



DOWN TIME

Once you've made a name for yourself in the burly world of ski mountaineering, astonished your buds, bagged a few sponsors, shot some sick footage that had Banff buzzing—in short, once you're at the top of your game, can you actually take a vacation? The author investigates in Peru's Cordillera Blanca, where six adventurers scramble to beat "poachers" to first descents, contend with one another's egos, and, finally, try to make history. **By Rob Buchanan Photographed by Kristoffer Erickson**

THE COLECTIVO SPED down the valley, flicking past cornfields and eucalyptus groves and little adobe villages where tomato-cheeked women in bowler hats and Day-Glo skirts squatted in the dust, waiting for a ride to the market in Huaraz. It was early June. The hillsides were aflame with yellow broom, and the tributaries rushing down the *quebradas* from the high glaciers of the Cordillera Blanca were running clear and full. Every few miles another giant, fantastically fluted peak would swing into view and someone in the van would call out for a photo stop, but by the time the driver got the message and took his foot off the gas, the moment was gone and we'd wave him on. Then, just outside the grimy hamlet of Mancos, we came around a corner and it was right there, filling the windshield, too big to believe. Everyone yelled at once, the driver laughed and pulled over, and the five of us tumbled out onto the side of the road.

Nevado Huascarán. At 6,768 meters (22,205 feet), it's the highest mountain in Peru, and the loftiest peak in the tropics. (Argentina's Aconcagua, at 22,834 feet, is the highest in South America.) Huascarán is two peaks, actually: Huascarán Norte and the slightly taller Huascarán Sur, both massive snow domes connected by a vast snow field called the Garganta; you could land a space shuttle up there.

Squinting into the morning sun, Kristoffer Erickson, our de facto expedition leader, pointed out the *ruta normale*, the standard climbing route to the summit of Huascarán Sur. Established by a German-Austrian expedition in 1932, it goes up the south side of the lower glacier, angles through a serac-studded icefall to the Garganta, then straight up the north shoulder of Huascarán Sur to the broad summit plateau. In 1978, French extremiste Patrick Vallençant made the first ski descent via the *ruta normale*. Since then it's been skied and snowboarded many, many times.

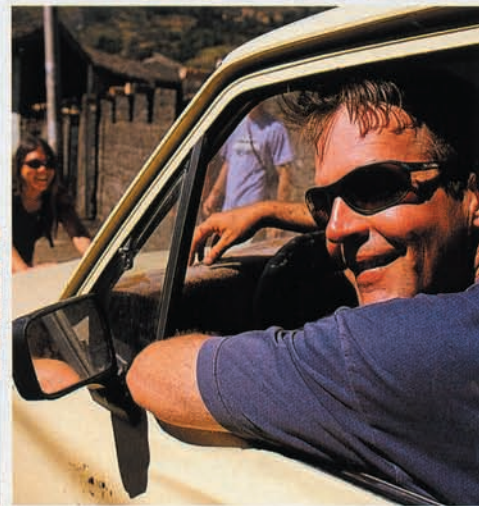
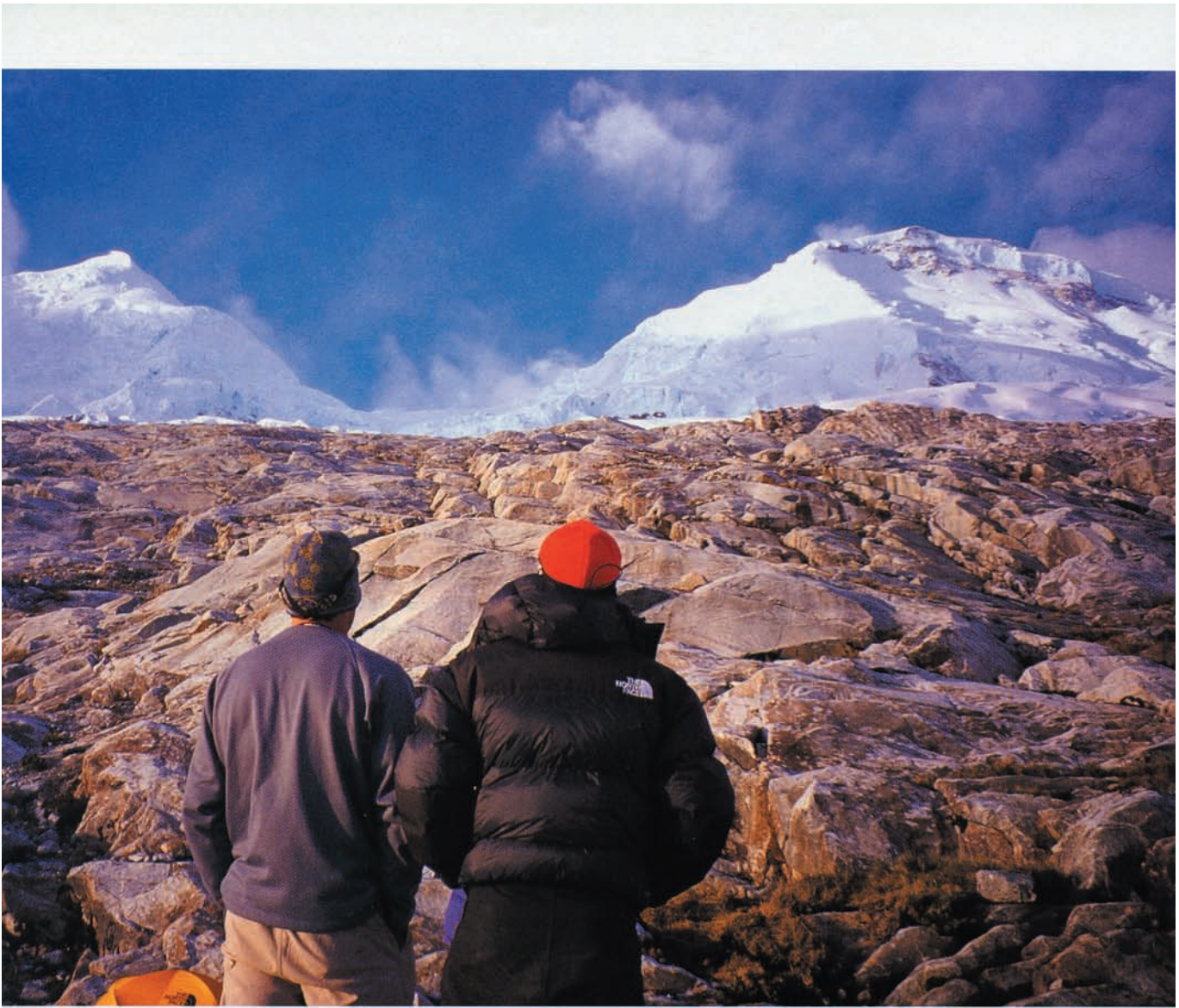
Now Erickson traced another line. It was breathtakingly direct, cutting from the icefall onto a great chevron-shaped snow face and then back along a sharp ridge—the West Rib—to the summit of Huascarán Sur. The face was the crux. Erickson estimated it at about 1,500 vertical feet and 55 to 60 degrees. It was oddly smooth and unbroken, as if it had been hacked out of the



Objects of desire: Kristoffer Erickson and Hans Saari behold Huascarán Norte (left) and Sur; below, scenes from a Peruvian road trip; bottom right, the author at the wheel.



TOP PHOTO: ROB BUCHANAN



mountainside by a giant cleaver. El Escudo, the Peruvians call it. The Shield. As far as anyone knew, it had never been skied.

Erickson, 27, is an affable and self-assured former high-school swimmer who was born and raised on the plains of north-central Montana. In 1993 he enrolled at Montana State University, in Bozeman, where he planned to major in landscape architecture. He took up photography instead, and he soon fell in with the boisterous local climbing crowd. Along with an ice-climbing buddy named Hans Saari, a sober, quietly competitive housepainter with a humanities degree from Yale, Erickson developed a passion for ski mountaineering, the once-obscure sport that involves carving turns down “slopes” previously considered to be climbing routes.

In 1998, after a series of noteworthy first descents in Montana’s Beartooths and Wyoming’s Tetons, the duo talked The North Face into sending them and four friends to Peru to shoot a ski flick on an absurdly steep, Matterhorn-like peak called Artesonraju, a few *quebradas*, or deep valleys, north of Huascarán. (Their footage became the lead segment of the DesLauriers brothers’ 1999 film *Altitude*.) Now Erickson and Saari, who is 30, were back, with a new crew of Peru first-timers: Chris Trimble, 32, a voluble, redheaded snowboarder from Basalt, Colorado; Nat Patridge, a laconic, 30-year-old ski guide from Jackson Hole, Wyoming; and me. A sixth member of the expedition, 32-year-old Stephen Koch, a Jackson-based snowboarder, would join us a few days later.

On their way to Artesonraju two years earlier, Erickson and Saari had scoped the Shield, and found it blue and sheeny—far too icy to hold a ski’s edge. But because the past winter had been more severe than usual, it now looked as if the left side of the Shield might be covered in snow. Skiable snow.

IF YOU’RE LYING in bed in Huaraz on a June morning, acclimatizing (the city sits a heady 10,200 feet above sea level) or just recovering from a night at the Tambo, the nightclub where climbers, tourists, and locals mix, here are some of the sounds you might hear:

A rooster with a throat infection.

Distant tuba bands playing dirges.

Pickup-truck-mounted megaphones blaring political slogans.

And, without fail, the metallic jouncing of rebar being carted to construction sites.

In Huaraz, rebar is serious business, a legacy of the terrible earthquake of May 31, 1970, which leveled the city’s unreinforced adobe buildings and killed 20,000 people, half the population. (All told, the death toll in northwestern Peru came to 70,000, making the quake the worst natural disaster in the recorded history of the western hemisphere.) A tragedy like that could haunt a place for generations, but Huaraz today is a vibrant boomtown of 100,000-plus whose prosperity is due to two new nearby Canadian-owned copper and precious-metal mines—and to adventure tourism. With easy access to climbing and trekking in both the Cordillera Blanca and the Cordillera Huayhuash, the city has become a mandatory stop on the Gringo Trail, a sort of Andean Chamonix.

In the two years since Erickson and Saari last visited, the place had changed dramatically. Internet *cabinas* had sprung up everywhere, a half-dozen new cash machines had gone in around the Plaza de Armas, and there were even seafood restaurants. Yet the two had gotten their biggest shock when we checked in at La Casa de Zarela, the little hillside hostel run by Erickson’s friend

Zarela Zamora Lopez. Erickson and Saari expected to find the usual crowd of penny-wise climbers on the back terrace, one of the pension’s prime attractions. What they weren’t prepared for was the half-dozen skiers and snowboarders hanging there, too. One of them, a rawboned Scotsman, had just reprised Vallençant’s classic descent of the west face of Yerupajá, in the Huayhuash. Next to him, two longhaired French snowboarders lounged in the sun, rolling joints and waiting for their photographer to recover from a bout of “gastro.” As soon as he did, they were going to ride Huascarán Norte.

Saari shook his head in disbelief. “Two years ago people would see our skis and just say, ‘What are you doing?’” he muttered. “Now it seems like everybody’s down here.”

“Maybe it’s time to stop making movies,” Trimble said.

He had a point. Even as Saari lamented the ski bum’s rush on Huaraz, he knew that he and Erickson had had a hand in kicking it off. Make an over-the-top video like the one they filmed on Artesonraju, and you’re going to draw a host of imitators. On the other hand, what choice did aspiring backcountry careerists have? Ski mountaineering isn’t pro golf, and the only way to make it pay is to go bigger, get higher, publish more articles, and make more movies.

Even so, Erickson and Saari insisted that this trip was to be casual and relaxing—a vacation.

The previous fall the two had been witnesses to the avalanche on Tibet’s Shishapangma that killed alpinist Alex Lowe, 40, and cameraman Dave Bridges, 29, and neither felt ready to attempt something of that magnitude again, much less return to the Himalayas. All he and Saari wanted, Erickson said, was to kick back and show their friends Peru.

But was it really possible for these guys to chill? In a month, Erickson, Saari, Patridge, and Koch—all of whom worked for Exum Mountain Guides—were due in Jackson Hole for the summer climbing season, a two-month slogfest in which they



Dandies in the Andes: clockwise from top left, photo ops on the road east of the Cordillera Blanca; Saari and Nat Patridge’s trial run on Huandoy; Team Peru (left to right): Koky Casteneda, Stephen Koch, Patridge, Chris Trimble, Saari, and Erickson; a ski-bearing burro



might clear \$12,000 each. The stake would carry them through the rest of the year, but during the season they'd have next to no free time. As such, this "vacation" represented their best chance to stay on the radar of potential sponsors. What's more, this was their last opportunity to secure summerlong bragging rights within their fraternity of climbers and guides. As they all well knew, reputations are made in the off-season. If they didn't come back from Peru with some spectacular first descent, someone else would.

Beyond all that, I suspected, there was something else—a simple, burning need to take things one step further. Sitting there on Zarela's terrace, I suggested as much to Erickson.



He shook his head. "We don't go out there to up the ante every single time," he said. "We're out there because it's what really fuels us, gives us the drive to do everything else we do. It's not to outdo anybody. It's the camaraderie, the bond between us, the excitement."

Whatever the motive, I replied, the effect is the same: Your next expedition winds up being heavier than the thing you did before. Erickson laughed.

"That is true," he said.

STEPHEN KOCH KNOWS how to make an entrance. Blond, muscle-bound, and rakishly dressed in crisp khakis, a porkpie hat, and a pink aloha shirt, he strode into Zarela's, set down two giant duffels, and cheerfully crushed all our hands in turn. Then he hoisted himself up onto the stuccoed eaves of the

MAP BY PAUL NIETO. BOTTOM CENTER PHOTO BY ROB DUCHANAN



roof and made his way around the courtyard, hand over hand. "Need a little workout after that bus ride," he explained, panting a little.

Erickson might have been our leader, but Koch was our rock star. Born in San Diego, he skipped college, moved to Wyoming, and taught himself to board, startling the locals with his out-of-the-blue first snowboard descent of the Grand Teton, in 1989. Though he spends his summers guiding, like everyone else, he also has a mediagenic multiyear quest: to become the first snowboarder to ride the Seven Summits, the highest peak on each continent and Oceania. So far he's knocked off five and is seeking more sponsorships (Burton Snowboard Company is already backing him) for an attempt on the last two—New Guinea's Carstensz Pyramid this year, and the formidable north face of Everest in 2002.

Despite all he's done, Koch was new to Peru. He'd meant to come down on the Artesonraju trip in 1998, but an avalanche that spring on Mount Owen, in the Tetons, got in the way. The slide carried Koch 2,200 feet, broke his back, and blew out both of

his knees. Now, after a full year of therapy, he was again ready to charge—and charge he did. That night at Tambo, Koch delighted the mostly female crowd by ripping off his shirt and clearing a swath on the dance floor with his gyrations.

"Did you know Hasbro and The North Face are coming out with a new Stephen Koch action figure this Christmas?" Trimble said one morning over breakfast. "It's gonna have a little snowboard and two little ice axes for accessories." He mimed the toy, making hand-over-hand ice-climbing motions. Everybody laughed, but the truth is we were grateful for Koch's infusion of energy. It was good to have someone impulsive and headstrong in our midst. Until his arrival, the rest of us had been bumping along in professional nice-guy mode, carefully deferring to one another with the jokey bonhomie of package tourists.

The next morning we huddled with Koky Casteneda, a local guide and an old friend of Erickson's who knows all the climbing news. Saari outlined two possibilities for our first project: the Ferrari couloir on Alpamayo and the north face of Huandoy. (The Shield isn't the sort of run one warms up on.) Both op-



Brendan O'Neill; he worked at Jackson's Mountain High Pizza Pie. Could a guy from home be doing a little poaching?

THE TRAIL TO HUANDROY zigzagged up through chest-high thickets of lupine in riotous purple bloom. Paintbrush and miniature organ-pipe cacti brushed our boots, and we passed through a last, gnarled grove of papery-barked quinal, one of the world's highest-dwelling trees. Then, at 15,400 feet, we crossed over a little ridge in the moraine and dropped down to a turquoise glacial tarn: base camp.

After hearing about O'Neill, Saari had checked the logbook at the local guides' office in Huaraz and discovered that O'Neill and a partner had indeed climbed Huandoy Norte but had left their skis at base camp. Good news. The peak was still a potential first descent, and we'd quickly decided on it.

Above base camp we could see a series of smooth granite slabs, then the toe of a massive glacier leading back into the giant bowl formed by Huandoy and its sister peak, Huandoy Oeste. The first afternoon we made out a faint trail leading up the glacier—

tions were audacious. Huandoy is a 55-degree slab bordered by a sickening 1,200-foot overhang, while the Ferrari is a 60-degree ice runnel ten or 12 feet wide.

Everyone knew that to ski the Ferrari would blow the collective mind of the climbing world. But Casteneda, who had just returned from Alpayayo, had discouraging news. "There were 40 people in base camp," he reported. "It's like ants. Every morning there's a race to get out of camp and be first on the face." Even if we won that race, then what? Would we ski it with everyone else coming up the same line?

That night another Bozeman climber dropped by Zarela's. "That's funny," he said after hearing our plans. "There's this other guy from Jackson who's trying to do the same routes."

"He's on skis?" Saari asked. "I think so," the Bozemanite replied. "His partner got sick on Alpayayo, but after that I know they went to Huandoy. Now they're on Huascarán."

An almost palpable shiver ran through the group. Before leaving the States, Saari had posted a brief write-up of the trip on the Exum Web site. Koch, it turned out, knew the other skier. His name was

O'Neill's bootpack—but above that, nothing.

"It's going to be burly, really burly," said Saari. "It needs lots of traverses and rappels." He looked around, smiling. "I'm psyched."

After three days of acclimatizing, we decided to take a warm-up run on a ramp dropping down from the flanks of Huandoy Oeste. To me it was the only line on the whole mountain that looked remotely skiable. But when I got to the crux, a funneling, 53-degree couloir that connected the upper part of the ramp to the slightly mellower lower slopes, I changed my mind. Ditch-

"There were 40 people in base camp," Koky Casteneda said of Alpayayo. "It's like ants. Every morning there's a race to get out of camp and be first on the face."

Play dates: clockwise from left, Saari scales Huandoy; Trimble follows suit; chess break; rations; Saari's game face; supper by headlamp.

ing my skis and poles, I climbed the rest of the way up with an ice ax in each hand.

A strange sight greeted me up on top: thousands of foot-high ice towers, apparently created by fierce sun and a lack of wind. They're known as *penitentes*, and the name is apt: They looked like cloaked pilgrims plodding mindlessly toward some holy summit where they might or might not be redeemed. Luckily, the towers turned slushy with the heat of the day and gave way easily beneath the pressure of turning skis and boards.

The slope, which we later dubbed Los Bonitos Peni-

tentes, topped out at about 18,500 feet and offered 50-degree turns over a terrifying precipice. Everyone gritted their teeth as Casteneda threw his first few turns. He'd been on them for only a couple of seasons, and his self-taught technique was ragged. But he kept his stance low and wide and calmly shoulder-steered clear of trouble.

Trimble went next. I watched him, impressed by how casually he shifted his weight when turning from toeside to backside. Too casually, perhaps; an instant later his board shot out from under him and he went down hard on his butt. At first it was almost funny. He wasn't sliding fast, and the expression on his face was more of annoyance than fear. Then he began to accelerate.

"Get a tool in!" Erickson yelled.

Not a chance. Trimble was on his back, enveloped in a cloud of flying ice chips, straining hard to keep the bounces from becoming cartwheels. Though the pitch gradually flattened below, it wasn't at all clear that he would be able to avoid being swept over the cliff at the very bottom. And then, suddenly, he got his edge in and stopped. Shaken but unharmed, he sat up, swallowed hard a few times, and waved weakly toward us. By the time we caught up to him, the Chattering Skull—one of Trimble's many nicknames for himself—was back to his customary self-mockery.

"How'd you like that one?" he said. "Bucky's Wild Ride."

THE NEXT DAY BROUGHT the first of the debates that would rattle and eventually fracture our team. Casteneda left for a guiding job in Huaraz, and everyone except me wanted to ski Huandoy. (After the warm-up run, I quickly decided to stay in