



REPORT

'THE ALTER OF THE GODS'

The British Patagonian Winter Expedition 1999

Supported by the Mount Everest Foundation &
British Mountaineering Council Expedition Grants

Sponsored by Montane, Wild Country,
Patagonia, PHD and Fuji

Introduction

The grandly named Alter of the Gods expedition was primarily a lightweight exploration of the areas climbing potential outside the traditional Patagonian climbing season (late October through to early March).

The expedition team consisted of Paul Ramsden (Leader) Andy Kirkpatrick, Jim Hall and Nick Lewis. Considering the relative short amount of time spent in the mountains, combined with storms and the difficult logistics involved in accessing routes in winter the expedition was a great success.

The Team made the first winter ascent of Aig Poincenot (3036m) via the Whillans route and Aig Guillaumet (2593m) via the Amy Couloir, plus the 3rd Winter ascent of Fitzroy's Supercouloir, though we did not summit. We also explored the approach to Cerro Torre, Egger and Standart, and attempted the Grassi Couloir on El Mocho.

Aims and Background

The expedition took place from 20/6/99 to 20/7/99. Our primary aim was to be the first British team to explore the winter climbing potential of the Cerro Torre and Fitzroy areas. We aimed to be very flexible in our objectives, which is really the only way to get anything done in Patagonia.

The idea of climbing in the Patagonian winter originated as a suggestion from Paul's Uncle Peter who visited the area in the 1960s. This combined with the team's experience of climbing in other cold areas, lead to a belief that the normally erratic weather may be more stable in winter.

Most people who were asked for advice seemed very pessimistic about our chances. Derek Walker and Rolo Garabotti (both of whom have lived in Patagonia) where the first climbers to give us the thumbs up for such a hair brained scheme. The best source for information was the American Alpine Journal, which had information on previous winter expeditions. There was also an excellent article in Wild magazine.

Together these sources built up to a hazy picture of what to expect. We knew it could be very cold, with most of the previous winter ascents involving frost bite, and the weather may still be quite stormy. The overall impression though, was that the weather was more stable, offering a window in which to make any attempt.

Preliminary Details

We treated the expedition like a trip to the European Alps, simply bought our tickets, packed our bags and went. We were unsure about winter transport having heard that no buses ran in the winter, but we budgeted for the use of taxis to get to El Chalten.

One mistake we made was not taking enough information on previous routes in the area. Although there is a great deal of information at the ranger station we'd recommend any team photocopying as much information on routes including diagrams, photos etc. as possible. Good sources are Mountain INFO, AAJ and back issues of Mountain, High and Climbing.

Food

Although all our food was bought in Rio Gallegos in one of the many excellent super markets there, we'd recommend buying your food in Calafate. We didn't know that Calafate was as developed as it was, with everything you need available there all year around. Prices were good and the choice was excellent. Two large duffels are highly recommended for transporting food to Chalten.

The only food we brought with us was a large supply of High 5 energy bars (nothing like that was available in any of the shops). Tea bags (Yorkshire Tea is good and strong), dehydrated beef granules (probably illegal) and some of Nick Lewis' mums special chocolate fudge cake (an incredible number of calories per slice).

Food can be bought in one of the three general stores in Chalten (basic and expensive) and fresh bread it best bought

from the old woman near the Fitzroy trailhead. In Chalten we stayed in the Patagonian Albergue where we ate our own food plus, every now and again excellent (and fairly cheap) meals made by Ruben and Ester the proprietors.

Mountain food comprised of a basic diet of porridge (usually burnt), biscuits, chocolate, pasta and dehydrated meat thickened with polenta. The diet was basic and close to 'starvation' levels with all members losing a considerable amount of weight. The food was kept to a minimum due to the difficulty in accessing the base camps, with heavy rucksacks over steep snowy terrain.

Route food was even more minimalistic, comprising of 'Tang' (orange juice powder) and a couple of High 5 bars. On Fitzroy we also took a few packets of noodles and some soup. It's worth steering clear of the cheap Argentinean cupa soups, as you could get more powder out of a mouse with dandruff!

We took two MSR Dragon Fly stoves converted into hanging stove arrangements by a friend of Andy's. They proved excellent with no blockages. Gas is available (Bluet), but stick to some kind of hybrid petrol stove, especially in winter. White gas (solventa) is not readily available in Chalten and should be bought in El Calafate before you arrive (though if you get desperate try asking one of the Rangers to help you out!). You need to bring your own fuel bottles to transport the fuel safely!

Gear

All team members used Pile/Pertex clothing (Montane and Patagonia Inferno), leaving heavy shells in the UK. This reduced weight considerably and all members yet again thought this system is the best yet designed for hard mountain use. Some may say that you won't survive a big storm with such light clothing on, well we did, and they're wrong!

Each member also used a big synthetic belay parka which was a real lifesaver being used through out the trip, going on as soon as you stopped.

All members used insulated Yeti type gaiters and roomy expedition plastics. Leave your leather boots and rock slippers at home.

All members took ski mountaineering skis, with bindings that fitted plastic boots. Skis are a necessity in accessing areas deep in the mountains in poor snow conditions and make traveling over frozen lakes less exciting. Snowshoes would be the second choice and may be more useful if they will have to be carried to the snow line over greater distances.

A standard alpine rack was taken, along with two 60m 8.5mm ropes per team (one spare rope was also taken). We made the mistake of taking one set of Friends (.5 to 5) between both teams. Rockcentrics were very useful. In future I'd recommend taking the type of rack you'd use on your average Cairngorm grade VI including a 3.5 & 4 Friend as well as a bigger unit (Friend 5 or Camelot 4). A set of handled jumars would also be useful for the more technical route. A large rack is necessary for both climbing and retreating.

For a two or three man team a second 6mm or 7mm rope may be a good idea if you plan on retreating from anything totally committing. A good supply of ab tat is highly recommended. Expect to lose a lot of gear, there are no walk offs in Patagonia!

Sleeping bags (PHD) had 1000 grams of 800+ fill power down and proved excellent. A lighter weight bag could be used on a fast ascent or used in conjunction with a bivvy tent. A very warm sleeping bag is recommended for biving in snow holes, forest huts etc.

The team used a lightweight bivvy tent (home made). The chances of survival in a winter storm while biving in the open would be quite slim and we will never attempt another big mountain route without some form of group shelter.

Account of the trip

All four members met, and finished packing, at Heathrow airport on the 20th June. With our gear way over the

baggage limit (our allocation was 20kg each but the total weighed in at approximately 250kg) 'lady luck' smiled on us and broke the scales at the check in. Changing at Madrid we arrived in Buenos Aires early on the morning off the 21st. The Rio Gallegos plane departs from another airport, and there is a free shuttle bus to take you there.

The flight down the coast gave us a good view of the desolate nature of the Pampas, and on the horizon Fitzroy and the ice cap.

Coming into land we saw huge areas of white, which we took for salt, but turned out to be ice! We were glad we'd worn our plastics for this half of the journey when we disembarked into the frigid air of Rio Gallegos.

After a brief panic when we left all the climbing hardware on the plane, we went into town to buy food and fuel, happily finding that two buses a day go to Calafate (tickets can be bought at the airport, which is where the bus stops). Rio Gallegos isn't a pretty town, looking a little like a Sunday morning Grimsby, but there are some good eating places (much appreciated on our return) and a basic outdoor shop.

From Rio Gallegos we got the late bus, arriving in Calafate in the early hours. We slept in the bus station, before leaving early in the morning for Chalten. The bus was pretty full so we had to buy an extra ticket for our gear, and a bit of persuasion that the van wouldn't explode under the weight was needed.

After a very bumpy journey across an amazingly desolate frozen landscape we finally arrived in the drab town of El Chalten. It was becoming apparent that we wouldn't be camping in such a hostile place and luckily we met Ruben, the owner of the Albergue Patagonia travelers hostel. He had decided to stay open for the winter for the first time, which was very lucky for us.

We spent the rest of the day locating fuel and settling down in the splendid hostel. We also discovered another team had departed the day before we arrived intending to try the Ferrari route on Cerro

Torre. Now that we had to share the whole mountain range with another team, We did not want to share base camp with another team or worse still end up on the same route. We switch our initial objective to Fitzroy, then see how the other team got on.

The following day we set out early for El Mocho, planning on a quick trip into the mountains to see what conditions were like. Within an hour we were skinning through the forest, and it immediately became apparent how important skis would be in order to get around.

Camp Bridwell was empty except for mice and we stopped to brew up and check out this legendary camping spot. The masochistic may want to stay here in winter and it would be possible to get horses up here if need be.

We then crossed the Laguna Torre and started to make our way up the very crevassed glacier. The usual approach routes were now hidden up on steep sided snow covered screes, which we chose to avoid because of avalanche danger. Darkness found us still battling away through deep snow and nasty glacier terrain so we bivied beneath a boulder for the night. The weather had been misty and unsettled with light snowfall.

The following morning we made it onto the easier flatter upper glacier and made good time to El Mocho, where we scoped the route and dug a snow hole. The weather was windy and cold.

The following day we set out early and climbed up to the start of the route (Grassi Couloir). The snow was deep and progress was very slow. On arriving at the first pitch we found the ice was very thin and in places very poor. The first pitch took two attempts and required a great deal of insecure offwidth, caving and footless ice technique!

The next couple of pitches were better with good steep ice that lead to a bare upper pitch where the usual icefall was missing. Not wanting to aid the last two pitches we rappelled the route and got

back to our snow hole before dark. The weather was cold and clear.

The following day we returned to Chalten arriving back after nightfall, glad to return to the warmth and hospitality of the hostel.

After a rest day, in which we found out from the Ranger that the last dry winter had stripped a lot of the ice from routes, we set off on the long journey round to the Northwest face of Fitzroy.

We managed to get a lift up the 12 mile track to Rio Blanco and from there we made slow progress under the extremely heavy sacks. We arrived at Piedro Del Fraile mid afternoon where we made camp and made a reconnaissance of the approach up to the Paso Del Cuadrado. There seemed no set way up the steep hillside and we were forced to bushwhack a path up steep vegetated snow covered ground until we broke through into the rocky upper slopes of the hill, then returned to the valley for the night.

The following day we started out early and began to hellish climb up the hillside through bushes covered in deep soft snow. The upper basins weren't as bad, but under such heavy loads we were always fighting for ground. The map was very vague where the pass was and we ended up a little higher than we needed to be, but of all three options get you were you want to go.

A steep (avalanche prone in poor snow conditions) slope lead down to the glacier, where we placed our tent under the North face.

We rested the following day and tracked into the base of the route. The Couloir looked very bare and we were unsure that it would go. All we could do was go and have a look.

Setting off at 2am on the 1st July. We found deep unconsolidated powder in the initial section of the couloir. As height was gained this changed to powder covered rock slabs before eventually thin ice was reached after 300m. At this point the couloir narrows considerably and the route is fairly obvious. There then followed pitch

after pitch of thin ice culminating in a 50m corner line with ice one foot wide and one inch deep.

At half height the gully opens and gradually peters out. We then climbed several steep rock pitches in order to reach the obvious chimney line above. This was quite hard with difficult route finding.

We became established in the bottom of the chimney around dusk (5.30pm!). There being no obvious bivi we decided to push on. What followed were many pitches of extremely hard and uncompromising climbing before the first half reasonable ledge was reached at 2am. At the top of the chimney there is a small snowfield and the ledge is up to the right and is protected from stonefall, which was not a problem while we were on the route.

In the morning it was clear that the wind had increased during the night and several strange clouds were visible in the distance. Ever optimistic however, we decided to press on. After several more pitches in the continuation of the couloir we made a long traverse rightwards in to the center of the large basin shaped wall that falls down from the ridge above. From the basin we climbed straight up and were treated to many pitches of excellent mixed climbing with ice smears, snow filled cracks and nasty offwidths all adding to the fun.

We broke out on to the ridge proper about mid afternoon. The ridge is followed for several pitches before you make a long traverse left on the west side of the ridge to avoid the first pinnacle. Beneath the so-called second pinnacle we found a reasonable ledge and decided to stop for the night. The weather by this time had deteriorated considerably but we hoped it would blow itself out over night as many of the previous storms had.

Unfortunately it did not and things gradually deteriorated during the night. Several times our bivi tent was actually picked up of the ground with all four of us in it! (in Chalten the Ranger Station recorded winds up to 120mph and that's in

the valley). Dawn eventually arrived with no improvement in the weather but we decided to stay where we were as we still had plenty of food and fuel and still felt roughly in control of the situation. Unfortunately around mid day the roof blew out of our bivi tent and sitting it out no longer became an option.

What followed was a rather grim 16 hour descent back down the couloir. One of the other routes may have been a safer choice but better the devil you know than the one you don't. I can say however that the Supercouloir in a storm in winter is not a good place to be.

We eventually emerged out of the spindrift maelstrom much relieved in the early hours of the morning. With thoughts on tea and biscuits we descended to the tent only to find it had gone! We had left the tent well secured but now all that remained was the snow stakes anchoring down a few tatty guy lines. Aware that things could get quite serious we dug down and built a shelter by pitching the bivi tent upside down into the side of a snowdrift. Once inside the situation looked a lot better. Unfortunately the tent contained our passport, credit cards and cash as well as all our non-route camping equipment. We spent the rest of the night crammed in the tent making brews and getting thoroughly soaked as the temperature on the glacier seemed to be hovering around zero which was abnormally warm.

Dawn brought no relief in the weather and our situation with little food or fuel, no tent and saturated sleeping bags left us with no option but to make for Chalten in one day. The route back was obviously now avalanche prone but there was no choice. Fortunately the rucksacks were now considerably lighter though they did not feel it.

The 30 mile walk back to Chalten via the Paso Del Cuadrado can only be described as exhausting and the feeling of relief as we dropped out of the snow line down into the rain soaked leafless forest is not one that I will forget for a long time.

Back in Chalten we fed and rested for a day before beginning the bureaucratic

nightmare of reporting lost passports to the police/gendarmerie/immigration. We had to travel all the way back to Rio Gallegos in order to get a special travel permit to go to Buenos Aires to pick up our new passports. All the hassle filled up a week but we did get back to Chalten just as the big storm finished so in reality we lost no climbing time at all which we thought was very impressive.

Now distinctly lacking in gear and running short of time we decided to opt for something with a shorter walk and the possibility of good snow hole accommodation. We decided to head on to the Paso Superior and check out Guillaumet, Mermoz and Poincenot.

The walk through the woods with a sprinkling of fresh snow was marvelous and we spent an excellent night in one of the improvised huts at Fitzroy base camp. Unfortunately the heat from our stoves woke up the mice. From there it was a steep flog to the col with plenty of hidden crevasses on the final slopes.

We dug a snow hole at the col, which made an excellent base for our last week in the mountains. What is more the weather appeared to have settled down so we were hopeful of ticking a few routes. The next day still tired from the approach we opted for a short route and made the first winter ascent of the Aig. Guillaumet. This was done via the excellent Amy Couloir and North Ridge. The weather was excellent and the climbing on good granite was very enjoyable, though the gloves did stay on.

The next day was spent resting, improving the snow hole and making some tracks into the foot of the Aig Poincenot as we planned to make the first winter ascent of this peak hopefully by the Whillans route.

We left the hole early in the morning and followed our tracks, which had been well worth the effort. The first half of the route followed the obvious ramp line and was fairly straightforward if unprotected and very exposed. The first pitch over the bergschrund is particularly exiting as you traverse from flatish glacier to a 2000ft drop in only one rope length! We had

timed things so that we would arrive at the top of the ramp as dawn arrived so that we would have maximum daylight for the difficulties above.

The transition from snow to mixed also involved a considerable increase in difficulty, with Jim leading a particularly fine and hard pitch to reach the shoulder on the south west ridge. From the shoulder things looked steep and intimidating and we were unsure of the feasibility of our proposed alpine dash. In the end though we found that a bit of strategic traversing allowed use to link a series of grooves and walls at a pleasantly acceptable grade. Gradually the blank granite walls and overhangs were passed and we found ourselves just below the summit.

Like all good routes there was a sting in the tail to remind you just where you are. In this case it was an overhanging offwidth crack that circumed to a Friend 5 and a bit of thrutching. The crack lead to the summit ridge and then followed a bizarre sequence of chimneys and squeezes to reach the knife edge summit proper. Warm sunshine and still air greeted the first to the summit, which was a pleasant relief from the icy south face. By the time all four were on the summit the wind had got up and the temperature had started to drop.

After a team summit shot we headed back down our route of ascent as the light started to fade. In the dark we became disorientated and eventually headed of down the 4000ft vertical west face. We only realized our mistake after a few rope lengths in the wrong direction. Having pulled our ropes through we were faced with climbing back up a series of blank and overhanging walls! The thought of an enforced bivouac without sleeping bags was not really an option. Fortunately a long traverse to the north lead us into a steep chimney line, which eventually lead back onto the proper route.

We then made a long series of abs as the weather deteriorated and the temperature dropped before arriving back at the bergschrund at about 3am. An hours walk got us back to our snowhole that was still

there! We then had a good brew session in our warm pits, unfortunately the food had run out by then.

The next day we descended to Chalten well content with our first trip to Patagonia. It had been very productive and we considered it a great success despite the considerable setbacks.

In conclusion we would say that the winter offers longer periods of good weather but with the huge drawbacks of little daylight, very cold temperatures and relatively little ice build up. Winter may well be the key to getting up some routes but not them all.

Environmental Practice

We adhered to the BMC Environmental Guidelines for Expeditions entirely throughout the trip.

All the domestic (i.e. non-human) waste produced during the course of trip was removed to El Chalten where it was passed into the local waste disposal system. We reduced the amount of potential waste we took into the mountains with us by previously removing as much food packaging as was practical. We did consider separating the waste to sort that which came from goods bought in Argentina from those in the UK. We could then have brought home the packaging from those goods brought from the UK. Pragmatically however, the amount of packaging produced from the foodstuffs we brought from the UK consisted of such a relatively small amount that we felt it unnecessary to do this; especially since many products sold in one country are packaged in or distributed from another.

The only stuff we left behind were 60m of climbing tape and various pegs, nuts and slings on the rap descents off Aig Poincenot, Guillemet and Fitzroy. This is an unavoidable practice and it is paradoxical that even the greenest-minded alpinist will have to leave some trace of their passage in a long, rap descent.

Acknowledgements

Like any trip which receives quite a lot in the form of financial, material and moral

support, we are indebted to many people for their kind assistance and encouragement.

Thanks to Bill Ruthven and the panel of the Mount Everest Foundation, Andy Macnae and the panel of the British Mountaineering Council for the awards we received. Every year, long hours are put in by these people so that climbers can reap the financial benefits and go on expeditions.

The compilers of this report and the members of the expedition agree that any or all of this report may be copied for the purposes of private research.

We are all extremely grateful to Chris Roffe at Montane, Pete Hutchinson at PHD, Ritchie Patterson at Wild Country, Pipa Curtis at Patagonia, Terra Nova and Jonathan Topps at Fuji for their generous sponsorship with equipment. It all worked brilliantly and we hope that the photos were worth it.

Finally thanks must go to Pauls uncle, Peter Hanson for sewing the seeds many years ago. Luckily three other people also thought it was a good plan.

Budget

Costs:

Flights to Argentina	£2400
Road transport	£500
Food	£400
Equipment	£400
Insurance	£800 (annual)
Miscellaneous	<u>£100</u>
	£4600

Income:

MEF Grant	£900
BMC Grant	£2300
Personal Contributions	<u>£1400</u>
	£4600

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