

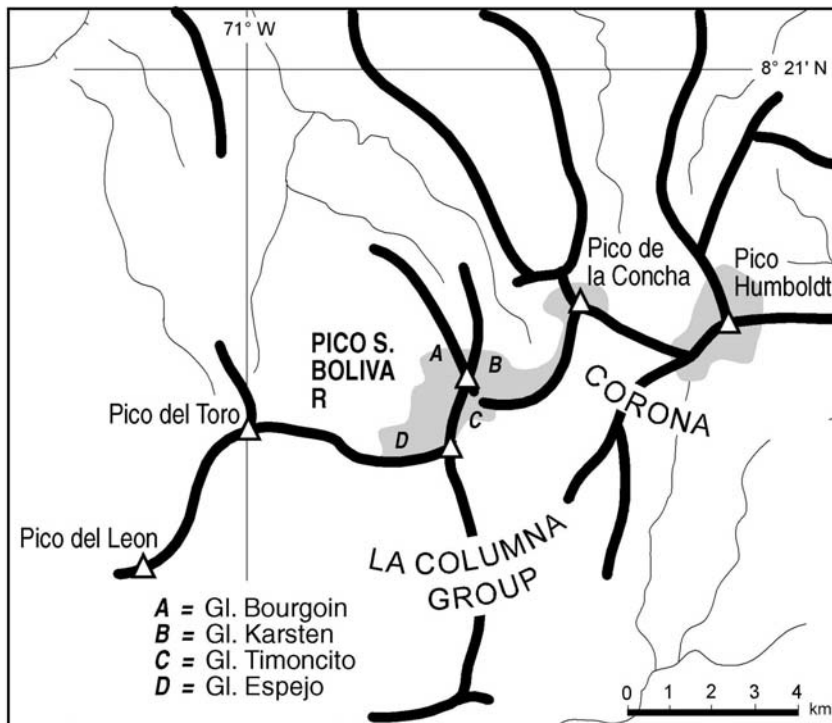
## **VENEZUELA**

The Andes of Venezuela are a continuation of the Cordillera Oriental of Colombia. From the Colombian border, in the region of San Cristobal, the mountains rise gently to the north-east, culminating in the small but important Sierra Nevada de Mérida. Thereafter they decrease gradually until they are lost in the plains around Barquisimeto. The range is about 400 kilometres long by 100 kilometres at its widest, and forms the watershed between the basins of Lake Maracaibo and the Río Orinoco. For nearly 100 kilometres between Mérida and Trujillo the Venezuelan Andes divide into two parallel cordilleras - to the north, La Culata, or Sierra del Norte; and to the south, the Sierra Nevada de Mérida, Sierra de Santo Domingo and Cordillera de Trujillo. These cordilleras are separated by the long, straight, deep-cut valleys of the Río Chama and the Río Motatan, part of the route of the Pan-American Highway. The Sierra del Norte boasts many unclimbed rock walls of interest, although the rock is of variable quality. The Sierra de Perija which forms the north-south boundary between Venezuela and Colombia is of no particular interest to mountaineers. Its northern (and highest section) is known as the Serranía de Valledupar.

In the Andes of Venezuela the coastal sierras have a west to east direction. Eastwards from Puerto Cabello the range rises steeply from the coast, the principal peaks being Silla de Avila and Pico de Naiguata. East of the Gulf of Paria the Andes arise for the last time in the Cumana Range (highest point, Turumquire, 2050m), before finally sinking into the Caribbean. The first recorded ascent in Venezuela was that of the coastal peak Silla de Avila in 1799 by Alexander von Humboldt. Also in the coast range, in 1872, Pico Naiguata was climbed by J. Spence, a British resident, together with several scientists. These ascents were repeated by the Italian Celestino Uselli who arrived in South America on business in 1900. He also visited Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador, and managed to fit in a number of climbs between other engagements. He was typical of the early andinists - adventurous, full of initiative and energy, and a man of many parts; traveller, businessman, scientist and poet.

## Sierra Nevada de Mérida

*Map showing Sierra Nevada De Mérida*



Though small, the Sierra Nevada de Mérida is an important range of rock and ice peaks, and by far the most accessible of all the Andes, lying a few kilometres south-east of the tourist city of Mérida, which is easily reached by air or road from Caracas. The principal peaks, from west to east are - El León; Pico del Toro; Pico Bolívar, originally known as La Columna; La Concha, sometimes referred to as La Garza; and the two peaks which make up the massif referred to as La Corona, Pico Bonpland and Pico Humboldt. Pico Bolívar is the most impressive peak of all, a steep, three-sided pyramid with sharp jagged ridges, high rock walls and several hanging glaciers.

The mountains of the Sierra Nevada de Mérida carry glaciers which are permanently in retreat, a phenomenon common to other Andean regions, and the rocks, mainly schists and granites, provide good climbing. The rainy months are January-February and August-September and snowstorms are common during the months July-September. December is considered to be the best month for climbing, with cold, clear days. Access to the peaks is by trails, in one or two days, or by the world's highest cable car, which starts from Mérida and in one hour climbs over 3000 metres to the terminal on the summit of Pico Espejo, which is a minor peak and the usual starting point for climbing Pico Bolívar. Hiking permits (party of two minimum) must be obtained from the park service office (next to the teleférico station in Mérida) where an outline topographical map is available. Climbing information (e.g. Club Andino, guides) is available from the teleférico station. Mountaineers must obtain a permit and submit a climbing plan. The dozen or so refugios are free and contain the basics.

Although several eminent scientists had visited the area from the 1830s onwards, the Sierra Nevada de Mérida was not explored until February 1868 when a party led by Dr. P.H.G. Bourgoin, professor of botany at the university in Mérida, climbed to the eastern summit of El Toro. In the remaining

years of the nineteenth century the two principal visitors were - in 1869-70 Anton Goering, a German painter and ornithologist who spent six months in Mérida; and in 1885 the German geologist Wilhelm Sievers, who also climbed Pan de Azucar in the Sierra del Norte and who was the first to publish a geological map of the mountain regions. Later, in 1910, the appearance on the scene of the Venezuelan geographer Alfredo Jahn marked the start of the development of Venezuelan mountaineering.

Dr. Jahn's first visit to the high Andes was made in 1910-11 as head of a commission of scientific exploration. After having made the first ascent of the highest summit of El Toro, he attempted Pico Bolívar, reaching only Pico Espejo. On 16 January 1911, accompanied by L. Hedderich, he made the first ascent of Pico Humboldt. During the same expedition Jahn and some Venezuelan surveyors made first ascents of Micanon, Tucani and Pico de los Conejos in the Sierra del Norte. A further attempt on Pico Bolívar in 1915 failed on account of sickness in the party. Dr. Jahn's writings include geography, geology and glaciology.

In 1922 a Swiss geologist, Dr. M. Blumenthal, engaged in surveying for oilfields, spent a local leave journeying through the Venezuelan Andes. Despite having to contend with travelling conditions similar to those encountered by the armies of Simón Bolívar a hundred years before, Blumenthal made some impressive first ascents of outlying peaks, such as Macuñuque in the Sierra de Santo Domingo and Pico Turmero in the Sierra del Norte. Travelling alone, he had only a rusty garden hoe as ice axe and to keep out the cold he padded his clothes with newspapers. Once arrived in Mérida, he climbed on the southern end of the chain and then attempted Pico Bolívar. Upon reaching the summit of Pico Espejo, he abandoned all hope of tackling the long south-west ridge, an icy arête bristling with spikes and towers, and instead turned to the southern aspect of the massif. He was thus possibly the first person to tread the Glaciar de Timoncito and reconnoitre the south (south-east) ridge of Bolívar, which he did from the adjoining ridge of Las Hermanas. If his travel plans had not obliged him to move on, Blumenthal might well have succeeded in climbing one or more of the big peaks.

During the period 1929-35 the best part of a dozen attacks were launched against Pico Bolívar, Venezuela's highest peak, by among others Dr. A.H. Colijn (later to visit the Carstentz mountains in New Guinea), and Drs. Lüthy and Smith who approached from the south, but principally by Dr. Enrique Bourgoin, grandson of the original explorer of the range. In February 1931 a committee ('Junta Pro-monumento al Libertador en el Pico Bolívar de la Sierra de Mérida') was formed, with Dr. Bourgoin as president, whose object was to achieve the ascent of the peak and to place on the summit a bust of Simón Bolívar, the 'Father' of Venezuela. After several attempts by Dr. Bourgoin and others in subsequent years the first ascent via the south ridge from Garganta Bourgoin was eventually claimed by Dr. Bourgoin in February 1935, but his article in the Caracas Universal was vague and the final stages of the climb were not given in detail. Probably he reached the lower north-east summit. On 3 February 1936 a German surgeon, Dr. Franz Weiss, made the first undisputed ascent of the highest point of Pico Bolívar, when he discovered a moderately easy face and gully route on the south-facing cliffs of the south ridge.

The summit of Pico Espejo is the usual starting point for an ascent of Pico Bolívar. The normal (Weiss) route takes the trail from Pico Espejo as far as the snout of the Timoncito Glacier. Above this glacier a large gully leads up the south face, which is largely snowfree during the dry season. Some parties may wish to rope up at this point. The gully is followed in the direction of the east ridge but before reaching the crest a smaller gully angling left towards the south-west ridge is taken. A gap in this ridge leads to the north-west face where easy exposed ledges lead to the summit.

The next significant expeditions to the Sierra Nevada de Mérida were those organized by the British climber A.E. Gunther in 1939 and 1940. In 1939, after members of the party had repeated the ascent of Bolívar, Gunther and Weiss, accompanied by two local arrieros, Domingo Peña (one of the first native guides in South America) and Ventura Sanchez (as well as a dog called 'Caribe') succeeded in climbing La Concha. The following year Gunther and Peña made the first ascents of Pico Bonpland and Pico Abanico (which Gunther refers to as Columna Sur). A lesser peak, El Leñ, was climbed at the first attempt in 1946 by Hugo Matheus and Baltasar Trujillo.

The arrival in Venezuela of Italian climber Alfonso Vinci marked a decisive turn in the development of mountaineering in the country. Cast in the Italian mould of scholar and man of action, Vinci and his companions succeeded in climbing the north face of Pico Bolívar in 1951. Subsequently, with P. Kiener, he traversed the north ridge, and two years later solved a major problem on the mountain, the east face, which he climbed via the Encierro glacier with P. Kiener and the Venezuelan Luis Ruiz Terán.

The main objective of an expedition organized by Sir Douglas Busk in 1962 was the first ascent of El Vértigo, the fourth conspicuous rock tower on the south-west ridge of Pico Bolívar, a prize coveted by mountaineers for more than thirty years. The party included George Band, veteran of Himalayan expeditions; David Nott, who in 1971 participated in the ascent of Venezuela's Angel Falls; American Nat Davis; and Jos, Antonio Uzcategui, a student at Universidad de los Andes, Mérida. The route, which was accomplished by Band, Nott and Uzcategui after a reconnaissance, runs directly up the vertical wall to the left of the Glaciar Timoncito. Members of the party then made the third ascent of Pico Abanico (Ruta Band-Nott; a very difficult climb of 200 metres, best attempted in February or March); the first ascent of a prominent rock peaklet at the foot of the south-east ridge of Bolívar, above the Garganta Bourgoin, which they named Pico Jahn; and other climbs. One valuable outcome of this expedition is the map compiled by Douglas Busk, based on previous efforts by Jahn, Gunther and Vinci, and published in the AJ in 1964.

The current emphasis in Venezuelan mountaineering is on new routes on the rock walls of the peaks of the Sierra Nevada de Mérida and Sierra del Norte. Local granite walls are short (c.100-200m) but steep, and artificial aid is often used. One of the leading Venezuelan climbers is Jos, Betancourt of Mérida who, in 1980, made the first solo ascent of the north face of Bolívar, reputedly one of the most difficult climbs in Venezuela. Other recent climbs in which Betancourt has participated include - Pico Abanico, south face direct; Pico Vertigo, east face; and Pico Anton Goering, east wall. During the 'eighties Jos, Betancourt and other local climbers ascended most of the pinnacles and aiguilles (e.g. Pico Miranda, El Carmen, Anzil, La Reina, Caribay, Murachi and others) that form Pico Bolívar's complex ridges. British climbers returning in 1986 reported considerable scope for short difficult rock routes on the Leñ-Toro ridge, as well as possible lines on the short but complex north-east and east faces of Pico Bonpland and Pico Humboldt. There is also the possibility of a complete traverse of the main crest from El Leñ to Pico Humboldt which would take several days.

### **Venezuela Peak List**

#### **Coastal Range**

*Silla de Avila* 2640m: 1-1799.

*Pico de Naiguata* 2765m: 1-1872 (see AJ, 6 (1872-3): 50,101-2)58

#### **Sierra de Trujillo (North-eastern extension of Sierra del Norte).**

*Pico Turmero* 4400m: 1-1922.

*Pico las Tapias* 4550m:

#### **Sierra de Santo Domingo (North-eastern extension of Sierra Nevada de Mérida).**

*MucuCuque* 4672m: 1-1922.

#### **Sierra del Norte (Culata)**

*Micanon* 4713m: 1-1910.

*Tucani* 4676m: 1-1910.

*Pan de Azucar* 4620m: 1-1885.

*P ramo de Los Conejos, Pico Campanario* 4070m: 1-1911.

*La Vieja I* c.4300m: E. face-1982.

*La Vieja III* c.4300m: E. face-1982.

*Pico La Torre* 4311m: E. face-1982.

*Pico Agua Blanca* 4671m: S. buttress-1985. Loose rock.

*Pico Micarj (Bartolo)* 4441m: S.E. rock face-1983. All other routes are on W. side. Good rock.

*Pico Mina de Hierro* 4582m: 1-1989.

*Pico Mistaya* 4000m: S. rock ridge (III-IV)-1986.

N.B. The quality of the rock varies in this range.

#### **Sierra Nevada de Mérida**

(D.C.N. map 1:100,000, Sheet 5941. Also: *Andes Centrales - Mapa alpinistico y turistico*, available from National Park).

*Pico El Leçn* 4746m: easy 1-day hike from Espejo terminal; 1-1946: N. face-1990.

*Pico Antçn Goering* 4550m: between Toro & Leçn: 1-1981 via E. wall.

*Toro-Leçn* crest: 7 km classic ridge traverse, continuously exposed scrambling, some more difficult pitches. Excellent rock.

*Pico del Toro* 4758m: 1-1910: E. ridge-1950. Easy 1-day hike from Espejo terminal.

*Pico Espejo* 4765m: 1-1910. Cable car to top; starting point for many climbs.

*Boljvar* massif:

--*Pico Boljvar* 4979m: 1st undisputed ascent-1936 via S. face (normal Weiss route): N. face; N. ridge-1951: E. face-1953: N. face solo-1980. The N. face is reputedly one of the most difficult in Venezuela: N.W. buttress (pillar)-1983, mixed route, poor rock: complete ascent W.N.W. rib-1985, mixed route with poor rock except for summit ridge: Difficult ice gully 'Var.Sur' (IV-V)-1986. Most serious climb on Boljvar, 1986.

--*Pico V,rtigo* 4904m: 1-1962: E. face changing to S. face in upper part-1982: S. face variant 'Ruta Dedos de Duende'-1985.

--*Pico Jahn* c.4850m: 1-1962: New route 120m (III-IV)-1986.

--*El Gemelo* 4909m:

--*Picacho Carmen* 4800m:

--*Pico La Reina* 4800m: 1st winter ascent E. face (III-IV)-1986. Much snow.

--*Aleta de Tiburçn: 45m pinnacle on N.W. ridge of Pico Bolívar: Reached by traversing two heavily afforested valleys-1988.*

*Pico Abanico 4900m: 1-1940: Oblique route, ascent from S.W. to the summit facing south-1962: S. face direct-1978 up prominent pillar that splits S. face and rises directly to summit: S.W. variant on S. face-1985; S.W. wall-1985:*

*Pico de la Concha (La Garza) 4922m: 1-1939.*

*Humboldt massif:*

--*Pico Humboldt 4942m: 1-1911. 2-day trip from Espejo terminal via large glacier on W. slope: N.E. face-1986.*

--*Pico Bonpland 4885m: 1-1940: N.N.E. wall (300m, IV-V+, mixed)-1986.*

--*Pico Ruiz Terán 4910m:*

--*Picacho Sucre 4800m:*

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### **Topographical Maps**

The mapping agency is the Dirección de Cartografía Nacional in Caracas, within the Ministerio del Ambiente y de Recursos Renovables. The current topographic series are: 1:25,000; 1:100,000; 1:250,000; and 1:500,000. The 1:25,000 series dates from 1962 and has 20m contours. An alternative 1:50,000 scale was introduced in 1979 for some areas. The 1:100,000 series dates from 1962. The post-1970 1:250,000 series has 50m or 80m contours. Not all the sheets in these series may have been published.

### **Mountaineering and Other Organizations**

Asociación Distrital de Andinismo, Apartado 20377, Caracas 102.

Club Cándor, Calle 24, #8-259, Mérida.

Club de Andinismo/Centro Excursionismo y Andinismo, Universidad de los Andes, Mérida.

Dirección de Cartografía Nacional, Edificio Camejo, Centro Simón Bolívar, Avenida Este 6, Caracas.

Dirección General de Información e Investigación Renovables, Esquina de Camejo, Edificio Camejo, Caracas 1010.

Grupo Andino de Rescate, Facultad de Ciencias Forestales, Apartado 24, Chorros de Milla, Mérida.

Grupo de Rescate (Domingo Peña), Urbanización Humboldt Bloquel, Edificio 1, Oficina 68, Mérida.

Instituto Nacional de Parques, Edificio CVB, Avenida Germania, Caracas.

Ministerio del Ambiente y Recursos Renovables, Parque del Este, Caracas. (Responsible for national parks and maps).

### **Mountaineering Journals**

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