

Day 1. Rondoy to Garagocha Lake.

Summary. A warm-up hike. I recommend combining this day with the 4-5h taxi ride from Huaraz to Rondoy.

Elevation Gain: 400m Elevation Loss: 0m Time: 2h Distance: 3km

Ascent:

Walk up the Rondoy Valley for about 2km then pick your way through the cliffs below Garagocha Lake via grassy ramps. Top out on a shoulder above the lake and then descend to camp about 50m north of the lake, between some boulders.

Day 2. Garagocha Col.

Summary: This day is intimidating, technical, exposed, and complex. High crosswinds at the col, potential ice and snow in any month, and low 5th class rock climbing up and down earn this day its reputation as the crux of the Alpine Circuit. Only strong parties with decent weather should attempt Garagocha Col. I recommend referring to the gpx track repeatedly on this day. To go around Garagocha Col, return to Rondoy, hike up (N) the road for 4km to Quartelhuain, then follow the Valley Circuit trail over Cacanamputa (4690m) to Mitucocha.

Elevation Gain: 1200m Elevation Loss: 1100m Time: 8h Distance: 12km

Ascent #1: An intimidating cliff band runs the entire length of the lake, blocking passage to the col. To get past the cliff band, backtrack north from camp for 100m to the shoulder you crossed the day before, then turn R (east) to gain a path heading uphill. The path ascends for 200m then traverses right (S) on a narrow bench above the cliff band (exposed and tricky at times). After 300m, reach slabs and benches. (It is possible to reach this point by walking along the lakeshore to the S end of the lake and then ascending steep grassy slope, which is hidden from camp.) Angle up and right toward the SE for 600m through ledges and slabs, then ascend slabs directly upwards (east) for 250m to reach the base of a steeper rock headwall at 4860m. Route finding here becomes critical. Turn left (N) and ascend a scree-covered ramp for 100m to reach the base of a distinct yellow basalt dyke beside a right-facing corner. The technical climbing begins here. The dyke is blocky, solid 5.0 rock climbing (with a light pack; harder with a heavy pack) for 25m, with the crux ~15m up. After passing a piton, an additional 15m of easy scree leads to Garagocha Col (4910m). 3h from camp to the col.

Descent #1: From the col, descend to the right (SE) for 30m down a sandy, narrow ledge to its end at a wall. There are two steep gullies/corners below. Carefully down climb to the buttress between the two corners to a solid block that can be slung. Descend the right (S) gully via an 8m ramp (5.0) to a ledge then down climb straight down for another 10m of 3rd class to a second ledge. This ends the technical climbing. Walk left (N) for 30m down a sandy ramp to reach the top of a large scree cone. Walk down the scree cone, past a bottleneck, to where the scree meets grassy slopes below. Turn left (NE) and aim for the base of a large cliff visible from here. This avoids a major invisible cliff band that runs the length of the slope below. Once past the cliff band, descend easy grass slopes to the south end of Mitucocha. 1h from the col to Mitucocha. There is an option to camp at the north end of Mitucocha (shared with the Valley Circuit; expect to pay a fee there).

Ascent #2: Walk up grass slopes E of Mitucocha to reach a grassy bench. Turn S and slog uphill toward a grassy break in a cliff band above. The grassy break has a trail up it, which leads to a ridge crest. Do not cross the ridge crest. Instead, turn right (S) and walk up the ridge crest to 4700m elevation then traverse the left (E) side of the ridge for 1km, staying high above the valley floor. A wet, slabby cliff blocks the end of the valley below and on the left. Avoid it by remaining high on the E flank on a trail that becomes well-worn and easy to follow. Once above the cliff band, descend to Alcaicocha Lake (4670m; optional camping). From the S end of Alcaicocha, maintain your elevation, and side-hill toward the S. Curl under two shoulders then turn SW and slog up loose talus to a small notch (3h from Mitucocha; 4780m) to catch a first glimpse of the stunning view of Jirishanca's SE face.

Descent #2: Descend scree slopes to the creek that flows out of Chaclan Lake (4h from Mitucocha; 4487m). Camp here, which is among the best three campsites on the Alpine Circuit.



Day 3. Siula Pass.

Summary: A long, easy hike with some great views on the first half. The second half of the day is somewhat of a chore, and joins the Valley Circuit. Many folks on the Valley Circuit take Siula Pass, making this a social exception to the rest of the Alpine Circuit.

Elevation Gain: 600m Elevation Loss: 900m Time: 6h Distance: 13km

Descent #1: Hike down (S) from camp at Chaclan Lake (4487m) on the W side of the creek to the Carhuacocha Valley (4150m; 0.5h) and cross it.

Ascent #1: Walk through the mini-valley to the E of the moraine wall that circles Gangrajanca Lake. Pass Gangrajanca on its E side, a new lake caused by a rockslide on its W side, and Siula Lake on its E side. Make a rising traverse, following a well-worn trail system, up a steep grass slope. Eventually gain a shoulder (2.5h) and walk into a hanging valley. Meander up a switchbacking trail at the end of the valley to reach Siula Pass (4834m; 3.5h). A more adventurous and scenic alternative is to traverse the foothills directly south of Carhuacocha and directly east of the Siula Lakes chain.

Descent #2: Walk down from the pass, aiming for a second pass on your right (S). Cross through this second pass (4710m), then descend the long, gradual valley to Carnicero Lake (4441m) and beyond to the Valley Circuit campsite called "Huayhuash". There, you will have to pay a trekking fee (S/30). Pay it and camp here. Alternatively, you can pay the fee and hike uphill for 3 hours to camp at Trapecio Lakes; see Day 4). A second alternative is avoid the Huayhuash camp altogether by ascending grass slopes 1.5km south of Carnicero Lake to a grassy bench, then hike southward on the bench to rejoin the trail at the foot of headwall below Trapecio Lakes.

Day 4. Trapecio Pass.

Summary: A gradual ascent into the alpine, circling the majestic Trapecio, is followed by a dramatic unveiling of the major southern faces of the range at a high point. An easy, flat glacier crossing offers more breathtaking views. The day ends with an interesting but straightforward slab descent and a hike along a moraine crest to what is perhaps the second best camp on the Alpine Circuit.

Elevation Gain: 800m Elevation Loss: 800m Time: 6h Distance: 12km

Ascent #1: Cross a rock wall and hike up the right (W) side of the valley rising to the S for 3km. Curl over a shoulder to enter a hanging valley to the W. A cliff band looms at the end of the valley. Follow either a grassy route on the left or a moraine crest route up the center of the valley to ascend through the cliff band. The trails converge above the cliff band in a beautiful hanging plateau. Pass Trapecio Lakes (glorious campsites available) then follow a trail on scree up to the continental divide at Trapecio Pass (4910m; 3h from Huayhuash). Do not descend the other side. Instead, turn right (S) and scramble uphill on redish rock, to a notch (5110m) with incredible views of Carnicero, Sarapo, and Siula Grande.

Descent: As late as 2010, it was easy enough to walk through the notch, then making a scrambling descent to reach the Huayhuashjanca Glacier. However, glacial recession has made this direct route steep and loose in recent years. A better approach is now to scramble down to a col due W, then walk down easy scree to step casually onto glacier. The glacier is flat, aerated ice, with no real crevasses. Hike NW on the glacier and exit it after less than 1km. Hike on scree, within 100m of the edge of the glacier. Pass over a shoulder notch, then begin a slab descent (1.5h from the high point). Descend to the right (N) down easy friction slabs beside a steep, dark wall. Once at the base of the wall, descend directly down easy friction slabs (many cairns), to a small, cairned bench around 4700m. Traverse left (S) to exit the slabs into a grassy gully. Descend to cow pastures atop the moraine S of Jurau Lake. Follow a trail on the moraine until directly above the outflow of the lake then down to a pristine camp between Jurau Lake (4343m) and a tiny lake to its W.

Fee Payment: The people of the town of Huayllapa (12k down valley from Jurau Lake) collect travel and camping fees from Alpine Circuit travellers near Jurau Lake. My understanding is that the fee collector hangs out near a tiny homestead called Cutatambo, located 600m SW of and 100m below Jurau Lake. Descend to Cutatambo and pay the S/60 per person fees. Please, for the sake of maintaining access to the Alpine Circuit, **do not avoid paying the fees..**

Day 5. Touching the Void.

Summary: Simply stunning. The views are jaw-dropping. And the stage is that of the legendary Touching the Void. This day is both figuratively and literally the high point, taking in a summit at 5152m. And it ends at a campsite that might even feel sacred to atheists.

Elevation Gain: 800m Elevation Loss: 600m Time: 6h Distance: 10km

Ascent: From camp at Jurau Lake (4343m), ascend the moraine to the N then descend the other side to enter the pleasant Sarapococha Valley. Joe Simpson and Simon Yates' base camp is about 2km up the valley, on the left side. An angular boulder 8m in height marks the spot. As you approach a terminal moraine get some water (there isn't any more until camp), and then gain a trail rising on the left valley wall, which eventually climbs onto a shoulder overlooking Sarapococha. Small cliffs loom above. Once beyond the cliffs, switchback, hiking up steep grass. Slog upwards on grass then scree to Velilina Pass (3h from camp; 5060m). Hike north along a stunning alpine traverse, a sidewalk into the sky, for 2k in total. The 360-degree views are the best on the Alpine Circuit, including the famous Siula Grande and infamous Simpson crawl route down to the right. Skirt around rocky outcroppings on the right and left to crest Cerro Gran Vista 5152m (high point of the entire circuit).

Descent: Walk straight north toward Rasac ("The Toad") over a 5097m summit and eventually reach a pass made up of white sand (which is 400m S of Seria Pass). Descend scree then a trail to a magnificent camp at the outflow of Caramarca Lake (6h from Jurau Lakes; 4575m)

Day 6. Rasac Pass.

Summary: This is the second most technical day on the Circuit. The majority of the terrain is straightforward. Some glacier travel, a brief loose gully ascent, a somewhat convoluted, potentially confusing descent, and a 20m 4th class down climb will keep you on your toes. The views of Rasac and its West Summit on the ascent are a highlight.

Elevation Gain: 550m Elevation Loss: 7m Time: 5h Distance: 5km

Ascent: Start at camp beside Caramarca Lake (4575m). Hike up the crest of a moraine immediately W of the lake to gain a boulder-strewn plateau. Boulder hop past a small lake to the edge of the Seria Glacier (2h). Hike up the glacier (15 degrees), passing a few minor crevasses. Unavoidably, the route crosses an avalanche path coming off Rasac Oeste. The glacier culminates in a 35-degree 50m headwall just below the pass. Either crampon up the headwall or step left onto a rocky bench and scramble around the headwall on easy talus. Above the headwall, turn left (W), walk horizontally on scree under a rocky cliff then climb 8m of exposed 5.0 rock (hands and right foot) and sand (left foot; or keep your crampons on and walk up the sand) to reach the minor West Col 100m west of Rasac Pass. 3h from Caramarca to the Col.

Descent: The first 1km of descent is not intuitive. Pay close attention to the instructions. Boulder hop downwards for 50m from the West Col then traverse horizontally left (toward the NW), just below cliffs on Huacrish Norte, for 700m. Look for a place where you can walk straight down hill and then double back toward the E along a hanging bench (4h from Caramarca). Many cairns mark the bench but they are not easy to spot from a distance. Traverse the bench toward the east, staying high, then descend via a 20m 4th class downclimb (3rd class at the top, then traverse W on ledge with positive handholds) to reach the top of a grassy moraine. The rest is walking. Walk along micro-valleys past Barrosococha and then join the cows and camp near Rasacocha. Continuing on to the Jauacocha Valley is not recommended because the locals may not welcome camping anywhere other than the W end of Jauacocha (fee), which is 3km off route.



Day 7. Sambuya Pass.

Elevation Gain: 700m Elevation Loss: 1000m Time: 5h Distance: 12km

Summary: With all of the technical terrain behind you, this final day of the Alpine Circuit offers a mellow and scenic conclusion, ascending over a pass and an easy descent to the road. I recommend combining this day with the drive from Rondoy to Huaraz.

Descent #1: Follow trails for about 1km N of Rasacocha, then cross the creek to the E side and follow an exposed, traversing trail that curls to the E into the area between Jauacocha (4050m) and Solteracocha (4120m). Cross the valley to reach a major trail on the N side of the valley.

Ascent #1: Follow the major trail past Solteracocha. The trail then turns uphill, switchbacking into the alpine, with excellent views of Jirishanca and Yerupaja behind. Reach Sambuya Pass (4750m) and Rondoy Pass (4735m) and bid farewell to the mountains of the Huayhuash (3h from Rasacocha).

Descent #2: The trail makes a high, descending traverse of S slope of the Rondoy Valley, all the way to the homestead of Rondoy, where your ride is hopefully waiting for you.