

ACONCAGUA
AND THE SOUTHERN ANDES

I grew up in this city, my poetry was born between the
mountain and the river, it took its voice from the rain,
and like the timber, it steeped itself in the forests.

Pablo Neruda (Chilean Poet)

About the author

Jim Ryan is a civil engineer by profession. A seasoned traveller, his lifelong passion for the mountains has taken him to many remote places. He has travelled, and written extensively, on some of the great walks of the world, such as in Nepal, Lesotho in South Africa, Kilimanjaro and the island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean. His guidebooks include *Carrauntoohil* and *The MacGillycuddy Reeks* and *Scenic Walks in Killarney*, as well as *The Mountains of Nerja*, published by Cicerone.

Jim has a special interest in geology. The mountain of Aconcagua and its region made a significant impression on him on his first journey there as part of an expedition in 1999/2000. He noted the lack of information on one of the world's great mountains and produced this guidebook. This is the third update on the original issue.

Acknowledgements

Thanks are due to Fergus Humphries for producing the maps, to Eduardo Depetris, Pablo Reguera, Sebastian Tetilla, Angel Tetilla, Marco Garrido Dasté, Pedro Marzolo, Nito Giordano, Pancho Medina, Elias Lira, Gisela Palacios, Heber Orona, and to Professor John Gamble of University College Cork. Thanks to Quazi Shahriar Rahman for the picture of the Cólera campsite, to Arkaitz Mendia Arakama for the photo from the summit down the Canaleta, and to Xabi 'Smithy' Mujika for the pictures of Camp Guanacos, the Grande Acarreo and Camp Cólera. For this latest revision to the guide I was accompanied by my son, Dylan, and by my partner, Birgit Halir, both of whom I am indebted to for their support and patience.

ACONCAGUA AND THE SOUTHERN ANDES

by Jim Ryan

CICERONE

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL
www.cicerone.co.uk

© Jim Ryan 2018
Third edition 2018
ISBN: 978 1 85284 974 0
Second edition 2009
First edition 2004

Printed in China on behalf of Latitude Press Ltd
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
All photographs are by the author unless otherwise stated.

Warning

Mountaineering and mountain walking can be a dangerous activity carrying a risk of personal injury or death. It should be undertaken only by those with a full understanding of the risks and with the training and experience to evaluate them. While every care and effort has been taken in the preparation of this guide, the user should be aware that conditions can be highly variable and can change quickly, materially affecting the seriousness of a climb or expedition.

The mountains described in this book reach high altitudes. There are health risks in high-altitude climbing such as pulmonary and cerebral oedema (which can cause sickness and death); extreme temperatures (which can cause frostbite); and traversing over ice (risk of falling and sliding). Climbers are advised to be in good physical condition; to acclimatise and not too ascend too quickly; to keep a constant check on saturated oxygen level; to descend if they feel unwell; to consult a doctor before attempting high-altitude climbs; and to bring adequate medication, gear and clothing with them. Training in ice climbing, ropework and high-altitude problems is essential for the uninitiated.

Therefore, except for any liability that cannot be excluded by law, neither Cicerone nor the author accept liability for damage of any nature (including damage to property, personal injury or death) arising directly or indirectly from the information in this book.

Front cover: The route to Plaza Argentina (Vacas Valley Route)

CONTENTS

Index of maps and illustrations	7
Map key	8
Map of South America	9
Area maps in this guide	10
Aconcagua – Normal and Vacas Valley Routes	12
Routes to the summit	14
Summary of camps	15
Summary comparison of Normal and Vacas Valley Routes	16
Table of co-ordinates and elevations	17
Foreword by Sebastian Tetilla	19
Preface	21
A note on the third edition	21
INTRODUCTION	23
The mountain in context	24
Two trekking routes	25
Location	26
Geology	27
Topography	29
Maps and co-ordinates	31
Wildlife	31
History	33
Climbing history	38
Trekker/climber profiles	41
Weather	42
When to go	45
Getting there	47
Preparations	52
Acclimatisation	59
Guides and trekking companies	63
PART 1 THE ASCENT OF ACONCAGUA	69
Mendoza to Puente del Inca	70
Mendoza	70
The road to Puente del Inca	74
Aconcagua routes	79
The Normal Route	79
The Vacas Valley Route	91
Summit day	102

The long walk out.	109
Other routes.	111

PART 2 ACCLIMATISATION NEAR ACONCAGUA, VALLECITOS AND THE MAIPO VOLCANO 113

Treks in the Aconcagua area.	114
Puente del Inca and Los Penitentes.	114
A walk to the Statue of Cristo Redentor.	115
Horcones Valley to Plaza Francia	117

Routes at Vallecitos	120
Vallecitos Ski and Mountain Lodge.	120
Lomas Blancas (3850m)	122
Cerro Vallecitos (5770m)	123

The Maipo Volcano	125
------------------------------------	-----

PART 3 THE TUPUNGATO AREA 127

Tupungato	128
The Andes' Great Mountain	128
Tupungato routes	132
Tupungato via Chile and Rio Colorado	135

Tupungato Provincial Park	140
Wilderness Trek to Friar's Col	141

PART 4 THE SANTIAGO AREA 145

Santiago	146
Santiago City	146
In and around Santiago.	147

Routes near Santiago	150
El Morado Valley	150
La Campana National Park	151
El Plomo (5430m).	152
Provincia and San Roman.	159

Appendix A Maps, guidebooks and further reading	160
Appendix B Checklist of essential gear.	161
Appendix C Guides and mountain services	162
Appendix D Accommodation and local facilities	163
Appendix E South American cuisine	171
Appendix F Wine tasting in Argentina and Chile	173
Appendix G Spanish–English language notes	175

INDEX OF MAPS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

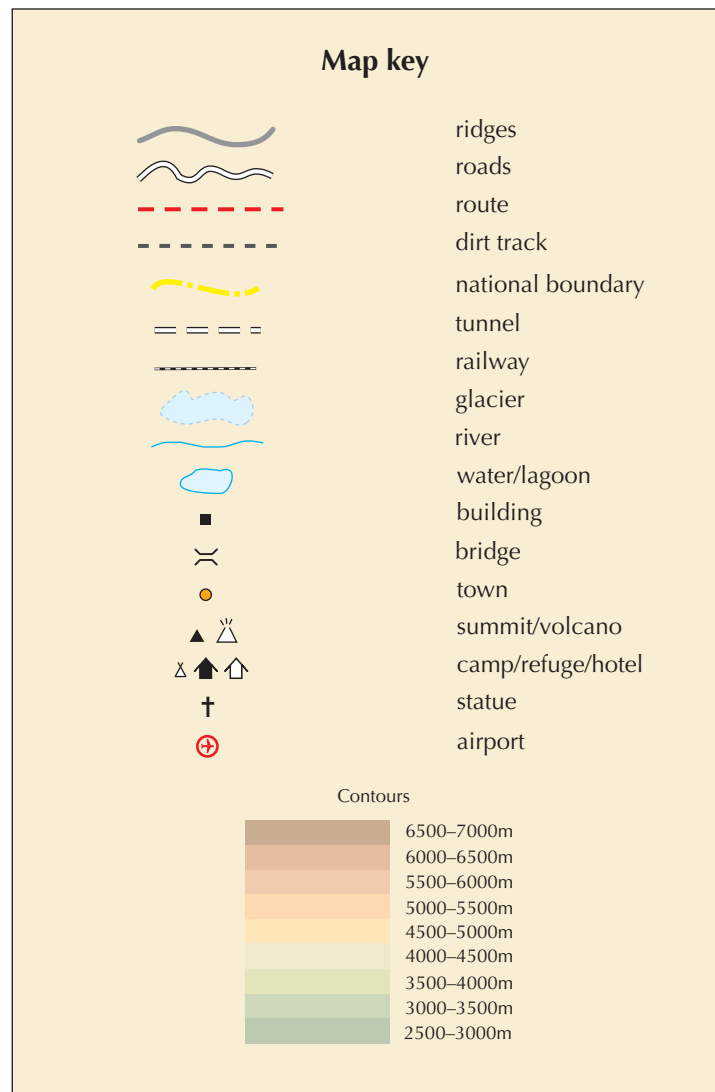
Map key	8
Map of South America	9
Area maps in this guide	10
Aconcagua – Normal and Vacas Valley Routes	12
Routes to the summit	14
Geological cross section.	28
Panorama – Cordón del Plata	29
Central Mendoza	71
Aconcagua – Normal and Vacas Valley Routes	80
Casa de Piedra	95
Routes to the summit	103
Cristo Redentor.	116
Vallecitos	120
Lost plane flight path	130
Tupungato	133
El Plomo.	155

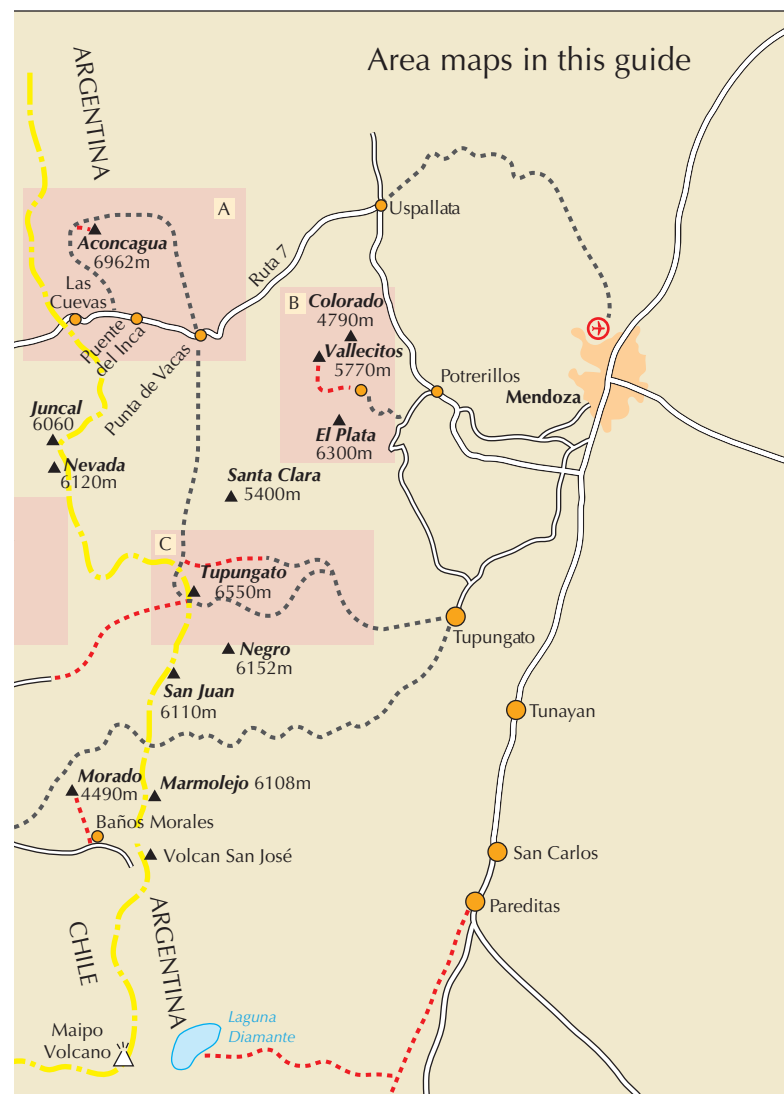
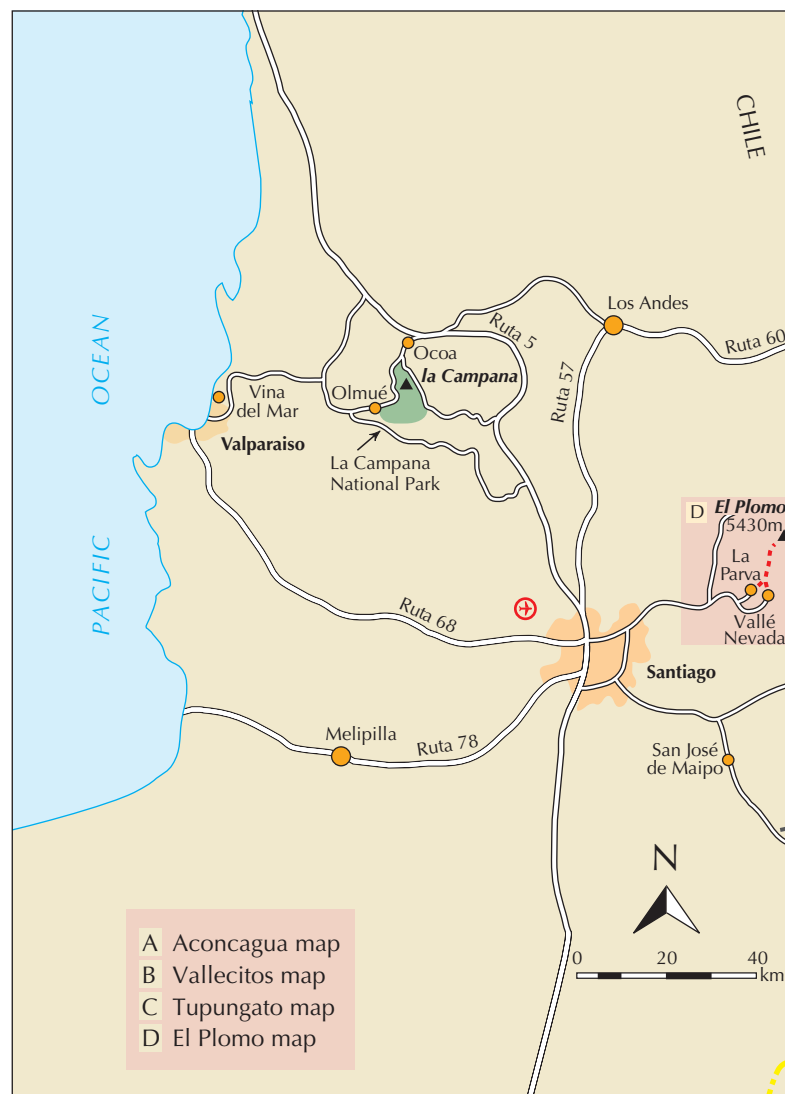
Updates to this Guide

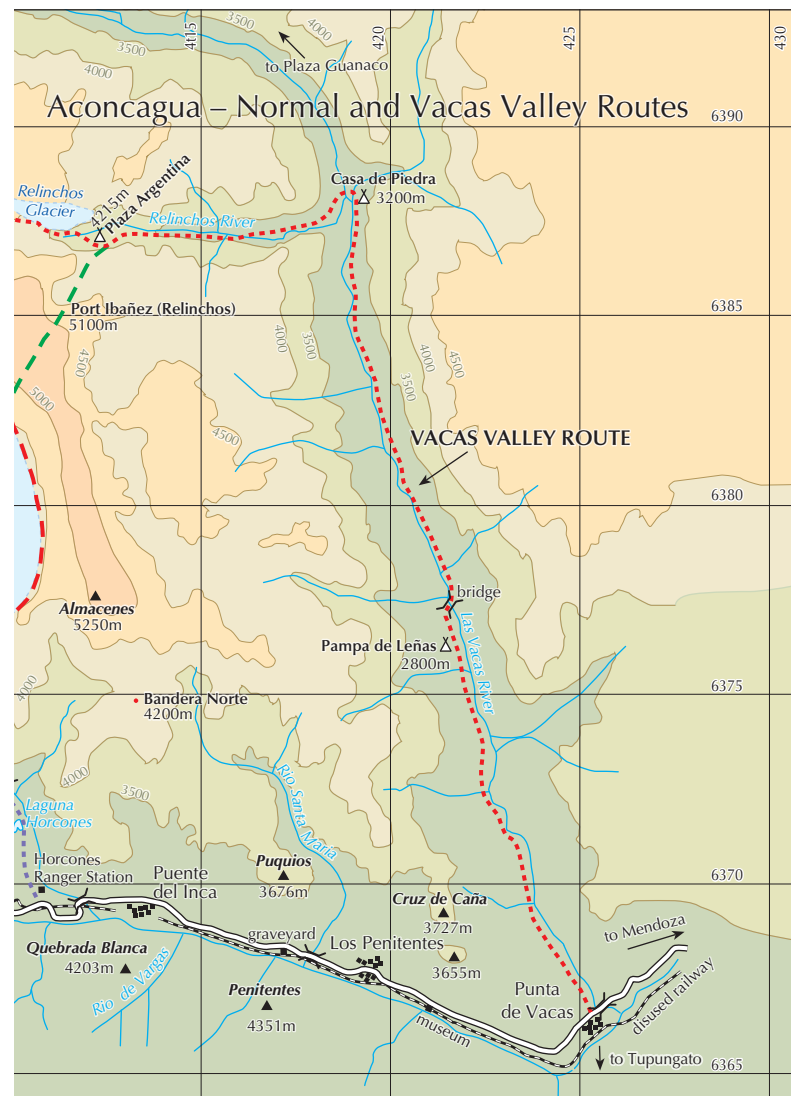
While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Please check the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/974/updates) for any updates before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

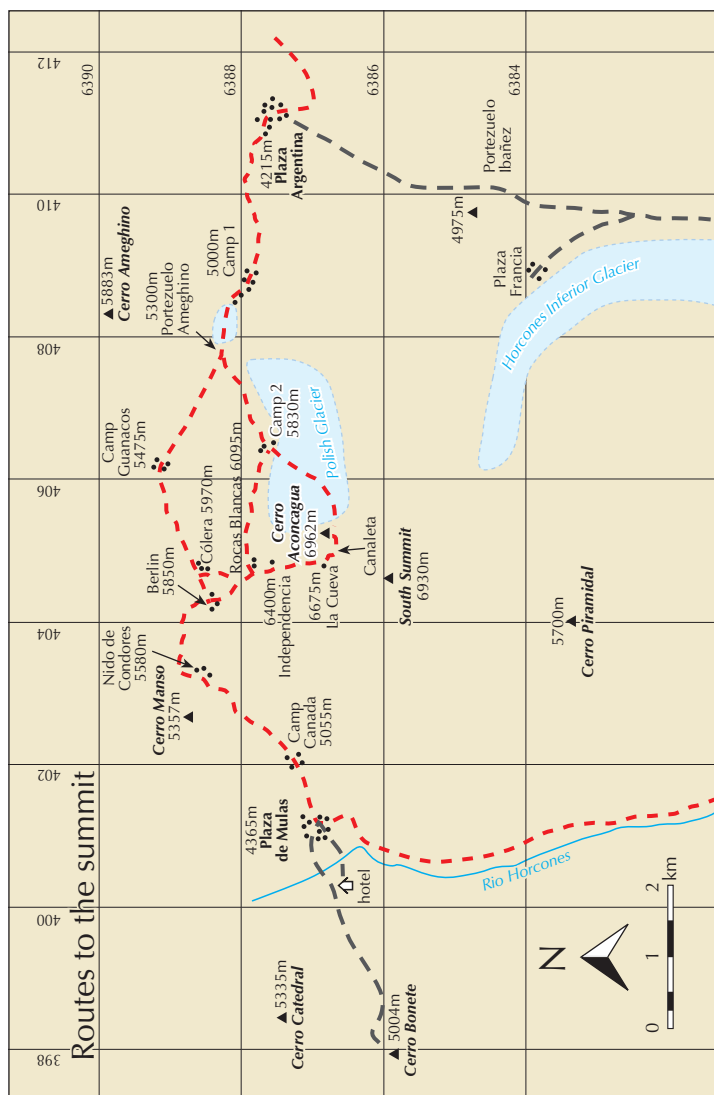
The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly-available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL, United Kingdom.

Register your book: To sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at www.cicerone.co.uk.









SUMMARY OF CAMPS – NORMAL ROUTE					
Camp	Elev	Elev Gain	Distance	Time	Difficulties
Roadhead Horcones	2535	-	-	-	Present permit and passport at Ranger Station
Confluencia	3420	885m	8km	2½ hrs	Easy walk. Hot, no shade
Basecamp Plaza de Mulas	4365	945m	28km	8 hrs	Tough, long day. May have to cross shallow streams. Wind-blown sand. No shade
Canada	5055	690m	3km	5 hrs	Steep, steady climb
Nido de Condores	5580	525m	4km	5 hrs	Steep, steady climb
Cólera	5970	390m	5km	4½ hrs	Tough, though short, climb
Summit	6962	992m	9km	9 hrs	Long trek, initially in the dark, very cold. Canaleta the most difficult part. Descent to Cólera will take 5 hours
Return to Basecamp			12km	6 hrs	Steep in places
Return to Roadhead			36km	9 hrs	Long, energy-sapping walk
SUMMARY OF CAMPS – VACAS VALLEY ROUTE					
Camp	Elev	Elev Gain	Distance	Time	Difficulties
Roadhead Punta de Vacas	2415	-	-	-	Present permit and passport at Ranger Station
Pampa de Leñas	2800	385m	18km	5 hrs	Medium grade, though undulating, pleasant beside river
Casa de Piedra	3200	400m	17km	5 hrs	Similar to previous day
Basecamp Plaza Argentina	4215	1015m	12km	7 hrs	Cross ice-cold river, then precipitous walk, cross a second river. Steep initially. Steady/medium thereafter
Camp 1	5000	785m	3km	5 hrs	Tough climb through penitentes
Guanacos	5475	475m	4km	6 hrs	Initially tough climb possibly in crampons through snow/ice. Then easy walk
Cólera	5970	495m	4km	4 hrs	Tough, though short, climb
Summit	6962	992m	9km	9 hours	Long trek, initially in the dark, very cold. Canaleta the most difficult part. Descent to Cólera will take 5 hours
Return to Basecamp			20km	7 hours	Long and steep descent, especially coming into basecamp
Return to Roadhead			47km	2 days 9 hours + 4½ hrs	First day is very long to Pampa de Leñas. Two rivers to cross. Second day is short and easy

MENDOZA TO PUENTE DEL INCA



MENDOZA

Mendoza is a bustling city of over 1 million inhabitants. It is a relatively modern city. Founded in the mid 16th century as a province of Santiago in Chile (and named after the then Captain General of Chile), Mendoza was virtually destroyed by the worst earthquake in South American history in 1861. The city was quickly rebuilt, with wide, tree-lined streets, a central plaza and four satellite plazas (named after the countries that helped in the rebuilding).

The French planner of the modern city laid it out in a grid pattern. Each street has a grass margin with trees separating the footpath from the road. In

the grass margin there is a deep trench that conveys water, coming down from the Andes, to irrigate the trees.

Mendoza is the centre of wine-making in Argentina. The Mendocinos have been making wine since the foundation of the city in the sixteenth century. Over 70 per cent of Argentina's wines are produced in Mendoza province. Of the many visitors to the city every year the majority come on wine trips, visiting bodegas in and around Mendoza.

From the city centre the snow-capped Andes are clearly visible (though not Aconcagua, which is blocked from view by a range of intermediate mountains). The Andes is



the second most important attraction of Mendoza for visitors. However, only a small proportion are here for Aconcagua. Mendoza is at an elevation of 700m.

Maps of the city are available at every hotel reception. Essentially it is laid out on an (almost) north-south axis. The main artery, from the airport south through the city and out towards Chile/Aconcagua/Tupungato is Av San Martin, commonly called the Alameda. From the Alameda going west there is first of all the main city centre, then Parque San Martin which rises up to the Andes.

The city is compact, and most places are reachable on foot. It is user-friendly and it is nearly impossible to get lost. There is a strong police presence, many patrolling on bicycles.

SURVIVAL TIP

From 2pm to 5pm is siesta time in Mendoza, when many businesses and offices are closed.

The water from the Andes is fundamental to the economy and survival of Mendoza. The main river, Rio Mendoza, is dammed at Potrerillos, where much of the solids settle out. From here it is controlled to irrigate the vineyards, the agricultural lands and the city trees and parks. Drinking water is taken from the Rio Blanco below Vallecitos and piped separately to the city.

White water rafting (and kayaking) is an activity that is growing year by year, and the fast-flowing Mendoza river above Potrerillos is ideal.

For the mountaineer the city has all the necessary facilities. Some of the best gear shops in the world are here, although the costs are not low. You can also hire good gear. Supermarkets within the city and on the outskirts have food suitable for camping and internet cafes abound. *Correos* (post offices) and *locutorios* (businesses offering the use of telephones) are alternative, good value options.

Changing money and paying for things

There is little point in discussing exchange rates, and the cost of commodities if you do not handle your money to the best advantage. Cash is king in Argentina. If you pay with a credit card you may be charged an additional 10 per cent (because the recipient is not declaring his full income). If you take money from an ATM expect to pay a hefty charge, possibly as much as 15 per cent. In general, you can only pay for things in shops, taxis, bus stations and the like in pesos. The most popular foreign currency is the dollar, but euros are now equally acceptable. Sterling is the least popular of the major currencies.

The worst place to change money is at the airport. The rate you will get at your hotel will be marginally better. The best rates are from *casas de*

cambio (bureau de change), but these are closed on Sundays. You will be approached to enquire if you want to change money. Be aware of rates and negotiate to your advantage. The *casas de cambio* are all located in and around the tourist/permit office on San Martin. You will need your passport to change foreign currency.

Water and food on the mountain

If you are part of an organised expedition you need not worry about a number of matters, such as water, food and toilet facilities. The trekking company will provide all of your needs. Every morning you will be issued with drinking water; if you are on the move you will get a lunch pack; if you are static a lunch will be cooked for you. You will not have to concern yourself with cooking facilities, foodstuffs, gas, etc. Your trekking company will also give you snack bars, fruit drinks, nuts and the like. However, there may be particular items of food that you like and perhaps you should spend an hour in the Mendoza supermarkets checking them out (see also the recommendations below for food on summit day).

If you are independent it is most likely that you are well used to finding water, gauging how many canisters of gas you will need, how much salt, sugar, tins of food, fruit, etc. to carry. For your six litres of water per day you will need to be particularly careful, watching for sources in streams, noting areas of clean snow.

Buying provisions

The supermarkets of Mendoza are excellent sources of food for the mountain. However, not all stock the specialist items that climbers seek. There are two Carrefours, for instance, one in the centre of the city on Belgrano, the second on Las Heras.

The following suggestions may be helpful:

- The water that is available on the mountain comes from melted snow and ice. It contains no minerals or nutrients. Supplements can be purchased to provide these ingredients. These are in the form of flavoured sachets and are widely available. Trekking companies will issue a selection of these sachets to their clients.
- Powdered food, such as egg, semolina, milk and potato, is a good and palatable form of food that is easily prepared. Powdered egg is not easy to source. Tea bags, coffee, sugar, soup and the like are freely available. Tea or flavoured herbal mixes may be less harsh on the stomach than coffee, particularly taken in large quantities. Bags of muesli and breakfast cereals, including porridge, are popular. Many shops sell an array of nuts that can be added to the muesli.
- Argentinean fruit and vegetables are wonderful. Oranges and grapefruits are relatively large, but not easily damaged, and provide a welcome juice source. The

local tomatoes are particularly large and succulent. A dish of tomatoes and onions, sprinkled with olive oil and a herb-garlic pepper, takes little time to prepare. Fruit and vegetables, however, must be protected from frost. Canned forms are not as nourishing or appetising, and are heavier, but last longer.

- Argentina and Chile produce quality beef and lamb. Getting meat up to basecamp requires an insulated cooler. There is no traffic in live fowl or animals. Tinned meat is the alternative, generally not available in supermarkets, but in the smaller shops. Specialised boil-in-the-bag meals are not easy to find, and ready-meals are of little use without a microwave. Salami and cheese are great for lunch, and can last the whole expedition if they are protected.

- The most popular form of cooking is liquid paraffin via a pressurised bottle. This commodity is cheap and transferable. It is likely to be one of the heaviest loads to be carried. Standard gas canisters are also readily available.

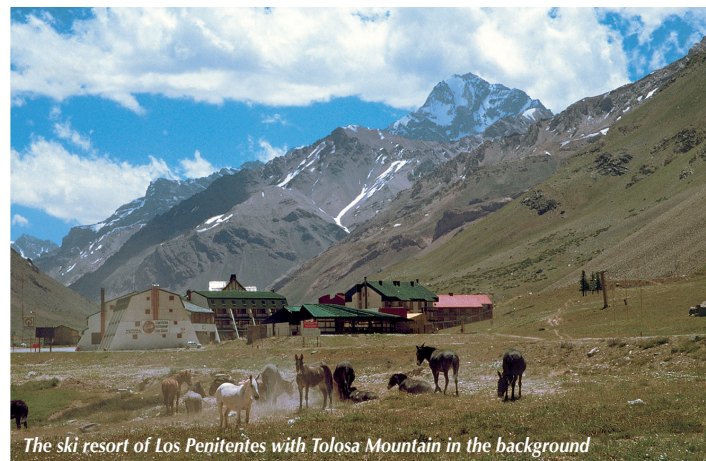
THE ROAD TO PUENTE DEL INCA

There are three roads out of Mendoza going south towards Chile, Aconcagua and Tupungato. The fastest is the *autopista* (motorway). The most interesting, but also the slowest, is the old route through the vineyards, via the suburb of Lujan. Of further interest along this route is the house of Fernando Fader, the great Mendocino artist whose impressionist style made him world famous.

The long distance public buses that travel between Santiago and



Casa de Fader where Fernando Fader's paintings are housed



The ski resort of Los Penitentes with Tolosa Mountain in the background

Mendoza are of excellent quality and are relatively inexpensive. The buses from Mendoza stop at the town of Uspallata, a dusty town clogged with trucks and buses, at an elevation of 1850m. The town was formerly a centre for iron ore smelting, where cannonballs were manufactured for the army that swept down into Chile to defeat the Spanish. In recent times the area became famous as the location for the making of the film *Seven Years in Tibet*.

There is a road out of Uspallata to the east, not the old road to Mendoza, but another dirt track road south of it. This road leads to The Rock of the Seven Colours, an unusual volcanic landscape, with colours ranging from white to yellow to purple.

On the approach in to Uspallata there is a busy restaurant on the

right-hand side that is the best place to eat between Mendoza and Aconcagua. The establishment is called Estancia Elias and is 2km from the village centre. Their *parillada* is particularly good.

There is a regular local bus service (inexpensive, three per day) from Mendoza that stops at Punta de Vacas, Los Penitentes and Puente del Inca. These must not be confused with the long distance buses to/from Mendoza to Santiago, most of which do not stop at all between the two cities, the minority only stopping at Uspallata. The bus station in Mendoza is southeast of the central block (see Mendoza map) on the street extension of Calle Colon. The local buses stop at Punta de Vacas, at Los Penitentes and on the road beside the Horcones ranger station.