

The British Darwin Range Expedition

2007

Final Report

Introduction

The aim of our mountaineering expedition of just two climbing members –Andy Parkin and Simon Yates – was to attempt a new route on the South Face of Monte Frances (2200m) in the Cordillera Darwin range of mountains, Chilean Tierra del Fuego.

This extensive range of heavily glaciated mountains are located in the S.W. of the main island (See Map). The area is virtually uninhabited and this combined with a lack of roads for access, maps for navigation, information on objectives and a reputation for foul weather conditions have kept climbing visits to a minimum over the years. The Cordillera Darwin is one of the most remote, inaccessible and infrequently visited mountain regions in the world, outside of the Polar Regions. The mountains are only approachable from the sea. In order to visit the area you require the services of a boat. Once on land approaches have to be made through a terrain of bog, dense forest and glacial rivers before awkward moraines and glaciers can be reached to access the peaks.

A simple plan was devised. The team would meet up in Ushuaia at the end of February 2007 and then access the mountains by taking a yacht chartered for the purpose.

Summary of Events

25/2/07 Andy Parkin commenced his journey to Ushuaia from the UK. Simon Yates was already waiting in Ushuaia having completed a previous trip into the Cordillera Darwin.

26/2/07 Andy failed to arrive on his flight from Buenos Aires. Simon secured the charter of the yacht Iorana, skippered by Belgian Marcel de Letter (the services of another yacht had been arranged, but it developed gear box problems). In the evening Andy telephoned from Rio de Janeiro to say he would arrive the following morning.

27/2/07 Andy arrived in Ushuaia, where Simon informed him of the lack of snow and ice on the expeditions chosen objective – the South Face of Monte Frances. A decision was reached to do some exploratory mountaineering in the fjord Sena Pia further to the west. Marcel stocked Iorana, while Andy and Simon shopped and packed. The yacht was loaded and then the whole process was repeated when Marcel agreed for Jane Yates and the children Maisy and Lewis to come along. In the early afternoon we set sail for Puerto Williams.

28/2/07 Left Puerto Williams after completing immigration formalities (entry to Chile), but ran into strong head winds forcing Marcel to seek anchorage in Caletta Victor Jora at the N.W. end of Navarino Island.

1/3/07 Strong head winds soon forced a stop in Caletta Eugenio at the eastern end of Isla Hoste.

2/3/07 With the wind still blowing strongly out in the Beagle Channel Andy, Marcel and Simon took a hike up a nearby peak while Jane stayed on the yacht with the children.

3/3/07 After a calm start, strong winds were encountered forcing a stop at Point Yamana a little further west on the north side of the Beagle Channel.

4/3/07 A wet but totally calm day allowed us to motor to Sena Pia. After taking a fruitless (low cloud) reconnaissance mission to the head of the fjord we anchored about 4 miles further down it on the west side.

5/3/07 A wet day waiting at the anchorage.

6/3/07 Andy and Simon were taken back to the head of the fjord and dropped off. The yacht returned to the anchorage while they set up a base camp and made two reconnaissance trips to look at objectives and approaches to them.

7/3/07 Having decided on a peak at the head of the fjord a very long day was spent flogging up to an advanced base camp on a shoulder at around 1000m.

8/3/07 Another very long day, resulting in the first ascents of two peaks (2070 & 2340m) which were named Iorana II & I respectively. A further night was spent back at the advanced base camp.

9/3/07 After descending to base camp the yacht returned for the pick-up. By the end of the day we had made our way back to Caletta Ola in the Beagle Channel where we spent the night.

10/3/07 Sailing from Caletta Ola to Caletta Mejillones (Navarino Island).

11/3/07 Sailing from Caletta Mejillones to Puerto Williams.

12/3/07 Sailing from Puerto Williams to Ushuaia.

13/3/07 to 14/3/07 Ushuaia

15/3/07 Simon and Jane Yates along with children Maisy and Lewis start the journey home arriving in the UK on 17/3/07.

15/3/07 to 30/3/07 Andy stayed on in Ushuaia and made a solo 4th ascent of the highest peak in Argentinean Tierra del Fuego.

31/3/07 Andy flies home reaching the UK on 1/4/07

The Expedition

Simon Yates left the UK on 30th January 2007 and arrived in Ushuaia (Argentinean Tierra del Fuego) on Friday 2nd of February to work with a group of clients before the expedition arranged with Andy Parkin commenced. This was fortuitous, as he was able to view the proposed objective (Monte Frances) and make arrangements for the charter of a yacht (which turned out to be problematical).

Simon had managed to secure the services of a yacht, which sadly developed gearbox problems two days before Andy's arrival, but the owner kindly arranged a late substitution. It seemed we were now on a yacht called Iorana. Simon met the Belgian captain - Marcel de Letter, agreed terms and left him to get on with some shopping.

On Monday 26th February Andy's flight from Buenos Aires arrived, but he did not. Phoning from Rio de Janeiro later that day he related a tale of woe due to a delayed flight from Heathrow to Madrid. He hoped to be with us the following morning. The airlines finally delivered Andy somewhat jaded after days of sleepless travel from his Chamonix home on the morning of the 27th. With just two weeks scheduled for the entire trip there was no time to relax. I informed Andy that the South Face of Monte Frances was bare of snow and ice and we took a decision to go further west and do some exploratory mountaineering in Sena Pia, which we had both visited previously in 2001. In a frantic morning we loaded the boat and prepared to sail. Then did the

whole process again, after it was decided there was enough room aboard for Jane Yates and the two young children Maisy and Lewis to accompany us. The sail to Puerto Williams that afternoon was a pleasant interlude, but the immigration officials failed to show at the harbour. Marcel was furious as he had hoped to steal a march on an approaching storm by leaving that night. A lunch-time departure on the 28th meant we soon hit head winds. Our progress faltered and we were forced to take shelter in Caletta Victor Jora at the western end of Navarino Island.

The morning of Thursday 1st March was calm, but the weather soon blew up again forcing us into an anchorage – Caletta Eugenio – at the eastern end of Isla Hoste. The wind from the west was too strong the following day to even consider going out into the Beagle Channel. A day was spent walking on nearby peaks.

On the 3rd of March we woke to silence - the wind had finally dropped. However, once out in the Beagle Channel we met a wall of waves and once again were forced into an anchorage. The following day dawned wet and still. We motored west past the lonely Chilean naval post at Point Yamana and into the North West fork of the Beagle Channel. Tantalising glimpses of snow and glaciers above the northern shore offered hints of the mountains above.

It was a relief to leave the channel later in the day, slip through a gap in a line of rocks - a submerged moraine ridge and enter the fjord of Sena Pia. As we crept further along the rock walls steepened and ice began to appear in the water. The pack-ice gradually became denser towards the head of the fjord, where two huge glaciers spilled down into the water. The cloud base was low, obscuring the mountains above. Andy's map from six years earlier now came into its own. There was a 'face mixed' marked above the right-hand glacier and a suitable place nearby for a drop-off. We called it a day and went back to a beautiful anchorage in a tiny bay below a waterfall four miles back down the fjord.

A week had now passed. We still had to find an objective, climb it and make the journey back. Time was going to be tight. To add to our worries Marcel expressed his concern about dropping us off near the head of the fjord. On a previous visit he had only just escaped from the anchorage due to very dense pack-ice. If a lot of ice calved away from the glaciers there was a danger of being stranded. As land-lubbers it was not a scenario Andy and I had considered. The only positive was the air-pressure that had now climbed above 1000mb, but during the night it blew hard. Monday 5th March brought a day of torrential rain, making a mockery of the rising barometer.

On the morning of the 6th our luck began to change. The rain had stooped the cloud was lifting and it was eerily still. We slipped anchor and Marcel motored back to the drop-off. He grounded the yacht on the shore, making unloading a simple matter of passing gear down off the bow of the boat. We stood on the beach with our gear and waved our goodbyes as Iorana departed to wait at the anchorage. We had four days before the pick-up.

In a hurried frenzy we set-up base camp in the forest and left for a reconnaissance. The glacier nearby was relatively easy to cross, but the moraine on the far side did not extend above an icefall as we had hoped. We tried to go higher on the glacier and

found ourselves weaving up through huge unstable seracs. It was soon obvious the dangerous terrain continued for some way above. We opted for another approach.

Back at the base camp we dumped our rucksacks and swapped boots for wellies. A gully/waterfall line up through the cliffs behind the camp offered the only viable alternative way above the icefall. Bog in the lower section of forest gave way to steep heavily wooded slopes. Progress was gained by monkeying up branches and roots. The loose boulders in the stream bed above were little better. Then a waterfall barred the way – the walls on either side coated in dripping moss. I took the plunge and nearly fell on the steepest section as a chock-stone dislodged beneath my feet, leaving me hanging from a loose block by one hand. The ground eased, but pushing through the head-high beech as the tree-line approached was a battle. Finally, I burst out into meadows, covered in what I affectionately named cabbage daisies. The sun was now shining, swallows were darting around picking up insects floating above the flowers and the views of the fjord stupendous.

Time was getting on so I hurried to get across the meadows, but the terrain proved awkward. The knee-high daisies poked through wet snow and the slope was steep. Snow slipped from the daisy leaves when trodden on and the stems broke off in the hands as I tried to use them for purchase. Staggering progress was regularly interrupted by barely controlled bum-slides until I reached a shoulder and could look down on the glacier. The view was not encouraging. The icefall continued way up the glacier, with a further band of seracs between the glacier and the face. The approach to the face was simply not safe and the face itself was bare of snow and ice.

Retracing my steps I returned to break the news to Andy. I met him just above the tree-line, looking ragged and dripping wet. He related tales of slips and small falls and pointed out that coming up the gully with heavy rucksacks was not a viable option. His time in the gully had been even worse than mine. I informed him of my discoveries and with the day drawing to a close we set off down.

The descent of the gully was unpleasant, but mercifully quick. Soon we were back in our forest base camp discussing options. Should we try and approach the face and force a way up it, or go for a more modest objective at the head of the fjord? With time pressing, a desire for self-preservation and an urge to make the most of the good weather we opted for the latter.

The night passed clear and cold. On the morning Wednesday 7th March there was frost in the forest and a skimming of ice on the fjord. The barometer remained absurdly high. After a leisurely start, we packed our rucksacks, re-crossed the glacier and headed off directly up the hillside. Stream-bed gave way to forest, cabbage daisies and then rock slabs covered in deep snow. The ground was slow-going and route finding difficult but at least we were making progress. Towards the end of the day we reached a glacier and followed it up to a shoulder below a faint rocky ridge at 1300m. We chopped out a platform and put up the tent.

The ridge above ran up to another glacier split by a band of seracs. A ramp line through the seracs led into a basin capped by further seracs below the summit. The route looked reasonable (see photo and topo) and the weather was holding. We went to sleep confident, anticipating a special day to follow.

In the morning there was some work. We left all our surplus gear in the tent. The glacier had some nasty crevasse bridges to cross, the serac band boomed and fractured vertically with one of my axe placements and there was some very deep snow in places, but the outcome was never in any doubt. With the sun shining and just day-packs on our backs we could enjoy the moment and the ever expanding views. And when we crested the summit ridge of our chosen peak (barometer read 2070m) another higher one to the west presented itself to us. We dropped down a little to a col and climbed it as well (2340m). The views of the Cordillera Darwin, Isla Gordon and Isla Hoste were stupendous throughout the entire day.

We reached the tent just before nightfall and completed the descent to our base camp by lunch-time the following day. I called by radio for the pick-up and as we ferried bags to the shore Iorana slowly advanced up the fjord through the ice. By the evening of Friday 9th March we had already motored some way east back along the Beagle Channel and spent the night at Caletta Ola. A further days motoring/sailing took us to Caletta Mejillones on Isla Navarino and by evening of Sunday 11th March we were able to celebrate our success in Puerto Williams. On the 12th we returned to Ushuaia, completing the expedition.

Simon, Jane, Maisy and Lewis Yates flew back to the UK on Thursday 15th March, arriving on Saturday 17th. Andy stayed on in Ushuaia and made a solo 4th ascent of the highest peak in Argentinean Tierra del Fuego, before flying home on 31st March.

We both felt privileged to spend time in such a fantastic mountain range and were incredibly lucky with the weather conditions during the crucial climbing period (April had been un-seasonally warm and stable).. Our new route up the two peaks, while not being particularly technically difficult was long, serious and committing. We feel it warrants an overall alpine grade of AD – 2340m of ascent. The peaks had no name, so in keeping with our own tradition (Monte Ada - Celia Bull's boat in 2001) we named them after Marcel's yacht - Monte Iorana I & II (2340m & 2070m). Apparently, it means 'good day' in Easter Island Polynesian. It seemed quite apt.

Budget

Expenditure		Income	
Flights	£1600	Mount Everest Foundation	£1150
Food and supplies	£100	British Mountaineering Council	£800
Yacht Charter	£1870	Personal Contributions	£1692
Insurance	£72		
TOTAL		£3642	£3642

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