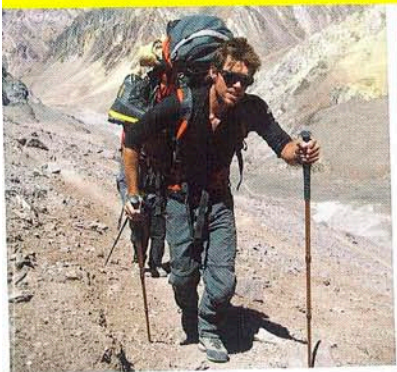


» TREKKING, HILLWALKING, CLIMBING, MOUNTAINEERING & MORE

# TREK & MOUNTAIN

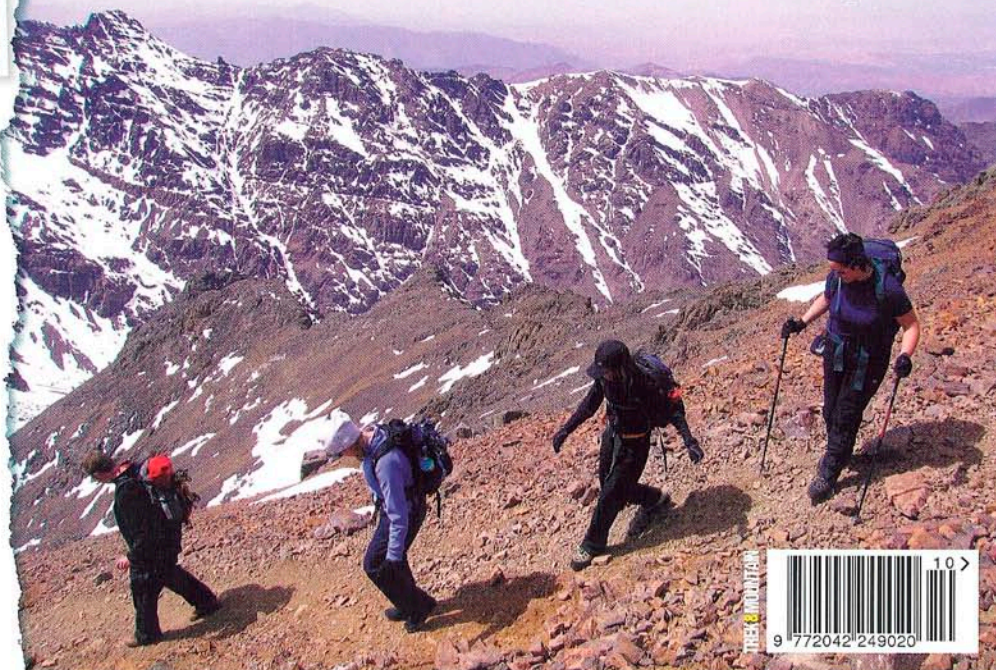
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# Andean Adventure

For his first high-altitude peak, **Max Roche** considered Aconcagua to be eminently achievable, but the Andean giant had some nasty surprises in store... >



# TREKKING ACONCAGUA



Max getting into his stride during the early stages of the trek

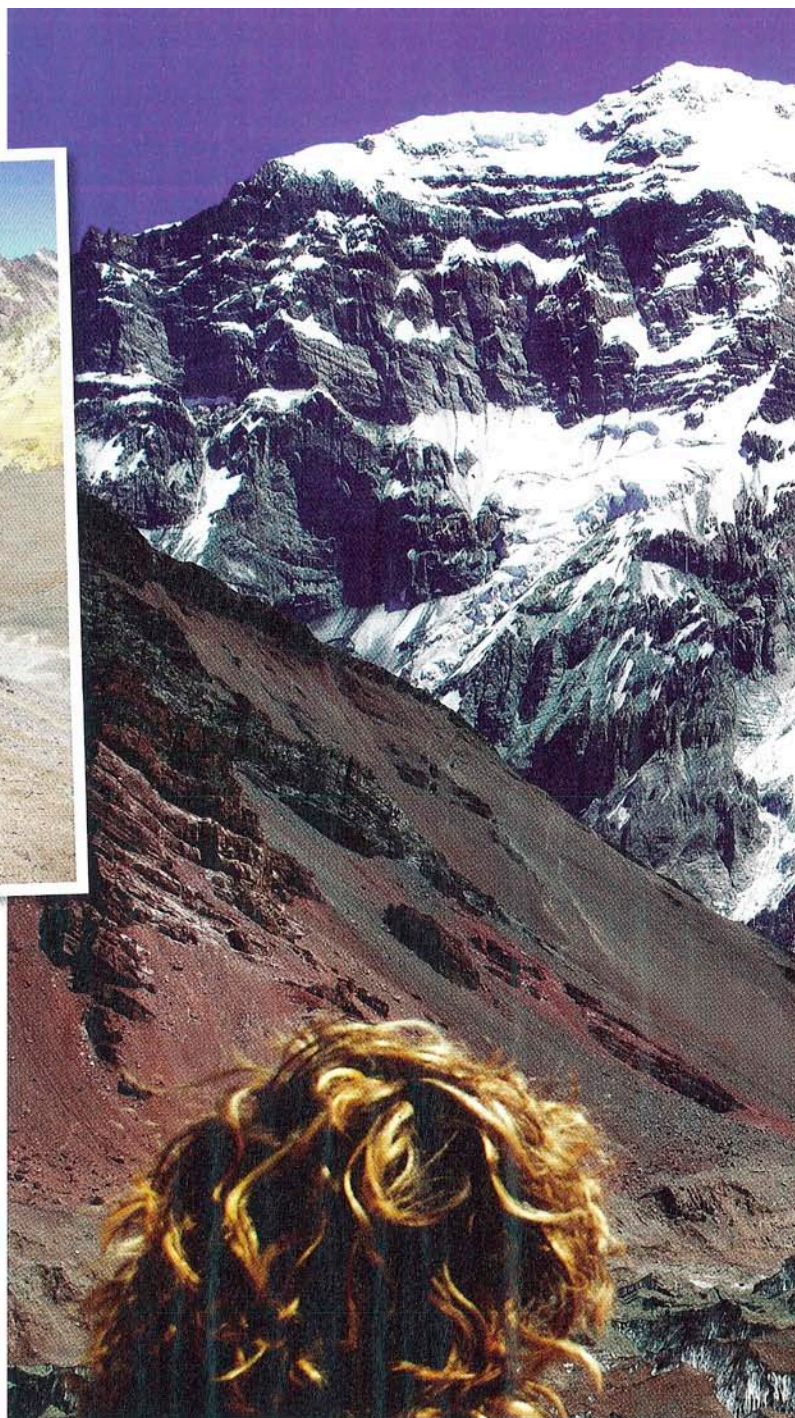
It's been 42 hours since we arrived in the Argentine city of Mendoza and it's close to 42 degrees. My team mate, Viet, stumbled out of a cab late last night and is now sleeping among the carnage of our ramshackle hotel room, crampon for a pillow, gathering all his strength for what is to come. My rear end, still sore from the 26-hour ordeal to reach Mendoza from the south, currently enjoys a comfy chair in the hotel lobby.

We're sport climbers Viet and I, old university buddies well versed in the literature of limestone from Dorset to the Dolomites, Sardinia to Switzerland. Over the years we've developed a sizeable repertoire of rocky results and successes but nothing like what we are about to attempt. Like so many other frustrated young professionals with a few weeks off each year to unleash the inner monkey, we've dreamed of going higher, colder and for longer. The trouble is, with limited experience comes limited possibility. We needed a mountain that was available not only to the technically experienced but also to the naively enthusiastic.

We've got not so much as a crumb of high-altitude or Alpine-style climbing experience between us but we'd heard on the grapevine how fit young enthusiasts might achieve great things on Mount Aconcagua. At 6,962m Aconcagua is the tallest peak in the western hemisphere and one of the world's coveted seven summits. According to the rumours, no technical climbing ability is required, just adequate equipment, a bit of luck with the weather and sufficient brain power to put one foot in front of the other – a piece of cake!

## GEARED UP

It's February 3rd and the preliminary stages of the expedition are now complete. Our passes for the



## ON THE MAP: ACONCAGUA

South America's giant

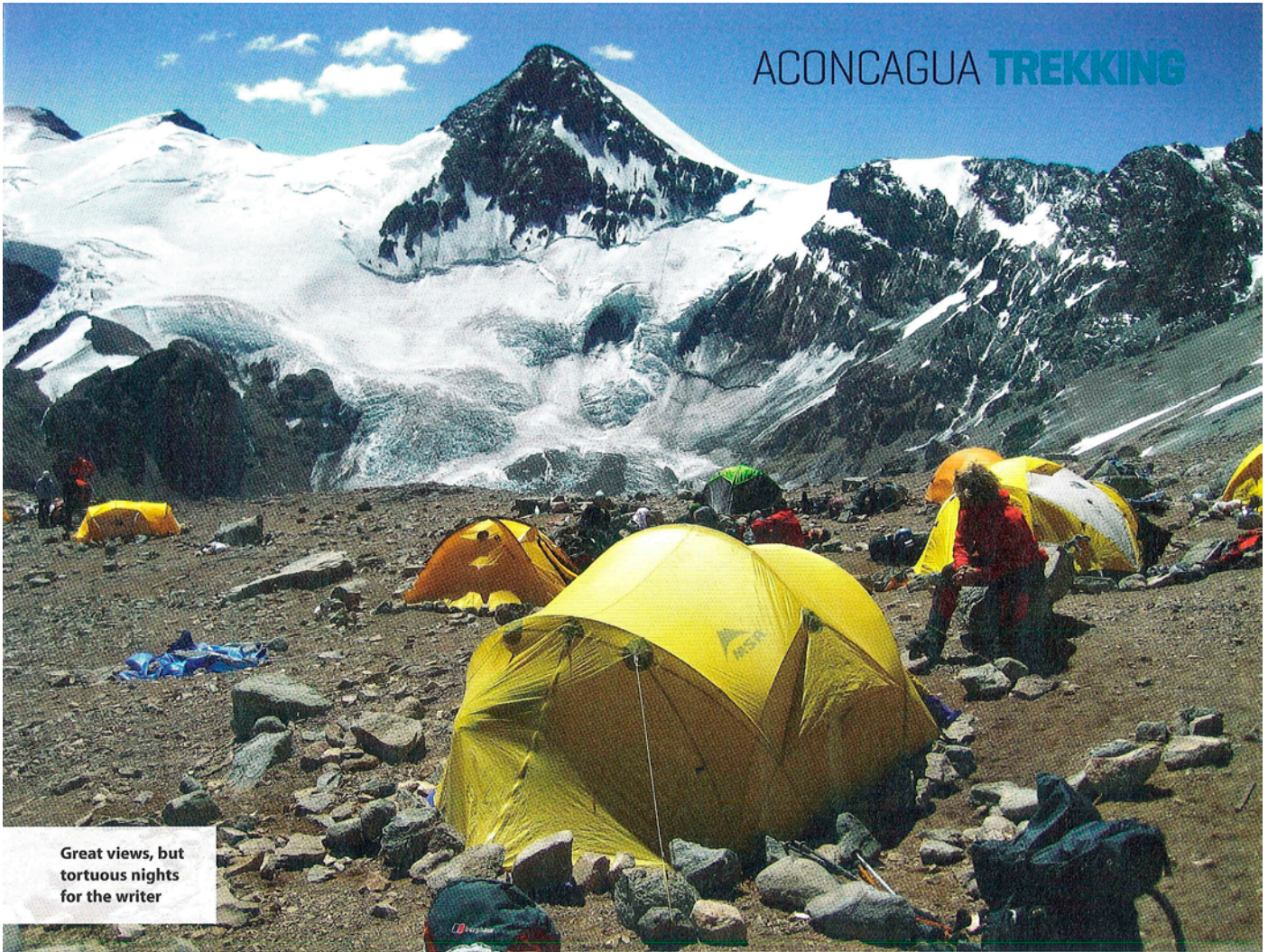
■ Sitting on the border between Chile and Argentina in the Andes mountain range, Mount Aconcagua is the highest mountain in the Southern Hemisphere (notching up 6,962m) and is one of the Seven Summits. The mountain boasts a number of glaciers the largest of which, Ventisquero Horcones Inferior, measures 10km in length.

CHILE

ARGENTINA



## ACONCAGUA TREKKING



Great views, but tortuous nights for the writer

Aconcagua National Park have been obtained at great expense along with the last remaining items of equipment. We've also rented ourselves a mule to transport our cold weather equipment to the base of the mountain where it will await our arrival in three days time. Muzzy Smith, the third and final member of our team, is negotiating (what will no doubt be the most challenging part of his trip) the logistical nightmare that is airport transfer and bus travel in a foreign language.

He's made it, good man, so we're booked to leave the metropolis the next day aboard the bus to Punta Del Inca: a humble huddle of houses and hotels on the border of the Aconcagua National Park, 3,500m above sea level. There we will rest for a day, maybe doing some last-minute gear checks and a mini acclimatisation trek through the valley. As we arrive at Punta Del Inca the jagged mountains that encircle the town thrust out of the Earth like the jaws of a prehistoric, subterranean monster and threaten to swallow the tumbledown town at any moment. The scenery is truly inspirational.

The plan is this: on the morning of February 5th all our equipment will be transferred over to the mule handlers and begin its journey to base camp. On Saturday 6th we will follow, hiking onwards to the small campsite of Confluencia (3,400m), where we will pitch our tent for the first time. After some good advice we have decided not to head straight to base camp on Sunday; instead we have opted to hike along a different route to a slightly lesser altitude of 4,100m before returning once

again to Confluencia for an extra night. Monday will be the day we hope to arrive at base camp, Plaza de Mulas.

So far, this is all we have dared to plan. In the last few days I have pondered long and hard upon various subjects but primarily my thoughts have been occupied by painting pictures of the mountain. I've been considering what it will feel like to hike for 14 days in a pair of solid plastic boots; what it will feel like to hike for 14 days wearing a bag weighing 30kgs in a pair of solid plastic boots; what it will feel like to hike for 14 days in freezing temperatures with a backpack weighing 30kgs, in a pair of solid plastic boots. And, finally, what it will feel like to do all this with little more than half the oxygen I am accustomed to. Our combined climbing experience and modest understanding leaves us helpless as newborn babes in this breed of terrain. Success or failure completely depends on our collective fitness as a team and on our ability to deal with the altitude. It's climbing for sure, but not as we've ever known it.

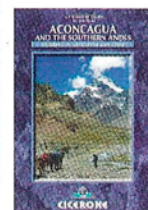
### HITTING THE WALL

It's day six and we're all in reasonable condition and still pushing in the right direction – sadly, though, not without distress: namely headaches, vomiting, dizziness, bleeding noses and insomnia. Blood oxygen levels are safely above 80 per cent according to Mario in the medical tent. We are currently at base camp, Plaza de Mulas at 4,267m and we'll be setting off at any

### USEFUL GUIDE:

**Aconcagua: Highest Trek in the World** by Jim Ryan, published by Cicerone.

This highly-practical guide gives you everything you need to know before trekking Aconcagua – from maps and routes to advice on how to acclimatise. Also including background details on the region's wildlife and flora as well as the cultural history of the mountain, this is a must-have for anyone heading to Aconcagua.





## TREKKING ACONCAGUA

"With such faultless skies the view from the summit will no doubt be even more magnificent than it has been in my imagination..."



**Nido de Condores:**  
5570m 'Nest of the  
Condors'

### WHEN TO GO:

Around 3,500 people head to the Andes to attempt an ascent of Mount Aconcagua every year. The optimum window to climb the mountain is during the austral summer, between December and early March. The most popular month for climbers is February when the weather conditions are at their calmest. During the winter (May to August) climbing conditions are very poor. Weather systems coming in from the Pacific Ocean mean the mountain can fall victim to very heavy snowfall and strong high winds. The roads to Mendoza can often be impassable during the winter months after heavy snowstorms.

minute for camp 1, Canada, at 5,050m. One night will be spent there and, providing our brains haven't squeezed through our ears, we will then move on to camp 2, Nido de Condores, at 5,560m. The next will be camp 3, Berlin, before setting off at 1am the following morning on the eight-hour slog to the summit at 6,962m. The weather forecast is good with blue blanket skies and not so much as a breeze.

Throb, throb, throb... with every step comes a new dimension to the pain. It's February 10th and I've made it to 5,200m but it feels as though Andy Roddick is doing service practice with my brain while the seven dwarfs tunnel for diamonds behind my ears. The nights are worst of all: writhing around inside the tent between my two companions who lie at peace, snoring in harmony oblivious to the struggle so close at hand. In the afternoon, after trekking up to and down from camp 2 in one last bid to acclimatise, I'm mortified to say, I throw in the towel. I say goodbye to the boys and run, close to tears, back down the mountain.

After another excruciating night at base camp, a 20-mile hike through the valley plus a four-hour bus ride and I arrive back where I started: Mendoza.

### NO HEAD FOR HEIGHTS

I'm utterly exhausted and justifiably heartbroken but, thank God, well once again. I should have known altitude wasn't for me when I found myself curled in the dirt outside our tent, blood clogging my nose, needing

to vomit and the world spinning furiously as I had attempted to crawl from the camp so as not to alert the ranger. Stumbling blindly below revolving stars, swallowed by nausea in the night, I had sunk to my knees in desperation, rolled over in surrender on a vicious needle-covered shrub and heaved. All I could think was, 'It's happening to me, everything I've read about and been warned about, God, it's happening to me'. At the time, if someone had promised to make it stop in exchange for an arm or a leg, perhaps I would have accepted. Unfortunately, hope only arose on a few occasions in the form of a slight dilution to the pain. It was these fleeting moments that spurred me higher, and deeper, into the yawning gizzard of the beast.

What's most frustrating – not only for myself but also for the thousands of other climbers who suffer a similar fate each year in mountain ranges around the globe – is the insignificance of the problem when compared to the enormity of the task. There we were, three young lads fit as farmers after rigorous planning, packed and ready to achieve something great and scale a huge mountain. I felt as though I could run up and down the thing several times in an afternoon with both of the other guys on my back and yet I had ended up pathetically crippled by an agonising headache. This insignificant trifle turned what was to be one of the best weeks of my life into what is most certainly one of the worst. The mountain deprived me of what I needed most and my mind was continuously revolting against the loss of the oxygen. >



## ACONCAGUA TREKKING

Sadly, I have now developed a disaffection for my surroundings. The beautiful bus ride back to Mendoza didn't tickle so much as a heartstring. At the hands of such bitter disappointment my emotional condition has descended to something close to that of a small child who's had their sweets snatched from under their nose.

### THE PULL OF THE MOUNTAIN

Yet, all is not lost. Murray and Viet are still on the move. On the fateful afternoon I crumbled and descended, the forecast was looking near perfect and they were set to move up through the snow to camp 2 the following morning. The 12th should see them at camp 3 and the 13th at the summit. Both of them seemed composed, resolute and energised when I left so I have absolutely no doubt they will make it.

And with such faultless skies as those predicted, the view from the summit will no doubt be even more magnificent than it has been in my imagination all these months. So, I've got my fingers and everything else crossed for the remaining team and I'm putting beer on ice ready for their triumphant return to Mendoza. I'd do anything to be up there, but like so many others, I'm down here, whipped. The next few days pass in a state

of subdued contemplation when, unexpectedly, the boys came hobbling back. They have arrived a full three days ahead of schedule, looking neither healthy nor happy having also been beaten by the mountain.

So, here we are, in the stifling heat of a city hostel, skinny as rattlesnakes and angry as a bunch of burly badgers, perched on the edges of our bunks. We agree that mountaineering at such dizzying heights, particularly on the slopes of the more celebrated summits, is solely for those of a masochistic mind set. It's for those who boast a desire to live out their days panting frantically in mountain-top concentration camps surrounded by the sick and miserable. And why? To say they've done it, or simply because it's the biggest? Why trek day after day through the dusty and airless Andean wilderness? Why not opt for the seemingly more pleasurable alternative offered by a lower, quieter and less-esteemed mountain? Well, because we are human beings and as such are doomed to desire only the biggest and best of everything whatever the physical or financial cost.

"So," I say, turning to the lads with a knowing smile. "If we book some cheap flights now, maybe we can nip back next year for another crack?" T&M

## Altitude Q&A: What went wrong?

Richard Pullan at the Altitude Centre quizzes the author for answers

### ■ HAVE YOU TREKKED AT ALTITUDE BEFORE?

**I'd been to the Pyrenees and Alps but never more than about 3000m.**

**RP:** It is always advisable to test yourself at altitude by starting with moderate peaks and then selecting a slightly higher or more technical mountain for your next trip. Aconcagua can be quite challenging, not only because of its altitude but because you are expected to carry a lot of your own gear. It's advised to climb something like Kilimanjaro before attempting Aconcagua, so you get to know how you respond to altitude.

### ■ DID YOU HAVE A HEALTH CHECK BEFORE YOU LEFT?

**None of us had a health check before leaving for the trip – we assumed fitness wouldn't be an issue.**

**RP:** I would advise people get a health check before they go, and don't forget to see the dentist too. You need a good level of fitness

to trek, however mountain fitness is unique – sometimes the fittest people from trad sports find it very challenging at altitude. Economy and efficiency are the skills needed, rather than speed or strength.

### ■ WERE YOU COMFORTABLE WITH ALL YOUR KIT?

**We were used to most of our kit, however we all struggled with the plastic mountaineering boots.**

**RP:** Walking with large plastic boots or crampons is a new skill to most of us, one that takes extra brain power that can zap your energy at altitude. Learning to walk in crampons and mountain boots before you go on the trek will free up your brain to focus on other things like being efficient with energy at altitude.

### ■ DID YOU EAT AND DRINK REGULARLY?

**95% of what we ate was freeze-dried and pre-packaged. We also snacked on nuts and dried fruit. We drank**

### **between 3–5l of water per day.**

**RP:** It's important to keep drinking at altitude, but drinking too much pure water can be bad too – the lack of salt in pure water can actually make your cells swell which although relatively rare, can cause headaches and other complications. Try and add an electrolyte to your water to ensure you are receiving the vital salts that your cells need.

### ■ WHAT WERE YOUR SYMPTOMS?

**Persistent headaches, pressure in my ears and eyes, vomiting.**

**RP:** It sounds like you developed a high altitude cerebral oedema (HACE). The best cure is to descend to a lower altitude. Taking Ibuprofen and making sure you are hydrated with an electrolyte mix can help alleviate mild headaches, but if the pain persists you should descend as it is more likely to be HACE.

