

Aconcagua Trip 2007

Well the trip finally got here. We planned this for 8 months and now we were off. We left Philadelphia Dec 13, while Dad left St. Cloud. We all flew to Miami and then to Santiago Chile. We did not meet Dad till we got to Chile. From there we flew to Mendoza Argentina together. The nice thing about staying in your hemisphere is no jet lag. We were meet by our guide Pablo at the airport. He took us to out hotel, the hotel Aconcagua. The journey was about 24 hours from home to hotel. The hotel was a nice place with plenty large enough rooms. It was in the business district of Mendoza so walking to restaurants and parks was plenty easy. Our first impression of Argentina was this is a nice place where I felt comfortable and not concerned with security or safety.

The town does the standard Latin America schedule. Late meals and pretty much everything closes down from 2 PM till 5 or 6 PM.

Since my Dad's bags did not arrive due to a close connection in Atlanta we were a bit worried about the departure on the 15th.

The next day we heard that his bags were at the airport so off we went to get our permits. Now this is an interesting process. You go to the tourism office and get paper work. You take that paper work to another office a block or so away and pay for the permit there. Then you go back to the tourism office with that receipt and get the permit. I think this keeps everyone honest from what we were told. We got our permits and off we went the airport for the missing bags. Now we were set to drive the 186 KM to Puente del Inca a hostel type hotel about 10 KM from the trail head. Each room had 3 sets of bunk beds and a full bath. We got there about 3 PM and bummed around for the rest of the day. We were able to see a pretty cool mineral/sulfur mine. This area has a few ski slopes and is only about 13 KM from the Chile border.

The next day we had a light breakfast of cakes, cookies, and coffee. We later found out this was pretty much what breakfast would be for the entire trip. Not the best breakfast I was always hungry about 30 minutes after I ate.

We hit the trail at about 10:30 on the 16th which also seems to be the normal start for all the days on this trip. Up the Vacas Valley we went on our three day trip to base camp, Plaza Argentina. Each of the three days was about 8 miles obviously uphill. The mules had our large bags so we had a nice hike with lite packs. We really just carried a fleece, raincoat, light jacket, lunch and snacks, camera, and 3 liters of water. We followed the Vacas river to the Relinchos river which lead to base camp. Each day the mules would have our gear waiting for us at each camp. We finally got to see the mountain on the afternoon of the second day as we approached Casa de Piedra, but only for a few minutes and then the clouds hid it again. We saw Aconcagua in all its beauty about half way through day 3 from the top of a ridge. It was wonderful to finally see the mountain we've been dreaming about for all these months. We started at 9186 feet and topped out at base camp at 13,800. Over 3 days and 24 miles this was not too difficult. But toss in the river rock, 15-20 MPH headwinds with gust up to 31 MPH, and loose scree in parts and we were all happy for our rest day once at Plaza Argentina.

Plaza Argentine is the base camp for the Polish route and the Polish traverse route. We were planning on doing the traverse route. You can only see the tip of the top of the mountain from this camp. We enjoyed our rest day. This camp is very small compared to the base camp for the normal route. The four main guide services had large tents setup for their groups to eat in and for cooking and what not. Each

outfit had their own outhouse setup. We setup our tent and made ourselves at home as we'd be here for 4 nights before moving to camp 1. There were about 15-20 other tents I would estimate when we got there. But each day more and more folks would show up. We were very near the the English Glacier at this base camp. So near you could walk up and touch it. The glacier is covered in about 6-10 inches of sand and rock. Some of it is exposed and you can get a good feeling for it's thickness. It is thirty or forty feet thick in spots. And who knows how far down it goes. All the water we drank was from this glacier or others. We were drinking plenty of water I would shot for seven liters a day and would easily get 6. We had our Camelbak bladders setup in our tent like IV bags hanging from the loft hooks so we could drink at night. Since I slept pretty poorly I normally drank at least a liter if not the whole 2 liter bag each night. It was so dry at base camp that you had to drink. The temps are in the very low 30F range to as high as 85F during the day. But in any given 15 minute period of time during the day you could swing from nice sunny 85F to a nice sunny 50F if the wind picked up. One day it was 67F and snowing. The wind was blowing the snow from a storm on a near by mountain on to us.

After our rest day we had to get our medical check before we could continue our trip to camp 1. We all checked out okay. If you are over 160 systolic pressure you cannot climb past this camp. There is also a pulse oximeter check which you need to have a 80% blood oxygen percentage or better to climb. Our team was made up of My Dad who will be 70 in May 08, my wife and I. We are all ready to get going. We made arrangements for porters to carry our 30 kilos of food to camp 1. We left camp about 1015 and hiked up to camp 1. It was a pretty steep hike with so much scree that at some points you moved furter back with each step unless you moved quick. Since our team was moving slow it was a long day up to camp 1. It is supposed to take about 5 hours to hike the 2.2 miles with an elevation gain of 2610 feet. We took just over 6.5 hours. We rested a bit at camp 1 at an elevation of 16,732 feet while the guides arranged the food and gear so it wouldn't blow away while we were back at base camp. After about 30 minutes at camp 1 we headed back down. Down was faster and pretty easy but it still took us almost 2 hours. All together this day was just over 9 hours of hiking. The whole way up my father was coughing allot. He thought it was a slight asthma issue so he used his inhaler a few times but it didn't help. This coughing was worry some as it was keeping him from being able to move fast as he wanted. At one of our breaks we talked about our pace with the guides. The guide felt at our pace we'd have a slim chance to summit. When we got back to base camp my father, Bobbie and I spoke about this and my fathers health. He felt he was getting a ling infection and started taking antibiotics the day prior but had not said anything to us. Once we found this out we talked more about the expedition and whether we should continue to the next camp. He had a limited supply of antibiotics so going on with the hike would be risky. We decided it would be best to retreat. We also did not want to break the team up, then Dad would be left to the park guards. They would get him back to the road and transport to Puente del Inca, but then he'd be on his own. He'd have to catch a bus back to Mendoza. If we all left together then the guides would go out with all of us and get us back to Mendoza and the hotel.

So we informed the guides of our decision to head back down. They made arrangements for the mules which would require 2 days lead time. So we hung out at base camp for two more days and headed out on the 22nd. We also arranged for 2 mules for Dad and Bobbie to ride down on since the hike out would be a 2 day trip instead of three. We left camp about 10 AM and planned to meet the mules on the way up the trail. We meet them about 4 miles later. I kept hiking and Bobbie and Dad hung out as mules drank and got turned around on the very narrow trail. I made it back down to Casa de Piedra before them so I waited there for them as we agreed since I wanted to ride a mule across the river instead of wading across. The guide caught up with me and we hiked down the river till the mules caught up and then we crossed the river. Dad and Bobbie stayed on one side of the river while the guide and I were on the other side. We could look across and see them for awhile and then they got ahead of us and we didn't see them again till camp at Pampa de Lenas. That is when I heard the story about Dad's mule

stumbling in the river while they were crossing and dad taking a swim. It sounded like a pretty scary event where he could have been washed away if it wasn't for the muleteer grabbing him at the last minute. Mean while Bobbie was still on the mules and since they were all tied together the lead mule was still walking away and Bobbie was helpless in trying to stop the train. She finally jump off her mule and grabbed the lead mule and they all stopped. Dad lost his camera and iPod in the water. From what I understand the mule ride may have been tougher than the hike. I made the 16 mile hike with Pablo in 8.3 hours. We actually got to camp before the mules on this night so we had to sit around and wait for our tents and sleeping bags. We ate and sat around the camp fire the park rangers had going. The next morning we hiked out to the road. 8 miles in about 3.5 hours. This was very fast for Bobbie and she was beat. We took a bus back to the small hotel and had lunch and beer. The beer was like having a beer for the first time in your life. It was very refreshing and so dam good. After lunch we got on another bus and headed back to Mendoza and the hotel Aconcagua. It was the 23rd and after 8 days of no showering it was nice to be back at the hotel. We showered, ate, and slept. Now we had to kill some time till our flights on the 2nd of January. We figured wine tours and not sure what else could fill our time. But we also called the airlines to see about heading home early.

Now there was another team that arrived a day after us, so they were on the same schedule but one day behind us. We got to know them as we shared meals in the Aymara meal tent. There were 12 of them. Stefan was one of the team members. He was from Germany. Herb, Jim and Jim's daughters were from California. There were others but I don't remember their names. Stefan climbed Denali just last June 2007. Well we ran into Stefan on Christmas day at the hotel. He had to be evacuated due to AMS. They flew him out on the helicopter. It was nice to see a familiar face and we talked and had dinner over the next few days. He told us about a nice wine tour he had taken and suggested we do the same. He left on the 27th for another part f Argentina while he waited for his team to come down from the mountain. They were scheduled back on the 31st.

We had some pretty bad weather on Christmas. High winds and even some rain. For Mendoza, which has about 300 days of sun each year rain is an event. We kept thinking if it's windy and rainy here then the mountain was probably getting hammered. We found out in a few days just how true this was.

We took a wine tour on the 26th. It was a day long tour where we visited 3 wineries. Pulenta, Andeluna, and O. Fournier. We were drinking wine by 10AM at the Pulenta winery. This was a new winery with a small operation and a great Malbec grape. Two brother own and operate the winery. Then we were off to Andeluna. This winery is owned by an American. You can see the American influence in the facility. The owner an Ex Frito Lay CEO and family member or the Lay potato chip family has built a massive brick building in the middle of the vineyard. The wines were also Malbec and some blends. Very good wine. Dad, Bobbie and I were getting silly and it was still only about 1 PM. Our next stop would be for lunch and a tour of O. Fournier winery. This place was a mostly underground gravity winery. They started at the ground level sorting grapes and then moving things down via gravity. The main tanks had opening at ground level so they just dumped the grapes in. Then as they moved from tank to Oak cask they would use gravity since the oak barrels were on very bottom of the facility. The wine was the best of the three.

We still had time to kill so para sailing was in order. We got picked up at the hotel the next day and off to the near by mountain. At just over 5,000 feet it was a perfect launching spot for this. We got up there about 5 PM via old Toyota Land Cruiser. It was a nice view of Mendoza. After putting on the harness the pilot would attach himself to you. You'd hung/sit in front of him. You waited for the right wind and walked off the mountain. That was it, you were sitting in the air with a big para sail above. We caught some thermals and went up even higher as we floated around. It was allot of fun. Too bad it was only a

20 minute ride, I could have stayed up there all day.

On the 29th we ran into another team member from the team that was one day behind us. It was Jim this time. We had breakfast with him and he told us about their climb. Turns out they made camp 1 and then got hammered with weather. They did make a carry to camp 2 but then got stuck at camp 1 for 4 days due to extremely high winds and about 3 feet of snow. They knew they were out of time and went down to base camp and then hiked out from base camp to the road the next day. Doing the 24 mile hike in one day was a pretty impressive feat. We had dinner with them and many of the rest of their team that night.

We were able to change our flights from the 2nd to the 30th so that helped as you can run out of things to do in Mendoza pretty fast. The hotel did have a nice spa and Bobbie and I had a nice mud bath and got glazed like hams in the sauna. They painted us with honey. I kept licking my arm which made Bobbie laugh.

The day before we left, Argentina moved their clocks ahead one hour. No big deal we thought. We got to the airport for a 6 PM flight about 2:45. I wanted to be early to check our bags in and not be rushed. Well it turns out the flight time moved to 7 PM when the time change took place. So now we were really early. We landed in Chile before we took off as they don't do the time change thing. Other than that the flight home was fine. We all got to Dallas and then went our separate ways.

Pictures can be seen at

[Http://www.erickpanger.com/aconcagua.html](http://www.erickpanger.com/aconcagua.html)