

## Sheffield Patagonia Expedition



(Photo: Matt Burdekin questing up new ground during our first ascent of the Siren on Aguja Bifida Sur.)

A final report by: Tom Ripley

With support from the:  
Mount Everest Foundation  
British Mountaineering Council  
Austria Alpine Club (UK)

## **Introduction and summary.**

On Boxing Day 2016, Matt Burdekin, Polly Harmer and I flew from Manchester to El Calafate via Buenos Aires. After a 5 hours bus journey down dusty roads we eventually arrived in El Chalten, the small town nestled beneath the mountains of Cerro Torre and Fitzroy. Over the next five weeks we would make four trips into the mountains, attempting Fitzroy twice and making ascents of the Comesaña-Fonrouge on Aguja Guillaumet, the Austrian Route on Aguja de l'S and the first ascent of new a line Aguja Bifida Sur. This was probably the third ascent of the mountain.

## **The Climbing**

We arrived on December 27 and with a good, but short, weather window on the horizon. Rather ambitiously we decided to attempt the California Route on Fitzroy. This didn't go to plan. Firstly I forgot my softshell trousers, only realising this when we reached the edge of Laguna De los Tres. I wasn't prepared to climb Fitzroy wearing only fleece tights, so choose to run the 20km round trip to El Chalten, returning early next morning.

The next day we had planned to climb all the way up to Silla, but after our late start we only made it to Paso Superior before it got too hot to continue up the glacier. The next morning we climbed up to the Brecha de los Italianos and then traversed across to the start of the route. This appears complicated in the guidebook but is obvious when you get there. The approach took longer than expected. We arrived pretty late to windier weather than forecast. At this point we should have made the call to try and shorter route like the East Ridge of Aguja de la Silla. However being dumb we decided to press on with our original objective. We also decided to ignore the obvious traverse that both the photo diagrams and topos show and instead attempted to climb the Variante Suiza – a 6b+ variation, climbed by two off route Swiss climbers in 2014. After eight, or so, pitches of difficult climbing – the weather was freezing, and we were in the shade, so we ailed and fringed our way up, in big boots and gloves – strong gusts turned us around. We abseiled down and eventually got back to Paso Superior around midnight.

Back in town we rested for a few days before another window appeared. We headed back to Fitzroy with our eyes set on the 1500m long Afanassieff ridge. The guidebook implies that this route is very committing and would be difficult to escape off. With this in mind and the very cold climbing we had experienced on the California we packed heavy. After a long walk in we found ourselves bivied at the base of the Supercanaleta. The next morning we moved together up classic alpine terrain, until a steep wall was reached. Matt led a difficult pitch about E1, but with a heavy sack on. More straightforward climbing followed and we reached the base of the Central Slabs early in the afternoon.

The central slabs are 10 pitches long, have no ledges and represent the crux of the route. Unfortunately for us they were still wet and had some snow on them, though that was fast melting in the sunshine. Matt led off. The terrain

was tricky so he left his sack behind. Polly and I seconded up dragging Matt's sack behind us. Progress wasn't quick. Matt then led a second pitch on poor rock. At this point, fearing that the entire Central Slabs were made from loose rock, and that we would be unable to retreat, we decided to abseil off. We later found out that the rock on Central Slabs improves with height. Our abseil descent didn't do without mishap and we spent 3 hours pulling down our jammed ropes, using a 5:1 pulley system and all of our combined strength. We managed to get our ropes down shortly before dark and descended down to a good ledge, where we slept.

The next morning we were awoken by other climbers attempting the route. We continued to abseil down, cloud and wind, which weren't on the weather forecast, engulfed us. Eventually we made it down and back to Piedra Negra. The weather was still good. Matt and I were pretty knackered and keen to walk back to town. Polly however was still psyched and managed to persuade us to stay put. The next day we climbed Comesaña-Fonrouge on Aguja Guillaumet, which was a great consolation route with amazing rock and climbing up to about E1.

Back in Chalten we rested for a few days waiting for another weather window. With only a short window we decided to play it safe and climb the Austrian route on Aguja de la S. We walked up past the beautiful and deserted Laguna Sucia and spent the night at the Swiss Bivy – a boulder (roughly the size of the Roadside Boulder in the Llanberis Pass) that had been hollowed out underneath, leaving space for six climbers. The next day we climbed the Austrian Route, which gave super fun climbing up to about Hard VS and then descended back to El Chalten.

Unfortunately, at this point Polly had to expectantly return to the UK. Matt and I set our sights on our main objective, a new route at on Aguja Bifida. We managed to climb our planned route over two days, finding difficulties up to HVS and making the third ascent of the mountain in the process. See Tom's account of the climb below.

After Bifida the weather turned bad for about a week. We relaxed in town. We had one more weather window right at the end of our trip, however by this point Matt and I were both physically and mentally very tired so we enjoyed Chalten's café culture before flying home.

### **The first ascent of the 'The Siren' - by Tom Ripley.**

Thwunk. The rock, remarkably similar in size and shape to a rugby ball smashed into my stomach, knocking the wind out of me. The twenty something kilo pack on my back accentuated this, pushing me into the ground. "I don't care if Cerro bloody Torre is at the end of this valley." I thought, "I am never walking up here again."

\*

It is the middle of January, Matt Burdekin and I are walking along the side of Laguna Torre on our way into the Torre Valley. The ground beneath our feet is hideously loose and as a result progress is unfeasibly slow. We've been in Patagonia for around three weeks now and have managed to climb a couple of the smaller spires and have failed to climb Fitzroy twice.

Many hours later we arrive at the Nunatek, a rock dome sticking out of the Torre Glacier, and our home for the night. Matt, always the homemaker, sets to clearing a ledge and building walls. I collect water, brew up and prepare our freeze dried dinners. Few words are spoken as we both work away, before settling down for the night. Our alarm is set for 4:30.

A couple of hours after dark the wind picks up and it starts to rain gently. I snuggled down, grateful for the waterproof outer on my sleeping bag. Matt's less fortunate, he has just an ordinary sleeping bag and is starting to get wet. He manages to fashion some sort of shelter by wrapping himself in our bothy bag, which seems to do the trick. It still raining when our alarm goes off so we stay in bed. Eventually the sun warms our bodies and starts to dry our kit. At around 8 we begin to stir and start getting ready. By 9 we are slogging up the Torre Glacier. Soon we branch off leftward towards Bifida. The crevasses and the snow bridges are huge. Probably the biggest I have ever tried to navigate through. We tiptoe through them with the sixty metres of rope between us, knowing that if it goes wrong it will go really wrong and wishing we'd gotten our planned early start.

Eventually, around noon, the base of the wall is reached. Our planned line of ascent follows a shallow chimney. The line is so obvious we are unsure as to why it hasn't been previously ascended. Matt leads off apprehensively, expecting difficult climbing but it all goes smoothly. The initial chimney is about Severe. Soon we're swinging leads up the huge slab. There is plenty of loose rock about, but underneath is solid granite. Matt and I, expecting difficult climbing had packed enough supplies for three days on the face and had brought along a huge rack, including all sorts of aid climbing esoterica, and a haul bag. Thankfully this was mostly redundant and the climbing was mostly never harder than VS.

After thirteen pitches of climbing, shortly before nightfall, we joined the existing route, Cogan and found a convenient ledge. Matt busied himself the ledge palatial, while I melted endless snow. The night was clear and still. After a freeze dried dinner we both slept soundly.

We awoke the next morning to more perfect weather. Leaving most of our gear on the ledge we climbed up, down, then up again, on less than ideal rock to join the South Ridge. Here Matt led four tricky pitches, on wet but otherwise

excellent rock that were the cruxes of the climb. These led to the summit of Aguja Bifida Sur, with views stretching across the vast Southern Patagonian Ice Cap.

All too soon we were on our way down again, abseiling back our line of our ascent. After a straightforward descent we arrived back at our advanced camp shortly before dark. Being alone watching night fall with Cerro Torre on the right and Fitzroy on the left, with not a breath of wind, will stay with me for a long time.

**AGUJA BIFIDA**  
South summit  
East face

Cogan

The Siren

**PATAclimb.com**

© rolando garibotti



## **Notes**

### **Getting there**

We flew from Manchester to Buenos Aires with Lufthansa. After changing airports in BA we then flew onto El Calafate with Aerolineas Argentinas. In El Calafate we caught a direct bus to El Chalten with the Las Lenguas Bus Company. Despite there being pretty short gaps between flights, the whole journey went very smoothly and we arrived in Chalten, with all our luggage, the same day as we arrived in Argentina.

### **Luggage**

As usual on these trips we had far more luggage than is allowed by most airlines. On our outbound journey we managed to blag an extra sports bag onto the plane free of charge. We also totally ignored the hand luggage policy and managed to take two full climbing rucksacks each into the cabin with us. We were less lucky on the way back and had to pay Lufthansa £100 to take an extra bag home.

### **Accommodation**

There is a wide variety of accommodation in El Chalten to suit all tastes and budgets. We choose to camp, figuring that it was much cheaper and you'd get more personal space, compared to staying in a hostel. The campsite we stayed at was El Relenchio, which friends had stayed at on my previous visit to Patagonia. It has good facilities including a covered kitchen and living area, but no wifi. There was a good mix of international climbers staying there too, which made it super social. We were also well looked after by Mathias and Max who run the campsite. Those guys are total legends. The other advantage of El Relenchio is you don't pay for the nights you spend in the mountains and they are happy for you to leave your tent pitched and look after your values. We also managed to negotiate a substantial discount for our five week stay.

If camping, rather than taking an expensive mountain tent and letting it get trashed by UV during the course of your trip. I would recommend buying a cheap tent from the likes of Go Outdoors or Decathlon. You will have no problem selling it on, for what you paid for it, at the end of your trip.

### **Living in El Chalten**

Living in El Chalten is great. There is a huge number of restaurants, bars, bakeries and cafes to keep you entertained and well fed while you are resting or waiting for good weather. A particular favourite of mine is the ice cream parlour, Domo Blanco. Eating out isn't particularly cheap, but is little cheaper than eating out in the UK. There are also a number of good supermarkets that stock a good range of food. Prices in the supermarkets are quite, roughly similar than UK, but with lower quality food and much less variety. We brought a load of Mountain House freeze dried meals, as well as gels and Clif Bars, with us from the UK and I would thoroughly recommend these for eating whilst

on the hill. Freeze-dried meals and hill food are not available in El Chalten. We were able to sell our surplus to other climbers and trekkers, before leaving.

## **Weather**

Compared to my previous visit to Patagonia, in November and December 2013, the weather on this trip was excellent. It was much warmer (think British summer but drier) in El Chalten and I wore shorts almost constantly whilst in town. I think we had two days of bad weather in town during our entire five week stay.

While in town, climbers becoming addicted to checking the forecasts, so they can plan and scheme for the next weather window. The kite surfing website windguru is pretty good for simplistic forecasting. As is the American site NOAA, which is more detailed but is slightly more complicated to use. There are full instructions, as well as gold mine of other information, on Rolo Garabotti's Pataclimb site.

A good trick I found was to take a screen grab of both the NOAA and Windguru forecasts on my Iphone. That way I could view the forecasts when not connected to wifi.

## **When to go**

The first half of the season (November to early Jan) is best for ice and mixed routes. The second half (Mid Jan to the end of Feb) is best for alpine rock routes.

## **Cooking and gas**

Screw top canister gas is widely available in El Chalten for around £6 for a medium canister. It is worth testing your gas canisters before buying as the valves on argentine canisters are often faulty and a leak on the hill could end your climb. A MSR reactor stove is a worthwhile investment. They are super efficient and melt lots of snow for the amount of gas they use. While in town, cooking facilities including a gas hob and oven are provided at El Relenchio.

## **Cash**

There are two cash points in town, one in the bus station and one in the only bank nearby. They frequently, though less frequently than when I visited in 2013, run out of money. There is no problem withdrawing pesos with a UK debit card.

## **Gear shops**

There are a number of sparsely stocked gear shops in town, selling a small selection of climbing gear. Thanks to Argentina's very high import duty prices are much higher than the UK or USA. I would recommend taking everything



you need with you and take spares of things, like head torches and belay devices that are easily dropped.

The advantage of scarcity of climbing gear is it is very easy to sell any surplus gear at the end of your trip, especially to Argentine climber. On my next visit I would seriously consider selling all my climbing gear at the end of the trip. It is possible to sell gear in good condition for near it's new cost.

## **Wifi**

Wifi connections are available at many restaurants and hostels throughout town. The connection is extremely slow. I found the fastest Wifi to be at the bakery opposite the blue supermarket. As well as checking the weather, here I was able to use WhatsApp to make calls to family and friends back home.

## **Equipment tips**

### **Bivi**

A lightweight single skin tent is useful for advanced camps at the base of the routes. If you are planning on biving on the route, make sure your gear is as light as possible. The nights aren't cold during Jan and Feb but a sleeping bag is probably a good idea if you want to climb the next day.

### **Clothing**

Patagonia in January was very warm, even in the mountains. I wore similar clothing to what I'd wear on a big route in the Alps in summer. When I previously visited in November it was much, much colder. My advice would be to take a flexible system that can cope with all eventualities.

### **Drinking**

It is worth taking a 30cm length of thin plastic tube, to use as a straw or syphon when on the routes. This can be purchased for the hardware store in El Chalten.

### **Footwear**

I took a pair of Scarpa Phantom Guides, which were far too warm for the conditions we encountered. A lighter pair of boots like Sportiva Trangos would be fair more suitable.. I tried to approach some routes in approach shoes with strap on crampons but ended up with cold wet feet. I will take a waterproof pair next time.

For climbing any stiff, comfy rock boot will do, make sure they aren't too tight as they will be worn all day. I wore a pair of Sportiva TC Pros and found them excellent, especially as they protected my ankles from the rough granite. It is also worth cutting the ends off a pair of old thick socks and using them as ankle warmers.

## **Ropes**

Edelrid generously supplied us with ropes. We used their 9mm single rope called the Swift, which we found to be excellent and pretty resilient to the super rough Granite. We took two pairs of ropes to give us some redundancy if one pair got chopped. It also allowed us to stash a pair in the mountains. If climbing as a pair I would probably take two skinny half ropes, a thinish (9.8mm) single rope that is durable enough for jumaring on rough granite and a full strength tag line.

## **Abseil tat**

All the routes in the Chalten range have rappel descent, so you'll need lots of it. We took 60m of 5mm cord and came home with non of it. I'd probably take 100m if going for six weeks again. We also bailed off a whole load of slings, krabs, wires and pegs.

## **Rack**

A double set of cams to Camalot 3 is essential for most routes. It is probably worth taking a third set in case you have to abseil off/drop some. Take at least 4 sets of wires as you will abseil off plenty descending from routes. A good selection of knifeblades and small angles is pretty handy for getting yourself out of a tight spot.

## **Ice tools.**

Lots of North American climbers were carrying a pair of 45cm Petzl Sumtec Hammers between them. This seemed ideal for most Patagonian rock routes as most of the time you only need a single tool. Plus, having two hammer means that the leader can place pegs and the second can easily remove them. For ice and mixed routes both climbers will needs a pair of tools.

## **Crampons**

We took a pair of technical monopoints for ice and mixed routes and a pair of lightweight 10 points with a flexy bar for approaching rock routes.

## Budget

<b>Expenditure</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Income</b>	<b>Cost</b>
Flights	£3027	BMC	£700
Insurance	£100	Austira Alpine Club (UK)	£800
Hill Food	£355	Mount Everest Foundation	£750
Equipment	£250	Personal Contributions	£3578
Living expenses	£1800		
Transfers	£120		
Taxi Buenos Aires	£70		
Excess Baggage	£106		
<b>Total</b>	<b>£5828</b>		

## Acknowledgements and thanks

Matt, Polly and Tom are indebted to the following people and organisations. Without their help and support the expedition would not have gone ahead.

The Mount Everest Foundation, British Mountaineering Council and Austria Alpine Club

Thanks to Duncan Campbell and Oliver Burrows for the MEF references.

Thanks to Mountain House, Edelrid and Crux for supplying us with first rate equipment and hill food.

Thanks to Dave Burdekin and Nikki Sommers for lifts to and from the airport.