



The British Darwin Range Expedition

2013

Final Report

Introduction

Since my first visit to the Cordillera Darwin in Chilean Tierra del Fuego in 2001 I have been compelled to return to this remote area of pristine mountain wilderness, as it is still in its infancy in terms of both exploration and ascents. Having climbed a number of significant new routes with the artist and alpinist Andy Parkin and made a many repeat ascents of peaks while leading commercial expeditions to the range I have got to know some parts of it well and have the contacts to enable the organization of climbing trips to the region. In 2007 I saw some fine ice climbing lines on the west face of a peak that our rudimentary map dubbed Monte Darwin, which is actually Monte Cresta Blanca -2428m (see photo and map). Andy Parkin was busy at the time I proposed the trip, but another Andy (Cave) who had expressed an interest in going to the Cordillera over many years was not.

A spring date was chosen as it gives good climbing conditions, along with reasonably lengthy days and fitted in with our other commitments. The weather is variable year-round and something of a lottery in this particular region, but we reasoned our stay of nearly three weeks would provide enough time, as the mountain faces are alpine in scale and require no acclimatization with summits only up to 2500m. We booked some international flights to Ushuaia in Argentina and registered our intentions with the Chilean authorities CONAF and DIFROL.

Having agreed by phone and email what technical climbing equipment, stoves etc were required, a simple plan was devised. Andy and Simon would meet at Manchester airport, travel to Ushuaia in Argentinian Tierra del Fuego, purchase the remaining supplies and make their way into the mountains. Our proposed climbing objective can only be accessed from the sea. We needed to be dropped at the head of a remote fjord – Seno Pia – in the heart of the Cordillera Darwin. Simon enlisted the help of his friend and charter boat captain Marcel de Letter to sail into the mountains on board his yacht Iorana.

Summary of Events

The expedition ran from Sunday 8th September 2013 until Friday 27th September.

8/9/13 Andy and Simon met at Manchester airport and flew via Paris and Buenos Aires to Ushuaia at the southern tip of Argentinian Tierra del Fuego.

9/9/13 We arrived in Ushuaia in the evening and went to the yacht club to meet up with Marcel de Letter on his yacht Iorana.

10/9/13 We retrieved some gear stashed in town, shopped for food and supplies, went and did the formalities to leave Argentina and left Ushuaia on the yacht Iorana at 12-30pm. We arrived in Puerto Williams on Navarino Island at 6-30pm and were able to complete Chilean immigration.

11/9/13 In the morning Marcel completed some paperwork (ZARPE) to sail in Chilean waters and we left at 12-30pm to sail back west along the Beagle Channel. We got as far as Puerto Navarino on the south side of the channel opposite Ushuaia before a storm blew up and we were forced to seek shelter in the anchorage Isla Martinez.

12/9/13 The weather remained stormy and we were unable to leave the anchorage.

13/9/13 The wind had dropped overnight and so we headed out into the Beagle Channel, but it soon picked up again, forcing us to seek the shelter of an anchorage. We stopped at Caletta Eugenio on the eastern end of Isla Hoste - a place very familiar to Simon from previous enforced stays. After lunch we went ashore and took a small walk in the forest.

14/9/13 The wind increased overnight and we spent the day at anchor.

15/9/13 It was still windy in the morning but forecast to ease off. At 4-30pm we were eventually able to leave and reached Caletta Olla on the north side of the channel at the eastern end of the Cordillera Darwin at 9-30pm. The weather forecast was good for the following few days and so we planned an early start.

16/9/13 We left Caletta Olla at 7-00am and motored west in clear, calm conditions – the first since arriving in Ushuaia. Andy and I readied ourselves to go climbing and at 2pm we were put ashore at the head of Seno Pia below our climbing objective on the west face of Monte Darwin. Sadly we could not cross the glacier to approach our chosen climbing venue, as it had become too chopped up since Simon's previous crossing in 2007. Our climb was off even before we reached its base. Fortunately, Simon knew the area and alternative climbing objectives. We called Marcel by walkie-talkie and he returned from an anchorage further down the fjord. He arrived at 5pm, but unfortunately we got grounded and could not leave the shore until the tide turned. At midnight we escaped and moved to an anchorage down the fjord for the night.

17/9/13 We decided to attempt an unclimbed line on Roncagli III further east. At 9-30am we left Seno Pia and reached Caletta Olla in the early afternoon, where we prepared to depart for the mountains.

18/9/13 At 10-00am we started our approach to Roncagli, following a valley up to the South Face of Monte Frances to reach a platform on its SW Ridge by early evening. We dug out a platform for the tent in a snowstorm and put up the tent.

19/9/13 We woke to snow and wind, but it gradually cleared and we left the tent at 10-00am. It was a long day as we crossed the Hollandia Glacier and up to a col to the west of Monte Bove, where we descended into the upper reaches of the Roncagli Glacier. We crossed the glacier and climbed up Roncagli III's South Face. Near the top we reached a huge crevasse spitting the entire face. It was full of debris and overhung on its far side. We could find no way across and so retreated. The walk back in poorer visibility was a prolonged affair and we reached the tent at 8-15pm in a snowstorm.

20/9/13 We left camp at 10-15am and quickly descended in another large snowstorm. We reached the yacht at 1-50pm and left for the Estancia Yendegaia further east at 3pm, where we spent a pleasant evening with the residents Jose and Annemie.

21/9/13 A leisurely day at the estancia.

22/9/13 With the forecast bad and no chance of further climbing we left for Puerto Williams.

23/9/13 A leisurely day in Williams.

24/9/13 Williams.

25/9/13 We completed Chilean exit formalities and left for Ushuaia, where we completed entrance formalities for Argentina.

26/9/13 We began the long series of flights from Ushuaia back to the UK.

27/9/13 We arrived back in Manchester.

The Expedition

We left the UK on Sunday 8th September from Manchester and completed a long series of flights, a taxi transfer across Buenos Aires and finally a short taxi journey from the airport in Ushuaia to the yacht club, where we met up with Marcel de Letter on the evening of the 9th. His yacht – Iorana – was to serve as our transport, home and base camp for the duration of the expedition. We made a rapid departure from Ushuaia on the 10th and sailed eastwards along the Beagle Channel to enter Chile at Puerto Williams, where we spent the night. We left Williams on the 11th, but only got as far west as Isla Martinez – an anchorage opposite Ushuaia – when we ran up against a prolonged spell of stormy weather.

The following days were frustrating. We spent two nights stuck in Martinez, then managed to move a little further westwards to Caletta Eugenio where we spent a further two nights before moving to Caletta Olla. Here we were within striking distance of our drop-off point of Seno Pia and that evening received a good weather forecast for the following few days.

On Monday 16th we left early and motored west in clear weather along a still Beagle Channel. As Marcel took care of the yacht Andy and I prepared to go climbing. In the early afternoon we were dropped at the head of Seno Pia on the shore to the south of the East Guilcher Glacier (see map1). To approach our chosen objective – the West Face of Monte Cresta Blanca – we needed to cross this glacier as Andy Parkin and I had done in 2007 when climbing Iorana. Unfortunately, the glacier had altered drastically and we could not find a safe crossing and therefore not approach our objective. Fortunately, we did have a walkie-talkie to call Marcel as he was in a safe anchorage down the fjord. The yacht got stuck where Marcel had beached it for the pick-up and then with comic bad timing a huge chunk of ice calved off the glacier and into the fjord. The resulting tidal wave pushed the boat further ashore and onto its side. We were shipwrecked. There then followed many tense and uncomfortable hours as we waited for the tide to turn. Luckily the yacht re-floated as the high-tide approached and we were able to escape to the anchorage back down the fjord at midnight.

On Tuesday 17th we decided to attempt the south face of the unclimbed peak of Rongcali III(2019m) and so left Seno Pia to return to Caletta Olla from where we could approach the mountain (see map2). Once in Olla we re-organized and set off the following morning. It was a long day of hiking and some easy climbing to reach a camp at approximately 1400m on Monte Frances' SW Ridge.

What we hoped would be our summit day did not start well. We woke to wind and snow and so delayed our departure. However, by mid-morning conditions were improving and so we set off across the Hollandia Glacier, over the Col Aleta de Tiburon and into the upper section of the Roncagli Glacier where we could see our objective. We climbed the south face following the line of least resistance (see photo), but could reach the top due to the strange crevasse previously mentioned. We had little choice but to retreat and re-trace our steps in worsening weather and visibility. It was almost dark when we made it back to the sanctuary of our tent at the camp.

On Friday 20th we descended to Caletta Olla and with bad weather forecast left for the Estancia Yedegaia mid-afternoon. We received no more good forecasts or weather and were unable to climb again during the trip. We passed our remaining time at the estancia, in Williams and with two days of sailing to get back to Ushuaia. We arrived in Ushuaia on Thursday 25th of September and flew home the following day, arriving back in Manchester on Friday 27th.

The expedition had not been successful, but we did get to climb and explore some of the Cordillera Darwin. For me it was the second failure to climb Roncagli III, having attempted it from the east in 2008. The weather was poor for much of the trip, but somewhat warmer than when I had visited the region previously at a similar time. However, we were able to make the most of the short windows of better conditions, as Marcel was downloading forecasts daily using a satellite phone link. We were able to get updates while on the mountain as we had taken walkie-talkies. This is a good system for operating in such a fickle environment.

Budget

Expenditure		Income	
Flights	£2320	MEF grant	£2000
Food & supplies	£600	BMC grant	£800
Fuel for Iorana	£120	Personal contributions	£680
Harbour/mooring fees	£200		
Airport transfers in BA	£80		
Permit application	£70		
Insurance AAC	£90		
TOTAL	£3480	TOTAL	£3480

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Photo1

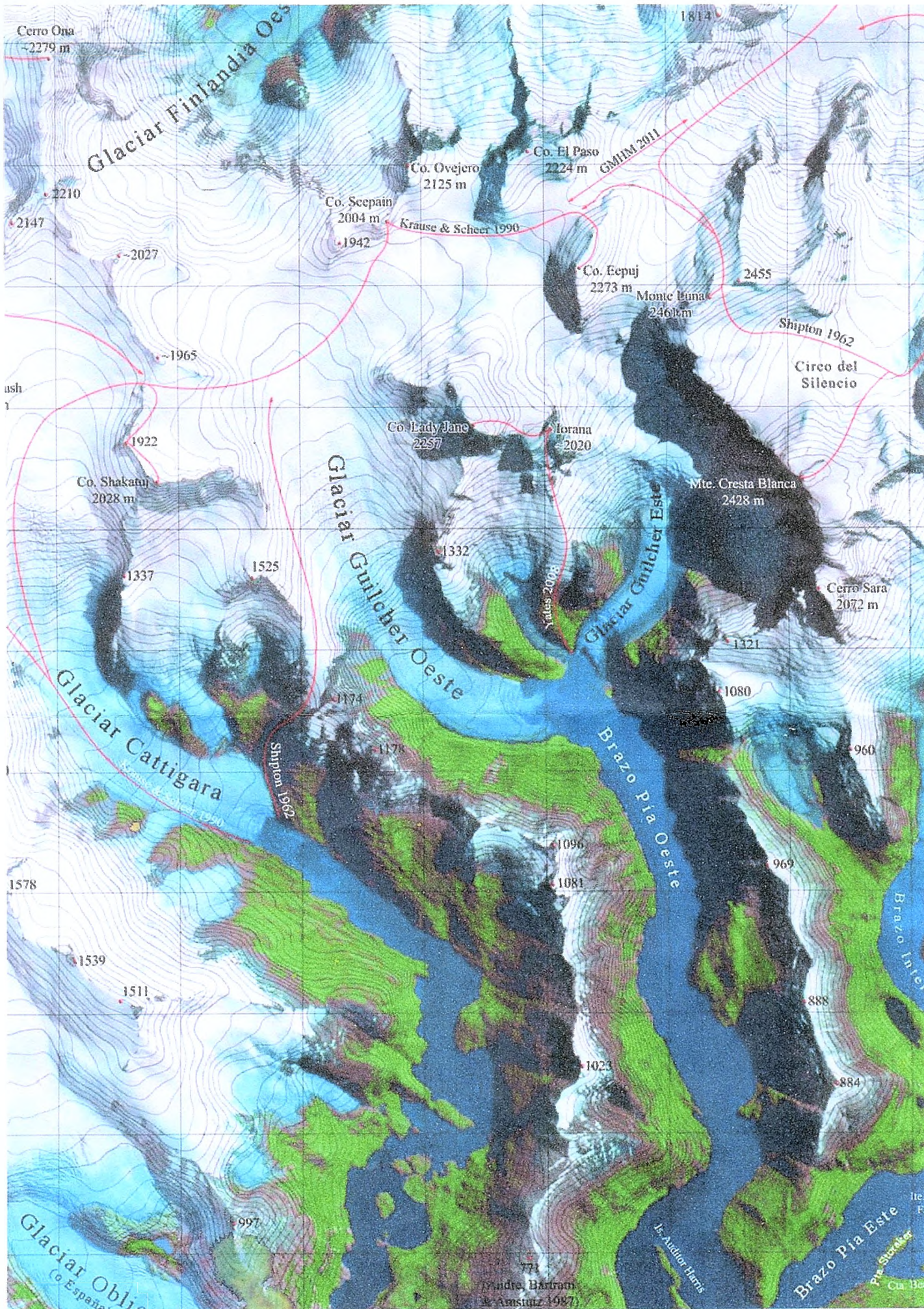




Photo2

