

*Chaupi Orko, Southeast Ridge.* From May 15–20 Raymundo Condori, Osvaldo Cortez, Andreas (a journalist from Poland), and I traveled toward Lake Suches. Heavy snow stopped us on a secondary road two mountain passes before Flor de Nevado Mine, so we hiked for three hours with heavy loads. At the head of Lake Suches we forded a river to camp in a nice grassy spot at 4,700m. For many years we had considered trying a route in this area, but there are almost no maps and little information. I planned this trip with a couple of rough possibilities in mind, but it was basically a one-shot attempt, in alpine style, with no support.

The next day we continued toward the mountain, staying high on the left side of the valley and arriving exhausted at the shores of Chucuyo Lagoon (5,056m). This beautiful, remote dead-end valley has superb mountain views and the colorful lagoons contrast with the green *stepedales* (tundra-type grass of the Andean highlands). That day we saw several herds of deer and vicuñas, a lone fox, and even puma footprints.

On day three we approached snowline to the south of the main peak, avoiding an avalanche-prone option in favor of scrambling on washed rocky slabs to the upper glacier, which seemed connected to the southeast ridge of Chaupi Orko (the highest peak in the Apolobamba, elevation uncertain, but 6,075m on our GPS). By following this route, we were playing an "all in" poker game, with no alternatives if we ended with a deep valley splitting our route. We continued into the unknown toward two black pyramids, and after five hours set our high camp



The Southeast Ridge of Chaupi Orko. Javier Thellaache



View from Chucuyo Lagoon. Javier Thellaache

on the ice at the foot of the second rocky pyramid.

The next morning we started before sunrise, negotiating the top of the upper glacier and the descent to the south glacier in the dark. The day's first light warmed us at a pass with a superb view, surrounded by huge glaciers that the sun colored with yellowish and orange tones, and an endless sea of clouds toward the Amazon basin. We could not help feeling touched and close to tears. We continued following the southeast ridge, split by several huge bergschrunds, taking

turns opening tracks in snow sometimes hip-deep. When we finally arrived at the main summit, dehydrated and exhausted, we could not believe our luck with the weather and our choices.

There is no good information about new routes in Bolivia, so we cannot be certain that this route had not been done before, but we could not find any record of it, and locals who live in the valley confirmed that no "gringos" ever entered the side valleys that lead to the southeast ridge. I have climbed most of the big mountains in Bolivia, but never have I been surrounded by so many big snow-capped mountains; really, the Apolobamba is a hidden treasure.