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LLANBERIS 2001 PATAGONIA EXPEDITION REPORT

By Leigh M^cGinley

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LOCATION AND DATES

FITZROY NATIONAL PARK
SOUTH PATAGONIA
ARGENTINA
OCTOBER & NOVEMBER 2001

AIM

A TWO MAN ASCENT OF CERRO TORRE (ALPINE STYLE) VIA THE UNCOMPLETED 1968 ANGLO-ARGENTINE ROUTE

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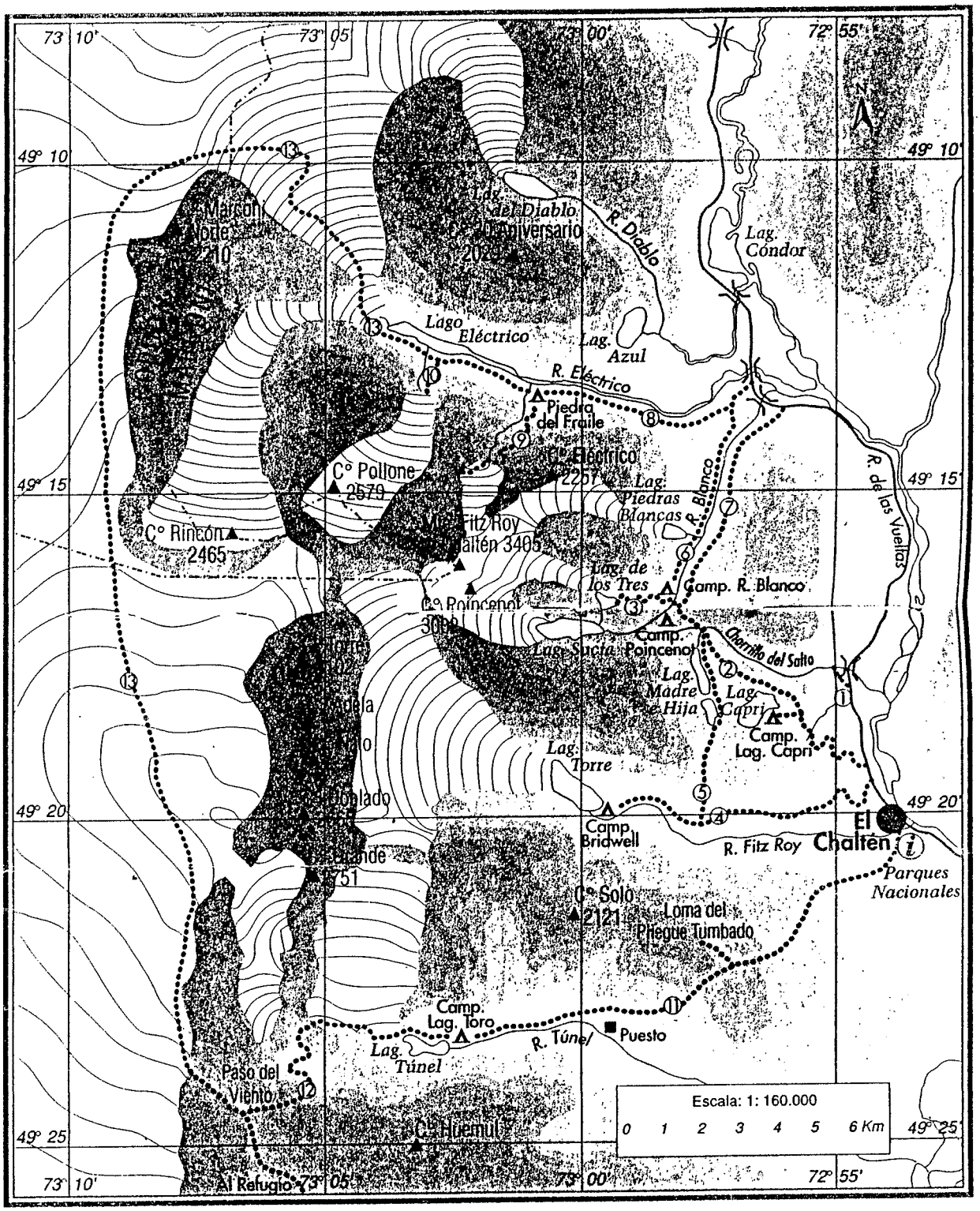
SUMMARY

The expeditions initial aim was to complete an alpine style ascent of Cerro Torre starting up the South East ridge (Compressor Route) for 9 or so pitches until access to a huge hanging snowfield above the South face was possible. This first section would be mainly free-climbing maybe with one easy aid pitch. The snowfield would then be traversed (250 metres) to join the West face route (Ferrari) at the helmet. The West face route would be followed to the summit. The descent would follow the same route.

On arriving at the Park at the beginning of October the rangers informed us that the good weather we were experiencing had so far lasted for three weeks. In South Patagonia this is most unusual and made us think twice about attempting such a committing climb. However, we decided to press on anyway. On the first carry to the base of the route we noticed several house sized blocks of ice littering the upper glacier. The summit mushroom was shedding its skin. We therefore elected to climb Torre Egger via a link of the 1980 Italian Route into Titanic. After establishing a snowcave base at the foot bad weather forced us back to camp for six weeks! Time ran out and we had to return home.

INTRODUCTION

In February 2000 myself and Mick Pointon climbed the West Face (Ferrari Route) of Cerro Torre. This, for Patagonia, was a very satisfying achievement. However, the summit still eluded us. Rather than go back and repeat the same climb for the sake of the last 200 feet we decided to attempt a line based on the 1968 Anglo-Argentine attempt. The South East ridge up which the route starts is now called 'The Compressor Route', which to our minds was flawed due to the excessive use of bolts. Free climbing has always been important to us and our proposed line would hopefully offer a predominantly free climb up the mountain, involving rock and ice to a high standard. We felt fairly confident that if we could reach the West Face and the weather held that success could be ours. To get optimum snow conditions we decided to visit the area in October and November when it would be cooler.


73° 10'
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N
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2210
Lag. del Diablo
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2020
R. Diablo
Lag. Cóndor
Lago Eléctrico
Lag. Azul
R. Eléctrico
Piedra del Fraile
C° Eléctrico
2251
C° Pollone
2579
Lag. Piedras Blancas
R. Blanco
R. de las Vueltas
C° Rincón
2465
Lag. de los Tres
Camp. R. Blanco
Camp. Poincenot
Lag. Sucia
Chorrillo del Salto
Lag. Madre e Hija
Lag. Capri
Camp. Lag. Capri
Lag. Torre
Camp. Bridwell
R. Fitz Roy
El Chaltén
Parques Nacionales
C° Solo
2121
Loma del Pliegue Tumbado
Camp. Lag. Toro
Lag. Túnel
R. Túnel
Puesto
Paso del Viento
C° Huemul
Al Refugio
Escala: 1: 160.000
0 1 2 3 4 5 6 Km

EXPEDITION MEMBERS

Leigh McGinley Shop Assistant. 30 years climbing experience. New routes in U.K. Big wall experience incl;uding first British one-day ascent of 'The Nose'. New route on North Tower of Paine. Many Scottish winter ascents.

Mick Pointon Hotelier. 35 years climbing experience. New routes on rock and ice in the U.K. Many alpine seasons. A great 'unknown' who has repeated many of the hardest Scottish winter climbs.

ADMINISTRATION AND LOGISTICS

Reasearch Materials I found trolling through old magazines useful. The idea for the climb came from Dougal Haston's 'In High Places'. The most useful source of knowledge however came from previous visits to the area: i.e. hands on experience.

Permission and Permits No visas are required for U.K. citizens visiting Argentina. Likewise no permission is required to climb in the Fitzroy Park. However, on entry the Rangers ask you to register with them giving rough details of your intended climb.

Finances For a two month visit we changed £800 each into U.S. dollars. This is no longer relevant, however, owing to the collapse of the Argentine economy.

A brief breakdown of our joint expenditure was as follows:-

U.K. Travel (petrol)	£40.00
Flights	£1600.00
Internal travel	£200.00
Insurance	£600.00
Food and Drink	£800.00
Equipment: (New boots, tent, snow shovel, ice screw, pegs)	£800.00
TOTAL	£4040.00

Insurance We took out (expedition) insurance with the B.M.C. at a cost of £300.00 each.

Food and Accommodation For hill food we took with us £200 worth of dried food available in most U.K. supermarkets. This would last us for about 20 days. The dried food available in Argentina is not really up to the task. Local food tended to be more in line with London prices - very expensive, apart from the fresh meat. At the roadhead (Chalten) there are now several supermarkets and bars. Chalten is an easy 10km. walk frombase camp so access to restock is easy.

Fresh water from mountain streams was used throughout our stay in the mountains. We camped or bivvied throughout our stay, even outside the airport in Buenos Aires.

Travel etc. Flight to Buenos Aires. Airport Bus 'Manuel Tienda Leon' to Jorge Newberry domestic airport. This cost about £10 each. Flight south. Although we had well over the baggage allowance we were not charged any excess. The flight south took us to Rio Gallegos from where we took a bus (5 hours) to Calafate. Many bus companies operate this service from the airport. However, Calafate has recently opened an airstrip and it is possible to fly directly from Buenos Aires. This option may be cheaper.

Calafate is serviced by many companies transporting trekkers to and from Chalten. The offices are located on the High Street or at the main bus station. An open return costs around £30.00. Be aware that they leave very early in the morning.

Once in Chalten you can start hiking gear to base, an easy 10km. Horses are also available although we never used this service. For MSR and petrol stoves (fires are illegal) Chalten has a petrol station and also a small hardware store selling white gas although the latter may have closed.

EXPEDITION REPORT

The compiler of this report and all members of the expedition agree that all or part of it may be copied for the purposes of private research.

Leaving Llanberis on 1st October 2001 we flew from Manchester to Buenos Aires where we took a bus across the city to the domestic airport. We overnighted (bivvied outside) here and flew south to Rio Gallegos the next day. A further bus took us to Calafate which is the last town of significance before going into the mountains. We camped here for a couple of days before bussing to Chalten, a small but expanding village at the entrance to the National Park. Free camping is available here. After registering with the Rangers we began hiking our gear to base (20km round trip, but very easy). The weather was excellent, and had been for the past three weeks, sun and absolutely no wind - highly unusual for Patagonia, but a great concern for us. How long could it possibly last?

After three days we were established at base and ready to start transporting gear to the foot of the mountain. We had a fair bit of kit as the intended route was in two distinct sections. Thje first half would be up the South East Ridge (the true ridge, leaving the 'Compressor Route' at the 90 metre bolt ladder) and would involve hard free climbing and maybe one aid pitch. The second half consisted of hard pure ice climbing with one or two mixed pitches. Therefore, as we anticipated hauling on the first half we were not going light.

After a couple of days we had a gear dump fully stocked in a rock cave at the base of the upper glacier. The weather then turned; snow, wind and very low temperatures pinned us in base camp for five days. It looked like the stable spell was over.

On the sixth day it came good again, sun and no wind. Off we went with very light sacks, and reached the rock cave after 3½ hours. This involved crossing a three mile dry glacier followed by some steep moraine. We were not feeling too confident in the weather and as we were expecting to be on the Torre for ten days doubts set in. Once on the upper glacier with our first loads the obvious presence of house sized blocks of ice clinched things for us. The summit mushrooms were dramatically reduced in size and were obviously exfoliating. Not prepared to venture into the 'line of fire' we elected to go for a new route on the East face of Torre Egger, the magnificent peak to the right of Cerro Torre.

During our sojurn at base camp we had discussed the possibility of a route on Torre Egger and had decided that if we were going in that direction we should try to link the 1980 Italian Route with the 1987 Route Titanic, hopefully making a free ascent, which to us is the way things should be done.

Torre Egger, although a couple of hundred metres lower than Cerro Torre has had only five ascents, and is considered by many to be the hardest peak to climb in the entire Patagonian range. Our proposed route would entail hard rock climbing topped off with 150 metres of ice and snow.

The foot of the route was only 800 metres from the foot of Cerro Torre, and also slightly closer to the rock cave.

Having made our decision we ploughed upwards to the base of Torre Egger where we dug a spacious snow cave, and retired for the night.

The next morning saw us ferrying the remaining gear from the rock cave to the snow cave, a round trip of six hours. We were now stocked and ready. That night a storm started with ferocious intensity. We sealed the snow cave, marked its position and thrashed back to base.

The following six weeks were a nightmare of frustration. Every morning we rose at 5.00 a.m. to check the weather, all to no avail. The winds never abated and it snowed heavily for a period of three weeks. The order of the day was usually to read a little, boulder and do pull-ups. We tried on several occasions to return to the snow cave to rescue our gear but were always beaten back by strong winds.

With two days to go before our departure we got a slight weather window and armed with heavy duty snow shovels waded our way to the cave (six hours). The whole area had changed into an unrecognisable morass of snow. After eight hours of digging we were eight metres down and reached a compressed area of hard black and yellow ice, the remains of our snow cave. All our gear, ropes, food, axes, jumars, ice screws had been sucked into the active glacier. Another storm started, so, exhausted and with heavy hearts, we had no option but to go back

The next day we left the Park in appalling weather to begin our journey home.

CONCLUSION

Having been to Patagonia four times, I have had two successful trips, a 50% success rate. The weather is a major factor for any expedition and cannot be predicted. For instance six weeks after our return climbers in Patagonia experienced an unprecedented five week settled spell which saw our proposed line on Torre Egger ascended (it awaits a free ascent though). The route on Cerro Torre remains unclimbed.

To avoid the devastating loss of gear that we experienced hang it on any available rock wall - don't leave it in a snow hole - our gear is now lost forever. However, at least we came home fit and healthy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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D.M.M. for ice axes
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