. Being in perfect comfort, free from all doubt or tension, seemed fair revenge for all the discomfort and mental anguish I suffered on its flanks. Another indelible memory. More practically, I thought of all the others currently struggling on its rocky heights and thanked my lucky stars that I wasn't among them.

Thursday, January 25

The overnight flight lasted exactly as long as predicted, 8 hours, and we landed at Miami at 5 am. The airport is still mostly asleep at that hour but it was wonderful to see the familiar sights of the terminal after being away for so long.

It's now 8 am and I'm on the final leg to Houston. The day is perfect and I will be home soon. This was a hugely successful trip. I accomplished my goal and learned a lot about myself, both physically and mentally. The experience has been an intensely personal one. It will bring me a lifetime's worth of pride. However, right now, I am ready to have the trip officially and definitively over.

I've been waiting to write this: this is my final entry.

Photo credit: many thanks to Kyle