



## The Alpamayo Circuit

### Introduction

Alpamayo is widely acknowledged to be one of the world's most beautiful peaks. It is situated in Peru's spectacular Cordillera Blanca mountains some 400 miles north of the capital Lima, and just south of Huaraz. This pleasant town is like the 'Chamonix' of the Cordillera Blanca range. The mountains form a long chain stretching south from the town, and all the main valleys of the range are easily accessible from the roads which feed off the main highway. From our hotel we have a superb view towards Huascarán, Peru's highest mountain, and many of the smaller adjacent peaks.

The circuit of Alpamayo is in reality a circuit of the central Cordillera Blanca, as our trekking route makes a circumnavigation not just of Alpamayo but also many of its nearest neighbours, including the huge massif of Huascarán. In addition to the various different facets of Alpamayo, we will also see many other significant peaks in the region including Artesonraju (6025m), Huandoy (6395m), Chacraraju (6112m) and Taulliraju (5830m).

The Cordillera Blanca is a spectacular mountain chain having many alpine characteristics. It contains numerous snowy peaks which rise above 6000 metres and the high summit, Huascarán, is at 6768m the highest mountain in Peru. The range is broken into a series of smaller massifs which are separated by delightful Andean valleys. At lower elevations these are lightly forested with ancient pine and quenual, and small Quechua villages can be found nestling in many of them. These villages cling to an ancient way of life seemingly cut off from the trappings of the modern world which can be found so close by.

As we progress into the higher reaches of the range, forests give way to grasslands and in places to moraine and glaciers. We have to cross a number of high passes of over 4000 metres in altitude, and although most of these involve no more than high level paths, some of the passes can be a little rough requiring some steep ascent and descent on loose scree slopes. Temperatures in the main trekking season are normally pleasantly warm. During the day it is often possible to trek wearing shorts and a tee shirt. And as our personal luggage is transported at all times by mules or donkeys, we trek during the day carrying just a light day pack.

### Itinerary

#### Day 1

We depart the UK early in the morning for our flight to Lima with Iberia. We connect in Madrid and arrive in Lima late in the evening. We transfer to the excellent Antigua Hotel in the up-market and safer Miraflores district of the city, away from the rougher downtown area.

#### Day 2

After breakfast we board a private bus for the eight hour drive to the town of Huaraz (3050m) in Peru's Ancash province. We head north out of Lima and initially follow the arid Pacific coastal road through sprawling shanty settlements to Pativilca. We then head inland following the Fortaleza valley where local villagers cultivate a wide variety of vegetables. Early in the season we will see acres of red peppers put out to dry in the heat of the sun. We cross over a high pass to Conococha (4050m) and from this high point on the road we get our first views of the snow covered mountains of the Cordillera Blanca and Huayhuash. We descend into the upper Rio Santa valley and finally arrive in Huaraz in the heart of the Peruvian Andes. We stay in the superb Andino Hotel which is undoubtedly the best place in town. The hotel is run by Swiss management and most rooms have superb panoramic views of the mountains.

### **Day 3**

We have a leisurely morning to recover from the travelling and adjust to the altitude. Huaraz is the major city in the region known as Callejon de Huaylas and is a cultural centre. There are many pleasant restaurants and cafes where we can enjoy lunch with the spectacular mountain backdrop of Huascaran, Chopicalqui and Huandoy. In the afternoon we can walk above the town.

### **Day 4**

Because the Alpamayo Circuit climbs to relatively high altitudes fairly quickly we acclimatise with a short trek in the delightful Quebrada Quilcayhuanca (Quebrada means 'valley'). This allows us to spend two nights sleeping at a campsite around 4000 metres before we head off for the main trek. Although situated very close to Huaraz, this region is not often visited by trekkers and the higher reaches of the valley are the habitat of Condors. We camp a pleasant site at 4000 metres.

### **Day 5**

We trek up to the head of the valley where we are surrounded by alpine peaks rising up to over 6000 metres, and there are several turquoise glacial lakes nestling in the moraines. We hike up to Laguna Cuchillacocha (4650m) where we have lunch and return via Laguna Tullparaju with the spectacular backdrop of Tullparaju (5787m) rising above the lake.

### **Day 6**

We return down the valley to the trail head at Pitec (3850m) and from there back to our hotel in Huaraz.

### **Day 7**

Today we begin the journey to Alpamayo. We drive north from Huaraz following the Rio Santa valley and pass through the town of Yungay beneath the fortress-like walls of Huascaran (6768m). In 1970 a huge earthquake unleashed a massive avalanche of ice and mud from the slopes of Huascaran which completely buried the town and killed most of its 25,000 inhabitants. Yungay has since been rebuilt and once more is a thriving market town. We have lunch here and then continue through Caras before turning off on the road to Cashapampa. This small settlement is the gateway for climbers going up the Santa Cruz valley to attempt the usual routes on Alpamayo. We drive on a little further to the tiny village of Hualcayan (3100m) with its attractive adobe buildings. We camp here and enjoy a traditional Andean meal in a village house.

### **Day 8**

In the morning we meet our muleteers and donkeys (arrieros and burros in Spanish) and load all our supplies and equipment. The arrieros are expert at this so we can leave them to it and begin trekking. We climb steeply up a series of zig zags heading towards the skyline and our grassy campsite at Wishcash (4300m) which overlooks the Rio Santa Valley.

### **Day 9**

A superb days walking – we leave Wishcash and follow a delightful airy path which weaves an ingenious route around steep cliffs and across smooth boiler-plate rock slabs. We soon arrive at Laguna Cullicocha (4650m) a sensational spot with great views of Nevado Santa Cruz (6241m). From here we cross the Paso dos Cedros (4850m) and can look down into the Quebrada Alpamayo. A steep descent is followed by a short climb to a second pass at 4800m. From here it is all downhill into Quebrada dos Cedros. We trek across the valley and reach the tiny settlement of Alpamayo (4100m), surrounded by terraced fields. A superb day's trekking.

### **Day 10**

An easier day today as we trek along the valley floor to Laguna Jancarurish (4300m). This beautiful green lake nestles beneath Alpamayo and the adjacent peak of Kitaraju. We camp by the lake in a fantastic alpine setting, and for those who haven't used up enough energy today we can climb up higher towards Alpamayo for some great sunset views and photographs.

### **Day 11**

An early start today in order to wade across a river before it becomes swollen with glacial melt waters. We climb up to a rocky pass at 4830m – marked as Gara Gara on the Alpenverein map. We initially descend rocky ground and arrive into a broad, grassy valley or 'Pampa' - a distinctive feature of this part of the high Andes. These valleys are very attractive to Condors and we may be lucky with a sighting of one of these rare birds. We follow the valley and cross another small col (4460m) which reveals fine views towards the summits of Nevado Pucajirca (6046m). We drop down into the Quebrada Tayapampa and camp in a pleasant alpine meadow.

**Day 12**

We follow the Quebrada Yanta Quenua up step screes to a small col at 4600m at the head of the valley. On the far side of the pass the first section can be a little awkward as we descend unpleasant, compacted gravel for about 100 feet. We then continue more easily into a rocky valley with a scattering of red-barked quenual trees which are peculiar to this part of the Andes. We follow the valley down to the still waters of Laguna Sactaycocha and continue along into the broad Jancapampa valley where wild horses roam freely. There are several villages nearby our campsite and the inquisitive local children will gather around our tents.

**Day 13**

We pass several small villages before heading up a pleasant grassy valley to the Tupatupa Pass (4360m). We get great views of the rarely seen eastern side of the Cordillera Blanca before descending into the sparsely populated Tuctubamba valley. A final climb of about 100 metres brings us to our campsite by Laguna Huecrocha (3950m).

**Day 14**

A very welcome rest day, but for those with lots of energy there is the opportunity to trek for a couple of hours up to the delightful Laguna Orococha (4240m).

**Day 15**

From Laguna Huecrocha we follow a narrow path which rises high above the valley floor. It eventually climbs steeply to the remote pass at Alto de Pucaraju from where there is a superb panorama of peaks including Taulliraju (5830m). We then drop down into the upper reaches of the Huaripampa valley. This is on the main trekking trail to the Punta Union pass and we will probably see other hikers and climbers here. We camp by the side of the river near Pariac (3800m).

**Day 16**

Instead of following the crowds over the Punta Union we head down the valley to the village of Colcabamba. This will be the first village of any size we have passed through since we began our trek in Hualcayan 10 days ago. If we are lucky we may be able to buy beers here. We continue easily through pleasant irrigated fields to our campsite at Molino Pampa.

**Day 17**

We follow the Quebrada Ishic Ulta to our campsite situated by a small glacial lake at Avalanche Place (4650m). This is so-named because from here we are able to view the avalanches which regularly sweep down from the slopes of Contrahiebas (6037m) across the valley. Our campsite is, however, completely safe. This is our last night under canvas, and a very special location.

**Day 18**

Today we cross our final pass, the Punta Yanayacu (4850m). This is also the most spectacular of our Cordillera Blanca passes and follows a narrow path cut into sheer rock walls and over a small rocky notch on the crest of the ridge. Views of Chopicalqui (6354m) and Huascaran Sur (6768m) greet us and provide a great distraction as we descend a steep zig zagging path down into the broad Ulta valley. Eventually we spot the road and our bus which will be waiting for us at the trail head. We say a final goodbye to our team of muleteers and load all our gear onto the bus for the two hour drive back to Huaraz. The comfortable Andino awaits with hot showers and cold beers.

**Day 19**

The long bus journey back to Lima. We stay at our hotel in the Miraflores district and in the evening will be able to choose from a great range of excellent restaurants.

**Day 20**

Our flight with Iberia departs in the early evening which allows most of the day to be used for sight-seeing and last minute souvenir shopping. Around 5pm we meet at the hotel and drive to the airport for our return flight via Madrid.

**Day 21**

We arrive in the UK in the evening.