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Fitzroy West face Expedition 1908-9

MEF REF 99/10



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'Outside' in Hathersage, especially Andy Kirkpatrick

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1 Introduction

The aim of the expedition was to make an ascent of Fitzroy's west face which to date has just one route, Czech 1982. The face is vast, complex and faces the prevailing winds. The team aimed to take a limited amount of fixed rope, 200metres, but aimed primarily to climb light and fast.

2 The Team

Andy Cave, 32 yrs., British, UIAGM Mountain Guide.

1st ascents - Birdsong E7 6c, Hawkscliff Yorkshire grit, Un Poco Loco V11, V11, Church Door Buttress Glencoe, 1st Free ascent of Citadel- Shelterstone Cairngorms, North Face Changabang-Gharwal Himalayas, ED+, Also West summit of Shishapangma 8040 Metres, many significant routes in Alps- Cima Grande-Brandler Hasse E5, Cima Ovest-Swiss Italian E6, South face of Marmolada- The Fish E6, Mont Blanc- Divine Providence Ed3, Aguille Dru-American Directissima E5.

Dave Hesleden. 32yrs., British, Difficult Access Consultant.

Many 1st ascents of desperate Scottish mixed routes graded V111, Grande Jorasse-Macintyre Coulour & Croz spur winter, Dru coulour direct, Rock climbs to E7, Mount Robson- Emperor Ridge in Canadian Rockies, Numerous significant first ascents in the Coastal range of Canada.

3 Getting There

We departed from Manchester at noon on the 21st of November 1998, flying via Madrid and Buenos Aires arriving at Rio Gallegos late afternoon on the following day. After an hours wait we boarded a bus to Calafate arriving there at midnight. We checked into Los Dos Pinos hostel (\$ 7 each). The following day we bought all our food for the expedition, excluding bread and eggs, which we took from Chalten. A variety of Goodie bars and isotonic drinks we felt might be worth bringing from the UK, as they are difficult to find here.

Importantly only camping gaz can be found in Calafate and not epigaz. White spirit for MSR stoves must be bought in Calafate, as it is not available in Chalten. We used unleaded petrol from Chalten which is OK but may block the stove more frequently.

From Calafate a 4 hour bus journey leads to Chalten. We stayed in the Rancho Grande (\$10 each) and spent the next day organizing our horses with Gaucho Guerra. Because of adverse weather and many of our respected climbing colleagues in Chalten having done no climbing in almost 2 months we decided to go to the East face of Fitzroy and look there at a number of new routes we had up our sleeves. We left on the 26th of November with three horses to Rio Blanco and set up our base camp.

4 Gurus, Climbing Literature and Maps

There is no substitute for local knowledge in the mountains. We were very fortunate to have in depth discussions about our plans with Andy Parkin, Brian Hall and Rab Carrington. We found the Group de Haute Montagnes Annales, 1993- 97 very informative on existing routes, (in particular 1993). The Mountain Info pages edited by Lindsay Griffin in High magazine were also very useful. We used the Monte Fitzroy, Cerre Torre trekking/ mountaineering map, 1:50 000, by Marcelo Gonzalez and Javier Veiga, (ISBN 1-879568 09 8).

5 Climbing

The table below gives a general idea of our movements on and off the mountain. Essentially we climbed for two and a half days in a month and only because we were on sheltered East faces and incredibly motivated. Nothing can prepare one for the winds in Patagonia!

It took us a while to acclimatize to the headset needed in Patagonia. One needs to be laid back during prolonged periods of bad weather and then spring into action immediately if things improve. In order to take advantage of any good spells sometimes less than 20 hours long one needs to very close to the climbing. It really is a tranquilizer – amphetamine environment, with nothing in-between. As someone aptly put it ‘ Patagonia is all or nothing.’

Fitzroy 3408m

Our first days climbing was on the Franco-Argentinean route on the East face of Fitzroy. With light sacks and no bivvy gear we left our snow hole on the Paso superior, (1965 metres), at 5 am, stunning weather. There was not a single person in sight as many had descended expecting the bad weather to continue. After trailbreaking through mid to full calf depth of fresh snow we reached the bergschrund. Dave led steeply through the overhanging rimaye onto easier slopes. After 5 or so fast middle grade ice pitches we arrived at the Breche Italianos. We then headed towards the wall proper over a granite ridge and then an ice arete easy but exposed with a dead body down to the left. The first wall pitch above the ice arete was completely choked with ice and took Dave over an hour to lead. I jumared up the A2 pitch and could see the rest of the route which looked verglassed. With winds picking up and our slow speed we decided to retreat.

Guillamet 2579m

On the 6th of December Dave spent 3 hours climbing the first pitch of a new line on the East face of Guillamet to the left of the route Terre des Hommes, Parkin & Koch, 93. The ice was detached and towards the end of the pitch Dave used aid on the left wall before returning into the ice groove. As the sun hit the route water began running everywhere and a 50 metre climbing rope was fixed. (We had a total of three 60-metre ropes and no fixed rope due to restrictions of weight on the plane).

After much up and down activity and plenty of bad weather we left to complete the route on Guillamet on the 14th of December. We were convinced that the route would be sensational if a little improbable. It followed a series of very steep grooves now less filled with ice than our first attempt due to things warming

up. We left the snow cave at 4 am. Breaking trail through deep snow to the base. The first pitch had almost disappeared and we were thankful for our rope that allowed us to reach the base of the ice on pitch 2. The climb was very sustained and seemed to get bolder the higher we went, although better ice might make it more amenable. By late afternoon we had reached the upper groove system after some tremendous climbing which we had found committing and engaging. Dave spent three hours leading an icy off-width and eventually took a hanging stance in etriers on the right wall at around 8.30 PM. We had been plagued first with spindrift then the sun melting the route and now a return to spindrift. Overhead clouds were racing from the west. Frustratingly the following pitch stopped the team due to spindrift, darkness and an unprotectable wide verglassed wide crack. With only a couple of hard pitches left we descended with a bitter taste in our mouths. During the descent the spindrift became worrying as we tried to arrange belays in the dark. One person crouched over the belay trying to keep snow out of the frame.. We arrived safely on the glacier and then in worsening weather headed back to our snow cave on the Paso superior arriving at 3 am.

We waited for a couple of days at the Paso Superior and then descended with all our equipment to Rio Blanco still in poor weather.

The route we attempted gave us 450metres of sustained mixed climbing, ED Sup, VI, A2. (All free except a 5 metre section of aid on the first pitch and one pendulum on pitch five.)

6 Conclusion

Although we failed on our main objective we almost completed a sensational hard and serious new route on Guillamet and in Patagonia it appears that one has to be grateful for achieving this amount. Only two and a half days climbing but what stunning climbing! Incidentally we both thought the sunrises were the best we had ever seen.

Note: During the same period there were two very strong teams in the same area. One team succeeded on Fitzroy having a very cold night out without bivvy gear. Another team did only 15 feet of climbing during the same period. It was too wintry to pure rock routes and we were glad that we had moved to an east face that offered new route potential. New lines on the east face of Fitzroy were ready in our minds but suitable rockclimbing conditions did not arise. Perhaps another time.

7 Fitzroy West Face Expedition 1998 table of activity and inactivity

1	21/11/98	Depart Manchester
2	22/11/98	Arrive Buenos Aries. Fly to Rio Gallegos. Bus to El Calafate.
3	23/11/98	Shopping for food and gaz. Take bus to El Chalten
4	24/11/98	Arrange horses with Gaucho Guerra
5	25/11/98	7a sports route, good bouldering. meet with friends Trym and Miles also Laurence and Bruno. They tell us about appalling weather and lack of activity generally, especially on West faces.
6	26/11/98	Walk to Rio Blanco 2hrs. Set up camp here.
7	27/11/98	Snows down low overnight. Check out Fitzroy with binoculars from Poincenot camp.
8	28/11/98	3am wake up, too windy. 6.am go to lake in mental winds both picked up and thrown. Eventually make it beyond lake, small rock lands on Cave's head, retreat in stupid winds.
9	29/11/98	Relax
10	30/11/98	Walk to moraine of Glacier Piedras Blancas, very good viewpoint of Mermoz and Guillaumet.
11	1/12/98	2am windy, 4am windy, 10am windy ah well go to Paso Superior 1965metres, takes 3hrs. Very warm and wet, stay in snowhole.
12	2/12/98	Descend in 1.5 hrs. to Rio Blanco. Walk to laguna Capri
13	3/12/98	4am pressure high climb up to Paso superior, strong winds and rain storm.
14	4/12/98	Stunning day. 5 am leave for Franco-Argentine. Deadbody below breche des los Italianos. Takes 1hr to lead the 1st A2 pitch due to ice in cracks, winds pick up and retreat to Paso superior.
15	5/12/98	Rest and dry gear at Paso sup.
16	6/12/98	Dave leads pitch 1 of new route on Guillaumet takes 3 hrs. We fix 50metres of rope. Looks hard but awesome. Thin ice up very steep granite grooves. Descend to Rio B. descend to Chalten
17	7/12/98	Bad weather
18	8/12/98	Up to Paso Superior Good weather
19	9/12/98	Wait in snow cave, really bad weather
20	10/12/98	Descend to Rio B lots of snow on a hard base, and then El Chalten, Party.
21	11/12/98	Back to rio Blanco.
22	12/12/98	Ascend to snow hole

23	13/12/98	Poor weather, very windy, many teams descend we stay
24	14/12/98	4am leave for guillamet, 23 hours continuous effort, 450 metres of new route but no summit.
25	15/12/98	Rest in snow cave
26	16/12/98	Wait Paso superior, eventually descend to Rio Blanco
27	17/12/98	Organise rubbish and equipment.
28	18/12/98	Go to El Calafate
29	19/12/98	Rio Gallegos to Buenos Aries.
30	20/12/98	Arrive Manchester.

8 Expedition accounts

Income		Expenditure	
Mount Everest Foundation	£ 1, 100	Air travel	£ 1 650
		Other travel	£ 200
British Mountaineering Council	£ 1, 000	Accomodation	>
		Food	>
		Kitchen	>
		Miscellaneous	£ 600
Personal contributions	£ 550	Equipment	£ 200
Total	£ 2 650	Total	£ 2 650

9 Note on costs

Bus to from - Rio gallegos to Calafate costs \$ 35 return 9 (3 times per day, takes 4-5 hrs)

- Calafate to Chalten costs \$ 50 return (normally one per day, takes 4 hrs)

Horses - \$ 25 each and Gaucho- \$ 35 per trip from Calafate to Rio Blanco = \$ 110 each way.

10 Map:

