

The British Darwin Range
Expedition

2008

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. We had looked at this objective previously in February 2007, but the face was bare of climbable ice lines. By returning towards the end of the winter season we hoped to find the face holding more ice.

This extensive range of heavily glaciated mountains is 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 travel to Ushuaia at the beginning of September 2008 and then access the mountains by taking a yacht arranged for the purpose.

Summary of Events

1/9/08 Andy and I met up at Manchester Airport and commenced a series of flights to Ushuaia in Argentinean Tierra del Fuego.

2/9/08 Arrived in the Argentinean capital Buenos Aires, where it was necessary to spend a night due to lack of connecting flights.

3/9/08 Arrived in Ushuaia after the flight from Buenos Aires and met up with Wolf Kloss – the Captain of the yacht Santa Maria Australis – to discuss our provisional arrangements for joining him and a friend Luis Turi from Ushuaia for a trip into the Cordillera Darwin aboard his yacht.

4/9/08 Having agreed to sail on the 5th for Puerto Williams in Chile we all spent the day shopping for food and provisions.

5/9/08 We left Ushuaia at 2pm and motored to Puerto Williams arriving at 8pm.

6/9/08 We left Puerto Williams at midday and arrived at Caleta Ola at 7pm.

7/9/08 With the weather set fine we hurriedly got organised and left the yacht at 11am. And began the approach to Monte Frances South Face. Once below the face we discovered that although heavily rimed in the upper sections it was holding no ice. We opted to make try the un-climbed West Ridge as an alternative and walked up to below it, bivouacing for the night in a crevasse at approximately 1600m.

8/9/08 A long day of mostly mixed climbing in good but cold and windy weather to finishing at an exposed bivouac at approximately 2100m.

9/9/08 During a long and cold night the weather gradually deteriorated and in the morning we took a decision to retreat. After abseiling the ridge we descended to the

yacht, reaching it by early evening. There we discovered that Wolf Kloss and Luis Turi had made the 6th ascent of Monte Frances by the standard SE Ridge on the 8th.

10/9/08 After rain during the night a long day was spent sailing back to Puerto Williams.

11/9/08 Wolf and Luis headed back to Ushuaia with the yacht Santa Maria Australis. Andy and I spent the day making further travel arrangements to Yendegaia and managed to secure a place and drop-off from the Puerto Williams to Punta Arenas ferry departing on the 13th. By accessing the mountains from Yendegaia we planned to attempt one of the un-climbed Rongcali peaks (II, III).

12/9/08 A quiet day in Puerto Williams, followed by an early night ready to catch the ferry the following morning.

13/9/08 An early start for the 6-30 am ferry, which put us down at Yendegaia as agreed. Unfortunately Andy left a rucksack on the ferry, but with a prompt call on the satellite phone we managed to retrieve it.

14/9/08 A rest day at Yendegaia. We arranged for the resident gaucho Jose and his partner Annamie to take us into the mountains the following day.

15/9/08 Before leaving the estancia we managed to arrange a lift back with a Dutch couple on their yacht Pacific Blue to Puerto Williams on the 25th. We then rode to the base of the Stoppani Glacier with two pack-horses carry our gear and were dropped off at a place known locally as Casa Gringo, where we set up base camp.

16/9/08 An enforced rest day at the camp in the rain.

17/9/08 We carried loads up the valley along the side of the Stoppani Glacier and then westwards across the Guanaco Flats and up an ablation valley at the side of the Dartmoor Glacier, making a stash at a set of beaver dams, before returning to the base camp at 7pm.

18/9/08 We left at midday and returned to our stash, picked it up and continued with difficulty up the ablation valley before dropping down onto the Dartmoor Glacier, where we camped on a nice grassy shelf at the side of the glacier and considered our climbing options on the east side of the Roncagli's.

19/9/09 As we approached the mountains up the glacier we decided that Roncagli III offered the safest climbing options. We began climbing a face at 11am that led up onto the East Ridge of the peak. Some difficult mixed climbing led to the ridge, which we reached just before nightfall. A cold night was spent in a bergshrund snow-cave.

20/9/08 Spent the day in the snow-cave in a storm.

21/9/08 The weather improved during the morning and we continued climbing, but a combination of poor snow slopes, little food and a long, complex way to the summit forced a retreat back to our ABC on the Dartmoor Glacier.

22/9/08 Returned to Casa Gringo, arriving at 2-30pm.

23/9/08 Rest day at base camp. Prepared to leave the following day.

24/9/08 Jose arrived with the horses as lunch-time and we returned to the Estancia Yendegaia.

25/9/08 Sailed to Puerto Williams aboard the yacht Pacific Blue.

26/9/08 Sailed to Ushuaia.

27/9/08 A day in Ushuaia preparing to leave.

28/9/08 We flew from Ushuaia to Buenos Aires and spent a night in the city.

29/9/08 We flew from Buenos Aires to Madrid.

30/9/08 Arrived back in Manchester.

The Expedition

Simon Yates and Andy Parkin left the UK on Monday 1st September 2008 and after a long series of flights and an overnight in Buenos Aires arrived in Ushuaia (Argentinean Tierra del Fuego) on Wednesday the 3rd. That evening we had dinner with local mountain guide Luis Turi and his friend Wolf Kloss – captain of the yacht Santa Maria Australis. Having decided to visit the Cordillera Darwin for the first time in winter I had struggled in the previous months to secure a yacht for charter to take us along The Beagle Channel to the mountains (in the winter months few charter operators remain in the area). A few weeks earlier I had learned that Wolf would be able to help us out, but the exact details of our trip to Caleta Ola were uncertain before we left the UK. Over dinner we learned that Wolf and Luis were going to Caleta Ola on Friday 5th of September to attempt to climb Monte Frances (2200m) by the standard route (SE Ridge). We were welcome to accompany them, but they planned to be back in Ushuaia by the following Friday (12th). This meant we were able to access our chosen objective (South Face Monte Frances), but time to climb would be limited and we still needed to make further travel arrangements for the rest of our allotted expedition time.

After a day of shopping for food and supplies in Ushuaia (and borrowing replacement skis, as ours had been mislaid on the flight to BA) on the Thursday we left for Puerto Williams aboard Santa Maria Australis on Friday 5th September at 2pm. In Puerto Williams we spent the evening with Denis Chevally (resident Swiss trekking guide/local historian and incredibly helpful guy), who said he would try and help Andy and I with further travel arrangements. We left Williams at midday on Saturday the 6th with future travel still up in the air, knowing that we would have to return with Wolf and Luis on Santa Maria Australis.

We arrived in Caleta Ola as it was getting dark and with the weather set fair had an early night. Sunday 10th September dawned fine and so we all started hurriedly making arrangements to leave. Wolf and Luis headed off first for Monte Frances SE Ridge. Andy and I left a little later and in a long and tiring day approached the mountain up the valley behind Caleta Ola over generally hard snow, a frozen glacial lake and then the Frances Glacier to below the South Face. Although the top section of the face was holding rime the face was ice-free. We quickly decided to switch objectives the un-climbed west ridge and traversed the Frances Glacier to a col leading to the Italia Glacier. From there we made a rising traverse towards the ridge and spent a night in crevasse snow-hole at approximately 1600m.

On Monday 8th September we climbed a steepening snow/ice slope to reach a col on the West Ridge, which we climbed mostly the on the northern side until its upper section. The weather was clear but cold, although the wind increased through the day. Late in the day Andy led a very difficult overhanging corner of rime and ice to reach and undulating section of ridge below the final tower. By now the wind was blowing hard and it was dangerously cold. All we could do was dig a shelf and bivouac. It was incredibly exposed and although we managed to get some protection from the wind by construction of a small snow-block wall we passed a very cold night.

By the following morning it was obvious that a weather system was moving and we took the decision to retreat. A long arduous day followed, initially abseiling the ridge and the retracing our approach, arriving at the yacht just before dark. There we discovered that Wolf and Luis had made the sixth ascent of Monte Frances on the 8th.

There was rain during the night and on Wednesday 10th September we made a late start for Puerto Williams, arriving at nightfall. Luis and Wolf returned to Ushuaia with the yacht Santa Maria Australis on the 11th while Andy and I moved to a hostel in the town and considered our options. Denis made a telephone call on our behalf to the ferry company in Punta Arenas and they agreed to put us down at Yendegaia during their regular weekly service from Puerto Williams to Punta Arenas. How we would return to Williams and then Ushuaia was less certain. We agreed to focus our climbing attentions on eastern aspects of the Roncagli peaks (only Roncagli I of the three has been climbed) while at Yendegaia, knowing that we would be able to hire horses at the estancia to approach the mountains.

On Friday 12th September we passed a quiet day in Williams and topped up on a few supplies in the local shops. We then packed our bags ready for an early start the following day.

The ferry departed at 6-30 am and we were pleased to discover that the very modest fare also included breakfast and lunch before the drop-off at Yendegaia (called Caleta Ferrari by nautical types). Shortly after waving the ferry off Andy discovered he had left a rucksack aboard (containing passport, money etc). Utilising modern telecommunications I made a satellite phone call to Denis in Puerto Williams. He radioed the police post at 2 de Mayo further up the Bahia Yendegaia. The police called the ferry and the captain very kindly made an unscheduled stop to drop Andy's bag with them. Jose the estancia's resident gaucho returned by horse later that day along with his partner Annamie and a Dutch couple Peter and Paula, whose yacht Pacific Blue was anchored in the bay. It was nice to see him again after a seven year gap. He happily agreed to help us approach the mountains.

We spent Sunday 14th September sorting gear at the estancia and packing to leave the following day. GPS – a local fisherman friend of Jose's – kindly arrived with Andy's rucksack dropped at the police post - 2 de Mayo - that afternoon.

On Monday 15th September we set off on horses and were dropped off at a site we had chosen for our base camp - Casa Gringo – at the snout of the Stoppani Glacier. Jose and Annamie then returned to the estancia having agreed to come and pick us up on the 24th. We set up camp, which promptly flooded with melt water necessitating some tent relocation.

On Tuesday 16th September we were confined to camp by persistent rain, but the weather improved for the following day and we decided to carry a load into the mountains. Leaving at 2pm we followed moraine ridges along the side of the Stoppani Glacier until its junction with the valley leading westwards to the Dartmoor Glacier. After crossing a large flat area (Guanaco Flats) below the moraine ridges at the snout of the glacier we walked up the ridge on the south side of the glacier and then the ablation valley at its side, stashing some gear near some beaver dams before returning to the Casa Gringo at 7pm.

We returned to the stash the following day and continued up the valley, sometimes in the forest and sometimes walking along the moraine ridge. The going was difficult with no continuous path to follow. Eventually we reached a small clearing known as Foxes Glade. Beyond this point the ablation valley blanked out forcing us to descend the moraine onto the glacier. We then followed a faint valley on its southern edge until a grassy platform offered a good spot for an ABC, where we spent the night discussing various climbing options.

The following morning we went out onto the glacier and as we approached the Roncagli's it became increasingly obvious that the most sensible/least dangerous climbing option was some snow slopes and a face on the north side of the East Ridge of Roncagli III. This led up to the ridge proper, which we hoped to follow up to a col between Ada and Roncali III, which would give access to Roncagli III's South Ridge. We made rapid progress up the snow slopes, which were followed by two pitches of difficult mixed climbing and further two of deep sugary snow lying over rock. We wallowed up these to the ridge, where we found a bergshrund that we could enlarge into a snow cave to spend the night in. We spent a cold night in the bergshrund with spindrift blowing in through the entrance.

On Saturday 20th September was spent in the bergshrund snow-cave sheltering from a storm. We kept ourselves busy/warm by enlarging the cave and snow blocking in the entrance. It snowed further during that night.

Sunday 21st September was better in terms of weather and by late morning we began to move up the ridge again. However, the snow conditions on the south side of the ridge were far from good and after I fell through a Rimee above a crevasse I had had enough. The summit was a long way off and complex to reach, our food was low and I felt that to continue would simply invite an epic. We decided to go down, abseiling the face, racing down the slopes below and walking back down the glacier to our ABC.

On Monday 22nd September we returned to our base camp at Casa Gringo walking straight down the lower reaches of the Dartmoor Glacier, avoiding much difficult walking on the moraine ridge/ablation valley above by doing so. We were back in the camp by 2-30pm.

The weather was perfect on the Tuesday, which was spent drying clothes and gear in preparation for leaving. Joes and Annamie arrived at lunch-time on the 24th as arranged and took us back to the estancia, where we passed a very pleasant evening having dinner with them. Peter and Paula kindly offered us a lift back to Puerto Williams and onto Ushuaia aboard their yacht Pacific Blue for the following day, neatly solving our transport short-fall (this turned out to be lucky as the returning ferry we hoped to catch back to Williams would not have been able to pick us up as it was carrying gas and therefore no passengers).

The sail back was uneventful. We arrived in Ushuaia on Friday 26th September after a night in Williams leaving a day free in Ushuaia before commencing our series of flights back to Europe on the 28th. We arrived back in Manchester on Tuesday 30th of September.

As usual we both felt privileged to spend time in such a fantastic mountain wilderness and while not successful I felt we learnt a lot from the experience. The weather and conditions for climbing in the Cordillera Darwin at this time of year seemed more favourable than in the summer. There was more stable high pressure weather than is usual in the summer months and less precipitation. Most noticeably though was how less windy conditions were. On the whole approaching through snow was also easier than the usual summer bog trotting/bush whacking. Sadly, the weather was bad for us at crucial times thwarting our two climbing attempts. However, the mountains are still there and I am sure we will return in the not too distant future.

Budget

Expenditure		Income	
Flights	£2162	Mount Everest Foundation	£1100
Food and supplies	£500	British Mountaineering Council	£1100
Transport – Yachts/ferry/taxis	£500	AC Climbing Fund	£500
Hire of horses	£300	Personal Contributions	£762
TOTAL	£3462		£3462

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