

Expedition reference 07/11a

NW Face of Cerro Mariposa 2007

Rio Turbio IV, Argentina: Final Report

Andy Cave

Aims: Between the 2nd of February and 3rd of March 2007 this expedition aimed to make the first ascent of the 800 metre North West face of the Cerro Mariposa at the head of the Rio Turbio IV valley, Argentina.

The team is extremely grateful for the financial support received from The Mount Everest Foundation and the British Mountaineering Council.

Andy Cave May 2007

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The British Mountaineering Council

The Mount Everest Foundation

Lyon Equipment; Petzyl, Charlet Moser

Mountain Equipment

Asolo

Lowe Alpine

Berghaus

Outside Store, Hathersage

DMM

Summary

The expedition wanted to make the first ascent of the Mariposa big wall. Unfortunately, at the last minute, a key member of the three man team, world renowned big wall expert Kevin Thaw, was unable to join the expedition and was replaced by Argentinean residing mountaineer James Bracken.

Plans were further thwarted by a serious delay of five days at the village of Turbio, as horses and gauchos were unavailable to transport the equipment and team up to base camp. Frustratingly, the weather remained perfect during this period with temperatures close to 30 degrees centigrade. Later, whilst approaching base camp, the team were attacked by meat-eating bees; Cave suffered a severely swollen hand for four days as a result. Arrival at advanced base camp coincided with the first storms for almost 6 weeks. The team felt inadequately prepared for the Mariposa in its current state; plastered as it now was in snow and ice. A dinghy was up to Advance Base Camp in order to cross the high glacial lake and access the glacier leading to the base of the wall. However, it was felt a more robust craft was necessary to carry heavy equipment and climbers across such a serious lake. Other objectives were reconnoitred but, because of continued poor weather and a lack of time, unfortunately no climbing was achieved.

Introduction and Maps

Climbers seeking good quality granite cliffs with relatively straightforward access would be advised to visit Cochomo in Chile. Those seeking bigger adventures read on.

All the upper Turbio valleys (I, II, III and IV) are reached by travelling up the main Turbio river valley, ideally on horseback as the river is crossed numerous times. During heavy rainfall this river valley is prone to flooding and potentially lethal. Once the main river valley is left, the trek through rain forest begins; machete essential! Once established in the upper Turbio IV Valley it's worth noting that some peaks have glaciated summits and approaches to some routes are exposed to extensive hanging glaciers. This objective danger cannot always be appreciated initially but, it becomes apparent once reconnaissance hikes are made. If available, aerial images of the area would be extremely helpful in assisting safe route choice.

Although gauchos have inhabited the lower reaches of the Turbio river for a few generations, the upper Turbio valleys are uninhabited and feel disproportionately remote - considering they are not that far from the main valley 'as the crow flies'. The first recorded British climbers to the area were Houlding, Thaw et al February 2006 (MEF Report 2005) The Argentinean Benegas brothers reconnoitred the Mariposa a few years ago. They managed to traverse the steep scree on the northern side of the high glacial lake (threatened from above). They led across smooth slabs at one point and fixed a rope. They reached the base of the wall but, decided the Mariposa wasn't for them and retraced their steps. They did, however, establish a fine-looking 16 pitch rock route on the upper right side of the Turbio IV (no summit reached).

However, the person responsible for most of the ascents in the Turbio IV valley (and the Turbio area generally) is Swiss born Pedro Luti. Based in Bariloche, he has visited this wild and beautiful area every year for up to a month since 1999. With a range of partners he has established crucial trails as well as building a fine small shelter at the entrance to the upper Turbio IV valley.

Houlding and Thaw shared their enthusiasm for the place with Cave, highlighting the potential for adventure.

Maps

Circled area on Map 1 shows the place visited in relation to Bariloche, (scale 1:3 800 000) Map 2 shows the village of El Turbio and the Turbio river to the junction by base camp (Rapapour refuge) South of here is Advanced Base camp, the Mariposa itself is due west.

Expedition Members

The Leader Andy Cave, 40 yrs old, is an IFMGA guide with over 20 expeditions to remote areas of the world. He performs at a high standard in all disciplines of climbing, on ice, mountain and rock. Leo Houlding, 25 yrs old, is one of the most renowned rock climbers in the world, climbing new routes on El Capitan and in the UK up to E9. Leo has operated in the greater ranges too, with numerous trips to Patagonia, climbing such routes as the Casarotto Pillar on Fitzroy.

Now living in Bariloche, Argentina, English-American James Bracken, is an experienced all round climber with significant expedition experience including an impressive first ski descent of the Schmid route on Mt St Elias, Yukon.

The Expedition Diary

Friday/Saturday 2-3/2/07

Cave and Houlding travelled by air to Buenos Aires and then on to Bariloche where Bracken greeted them and their mountain of equipment. Equipment included climbing ropes plus 200 metres of fixed rope, a substantial rack of protection and a porta-ledge as we anticipated some difficult aid climbing and few ledges to sleep on.

Sunday/Monday 4-5/2/07

Buying supplies, organising equipment and arranging transportation.

Tuesday 6/2/07

Depart Bariloche in a small truck to El Bolson and then Puelo.

Travel across Lago Puelo in power boat.

Establish camp on edge of Lago Puelo.

Wednesday 7/2/07

Try to find gauchos willing to take us to base camp.

Thursday 8/2/07

Transfer equipment and camp two miles to gaucho Adriano Fernandez's garden.

Friday/Saturday 9-10/2/07 Continued negotiations with gauchos attempting to secure labour and horses. Enjoyed cattle branding festival.

Sunday 11/2/07

Morning; finally leave for base camp with gauchos. Sleep beside Turbio river.

Monday 11/2/07

Afternoon; leave one of the dinghies by the main junction of the upper Turbio River for the descent back to Lago Puelo. Arrive at the Rapapour refuge (Base Camp) after Cave and Bracken stung by bees. Say good bye to gauchos.

Tuesday 12/2/07

Due to lack of remaining time we decide to go for Advanced Base Camp and try the mountain in a single push, using a semi-big wall approach. The weather is perfect. We leave Base Camp with enormous loads. After 12 hours of walking through jungle and two crossing rivers we arrive at the small cabin just as the weather changes. It starts to rain and then snow.

Wednesday 13/2/07

Wait for weather to clear

Thursday 14/2/07

Ascend to lake and test dinghy.

Friday 15/2/07

Ascend to lake – route still plastered in snow and ice

Saturday 16/2/07

Look into robot valley – scan new route potential and approaches. All walls drenched with water.

Sunday 17/2/07

Descend to Rapapour refuge

Monday 18/2/07

Raft out under darkening skies

Tuesday 19/2/07

Continue rafting out to Lago Puelo and then travel back to Bariloche via boat and local bus.

Wednesday 20/2/07

Organise equipment.

Thursday 21/2/07

Storms in Bariloche, local climbing area covered in snow.

Friday 22/2/07

Cave travels back to UK.

23-30/2/07 Saturday until Friday

Houlding treks into Frey to explore new free climbing possibilities. Due to average weather he climbs established classics with local Argentinean climbers.

Administration and logistics

With such a lot of equipment there were inevitable excess baggage charges. However, Lufthansa have a policy of charging a one off payment for sports equipment. See their

website for more details. This is paid and booked in advance. Excess baggage on the internal flights is paid at check-in (Aerolineas).

Excellent food supplies, white gas plus Epi-gaz style fuel were all found easily in Bariloche. A few dinghies were available but expensive - £150 each. We bought one good 2-3 person boat plus a second hand single chamber boat from a tourist. Could be worth bring these from the UK though they are heavy. We hired a private truck for the 2-3 hour journey to El Bolson and then on to Puelo (a friend of Bracken's as a favour). Public buses are regular and very cheap to the tourist towns of El Bolson and Puelo (6-6hrs). From Puelo we had a prearranged powered rib boat take us across the lake (Fernando 02944 15576728 or 02944 15620278). Takes 1 hour. El Bolson is a sizeable tourist town with plenty of cheap hotels, email/internet cafes and banks.

The starting point for the trek to base camp is the Rapapour hut which takes two days to reach with horses. To organise horses phone Adriano Fernandez - Cel.(02944) 1531 1935. Very little English is spoken beyond El Bolson in our experience and being able to speak and understand Spanish was essential in general. Camping at El Turbio is available via Adriano. Sometimes showers are available, plus fresh bread and jams. The journey back down the Turbio Valley was made in 2 dinghies which was adventurous in small water (Bracken is a former raft guide). It must be remembered that this is potentially an extremely dangerous river. If it is raining the gauchos will refuse to travel up the river. If there is a gaucho festival they will also be quite reluctant to leave! They have a lot of livestock to tend to.

They are not desperate for the work and it seems, other than day trips to Cerro Plataforma, is not yet a custom for them to take climbers/trekkers up the Turbio valley. Dry bags are useful as the loads will often get wet on the horses when crossing the rivers and on the raft out. The Rapapour hut has a wood burning stove and places to camp outside.

From here a very tenuous trail follows the river upstream starting on the left bank (travelling downstream) and early on uses a steel cable tyrolean to gain the right bank. This side is then followed until the river junction where the upper turbio IV valley branches to the west; an old rope is in place to cross, however, this may need backing up (UV damage). Small marks in the bark of trees shows the way throughout but, because the rainforest is so dense and changes each season this is not an easy path to follow at all,

even after some familiarity. There is a small refuge in the upper Turbio valley which can sleep 4-6 people and has a small fireplace. Good water source is available.

Miscellaneous

Cash as Argentinean Pesos was withdrawn via cash machines using debit cards. Food and dinghies were bought using credit card.

Turbio can be reached by driving and then walking on a small trail as well as by power boat.

No permits were required to travel through Parque Nacional Puelo.

A good range of footwear is useful; sandals for the river crossings and then mountain boots for the moraine etc in the upper Turbio valley.

Anti-histamine very useful to combat bee stings, or further medication for people who have a history of serious reaction.

The team didn't have a satellite phone but this might be a worthwhile consideration as evacuating an injured person from the upper Turbio valley would be very difficult due to the jungle like terrain.

Conclusion

Although no climbing was achieved, travelling up into the high Turbio IV valley was a tremendous wilderness experience. This is simply one of the most unspoilt mountain landscapes ever visited by any member of the team. There is huge potential for new routes on rock, alpine or mixed terrain. Around a dozen routes already exist according to Pedro Luti. It is essential to be self sufficient in this area. No rescue services seemed available – though this needs investigating fully.

Spanish is extremely useful as is a sense of humour when walking/crawling through the rainforest or rafting down the Turbio river. Being able to ride a horse is an asset too.

Various technical points, listed below, might be born in mind for future explorers.

- Consider using local guides to help carry loads up to high camp.
- Remain flexible with climbing objective and take equipment to cover possibility of classic mountaineering routes as well as big walls.
- Take robust multi-chamber dinghy to cross high glacial lake.
- Move expedition dates earlier into January. Allow plenty of time from El Turbio (6 weeks minimum)

Map references

Argentina, 1:3 800 000, Borch Map, www.borch.com, Isbn 978 3 86609 047 7. Stamford London.

Sendas & Bosques ediciones; El Bolson y Parques Nacionales Puelo y Los Alerces, 1:200.000, (\$9) Has English references. Isbn- 987-20080-8-6. Available in Bariloche.

Informal satellite image-map of Turbio valleys produced by Puelo Forest Services, Adriano Fernandez has a copy for viewing at Turbio.