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Patagonia report 2004



Four go free on Fitzroy

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An optimistic title

The objective; to climb a new route on the massive east face of Cerro Fitzroy Patagonia Argentina. The aim was to get established on the east Face and then to climb in the shelter of the face and hopefully establish a free big wall route. We had identified two potential areas and unclimbed lines

The team

Mike Turner 4th trip to Patagonia. Three new routes in Paine and attempts on the all three towers and Cerro Torre

Louise Thomas 4th trip to Patagonia. Three new routes in Paine and attempts on the all three towers and Cerro Torre

Stuart McAleese, first trip to Patagonia. New routes in Alaska with M Turner

Steve Mayers first trip to Patagonia. New routes in Pakistan and, Madagascar with L Thomas and M Turner

Travel and Transport

Flights Air France and Aero lineas

Manchester to Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires to Calafate

The connections are such that it is possible to fly the same day on to Calafate. However it is important to leave time as the domestic airport about one hours drive away. It impossible to hire a minibus relatively cheaply for a swift transfer. With a little more time the airport bus is very cheap and goes through of the city

Travel from Calafate to El Chaltarn

is very easy as there are a number of bus companies that travel every day. During the busy season December through February there are early and late buses.

We used Cal tur.

It was important to warn them of the extra baggage. Although the bus seemed packed with people the baggage all seemed to squash on.

During the peak season it may be advisable to book as far as possible ahead.

Horses

There seem to be a few horse agencies. We contacted them before we arrived and were able to book a head when we wanted to walk in.

Gauchito cabalgatas@hotmail.com

0054 2962 493087

For three horses to walk in to Rio Blanco the cost was 260 dollars.

Each horse carries about 50kg

Accommodation

El Chaltren

There are numerous hostels, hotels and hoppedja in both Calafate and El Chaltren.

We stayed in Calafate Hospedja for 50 dollars per night for a room for 4

In El Chaltren we stayed in la Base again 50 dollars for a room for 4.

It is really advisable to book accommodation ahead if arriving during December and January.

Food

There are a number of supermarkets in Calafate where all provisions can be bought. El Chaltren is a growing town with 3 supermarkets and a very good bakery. The choice is more limited and the prices slightly higher but it would be possible to buy most things.

The only hill food we could not find was noodles.

Eating out. There are numerous restaurants in both Calafate and El Chaltren and the food is excellent especially if you like pizza, pasta or steak. The wine is also very reasonable. Patagonicas in El Chaltren seemed to be very friendly with good food and a good chance of meeting other climbers.

Permission.

There is no charge to climb in Fitzroy Park but climbers must register at the park offices before they leave to climb. Every

climber must record Name, passport details, home address and insurance details. They also require your Campsite and intended route and departure date. The wardens are both friendly and helpful.

Climbers must also inform the park when they leave

There are route books and information at the park offices.

Base Camp

The traditional camp for the East Face of Fitzroy is Rio Blanco, which is only 2 hours from El Chaltern. Later in the trip we found this a good place for moving kit but rarely stayed at the camp as to have any hope of climbing it was important to be as close as possible which meant staying at the snow hole at Col superior. El Chaltern is close enough to descend to after a fight in the mountains

Rio Blanco base is too far for any serious attempt on a big wall route therefore it is necessary create an advance camp at Col Superior

The Approach

Col or Paso Superior

It is an hour's easy walk from Rio Blanco to Lago Los Tres. From the Lago to the col would take between 2 ½ to 5 hours depending on Loads and snow conditions.

Lago Los Tres.

On our arrival in early December the lake was frozen and crossable for about 20 days. When it became unsafe (very rapidly) it is possible to scramble around the rocks on the left of the lake looking up the slope. Large full depth avalanches threaten the right hand side of the lake.

There are a number of routes up the glacier to the col depending on conditions.

Early in December the glacier had very few crevasses open. We were aware from pictures that it is in fact quite heavily crevassed. As the temperatures rose through the month these became more apparent.

At the start of December we chose a line up the centre moving left and then right up a small rock step on to a snowy ridge that becomes the slope leading to the col.

The slopes immediately below the rock step are subject to very rapid fortunately small, sun released point avalanches.

There also some very large crevasses just below the rock step.

When this slope is too suspect or crevassed the alternative was to head up to the right hand ridge, which can be followed to the col.

The Col Superior.

We established a snow hole here and this became our main base. There were a number of teams and 6 holes in total while we were there. It is conceivable for there not to be enough room for all teams to snow hole.

From the col to the base of the East Face is about an hours walk. The initial slope from the col is at an uncomfortable angle to cross in high winds and of an angle to avalanche. Below it are again some massive crevasses.

Once beyond the slope there is a large basin giving access to the east side of Poincenont, Fitzroy, Mermoz and Guillamet

The trip;

We passed quickly through Calafate and Chaltarn stopping long enough to buy food. Four days after leaving home we were at base camp.

We decided to move as a four and establish a snow hole camp immediately. We took advantage of the cold early morning to climb the snow while still frozen. The sun hits the top of the slope rapidly after sunrise. Having created a snow hole Twid and Louise remained at the col while Stuart and Steve returned to base. The intention was to have 2 people climb for 2 days while the others rested then came up with a load and take over until established on the face.

Louise and Twid took advantage of the good weather to go head to the face with a load and identify the line to be attempted

A very obvious and strong line was identified on the Left of the east face.

The approach to this line is steep snow followed by icy runnels. The snow was unclimbable due to the intense heat so the pair decided to retreat and return in the cool of the morning.

Naturally the morning brought the first in a wave of storms. The pair tried several times to get established on the face only to be either blown back or threatened with avalanches. They were able to move most of the climbing equipment and camp kit to the base of the route.

For the next 10 days all 4 climbers took turns to battle with the approach as storm after storm brought impossible winds and heavy snow. Finally it was decided that the team would stick together as a four to give security over the frequently suspect slopes.

The team retreated to El Chaltren for some sleep away from the wind only to be woken by the sunshine!

They headed straight back to the col. While Steve and Louise enlarged the snow hole Stuart and Twid headed to finally make a start on the Face.

As darkness began to fall and the storms recommence the 2 had not returned. Finally 2 very white climbers appeared through the darkness and snow. At the foot of the face there was absolutely no sign of any of the kit. Despite being about 1 ½ m high and marked it all had been completely buried. There was a quiet depression in the hole that night. The next day we spent 8 hours probing until the weather won and we retreated to the snow holes.

In the next storm we decided to head for camp and gather what remnants of kit we had just in case we got a break in the weather.

We returned the next day as pressure began to rise. We were now very limited with only four axes between us and a minimal rack.

We decided to try the Franco Argentine route if the weather proved fine.

At 2 am the sky was clear as we headed out across the slopes. Much to our relief a German team was out in front breaking trail. Unfortunately we soon caught them. The snow was really deep and the going very slow. We kept our lead and crossed

the bergshrund to start climbing the gully. As we were limited by axes the leader carried 2 and the second combined one axe and a glove or pulled on the various bits of fixed rope. We reached the col as the wind began to howl. We could see up on the shoulder that the route was not really in condition all the cracks being very iced.

Quickly we retreated and reached the hole just as the next storm swept in.

The storm was so violent that the snow holes shook violently and boomed. When it was possible we beat a hasty retreat. Unfortunately a combination of heavy snow and a rise in the temperature ensured that the descent was suitably traumatic. Twid was lowered on to the slope to find a route down. 50m down he disappeared down a huge hole. Fortunately we were able to pull him out but wrenching his shoulder in the process. We carefully followed only to be over taken by some Italians who finding themselves with out a rope decided the best option was to take it all at speed and bum slide!

Next day was horrific snowing down to Rio Blanco

When it began to clear we headed back this time by the right hand ridge. We found a team that had got lost trying to reach the col and had spent the night out.

For 2 days we probed finally as we decided to give up Steve struck gold well a considerable amount of metal. The only problem in our minds was what to do now. We decided to give the wall one more try.

Unfortunately the weather never improved we shifted our focus to Poincenont and then the Guillamet.

Eventually we had to come to the conclusion that it was not going to happen in the time scale left as the storms continued to hammer us. We waited for a slight easing in the winds but no let up in the snow and with the help of one of the other teams cleared our camp.

We knew that having descended the weather would improve. With 24 hour till the horses arriving Twid and Louise headed to the north side of the Mountain in the hope of a quick day route on one of the smaller peaks. As they walked across in the rain up in to the Rio Electrico the footpath subsided causing Twid to fall and further aggravating his shoulder.

The End!

We had spent 20 plus days in our snow hole and had one 8-hour spell of good weather.

We still believe the line to be a good objective and that once established the face should offer some shelter until near the upper part of the Mountain.

Finances**Income****MEF £350****BMC £2200****Expenditure****Flights****£800 £2400****Accommodation £250****Food £500****Food meals £200****Land travel £100****Horses £175****Insurance £1200****Equipment £200****Medical £60****£5085****Sponsors DMM****Mammut**