

White Fear

Mountaineering tales can't mirror the reality of climbing Peru's intimidating Mount Tocllaraju

BY DAMIAN HALL

THERE'S ONE PROBLEM with being an armchair mountaineer – it doesn't prepare you for reality. In my case, the reality of being three-quarters of the way up a bloody big mountain. At 3.30 in the morning. At -10° centigrade. At an oxygen-shy 5200 metres, where breathing is hard, bordering on painful.

I blame my former boss.

I clearly remember him plonking a copy of Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* on my desk. "Read this," he'd said; nothing more. The book is a chilling firsthand account of Mount Everest's worst disaster to date, and I was hooked. I read mountaineering tales greedily from there.

After Sir Edmund Hillary, perhaps the world's best-known mountaineer is Joe Simpson, of *Touching The Void* fame. Simpson's tale of being left for dead after shattering his knee climbing in Peru – his partner famously had to cut the rope Simpson was dangling from so he could live – had a powerful effect on me. I wanted to taste

something of the same drama and heroism. I wanted to climb a mountain.

I was already a committed hiker. My next step was to learn some technical skills by summitting three peaks on a mountaineering course in New Zealand. While they may have been technically challenging, the Kiwi white pointers were all a bit, well, small. They didn't feel like "real" mountains; not like the ones in the books.

And so, almost inevitably it seemed, I found myself in the northern Peruvian town of Huaraz. The nearby Cordillera Blanca (Spanish for "White Range") boasts 33 Andean peaks over 6000m – the highest collection outside the Himalayas. Simpson's life-changing accident took place in the Huayhuash range, not far away. Was I here because of *Touching The Void*? I didn't want to think about that too much. »

↓ WHAT?

Strap on your crampons and climb one of the Cordillera Blanca's many peaks, from mountains you can trek up to serious technical summits. Or hike over breathtaking (figuratively and literally) alpine passes and down long, glacier-carved valleys.

↓ WHY?

The region boasts 50 magnificent peaks above 5500 metres. If size matters to you, Mount Huascarán, the highest in Peru at 6768m, towers over the town of Huaraz; or try Mt Alpamayo (5947m), dubbed "the most beautiful mountain in the world" by UNESCO; or Artesonraju (6025m), better known as "the Paramount mountain", as seen at your local cinema. And when you've climbed them all, the Huayhuash range is nearby, too.

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It's dark and bitterly cold when it comes time to leave camp two for the summit; on the way, a treacherous ice wave must be negotiated safely.

the name meant "yellow snow" in the indigenous Quechua language. He was unsure why

The next day, it takes us more than three hours to climb just 800m, the near-vertical gradient and thin air forcing us to stop several times to catch our breath.

Half a dozen climbers pass us coming down. They look shattered, like exhausted, shell-shocked soldiers returning from the front.

After setting up camp two, I spend the afternoon gawping at the heartbreaking views and fattening up on Mario's pasta, rice, potatoes and countless cups of coca tea with *mucha azúcar* (much sugar), José's favoured energy drink.

As well as providing an ingredient for cocaine, coca leaves – almost a religion in Peru – are believed to fend off the effects of altitude. And the tea does seem to be helping my acclimatisation (rather than making me talk incessantly about how great I am).

It's while sipping yet another sweet coca tea that I discover one of the main surprises about mountaineering – much of it involves not climbing, but killing time, waiting for the right conditions. It's fairly boring, although the setting means it's a truly wonderful place to be bored. It's something I don't recall reading about on the sleeve notes of any mountaineering books.

exactly; I had my theories.

I'd also hired a cook – nicknamed "Mario" after the *Super Mario* computer game – and a permanently grinning donkey driver to carry the majority of our kit to base camp.

Packed, it was time to find out whether I could go from the armchair to the ice face.

A taxi drops us in a hillside village and we totter off through ever-rising countryside, where indigenous farmers use oxen to plough the fields.

It's late afternoon when we reach the 4400m base camp, where a dozen tents dot the yellow grass and – remarkably – there's beer on sale at a small stall operated by two indigenous women. The camp has an airport feel to it: everyone's either waiting for, or returning from, an adventure.

Directly in front of us stands Tocllaraju – beautiful, challenging, and asking if I'm man enough. We scoff up dinner and fall asleep with the sound of avalanches rumbling in the distance. At least I hope they're in the distance.

With my limited experience, I wasn't foolish enough to attempt a serious peak alone. After consulting a local guiding company, we picked a peak, Mt Tocllaraju (pronounced "tock-yara-who"), and agreed on a "special price".

To reach Tocllaraju's 6032m summit required a final 70m ice climb. The attempt itself would take four days, a slow ascent allowing my body to adapt to the altitude. *Us gringos* are notoriously susceptible to the lethal effects of altitude sickness, which can attack above 2400m.

Huaraz is already at 3052m, but I felt fine. I'd been to around 5000m before, although when I tried to run I felt like I'd been winded by a punch from a giant fist. So this time, to help me acclimatise, I spent four days in Peru walking the Santa Cruz trail, which took me as high as 4750m. I was as ready as I'd ever be.

As a rule, Peruvians are a short people. But, thanks to African ancestry, my guide José was the size of two men, a monster-athlete who'd climbed 20 of the Cordillera Blanca's 33 peaks. "Tocllaraju is special," he assured me, explaining



Talking of books, I ask José about *Touching The Void*. "Should he have cut the rope?" I ask.

"Maybe," he concedes, after a long pause. "Maybe . . . under the circumstances."

We will go for the summit at night when the snow is firmer and safer. As I get into my sleeping bag it starts to snow.

"Time to climb," I'm told, at 3.30am, after a frustratingly sleepless few hours, courtesy of light but persistent altitude-induced headaches.

More coca tea with *mucha azúcar*. Equipment check (will I need my penknife? You never know). Crampons on . . . crampons on!

I don't know if it's the altitude, my drowsiness, the cold, or all three, but attaching my crampons has suddenly become very difficult. If I can't even do this simplest of tasks, how am I going to conquer this bloody big mountain? But José lends a heroic helping hand. Heroic because he has to remove his gloves to do so – and it's biting cold.

In mountaineering literature, climbers often find themselves at -20°C and lower. Even when frostbite claims six fingers and half their nose, they never ever whine. We're only at -10°C, but I want to complain. I have two sets of gloves on and I'm still purposefully wiggling my frigid digits to maintain circulation.

My enthusiasm has taken a knock. It's a reality check. After all, I was, until now, only an armchair mountaineer. But surely I wasn't naive enough to have thought there wouldn't be discomfort involved? Where there's pain, there's gain and all that.

After my mini pep talk to myself, I notice how dark it is, too. We rope up.

Then we're off. We slog through the snow, headlamps on.

We soon overtake a German couple, the only others going for the summit today. But the higher we get, the harder it gets. My legs are okay – I've ensured I'm in decent shape – but my lungs aren't. There . . . just . . . isn't . . . enough . . . oxygen . . . to . . . breathe.

I stop regularly, gasping and wheezing. It's as though I only have one lung, reaching for but never getting enough of what I want; like one of those arcade games where you try to grab a cheap toy with a claw.

"Uno momentito (a moment)," I request, yet again. (Later, José generously praises my fitness, so I'm certain it's the altitude hindering me.)

A few deep breaths and we're off again. Then, like flicking a light switch, the sun leaps across the sky. The views are magical; snow-topped peaks in every direction. It could be heaven, if I believed in such a place. Better still, the summit is just ahead – like a great wave, frozen just before crashing.

As we prepare to get technical for the final 70m, a vicious wind whips around the mountain. I take a photo of myself and see my lips are blue.

Surprisingly, José tells me to go first. I'm thrilled he's put his faith in me – and petrified. Our position is precarious. We're climbing up the side, the edge of the wave.

If I fell to my right, I would probably survive. A fraction to my left would be another matter. It looks like one giant steep white slide, perhaps 200 or 250m, then a cliff, then . . . nothing.

There's little margin for error. One slip and . . . and I don't want to think about it. Think positive, think positive.

I concentrate on kicking my crampon spikes firmly into the frozen, almost

“It's as though I only have one lung, reaching for but never getting enough of what I want”

rock-hard snow, then thwacking in my ice axe. Repeat. Pause for breath. Think positive. Repeat. At last, time to anchor in. I'm buzzing.

José catches up. I belay – feeding him the rope while acting as his safety anchor – as he shoots off above me. I wait a while. Then, hearing his call, I follow. So close now.

Then, finally . . . I'm there! On top of the world. Or near enough.

I'd read that mountaineers often find the actual summit disappointing; there's a sadness to it, almost a melancholia. Despite pioneering a new route, when Simpson reaches the summit of 6344m Siula Grande in *Touching The Void*, he experiences "the usual anticlimax. What now? It was a vicious circle. You succeed with one dream, you're back to square one."

Instead, I feel euphoric. It's an unmatched high, barely describable. I'm giving José high-fives and yelling "woo-hoo!" loudly. I'm a championship-winning boxer, a victorious bullfighter and Natalie Imbruglia has just asked me in for coffee.

I've just graduated. I can now call myself a mountaineer.



ESSENTIAL GEAR

Crampons >>

Ensuring you are stationary and upright, rather than involuntarily descending headfirst, these will save your life time and again. Find a pair to suit the type of climb you're attempting and take your boots along when purchasing them. (**Gladiator crampons, \$299**)

Boots >>

Mountaineering boots need to be rugged, durable, waterproof (or at least reliably water repellent) and yet extremely comfortable and warm inside. (**LaSportiva "Nepal Extreme", \$749**)

Ice axe >>

These multi-function tools can be used for ice-climbing, but are best for general alpine use, such as snow and glacier travel. It's worth spending more in order to get a stronger model, designed specifically for mountaineering. (**Raptor ice axe, \$269**)

Ice hammer >>

Also called a technical axe, these are used for ice-climbing, where your tools become your *de facto* hands. The reverse-curved banana-pick-style is ideal, and leashes are a great idea if you don't want to lose them down the mountain. (**Rebel ice hammer, \$439**)

All equipment available from Mountain Equipment (mountainequipment.com)

↓ WHEN?

The mountaineering season is from May to September. Treks can be made year round, although it may rain in the afternoons from November to April.

↓ HOW?

Flights from Sydney to Santiago, Chile, cost from \$2015 (cheapflights.com.au); flights from Santiago to Lima cost from \$294 (expedia.com.au). The eight-hour bus ride to Huaraz starts from \$25.

Guiding company Galaxia Expeditions (galaxia-expeditions.com) comes highly recommended, but check your guide is a member of the Union Internationale des Associations de Guides de Montagnes or the English version: International Federation of Mountain Guide Associations.