



The PackRat

Newsletter of the Rocky Mountain Ramblers Association April/May 2003



Rick, Jerry, and Bob on the summit of Aconcagua.

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**RMRA
Executive Committee**

President
Ron Hunter
president@ramblers.ab.ca

Vice President
Allan Mathies
vicepresident@ramblers.ab.ca

Treasurer

Doug Gossen
treasurer@ramblers.ab.ca

Secretary
Carl Potter
secretary@ramblers.ab.ca

Trips Director
Bob St. John
trips@ramblers.ab.ca

Program Director
Bernie Fritz
programs@ramblers.ab.ca

Social Director
Joyce Schneider
socialdirector@ramblers.ab.ca

Membership
Diane Lyders-Reid
membership@ramblers.ab.ca

Newsletter Editor
Irene Willett
packrat@ramblers.ab.ca

Past President
Dorothy-Ann Reimer
pastpresident@ramblers.ab.ca

President's Report...

One of the ways an organization remains relevant to its members is to solicit feedback. I would like to think members are not shy about providing the Executive with informal opinions, however we are also undertaking a more formal exercise in the form of a survey. This has been passed out at meetings and you can access a printable pdf copy through the calendar on the website. I am doing the tabulating and would appreciate the surveys being returned to me at a meeting.

The specific issues we are asking about are:

- **Club Trips:** Satisfaction with the selection and number of trips being offered - if not, which trips would you like to have more offerings.
- **Rambler Communications:** Use of the PackRat, website, phone line and meetings - specific website uses.

- **Bulk Purchases:** If there is interest (e.g. avalanche gear).
- **Other Non-profit Organizations:** Whether the Ramblers should make donations to them, or alternatively take out membership in them, versus keep the money with the club.

Of course, any other feedback on club issues is welcome. We will publish the results when we get a good base of replies.

One other area where your feedback is solicited relates to the planning for next year's 50th anniversary of the Ramblers. Anita is chairing a committee to consider celebratory activities we might want to undertake in this regard, so please pass on any ideas you may have.

**Deadline
for next PackRat
May 21, 2003**

Aconcagua, and Climbs in Chile

by Bob St. John



Aconcagua, Ameghino

In January 2003, three Ramblers, Rick Collier, Jerry Skvaril, and Bob St. John climbed Aconcagua (6960 m), one of the seven continental summits. Jerry and Bob also climbed two additional peaks in northern Chile: Volcan Ojos del Salado (6900 m), and Volcan Licancabur (5910 m) during February.

Aconcagua

Aconcagua is located in Argentina near the border with Chile, at latitude comparable with Texas. The climb is hardly a wilderness experience, with

over 2000 people attempting it every year, mainly in the high season from December 15 to February 15. There are two popular routes, the Normal and Polish Glacier.

The Normal route attracts about 80% of the climbers, mainly because it is shorter and somewhat easier than the Polish route. We chose the Polish route because of its fewer numbers, and because it is somewhat more scenic. The true Polish route climbs the final 1000 m on the Polish Glacier. As we did not feel it prudent to attempt a technical finish at an altitude higher than what we've been

to before, we chose a less technical bypass route, the Falso de los Polacos. As both the Normal and Polacos routes are basically trails during normal conditions, the major challenges with these climbs are high altitude, and high winds associated with storms.

Three days are required to hike into base camp at Plaza Argentina, a distance of 36 km with an elevation gain of 2000 m. Extra food and high altitude clothing and equipment is normally packed in by mules. The trail is in places very rocky and somewhat exposed in gorges carved by the Vacas

and Relinchos rivers, but for the most part follows broad valleys. The vegetation is mainly low lying prickly scrub brush and clump grasses. Very little wildlife was observed other than songbirds.

Plaza Argentina lies on the terminal moraines of the Ameghino Glacier at an elevation of 4200 m. The numerous Quonset huts and dome tents of various guiding firms, the park ranger huts, and the dozens of climbers' tents lends a circus atmosphere to the place. You can even buy a steak dinner with beer from one of several restaurants!

(Plaza de Mulas on the Normal route sports a hotel.)

All three of us had contracted a bad cough, which when added to normal high altitude symptoms such as loss of appetite, sleep disorders, and a general blah feeling, slowed us down and added four or five days to our ascent. Breathing at these altitudes is difficult enough without having to endure fits of hacking.

There are two more camps above base camp, with 800 and 900 m of elevation gain respectively. Moving to these camps

usually requires two carries, often with a rest day in between. The route to Camp 1 required moving through penitentes, peculiar formations of snow that has weathered into spikes ranging from a few inches in height to mini-towers rising 10 to 15 ft above the ground. It was a toss up as to whether it was easier going through them or tread milling up loose scree.

Sanitation at the high camps was minimal. Whereas base camp had pit toilets, there was no such control at Camps 1 and 2, leading to a rather messy situation. We could only wonder what the



Volcan Ojos del Salado

conditions were like on the much busier Normal route. To their credit, the park rangers insisted that garbage be taken out by climbers, enforced by stiff fines.

A storm blew in while we were at Camp 1, lasting two days and dumping 2 ft of snow. Tragically two climbers died of exposure on the Normal route. This, unfortunately, is not an uncommon occurrence. Many climbers are not prepared for this mountain, by either not being in proper physical condition, or not having sufficient experience with high altitude mountaineering, or not having proper

clothing and equipment, or by not properly acclimatizing to altitude. Two more died of endema, a severe form of high altitude sickness, while we were there as well.

Camp 2 at 5900 m was spectacularly situated below the Polish Glacier and summit, with views of the high peaks of the Andes stretching out to the north. On our summit day, we awoke at 4:30 A.M. to a cloudless night sky and cool temperatures. By 6:00 A.M. we were traversing the snow slopes of the Falso de los Polacos route, bundled up against the now moderate

wind. We joined a stream of other climbers on the Normal route at 6200 m. From here the trail ascends a ridge, then arcs across the Gran Acarreo scree slope to the Canaleta, a 400 m high gully of loose scree and boulders – considered the crux of the route. The easiest way up and down this awful stretch was by using crampons to climb a snow trail packed hard by the horde of climbers. We all reached the summit variously from 3:30 to 5:00 P.M. tired but very happy. After an hour or so of taking in the views, signing the register, and recouping some strength, we quickly



Volcan Licancabur

descended to camp, arriving at 8:00 P.M.

The return trip went smoothly. Rick and I made a side trip up Ameghino (5880 m), a four-hour climb from Ameghino col. The view of the Polish Glacier was impressive from this summit. Back at base camp we splurged on a steak dinner and beer, and generally revelled in the relatively thick air. The two-day return to the trailhead did have its tedious moments, but these were mitigated by the thoughts of soon having a shower, and eating while sitting in a chair – small pleasures made large by 19 days of camping.

After some R & R in Mendsa, a beautiful Argentine city, and a return to Santiago, Rick decided to fly back to what was left of the ski season in Canada, while Jerry and I travelled north to explore the volcanoes of northern Chile.

Volcan Ojos del Salado

Ojos lies on the Chile-Argentine border 1000 km north of Santiago. At one time it vied with Aconcagua as the highest peak in South America, but more accurate surveys relegated it to

second place. It is, however, the highest volcano in the world. It is considered to be active, with a significant event in 1956. Fumarolic activity continues to this day in the crater, although we did not observe anything unusual. The name means Salty Eyes, or Eyes of Salt, from the many salt lakes of the high altiplano.

We hired a guiding company to drive us 250 km from Copiapo to Camp 1. We were glad we did not rent a vehicle, as the road was rough, extremely in some places, and the route confusing. The elevation gain that day was 4600 m and while we retained some acclimatization from our climb of Aconcagua, we nevertheless felt under the weather the next day. Camp 1 and Camp 2 both had orange metal huts with bunks for four and six respectively. While not very aesthetic, they did provide shelter from the almost constant wind.

This peak, because it is 60 m lower, does not receive nearly the attention Aconcagua does. The log-books in the huts indicated that perhaps only 100 or so climbers visit each year.

However, eight Chilean students joined us, which made the huts somewhat crowded, but who provided good company as compensation.

The actual climb took only two days. The first day was a short four-hour walk up to Camp 2 at 5750 m. We left at 4:30 A.M. on the summit day to avoid stronger afternoon winds, and by noon stood by the snow-covered crater after spending all morning climbing endless switchbacks. The summit rose another 200 m, requiring 60 m of grade IV climbing – a pleasure after innumerable scree slogs. We spent some time on top admiring the views, then made a fast descent to camp on Yamnuska-type scree.

Volcan Licancabur

This classic cone volcano lies on the Chile-Bolivia border 1000 km north of Ojos, and just east of the Atacama Desert. It was an important location for the Inca, who climbed to its summit to perform rituals, including human sacrifice I'm told. Today it is an important research site for NASA, who is studying the lake in its crater as an

analog to possible life supporting ancient lakes on Mars – low oxygen, low-pressure atmosphere, high UV radiation, and volcanic origins.

The oasis of San Pedro de Atacama served as our staging town. It is a village of one-storey mud buildings that has become an ‘in’ destination for young travellers. Besides the many fine and funky restaurants, there are many touristy things to do including: mountain biking, horseback riding, and tours to geysers, salt lakes with flamingos, salt caves, sand dunes, and the Valley of the Moon – a lunar looking landscape. Here we hired transportation to and from the Bolivian side of the volcano.

We spend only one night in base camp, located in Inca ruins at 4600 m. During the evening a storm with strong winds blanketed the mountain with about an inch of snow. These short-lived storms, caused by daytime heating, are quite common on the high peaks in the summer months. The climb was a straightforward slog up trail and scree. It took seven hours to reach the summit, where we found

firewood and stone walls supposedly of Inca origin. We declined to go for a swim in the lake, but descended and returned to San Pedro that same day.

Non-climbing Activities

Most of our time in Chile was not spent climbing, but travelling to the mountains, R & R, and doing a few tourist things. We saw the geysers of El Tatio at sunrise, climbed huge dunes to see desert colours at sunset, toured Chuquicamata, the largest open pit copper mine in the world, and even spent a day at the beach.

The seven weeks I spent in Argentina and Chile were amazing. We had the best conditions we could have hoped for on all the climbs, and we got to experience the Spanish culture of southern South America. There is still lots more to do and see... I'm sure to return again, especially to southern Chile and Argentina, and maybe even climb another volcano or two.

Activities

Hiking, Backpacking, Skiing, Cycling, Climbing, Scrambling, Mountaineering, Education & Awareness Programs, Social Functions

Meetings

Every Wednesday evening at 7:30 p.m.

Mail

Rocky Mountain Ramblers Association
c/o Calgary Area Outdoor Council (CAOC)
1111 Memorial Dr NW
Calgary, AB T2N 3E4

Trip Info

282-6308 Information Line and at Meetings

Website

The Packrat is available on the RMRA website at www.ramblers.ab.ca. If we have your email address, you will be automatically notified that an electronic copy of the Packrat is on the website.

TIMBUKTU with Wally Drew

by Wally Drew

In November of 2002, the tour with Elder Treks began in Bamako, the capital and largest city of Mali in former French West Africa. Thus, French is the official language. Mali is a Moslem democracy with an elected President. The many ethnic groups get along harmoniously and even intermarry which is unusual for Africa. 80% of Malians speak Banbara. Bamako has 1.3 million population but no real high rise buildings.

All our food, water, transport, lodging, etc. was included. We drank two or three 1.5 litre bottles of water per day because it was hot. A real contrast to the freezing snowy Calgary I had just left. The highest shade temperature was 38° C. It was dry season. We had sun every day and no rain at all. This was primarily a cultural experience



Niger River boatman.

rather than a scenic one.

The southern part of Mali where we traveled is mainly very flat savannah. Sahel, which is transition from savannah to Sahara Desert, occupies the northern part of Mali. The landscape consists of loosely spaced scrubby trees and bushes. A lifeline is the Niger River with its big inland delta.

There is a broken paved highway from Bamako NE to Gao, otherwise mostly just sand tracks or dirt roads. We had three 4WD SUV's and drivers for the 12 of us (10 clients, tour leader and national guide). They had weak AC most of the time. Mali is a less developed country and poor, though not cheap, and things seldom get repaired

due to lack of parts and know-how. Our hotels were actually more like motels. There was no problem with pickpockets; however, the beggars and sales people were a pest.

We didn't see any wildlife bigger than birds and lizards in Mali.

They've eaten the rest. Lots of goats, sheep and cattle as herds are a main livelihood. Food wasn't great; mostly white bread, rice, pasta and tough beef, mutton or chicken. Fish from the Niger was a treat. I missed the vegetables and fruit although we did get quite a bit of watermelon. Their main grains are sorghum and millet.

We generally had long days getting up at 6 and leaving at 7 after breakfast. Our group were experienced travelers, punctual and non-smoking. The first village we strolled through was a Bobo one. Most houses are built out of mud blocks and round or rectangular. Little kids liked to take hold of our hands during the village strolls

and lectures. In this village and others we got to go into a family compound and shake hands with the Chief. Hands needed to be sanitized after these visits so we wouldn't get meningococcal and other diseases. As usual, I was taking Larium against malaria. Nobody got sick on this trip.

There is lots of garbage strewn around these countries. In the towns, the gutters are the open sewers.

Later we crossed the Bami River, a tributary of the Niger, on a little ferry to walk through Djenne, a town of 16,000 built of mud. The main attraction is the Djenne Mosque, the world's largest mud building. It's about a block long and several storeys high. The Bami and Niger Rivers are slow flowing and muddy. Since it was early in the dry season, they were still fairly high.

We walked through the busy port and market in Mopti before staying there

for the night. It was day eight before we stayed more than one night any place. Supper was usually 7:30 P.M. From Mopti we visited a Songho village and walked up to the circumcision site with pictographs. On to the Bandiagara Escarpment, a long series of sandstone



Djenne Mosque in Mali

cliffs that breaks the monotony of the plain. The Dogon villages along the bottom of it are built of mud and really blend into the landscape. We parked at the bottom of Tirelli and walked up to the center where we would camp for the night. Since we were a small group, they had one sizeable dome tent for each of us with mosquito netting. The tents were pitched on the flat roofs of houses.

Access was gained by a long ladder with footholds chopped into it leaning steeply against the outside wall. Supper was cooked outside. We commonly dined al fresco.

After breakfast we walked up to the top of Tirelli for the traditional dance ceremony at the base of the cliff. The secret dancers, all men, wore elaborate masks, some extending far above the head. Some were on long stilts, all were in costumes. As general in Africa they danced to drums.

We stopped at the nearly invisible Dogon village of Irelli, a designated World Heritage site. Then to Bandiagara town for the night in igloo-shaped rooms. A local music performance with supper. Next, we drove to Kona just north of Monticelli on the Niger River to begin our boat trip to Timbuktu. We had to stop for police checks on Mali roads. Our boat was a pinasse shaped like a big dugout but built of planks. Wooden poles



A Dogon village in Mali blends into its surroundings.

held up the cloth roof for shade. We sat on wooden bench seats built across. The biffy hung over the rear end so you could see the river going by under the hole. To get to it or any place else one had to walk along the narrow outside ledge holding onto a rail along the roof. It was powered by an outboard motor in the pilot house near the rear. Lunches were prepared in front of it and passed forward. Going downstream against the northeast trade wind we got constantly splashed even though the broad Niger is more like a lake than a river there in the delta. We did cross one lake. Occasionally, we stopped to visit a village going ashore and boarding

via a plank. For the two nights we went ashore in non-populated spot for supper, tenting, and breakfast. That gave us an opportunity to walk as there was little exercise on this trip. The second night, the temperature dropped to 13° C, the lowest temperature I measured on the trip. We had brought sleeping sheets but not sleeping bags. I was warm enough sleeping in my clothes and sweater but some weren't. I opened both doors of the tent to let the breeze through.

The next morning, the outboard motor quit. We beached at Niafounke and explored along the sand streets while they took it apart to fix it. It was full of

mud. The country had gotten drier and hotter as we progressed north-east. Some women were topless there as elsewhere, unusual for a Moslem country. The people were still black. In the early afternoon, the motor quit again for good. That left us with only the little emergency one which wasn't fully functional and was too slow to get us to Timbuktu. So we beached

and set up camp. Our leader and guide walked about 2 km to the nearest village with a telephone tower to try to reach our SUV drivers waiting for us in Timbuktu without any luck. After supper they went again and reached them. They would make the undesirable night drive on sand track to take us to Timbuktu in the morning. The roads to Timbuktu/Tombouctou are just tracks through loose sand. You must have 4WD with good clearance or camels or trucks. We got to our hotel/motel on the edge of town in late morning so we had one and half days there. The mud walls were a foot/30 cm thick with small win-

dows to keep rooms cooler.

Only 2,000 visitors a year get to Timbuktu. The population varies with the season and where the herds are but average about 40,000. The streets are loose sand except a short stretch of the main street which is surfaced. The people are Tuaregs or Blue people as



Nomadic Tuareg near Timbuktu, our local guide.

the blue die from their robes tinges their skin. They are more Arabic-looking. They bring big slabs of salt down from the north by camel and load them onto boats on the Niger.

The first afternoon we went on a short camel ride to a sand dune for a Tuareg dance performance. I found the unpadded wood saddle uncomfortable. The bread was different in Timbuktu. It had sand in it because it is

baked in sand ovens. The next morning we had a walking city tour and got to go into and onto the roof of a 13th century mud mosque. Some buildings, all low rises, were built of sandstone blocks. We had a free afternoon to explore.

We were instructed not to tell anybody how or when we were leaving Timbuktu because SUVs are precious and are sometimes hijacked and stolen. We got up at 4:30 the next morning and snuck out of town in the dark after quick breakfast.

A short drive south took us to the little ferry across the Niger River. We then drove south all morning on sand tracks to the highway. Each vehicle got stuck in deep sand once.

That afternoon and next day we spent driving east to Bamako with stops to explore in towns and villages. We were supposed to have a final night in Bamako and fly the next afternoon to Accra, Ghana but Ghana Airline doesn't pay much attention to schedules. We got word that the flight was leaving at 2 A.M., 12 hours ahead of schedule. It actually left at 1:00 A.M. That

made out long wait in the hot airport one hour shorter. It's still not easy to get to Timbuktu or from it.

OPEN HOUSE

May 21 - 7:30 P.M.

The open house will highlight summer club activities from day hikes and scrambles, to backpacking and occasionally some biking and canoeing. This event will be oriented towards providing information for people interested in joining the Ramblers. More info available at 282-6308.

The Packrat is published six times a year by the Rocky Mountain Ramblers Association. We welcome comments, articles, and ideas from our members and, if content is deemed suitable, will be used as space permits.

Email submissions to the ~~newsletter editor~~ packrat@ramblers.ab.ca or forward contributions to RMRA, c/o Calgary Area Outdoor Council, 1111 Memorial Drive NW, Calgary, AB T2N 3E4.

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Calgary Area Outdoor Council & U of C Outdoor Program Centre

19th ANNUAL NEW AND USED



OUTDOOR RECREATION CONSIGNMENT SALE

Friday, April 25 & Saturday, April 26
Olympic Oval - Free Admission

03:00 - 09:00 PM	Public Consignment	Friday, April 25
08:00 - 10:00 AM	Public Consignment	Saturday, April 26
12:00 - 03:00 PM	Sale	Saturday Only
07:00 - 09:00 PM	Reclaim and Payment	Saturday Only

- An easy way to sell your old gear – 20% commission.
- An easy way to purchase “**previously enjoyed**” gear at bargain prices.
- An easy way to purchase “**yet to be enjoyed gear**” supplied by local reps and retailers at bargain prices.

For more information telephone: 270-2262

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES

A variety of day of the event volunteer opportunities are available.

- Meet new people and have fun.
- Be immersed in the largest selection of new and used outdoor recreation gear and have the opportunity to purchase two items in advance of the sale at the Volunteer Pre-Sale.

For more information about volunteering: 270-2262