

Andes. When there came a point that a car could take us no further, we continued on horseback. When we arrived at a plateau below the cliffs of La Petaca, an incredible vista lay before us. Dotted along the face of the cliff, the naked eye could barely make out tombs carved into the rock. I couldn't fathom how the Chachapoyan people were ever able to navigate up the cliff and carve out these caves. Even in 2007, we were unsure of how exactly we would access the same tombs, and we had the privilege of technology, top-notch gear and an experienced Peruvian mountaineer who had already climbed Everest twice.

The next morning, we hiked up a trail to the top of the cliff. With carefully rigged harnesses and ropes, Rich and I prepared to rappel down the rocky face of the cliff. Rich kicked through the thick tree branches and brush that hung over the ledge and then disappeared over the side. Then came my turn. When I finally felt all my weight in the harness, adrenaline raced through my system—I knew there was only a flimsy rope between me and the valley floor 1,500 feet below. Rich and I were hanging side-by-side. Despite our nervousness, and the huge drop beneath us, we started laughing and high-fiving. We had the best seats in the house.

We descended 250 feet to a cave opening covered with warrior paintings that would lead us into one of the Chachapoyan burial sites. We stumbled over scattered bones and skeletons, but there wasn't a mummy in sight. On the ground of the cave, we found a newspaper scrap from 1985; this cave had been disturbed before. After chronicling our finds, we were ready to head back. The goal for the entire Peruvian expedition was to find an intact mummy that had not been disturbed, so we could extract it to the museum for examination and unwrapping. (Museum and town officials were being communicated with via phone.) We didn't find anything else worth noting. Since we didn't find a mummy, we got approval to assist in the unwrapping of a mummy from a recent archaeological discovery at the Leymebamba Museum. While I was excited to participate in the museum mummy-unveiling, I was disappointed that we hadn't found a mummy in the cliff caves.

We rappelled down another 200 feet to reach a path that would lead us back to the top. Shortly after, we literally stumbled right into what we were hoping to find: a mummy. It had fallen from a cliff above and lay in the dirt, completely undisturbed. We got as close as we could without touching it. Because the mummy had become unraveled due to time or the fall, it wasn't properly preserved; it had been broken, all the toes were missing, and the ropes that bound it together had come undone. Since it was so fragile, we had to leave it there. We took notes on our find and returned to the peak of the mountain to meet our team.

Days later at the museum, I was able to help unwrap a well-preserved

Chachapoyan mummy—only the sixth one ever unwrapped. Carbon dating showed that it was more than 500 years old. Like most Chachapoyan mummies, its hands covered its face, and it was curled into the fetal position. Shaping the mummy into a small bundle made it easier for its descendants to carry it up the cliff. The skin was intact, though it was dry and tight like rawhide. Because the mummy had no organs and was completely dehydrated, it weighed only about 15 pounds. The museum specialists guessed that it was a village elder. We spent hours examining the mummy and asking questions. When I finally left the museum, I knew unwrapping that mummy had been a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

*“THERE WAS ONLY A  
FLIMSY ROPE BETWEEN  
ME AND THE VALLEY FLOOR.”*

