

1 Planning and preparation

1.1 Planning your trip

Climbing Aconcagua is a serious undertaking, albeit one that offers great rewards. At 6962 metres (22,840 ft), it is not only the greatest mountain of South America, it is also the highest peak outside the Himalaya. Unlike other such high mountains, its main approach routes are mainly free of snow and ice. There are surprisingly few glaciers: the wind and sun are so strong that most snow is either blown off the mountain or melted away.

This means that during suitable weather, Aconcagua's summit can be reached by people with no technical climbing expertise. Although the mountain also offers classic extreme mountaineering routes on its South Face, the non-technical routes described here can be climbed by people experienced only in strenuous hiking at high altitude. On the Normal Route and Polish Traverse, there are steep slopes, but no crevasses, no deep abysses and no ladders.

Many people think Aconcagua seems like the next step after Kilimanjaro, but it presents a different level of challenge. Aconcagua is very much harder than Kili, because

- it is over 1000 m higher, with greater risk of altitude sickness
- the weather is notoriously severe, with extremely high winds
- the terrain is more difficult, with extensive scree, *talus* (rock debris), and *penitentes* (see page 9)
- it is normal for climbers to carry their own loads above base camp.

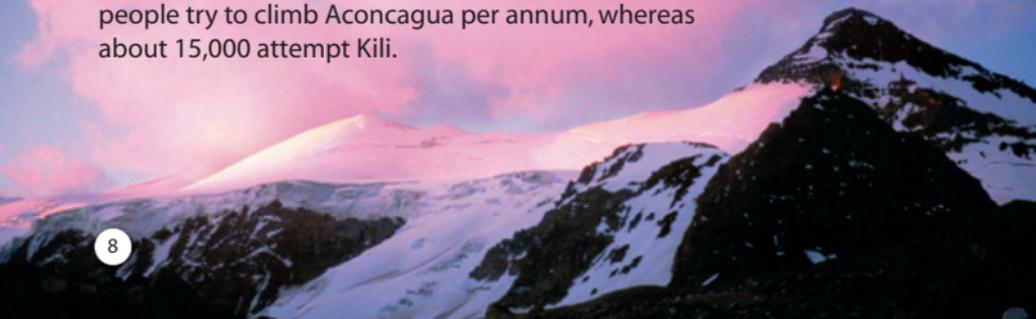
Unlike Kilimanjaro, Aconcagua demands an expedition of 2-3 weeks, perhaps longer if the weather is poor. You may want to consider climbing a different mountain first, as a warm-up and to acclimatize: for example, the Vallecitos area (between Mendoza and Aconcagua) has popular treks up Cerro Vallecitos (5770 m), Pico Plata (6100 m) and El Plata (6300 m). For those flying to Santiago, Cerro Plomo (5430 m) is a popular choice. More ambitious options could include an expedition to the remote volcanos of Tupungato (6550 m) or even Ojos del Salado (6890 m).

However, all of these involve extra nights, more travel and greater expense. If your goal is simply to summit Aconcagua, why not acclimatize on the mountain itself, so as to be poised to take advantage of any window of good weather? Don't count on a fast ascent even so. Bad weather could make any attempt on the summit unsafe for days on end.

Throughout several weeks, then, in addition to climbing the mountain, you also have to strike and break up your own camps, melt snow to drink and carry heavy loads. Because of this last factor, it is common to climb every stage above base camp twice, partly to split the loads and also because 'climbing high and sleeping low' can help you to acclimatize: see cache-and-carry (page 27).

By contrast, a one-week hike up Kilimanjaro is normally fully supported by teams of porters and guides, with only one strenuous day, namely summit day – almost always attempted in good conditions. The weather on Kili is much more predictable, and the short ascent time minimizes any danger of being caught out in a storm at high altitude. By contrast, on Aconcagua you can expect many really strenuous days, often in hostile conditions.

Summiting Kili may give you some idea about how you tolerate altitude up to 6000 m, but it does not compare with the demands of Aconcagua, where summit success ratios are lower. Many people find it too tough or too cold, and give up. Aconcagua has more deaths per annum than Kilimanjaro, despite having only about one quarter of the numbers attempting it. Firm numbers are difficult to gather and even harder to compare reliably, but about 4,000 people try to climb Aconcagua per annum, whereas about 15,000 attempt Kili.



As a proportion of those attempting the summit, even Denali (McKinley) in Alaska has fewer deaths. Out of about 1500 attempts, Denali has 'only' 1 or 2 deaths per year, whereas in some years Aconcagua has as many as 10 or even 20. It is dangerous not only as a high-altitude mountain, but also because it attracts people who are inadequately prepared, mentally and physically.

However, if you are sure you can climb at altitude whilst carrying a rucksack of at least 20 kg (see page 34), and that you have the mental strength to stay on a cold windy cold mountain for weeks on end under primitive conditions, then Aconcagua might be your next step towards the seven summits.

A guided expedition?

The first major decision is whether to join an expedition led by a mountain guide, or whether your team has enough experience of high-altitude expeditions to go it alone. The latter gives more freedom, such as a free choice of route, dates and itinerary on the mountain. But you will also have many more responsibilities, including navigating, booking the mules, cooking, supplies and technical equipment. Unless your Spanish is fluent, this could be challenging.



Penitentes are giant icicles formed by wind and sun, here towering over a distant trekker

The team is responsible for the safety of its weakest members: in an unsupported team, first aid expertise and communication skills are vital. If one person becomes seriously ill or has an accident, it is more likely to compromise everybody's chance of attempting the summit. This alone makes your chances of summiting greater when you use a local guide.

The other advantages of using guides are worth spelling out:

- they know the mountain routes, so you have no worries about navigation and no need to reconnoitre the routes
- they are professionally trained to help their clients to climb successfully but safely
- they speak the language, know the Provincial Park (see p 41) and medical personnel, and are expert in the mountain's weather systems
- they provide access to the toilet facilities in base camps
- they are responsible for logistics and supplies, leaving you freer to focus on climbing the mountain; however, all team members are expected to help with chores such as collecting water/snow, preparing food and washing up
- they are strong and well-acclimatized; although they often carry heavier loads than their clients, if you need extra help, you should rely on mules and perhaps porters, rather than expecting your guide to share your load.



Medical tent in base camp

Unless you have experience of high-altitude climbing above 5000 m, of winter camping and of managing expeditions, you should hire a guide. Many companies offer fixed and flexible dates with great variations in price and service levels. Make sure your guides are licensed, that they work for a reputable company and that you are clear about exactly what is included in the price and what is extra.

This book includes information that may assist unguided groups both in advance planning and on the mountain. This should also alert readers intending to book a guided expedition to dubious itineraries. For example, once you have grasped the combined effects of altitude, cache-and-carry and probable bad weather, it's easy to predict that a low-cost 15-day package won't give you enough time on the mountain. Since extra days will be expensive if added locally, perhaps prohibitively expensive because of international flights, draw the obvious conclusion and book a longer expedition with more built-in contingency days. Several local companies offer guided climbs of Aconcagua. The author works with selected local partners and you can book professionally guided climbs through his 7summits.com website.

The arid upper Horcones Valley



What is the best time of year?

Aconcagua lies in Argentina, near its western border with Chile. Its latitude is nearly 33° south, and it has well-defined seasons. The normal climbing season is the austral summer, from the end of November to early March. The jet stream is a permanent band of ferocious wind high in the earth's atmosphere. This blows above the summit most of the time, but can descend to the upper slopes of the mountain, causing the infamous *viento blanco*. This 'white wind' brings heavy snow and impossibly low temperatures. A large lenticular (lens-shaped) cloud over the summit is a serious warning to descend immediately.

Outside this period the winds are too strong, the temperatures too low and the Provincial Park service is not available. If you want to climb between mid-November and mid-March, report to the Park authorities which require you to sign a legal waiver.

There are many other things you can do while in the area. Argentina and its mountains offer other great treks, rafting and horseback riding. Mendoza is known for its excellent wine and steaks. Your international flight will probably be to either Buenos Aires or Santiago de Chile. Both cities offer plenty of sightseeing and interesting cultural treasures. Bear in mind that to obtain your climbing permit you must travel to Mendoza: see page 41.

During November to March, the temperature in Mendoza is very pleasant, generally about 15° C at night up to 25° C in the daytime, and it can be a great place to spend Christmas.



Rescue helicopter for emergencies

Insurance

Standard holiday travel insurance is useless on Aconcagua since it generally excludes mountaineering expeditions, and even the non-technical routes involve carrying equipment that makes insurance companies view the climb as technical. You must be covered for mountain rescue. Check the small print for any altitude or activity limitations and excesses.

Most national mountaineering associations offer suitable policies that are good value, especially to members. If you already have a general-purpose annual policy, ask for a price to upgrade it for this expedition: often it's cheaper than taking out a separate policy.

The time to take out insurance is when you first commit yourself – to the expedition or the flight, whichever is sooner. If you are unlucky and have a training injury or other emergency, at least you'll have cancellation cover.



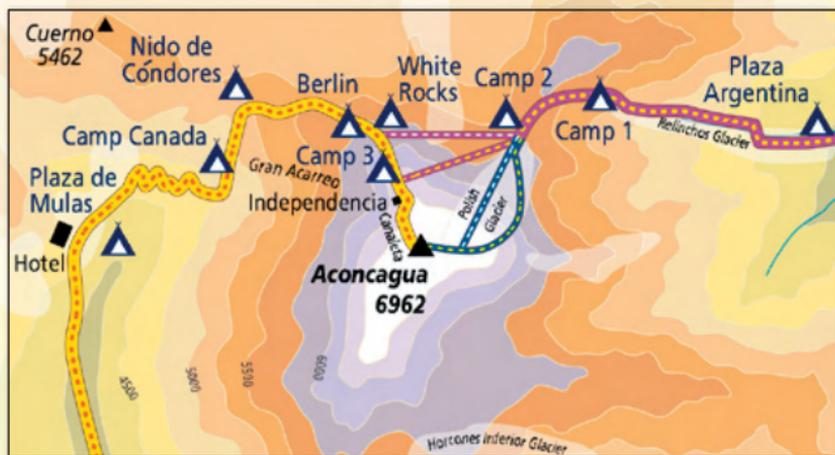
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1-2 Choosing your route

A major decision is which approach route to use. This book focuses on the Normal Route (Horcones Valley) and the Polish Traverse and Polish Glacier (Vacas Valley): see Table 1. The access valleys are named after the rivers that created them: see also page 44.

Table 1: Aconcagua ascent routes covered in this book

Name	Approach valley	Book sections	Options (Vacas routes)	Base camp	Comments
Normal	Horcones	3-1-3-7		Plaza de Mulas	non-technical, chosen by over 75% for ascent and descent; also used for descent by some Polish Traverse climbers
Polish Traverse	Vacas	4-1-4-5, 4-7,	4-6a Direct 4-6b White Rocks	Plaza Argentina	non-technical, goes around Polish Glacier, traversing to join upper part of Normal Route
Polish Glacier	Vacas	4-1-4-5, 4-7,	4-6c Original 4-6c Direct	Plaza Argentina	technical glacier ascent; demands experience of ice climbing and glacier travel



The Horcones Valley gives access to the

- Normal Route
- Technical South Face routes (outside the scope of this book).

The Vacas Valley gives access to the

- Polish Glacier routes
- Polish Traverse route (or 'Falso de los Polacos')
- Guanacos Route (outside the scope of this book)

The majority of climbers (over 75%) use the Normal Route as it presents no technical difficulties. It offers the option of luxury at the Hotel Plaza de Mulas with meals, bunks and even showers. However, it tempts people to ascend to base camp too fast, making severe altitude problems for the unwary, and it can be very crowded.

All Vacas valley routes are identical as far as Casa de Piedra at 3200 m, where the 'Polish' routes (Traverse and Glacier) turn west and remain the same up to 5900 m. At this point, the Glacier routes ascend the glacier whereas the Traverse route goes round it, making a traverse to join the upper part of the Normal Route.

The Polish Traverse route is therefore non-technical like the Normal Route, but it contains a few more snow fields and it takes three days to get to base camp. Some groups ascending on this route use the Normal Route for descent, making a full traverse of this magnificent mountain. This needs extra effort, since you need to carry all of your extra gear and trash over 6000 m (19,685 ft).

The Polish Glacier routes are technical, involving a long, icy glacier ascent. There are many potential routes up the glacier, all requiring experience of glacier travel and full ice climbing gear. The average slope is about 35°, with sections as steep as 50°-70° depending on conditions. The main choice is between the Original route as established in 1934 and the Direct, which runs over steeper but safer ice and snow. Neither is climbed very often because they are

viable only when the snow and ice is in good condition: most of the time, either there isn't enough snow, exposing hard ice, or there's too much, making it impassable. However, if you were planning on a glacier route, but from high camp can see that conditions aren't right, you can switch to a Traverse route instead.

The Polish Glacier routes, then, are suitable only for experienced technical ice climbers. For most people, the choice is between the Normal Route and Polish Traverse.

Choose the Normal Route if you

- like crowds and the option of relative luxury
- are relatively inexperienced in high mountains, scrambling and use of crampons
- are already fully acclimatized and want a quick ascent.

Choose the Polish Traverse route if you

- want a rougher trek, more rocks, harder tracks, more snow and ice, more variation, longer distance and fewer people
- are experienced enough to handle these challenges
- want any chance of seeing wildlife such as guanacos (see page 55).

Aconcagua from a plane, with the Horcones Valley at lower left

