

# SKI TOURING IN THE SOUTHERN ANDES

John Biggar

## The Andes

As someone who does both skiing and boarding, I'll apologise in advance for using the term "skiing" for everything!

The Andes are the world's longest mountain range, at over 7000km, and because they run north to south there is a huge variety of climates and snow conditions down their length. Imagine a mountain range 200km wide, running from southern Scotland, down through Europe and west Africa, all the way to Angola and you get an idea! This article focuses on the Southern Andes of Chile and Argentina; this area is a bit more homogenous in terms of skiing and probably contains 90% of the good skiing on the continent.

It is possible to ski in the northern hemisphere countries of Colombia and Ecuador, but it is very limited. There is plenty of skiing potential in the southern tropical countries (Peru and Bolivia), but only at extreme altitudes and on glaciers with snow-lines around 4800 or 5000m;



*John Biggar load-carrying.  
Photo: John Biggar*

this requires some very hefty carrying of skis and boots. It's also tricky to pick the best season.

## The Andes of Chile and Argentina

The Chile/Argentina border is one of the world's longest, and it is largely defined by the Andes. Snow conditions vary greatly as you travel southwards, as does the type of terrain around the

mountains and their accessibility. From 20°S all the way to the area around Santiago (the Chilean capital) at about 35°S, the Andes rise to over 6000m, and are generally very dry and often without continuous snow cover. South of Santiago, in the temperate zone, the highest peaks are only 3000m to 4000m high, and winters become increasingly, well, wintry! Summer snowlines vary from near 6000m in the north to 1000m or so in the extreme south.

The best ski-mountaineering season is the spring, centred on September. Many areas are just too wintry in July and August, with poor snow conditions, blocked access roads and lots of windy days. There are always rumours of great powder in August, particularly on the drier, Argentine side of the mountains, but for a first visit I'd definitely

suggest going for spring snow conditions in the last weeks of September or very early October.

As a generalisation the snowpack in the Andes is pretty stable, especially in the spring months. Cold nights and strong sun (and sometimes rain to the summits!) lead quickly to stable snow. I've seen avalanches much more often in the Alps or Scotland. Conditions vary from season to season more than in the Alps; as in Scotland, the great years are great, the lean years lean.

## General logistics

Here are some tips for planning a trip to the Andes; there are some more specific details in the individual area paragraphs below.



*Preparing to ski Volcan Lonquimay. Photo: John Biggar*

Getting to the Andes is pretty straightforward, with daily flights from most European capitals to both Buenos Aires and Santiago (the Argentine and Chilean capitals). No visas are necessary. For many areas an onward domestic flight will be necessary, as the distances are huge.

Some of the peaks and potential skiing areas are extremely remote, requiring many days to access; other peaks can be done as day trips. There are only a few small areas where public transport is a viable option for backcountry skiing. There are also only a few areas where more than one ski day can be done from the same base. For these reasons I'd recommend a rental vehicle to get the most out of your holiday; it will allow you to get to most roadheads, and also to drive between different areas. In some areas you'll need a 4x4, but in many places a car with reasonably good ground clearance will do. All the main roads are asphalted.

You will always find a wide variety of good hotels and guesthouses. Many places also have what are called cabañas; these are not always cheaper than hotel rooms but are great if there is a group of you, as you can self-cater and fix your own early breakfasts. Out in the mountains there is only one area, around Bariloche, with a reasonable provision of mountain huts; everywhere else, if you want to (or need to) stay in the mountains overnight you'll

have to camp.

Maps at 1:50 000 (Chile) or 1:100 000 (Argentina) are generally good topographically but very unreliable for man-made features. However most sheets are only available from the national IGM (Military Geographic Office) in the capitals ... and anyway, every volcano looks the same on a map: bullseye! A GPS to guarantee your return by the same route will often be more useful.

Finally, costs and money. Return flights out to the capitals are typically around £600 to £700, with onward domestic flights being £100 to £300 return. Once on the ground costs in Chile are generally high; many things actually cost more than they do in the UK. However, credit cards, banks and ATMs all work reliably. The Argentine economy is more of a roller-coaster; in some years Argentina can be cheap, especially if you like steaks and wine, but in other years it can be as expensive as at home. It is a good plan to bring lots of US\$ cash, as ATMs and card payments don't always work. For instance, recent inflation has made the 100-peso note worth only £1.50 and ATMs have not yet been upgraded to dispense larger notes.

### The 6000m peaks

The 6000m peaks north of Santiago, including the highest on the continent, Aconcagua (6959m), don't give good



skiing. They have all been skied, but snowlines are very high and snow conditions are always a huge gamble. The best options are the NE glaciers on Monte Pissis (6793m), Mercedario (6710m) or Majadita (6266m).

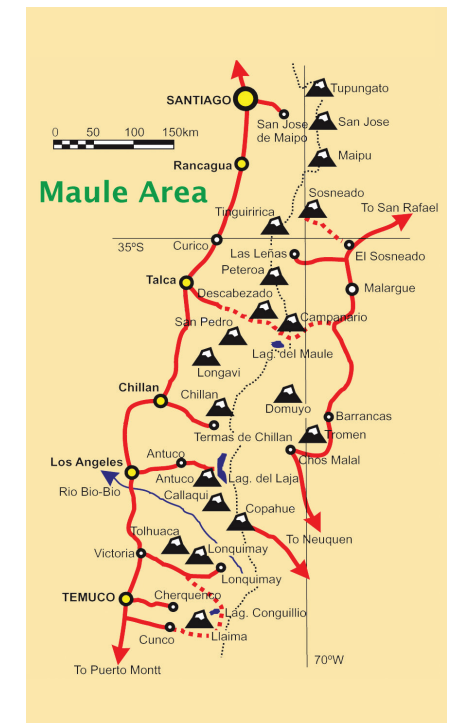
### The High Andes

While the 6000m peaks are frequently stripped of snow by high winds, worthwhile tours and ascents can be done on peaks in the 2500-4000m range. There is one big resort, outside Santiago at Tres Valles; nearby Portillo is better-known, although quite small, but very quirky and great fun. The best season is early spring, from August to October, when the snowline is 2000m-2500m. Good areas to try for mini-expeditions and/or day trips on the Argentine side include the Vallecitos valley in the Cordón del Plata near Mendoza, the Atuel valley above Sosneado and the Quebrada Matienzo by Puente del Inca. On

the Chilean side there are fewer access roads but the Maipo valley above Baños Morales can be good; the roadhead is only a two- or three-hour drive from Santiago. Several parties have made latitudinal ski traverses through the High Andes; this is a major undertaking that needs very careful planning as this is remote terrain, and big river crossings may be necessary.

### Maule region

In Chile just south of Santiago I've only done a few peaks as day trips, such as the active volcanoes Chillan (3212m) and Antuco (2965m). But on



the Argentine side I've had some great longer expeditions. One of my favorite ski trips was a 4-night camping expedition to make the first ski descent of Domuyo (4709m) with a couple of clients in November 2006. The nearby peaks of Wayle (3296m) and Cuadruple Tres (3333m) and other summits in the Cordon del Viento can also be skied. This area requires at least a mini-expedition of a few days, but camping in the valleys in October can be very pleasant, with warm afternoons and long sunny days. A bit further south there are good day trips around the active volcano Copahue (3001m), and on wee peaks near the road by the Paso Pino Hachado. In many of these areas the



skiing begins through beautiful araucaria (monkey-puzzle) and bamboo forest; while the monkey-puzzle trees are great for photos, the bamboo can be a bit of a struggle!

### The Chilean lakes

Further south is the classic ski-mountaineering area of the Chilean Lakes District. There is enormous potential here, but in many places the dense, cool rain-forests prevent access to the snow. The exceptions are where there are ski resorts: these are often on the slopes of active volcanoes, and access is maintained throughout winter. High clearance is usually a good plan at any time of year; a 4x4 and chains are sometimes necessary in July and August. This region is one of the best for "holiday" ski-mountaineering, with ascents of 2500-3000m volcanoes taking just one long day from a hotel or cabaña in a local town. In Chile Lonquimay (2865m), Llaima (3125m), Sierra Nevada (2554m), Villarrica (2847m), Lanin (3717m), Casablanca (1990m) and Osorno (2652m) all make fine ascents. Of these only Osorno has serious crevasses and only Lanin will need to be a 2-day expedition, using huts high on the mountain. Boot crampons and axe are usually necessary to reach the crater rims safely due to rime ice.

Winter snowfall is usually reliable, with the snowline varying from 2000m in the north to 1000m in the south, but the



Below the Brecha de la Cornisa on San Lorenzo. Photo: John Biggar

winter months can be windy and access can often be difficult. The best season is September and early October. During this spell there is usually nice spring snow, with freezing conditions overnight giving easy ascents, but then snow turning softly skiable for descents later in the day. Most of the volcanoes have at least some snow into the summer months, so they have a long potential ski season and I've had good conditions into November some years.

### The Argentine lakes and Bariloche

The only area in the Andes where you can do a hut-to-hut tour is in the Cordillera Catedral, just outside the Argentine

city of San Carlos de Bariloche, the "chocolate capital of S America". The mountains are very easy to access from the ski resort of Cerro Catedral, itself just a short bus ride from town; this is one of South America's better piste-skiing spots too. There are also good day tours on some of the other peaks near Bariloche such as Challhuaco and Ñireco.

### The Carretera Austral

The long, half-built road winding south around the Chilean fjords from Puerto Montt is known as the Carretera Austral. There are a number of big volcanoes along the way but access is



phenomenally difficult, and the weather shockingly wet, with some areas receiving rain on 350 days of the year! I once abandoned a ski attempt on Minchinmahuida (c.2450m) after four days of relentless rain and machete work, but was more successful on the beautiful



Pulk-hauling on the southern ice-cap. Photo: John Biggar

peak of San Lorenzo (3706m) near the town of Cochrane. For a mellow trip with better skiing in this area try the various un-named peaks above and around the road at Portezuelo Ibañez south of Coihaique.

### The Patagonian Ice-Caps

The Patagonian ice-caps provide one of the best opportunities for serious expeditionary ski-mountaineering in the Andes; indeed skis are generally necessary to reach the more remote peaks and have been used on all traverses of the ice-caps. The scenery is absolutely out of this world, BUT there are disadvantages. Steep descents are few and far between, large loads will need to be pulked, there are potentially serious navigation problems and some

truly enormous crevasses. Oh yeah ... and the weather can be truly, utterly appalling, often resulting in several stormbound days in a tent.

On the northern ice-cap the main target is Cerro San Valentin (4058m), requiring a 10-day self-supported expedition out on the glaciers. Only a few teams have ever been successful with this one. On the southern ice-cap nice peaks include the (relatively) accessible Gorra Blanca (2860m) and the more remote Volcan Lautaro (3580m) and Moreno (3505m), either of which can be done in a week if conditions are good.

There is a lot of debate about the best season to travel here. Summer is unfor-

unately a bit warm and it occasionally rains on the ice-cap (which is generally at 1000-1500m). Unlike the northern hemisphere, southern Patagonia is actually less windy in winter, but of course days are very short then. Probably the best season on balance is again early spring, September to October.

### Tierra del Fuego

Finally, just before Cape Horn, there is Tierra del Fuego where the skiing is damp, boggy and very Scottish. I've only skied here once, in a poor snow year, but we still made a few ascents outside Ushuaia at Montes Martial and above the road at the Paso Garibaldi.

John Biggar has been climbing, skiing and exploring in the Andes since the early 1990s, and has now skied and boarded on over 100 different summits out there. He is proprietor of the business "ANDES" and author of the only comprehensive guidebook to the mountains of the Andes. Although not specifically a ski guide, it does have information on ski ascents on the best peaks in over twelve areas. Back home John is a WMCI based in southwest Scotland. With his wife Linda he is slowly working his way through ski and board descents of the Scottish munros. "The Andes - A Guide for Climbers and Skiers", 5th edition, 2020 - Paperback 978-0-9536087-6-8 Or 4th edition E-book (published 2015) 978-0-9536087-5-1 (5th edition E-book due late 2020).

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