Alpinist 0

A SEASON IN PATAGONIA

Contents

The greatest climber in the world is the one having the most fun.

Alex Lowe

With special thanks to Rolando Garibotti and Beth Wald for their help with this issue.

Alpinist Magazine **Issue 0**

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Disclaimer: Don't do it. Look at the pictures between these covers, read the stories. Look in Leo's eyes. Don't be a fool. This shit kills people, takes friends, steals parents, seduces children. Maybe you won't die climbing, but you might. We suggest golf.

[Cover] **Pain! Leo Houlding moments after shattering his right talus on the east face of Cerro Torre.** Kevin Thaw/Leo Houlding collection

[Left] **A storm begins to clear over the ice mushrooms and granite spires of the Cerro Torre group. Left to right: Cerro Torre, Torre Egger, and Cerro Standhardt, Argentine Patagonia.** Beth Wald

[Back cover] **Tim O'Neill after the descent from Fitz Roy.** Nathan Martin

Editor's Note

We believe in sinker jams high off the deck, a bomber nut, the crescent moon, your partner's whoop, sand-washing the fry pan, road trips, one-swing sticks, remembering to breathe, alpine starts (more for the alpenglow than the early hour), espresso in the desert, the plungestep, pb&j on tortillas, lenticular cloudcaps, rest days, the focus of a runout, a cold beer at the end of it all. If you believe in these things too, join us.

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Cesare Maestri: curriculum vitae

1951: Detassis-Giordani Route (5.5, 820m), Croz dell'Altissimo, solo ascent, and first descent (solo) of Paganella.

1952: Campanile Comicci Route (5.8 A1, 350m), Salame del Sassolungo, first solo ascent. Solleder Route (5.8, 1200m), Civetta, first solo ascent.

1953: Soldà-Conforto Route (5.9 A2, 650m), Marmolada, first solo ascent. Guides' Route (5.8, 850m), Crozzon di Brenta, first solo ascent.

1954: Solo traverse of Ambiez-Tuckett (sixteen summits in eighteen hours).

1955: Southwest Ridge (5.6, 650m [from the Carrel Hut]), Matterhorn, solo winter ascent. Oppio Route (5.9 A1, 800m), Croz dell'Altissimo, first solo ascent.

1956: Guides' Route (5.8, 850m), Crozzon di Brenta, first descent (solo). Solleder Route (5.8, 700m), Sass Maor, first winter solo ascent. Micheluzzi Route (5.8, 500m), Piz Ciavazes, first solo ascent.

1958: Detassis-Dibona Route (5.8, 850m), Croz dell'Altissimo, first descent (solo).

1959: East Face to North Ridge (grade given at time of ascent as "ice up to 80°," 1374m), Cerro Torre, first ascent (disputed), Argentine Patagonia, with Tony Egger (Egger perished on the descent, killed by an avalanche).

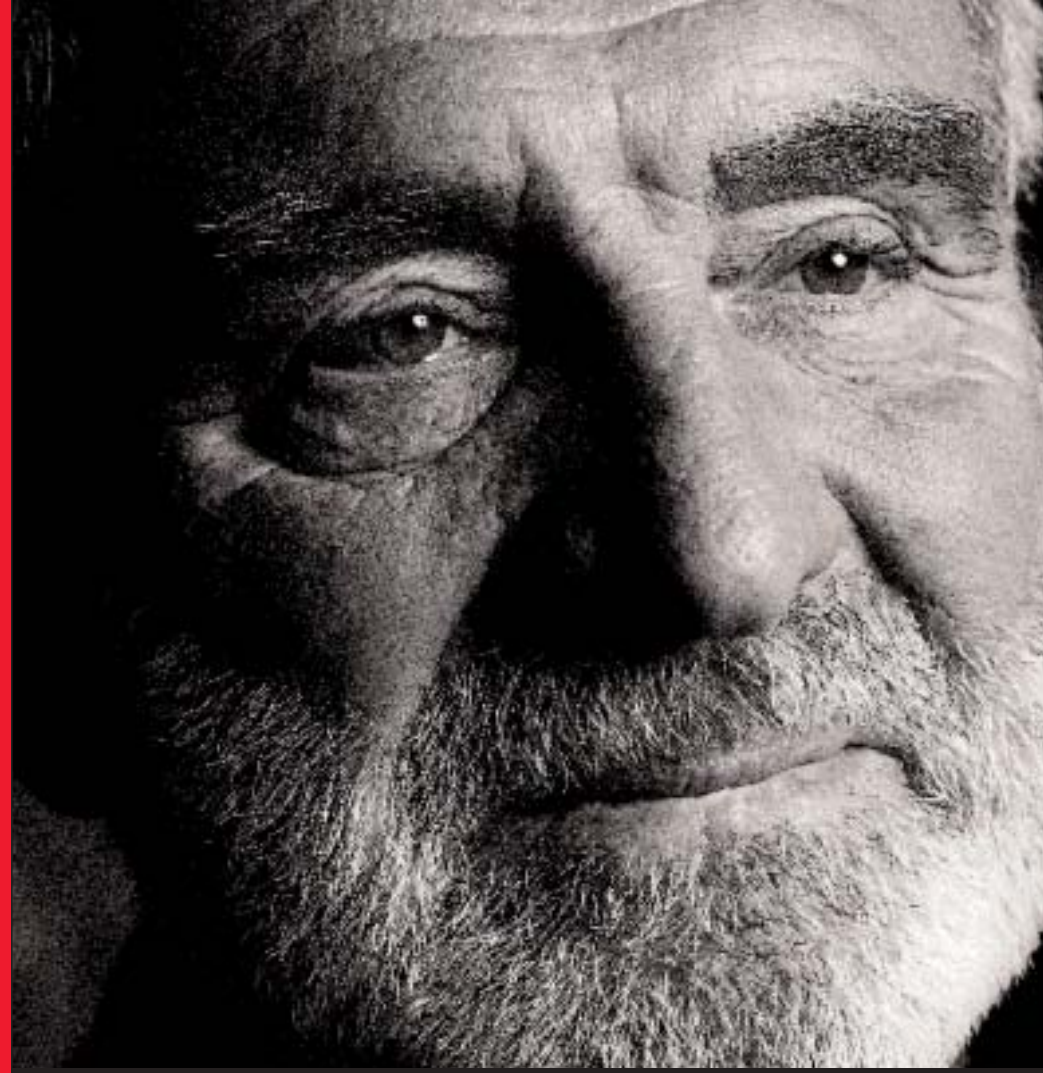
1960: Direttissima Route (A2, 350m), Red Wall, Roda di Vael, first ascent, with C. Baldessarri, and first descent (solo).

1961: Buhl Route (5.10a/b A1, 350m), Roda di Vael, first solo ascent, and solo descent of Direttissima Route.

1963: Kolibris Route (5.10a/b A2, 550m), Cima Grande, with C. Baldessari.

1970: Southeast Ridge (a.k.a. Compressor Route, VI 5.10b A2 70°, 900m; first complete ascent, Brewer-Bridwell, 1979), Cerro Torre, Argentine Patagonia.

Photo: Giulio Malfer. We are grateful to Mr. Malfer for his help with this section, and to Luca Maspes, Alberto Peruffo (www.intraisass.it), Samuele Scolet, and Arturo Castagna for their assistance with Cesare Maestri's c.v.



Cesare Maestri (b. November 2, 1929, Trento, Italy)

Cesare Maestri, "the Spider of the Dolomites," was the first person to establish solo climbs of the sixth grade (UIAA—roughly equivalent to YDS 5.10); he also was adept at solo down climbing at similar levels of difficulty. In Italy, he occupies a rarified position in the pantheon of elite Italian alpinists. He will forever be remembered the world over, however, for his association with a mountain far from his home. His claim of the first ascent of Cerro Torre, with the brilliant ice specialist Tony Egger, in 1959 (via a route that has yet to be repeated), created an international polemic that he "answered" with a return to the mountain in 1970. In that year, on two separate trips (a winter attempt in May and a summer attempt the following December), Maestri climbed the Southeast Ridge of Cerro Torre (the so-called "Compressor Route") to the end of the technical difficulties on rock, some 60 meters below the mushroom summit. He ignored the final ice slopes and mushroom that mark the true summit, dismissing the mushroom with the comment, "It's just a lump of ice, not really part of the mountain; it will blow away one of these days."

Maestri owns the climbing shop La Botega di Cesare Maestri in Madonna di Campiglio, in the Brenta Dolomites, where he lives with his wife. He is currently training for a November 2002 climb of the Tibetan 8000-meter peak Cho Oyu, "to spread a message of peace to all people."

Photo: Galen Rowell

Tequila Sunrise

Andy Cave

If I try to pinpoint the fatal moment that catapulted us all into that chaotic misery right at the beginning of the expedition, I am in no doubt that it was when the tall gentleman turned on his artificial foam machine in the Abracadabra Nightclub in Puerto Natales. Until that point we had been enjoying ourselves, but in a restrained manner, congratulating each other on a good day's work, which included buying all the necessary food and equipment and organizing transport to Paine National Park the following morning.

Another factor that might be taken into consideration is the ridiculous amount of tequila that the barman allowed Leo Houlding to purchase immediately prior to the foam machine being switched on. Downing huge gulps of the clear, viscous liquid had the effect of turning normally placid, reserved members of the expedition into raving lunatics. Dave Hesleden started the proceedings by fighting his way through the crowd and thrusting his head deep into the spewing foam cannon. Meanwhile, Simon Nadin, chest-deep in foam and surrounded by local admirers, took center stage on the dance floor.

By 6:45 a.m., the fun of the drink and the foam had worn off—which was just as well, as our bus to the park was due to arrive at seven.

During our approach to base camp in the Bader Valley that morning, we lacked our usual mountaineering acumen. Half the team walked up the right bank of the raging Bader River while the other half walked up the left. After moving uphill for almost two hours, we were able to wave to each other from the edges of the 1,000-foot gorge that now separated us. Finally, later that evening, we regrouped at our intended base-camp site, and, after sighing a brief sigh of relief, realized we had lost Leo.

After supper, he had still not arrived. Fearing the worst, we mounted a search. Phase One involved Dave descending 2,000 feet to the hotel directly below to check for Leo in the bar. One hour later, I sat in the dark on the edge of the gorge and began counting the flashes beamed up from below. Three flashes meant all was well; six meant that Leo wasn't there. After the third flash, time stood still. I recalled the voice of Leo's father at Manchester Airport.

"Make sure you look after him, won't you? I don't know why, but I've been worried about him going on this Patagonia trip."

My heart suddenly sank as the light below continued flashing without pause. Six.

The team now packed rucksacks and set off into the night. At the hotel, Dave Hesleden was nowhere to be seen.

[Above] **It's all fun and games until someone loses a retina.** David Gonzalez
[Facing page] **Dazed and confused. Ross Purdy and Neil Harvey trying to find base camp the morning after.** Andy Cave

By now the weather had turned nasty, with high winds and driving, horizontal rain. I woke the owner of the hotel by banging on the door and asked if he had seen a twenty-year-old blond Englishman named Leo Houlding.

"No. Lo siento," he said, standing in his Y-fronts and shaking his head. He opened the door, letting us into the unlit restaurant area of the hotel.

Outside, the wind increased, a sudden gust tugging at the roof. We wondered where the hell Dave had disappeared to. Perhaps he had embarked on a solo rescue bid. The owner gave us coffee and doughnuts. If we failed to find Leo by the morning, he could request a helicopter.

We decided to stagger the search. Neil Harvey and Ross Purdy headed out into the hideous weather first. Simon and I set off at around 4 a.m. at first light with two hotel cooks. The Chilean men had dressed up for the occasion, wearing black berets and dapper red-and-white silk sashes around their torsos.

After fifteen minutes of uphill walking, Jorge, one of the Chileans, began vomiting violently. He was forced to descend. His companion gestured that Jorge smoked too many cigarettes.

We carried on. After scouring the mountainside for three hours, we regrouped on a windswept vantage point on the left side of the gorge.

Our Chilean friend nudged me. Pointing to the opposite side of the gorge, he asked if we knew what the yellow item rolling down the mountainside was. At first I thought he had spotted a body, but, with a mixture of relief and then horror, I realized that it was our big base camp tent.

The wind pushed it farther and farther toward the edge of the gorge. On the very lip, the tent caught on a small bush and hung there, tantalizingly.

"This is surreal," muttered Simon. "I don't think I have been on such a strange trip before."

At midday, totally shattered, we regrouped at the hotel to find Leo enjoying a sandwich and coffee. He had got separated and decided to descend. Dave had descended and found Leo. Dave, exhausted like the rest of us, had mistakenly sent six flashes up to us instead of three and then gone to bed. The manager of the hotel had lent Leo a sleeping bag and taken his passport as a form of security, yet somehow managed to convince us that he had never seen such a man.

Who knows? The Herculean trial of sleep deprivation would come in useful if we ever made it to the base of the Patagonian rock towers we had come to climb. ∎

Ross Purdy and Leo Houlding celebrating their arrival in Bader Valley Base Camp. Andy Cave

Flying raven, burning sun. Potter's partners on the summit of Fitz Roy after Supercanaleta. Dean Potter

THE CALL

Dean S. Potter

A single raven calls from the trees at the base of Astroman in Yosemite Valley. I chalk my hands and put on my climbing shoes, then climb in the shade of the late afternoon while the raven silently drifts nearby on warm currents of air. I am not alone. On the last pitch, an exfoliating granite face, I struggle to keep my head together, until I am soothed by the sight of the lone bird disappearing over the top of Washington Column.

I have always related to ravens. They appear in my dreams at night and find me during the day. I notice them as signs, finding significance in the direction they fly and the tone and number of their calls. I often involuntarily answer with my own raspy "kahhhs."

Before setting off solo to Patagonia this year, I spent December in Utah, luxuriating in the warmth and dryness of desert winter and hanging out with my best friend Brad. On the Tombstone, a beautiful sandstone formation, we sat on a high ledge, watching the ravens soar. The birds cawed out as we talked.

On the ledge, Brad pointed out that there are no ravens in Patagonia. Disturbing, because for me the black bird is a symbol of protection. I was already sketched about the starkness of soloing in those windy peaks. Brad came up with the idea of painting a raven on my helmet.

The next morning we sat at our favorite coffee shop, sipping dark crème off the top of perfectly made americanos. Sydney, the barrista, not only makes great coffee but also is an artist. But when Brad asked Syd about painting my helmet, she gave us a strange look. I was pretty sure she thought we were geeks. On cup number two or three, I asked her again, and this time we were floored by her answer.

"It's really strange you want me to paint a raven," she said, pausing for quite some time. "I was out behind the shop a few weeks ago and found a dead raven, freshly killed. Its body was still warm, and it seemed like it had been fried on the electrical wires."

Our jaws dropped. I wondered if Sydney had ever seen my business card—with my drawing of an electrified raven—but I knew that there was no way she had.

"It's perfectly preserved," Syd went on. "I didn't know what to do with it so I wrapped it in plastic and kept it in my freezer."

Over-caffeinated and amazed, we started giggling out of control, chanting in unison, "You must paint the raven! Show us the dead raven!" Luckily, Syd seemed to understand.

Later, I went to her house to drop off the helmet and see the bird. Its feathers were softer than I had imagined. It looked fragile with its wings folded over its chest.

The next few weeks were hectic. Although I dreamt about the frozen bird, I didn't see Sydney again until I stopped by her house as I headed out of town for the airport. She handed me my orange helmet, and now a raven was flying into the burning sun.

We talked about the bird she had found and decided she should have a ceremony for it, returning it to the earth. We both felt strangely relieved. I headed south.

I arrived in Patagonia, and the weather was breaking. Within a week I sent my prime objective, free-soloing the Supercanaleta on Fitz Roy. Everything went perfectly and I fired the route in six and a half hours. My helmet only got a few scratches, so I went back for more.

This time a full Patagonian storm started raging, and I lay below Fitz Roy again, huddled in a tiny cave. Deafening wind showered me with snow and ice. Wedged with all of my gear inside my bivy sac, I struggled to get free before my bladder burst.

I covered my equipment with rocks and hurried to the other side of the boulder, barely aligning my zippers in time. With newfound relaxation, I realized that here it was calm while the wind pummeled my nearby bivy site. I shook my head: I had been torturing myself for the past eighteen hours, twenty feet from a comfortable bivouac.

"Nothing's going right," I thought. The day before, I had nearly been offed by rockfall, and then barely self-arrested by catching a jagged rock as I slid near the top of the approach gully on Sitting Man Ridge.

"I shouldn't be here!" I called into the wind. Somehow it occurred to me that I should be soloing Cerro Torre instead. I needed a sign—as if the weather deteriorating around me weren't sign enough.

Still, I kept thinking that I should just calm my thoughts and focus on Fitz Roy. I was probably just scared, probably just trying to talk myself out of this climb. The weather would clear.

Suddenly, my concentration was broken. As I turned to look at my gear, the helmet took flight. It spiraled up past me in slow motion, a black raven and a setting sun. It flew off toward Cerro Torre and disappeared. I jumped up, screaming, "HELMET!!" With no time to put on my Gore-tex, or even my boots, I raced out onto the glacier in hopeless pursuit. In my one-piece fleece suit, socks skidding over ice, I felt like a spastic kid in pajamas-with-feet. The wind pushed me farther out toward a crevasse field.

Having soloed one route on Fitz Roy and another on Cerro Torre, Dean Potter contemplates his slackline injury. Simon Nadin

Surrounded by gaps that fell into emptiness in the ice, I came to my senses. I realized the helmet was gone. It had flawlessly served its duty. I finally understood that it was time to go. I crawled uphill against the wind, barely able to fight my way back to my clothing.

With all my gear crammed into a light-and-fast pack, the thin straps cut into my shoulders mercilessly. It was going to be a long retreat. I left Fitz Roy and headed down. For the rest of the day and most of the night I struggled through endless melted-out crevasses, climbed thousands of feet up over Paso Cuadrado, then descended 5,000 more toward Piedre del Fraile. The wind knocked me down countless times as I followed a stream downhill. It blew the icy water up, showering me with stinging sheets. I tried not to sink into depression, endlessly walking.

I completely circumnavigated the Fitz Roy massif and returned to Campo De Agostini. Nearly forty-eight hours after I had left, I was safely back, but I had been through one of my most trying times. I passed out.

My friend José shook me awake the next afternoon. Barely coherent, I told him my story and asked if he knew someone with an extra helmet. José laughed and ran off to his tent. Still in a daze, I saw him coming toward me with a funky yellow Euro helmet. It had a small black raven printed on the front. I smiled, knowing.

Things fell into place perfectly over the next two days. Though exhausted from my mission around Fitz Roy, I managed to get into position below Cerro Torre. I fired the Compressor Route from the glacier, in eleven hours, alone. In the intuitive flow, I free-soloed the first integral ascent of Californian Roulette, on Fitz Roy's 7,000-foot west face, a week later. While rappelling, I was struck by rock fall and barely made it down. As usual, I needed a strong sign to go home.

Now, back in the desert, I try to regenerate my lost energy. In my dreams I'm flying, black wings spread. I listen to the world around me, fully aware, open to the call. ∎

From the Hip

Bean Bowers

The lack of wind in the trees and the clear skies at 1 a.m. made shaking off the three hours of sleep easy. In the dilapidated hut, we slammed the last sips of grainy coffee and shoved the day's supplies into our packs.

We knew we were breaking all the rules. We had two days to climb on our week-long foray from Punta Arenas. There would be no month-long wait or seemingly endless attempts prior to success. Bumpy bus rides, the wind-scoured border, violent weather and unclimbable conditions: traveling and climbing in Patagonia in a week seemed about as likely as shooting a flying object. From the hip. From a running horse.

Kris's headlamp lit the shanty's carvings as we ducked under the plastic sheeting of the makeshift door. Could the weather get any better? How long would it last? The question hung on the full moon as it set over Fitz Roy's north pillar.

Peaceful forest morphed into scree, scree became glacier as our meditative footsteps and breaths levitated us closer to the base of Aguja Poincenot. A week earlier we had been quelling the angst and anxieties of five international marathoners at the South Pole. The participants of "The South Pole Marathon," clad in their shiny new Gore-tex and spiffy trail runners, were frayed by bad weather and logistical delays. They were ready to go home. We were ready to go climbing.

The crisp air and firm snow bolstered our caffeine buzz, and we made good time to the melted-out snow caves from which most people climb routes. With one day to climb and an anemic rack, the Bonington-Whillans Route was the most likely candidate for success: we knew we could go light.

We moved steadily over the glacial terrain, never stopping, just following the vapor of our breath in the cool alpine air. Fresh sun turned the granite orange, warming our alpine microclimate as we moved in unison over the 400-meter ice ramp that led to the spire's southeast shoulder. Calves burned, but the pain was offset by the knowledge of what we were getting away with.

The sun rose simultaneously with our ascent, beaming us up. The 70 meters of mixed ground at the top of the ice ramp was the day's crux; with my picks placed precariously in an inch of old ice and my crampons on granite edges beneath an awkward bulge, it seemed particularly thin.

We pulled up over the bulge of ice-glazed cracks, then traded crampons and ice screws for rock shoes and a few stoppers and cams. Jamming and edging through the granite jungle, we moved fluidly over the wind-sculpted stone, the rime-ice mushrooms on the Torre group to our left constant reminders of the Patagonian fury we were slipping past.

At 11 a.m. my fingers moved from the last shady finger lock to the sunny warmth of the summit ridge. We were on top. The immense ice cap to the west looked soft and benign as it hid the next day's weather system.

A single day of alpine climbing—one day in Patagonia—and only Fitz Roy and Cerro Torre were above us.

Kris took a seat next to me on the summit and scanned the horizon.

"Feels like we're getting away with something here," he smiled.

"Yep," I said. "Kind of like having sex in public."

We dragged our tired bodies into town the next day in time for a celebratory dinner and the mandatory two boxes of good wine. At 3 a.m. we caught the bus south to Punta Arenas. As much as we would have loved to have stayed, we knew we had caught the best of the party. Besides, we had to use the bus ride to plan next year's six-day trip to Patagonia. ∎

Bean Bowers on the ice ramp to the Bonington-Whillans Route, Aguja Poincenot. Kristoffer Erickson

Dominos

Ermanno Salvaterra

We talked about the east face of Cerro Torre for the first time in 1985, when we passed beneath it on the Torre Glacier. My friend Andrea Sarchi was the first to pronounce it "*the* east face!" The day was incredibly beautiful, and as a result the wall looked fascinating and didn't scare us at all, but we were there to try the first winter ascent of the Compressor Route. Thus, we said we would have to talk about it another time.

Nothing came of our attempt on the Compressor Route, and perhaps the days we spent on the wall that winter threw a wet blanket on our enthusiasm. Even Andrea no longer talked about the east face.

The next year, Andrea proposed that we try the south face of Cerro Torre, but I wanted to go to the Paine group. And so it was. He made the first attempt on the south face, and I, with Maurizio Giarolli and Elio Orlandi, went to the Torres del Paine.

The years went by and my objectives were elsewhere. On the east face, however, I spent many days of my life in an attempt to repeat the 1959 Egger-Maestri first-ascent route. During one of these attempts a huge stonefall grazed me, leaving me safe and sound in body but not in mind. A few meters more to the left and I wouldn't be here now, telling my stories.

With time, the desire returned, and, since I am rather hot-headed, the sort of person who tends not to hesitate too much when he wants something, I started to talk again about the east face, and that's when I turned to Andrea. Things didn't go right for that trip: one of our friends fractured his arm just before our departure and we had to postpone the idea for another year.

A small speed bump on the way to the men's room. Ermanno Salvaterra

October 2001. There were four of us: Mauro Giovanazzi, Walter Gobbi, Paolo Calza, and me. My three partners had been on top of Cerro Torre together some years before.

We arrived in El Chalten at the tail end of a short period of nice weather. Then came the usual ball-breaking carries to the base of the face. We began to climb. One day you climb in good weather and you feel as if you're at home. The next, you climb in bad weather, and you really dream of home, but you grit your teeth because in Patagonia, as the Argentines say, you have to have a *cabeza dura*—a hard head. In those moments you seek the strength you sense lacking in your partner; and sometimes you ask yourself what you are still doing here, after nineteen times in such a place.

Finally we were on the wall, with two portaledges, a bunch of hardware, food for twenty days, and a lot of bad weather. But in Patagonia there is bad weather and then there is bad weather. In such weather in the Alps you would never go climbing, but in Patagonia you try to do something, even if you climb only a few meters or a single pitch, because if you go down you have to climb up all over again. And then there is the weather that won't let you move, that makes you stay in the portaledge, forcing you to share those two damned square meters with your partner, always hoping that the gust of wind that just violently pummelled the ledge is the last.

We had been closed up inside for two days. The ledge was no longer battered by the wind, but everything, inside and out, was iced up. There was a lack of oxygen, which we realized only when we went to light the stove and found that we could only do so after we cracked the zipper.

Toward midday I absolutely had to go to the bathroom. I started the long process of getting dressed. Once I was ready I opened the door to clip in to the belay loop with a sling. But it was impossible because the belay loop was a block of ice. I clipped in instead to a step in the aiders which, because it had been buffetted by the wind, was clean.

I exited and went down a few steps until I was beneath the ledge. While hanging from my harness, I lit a cigarette with difficulty and did what I had come out to do. Then I clipped the carabiner onto the lowest step of the aiders and….

"Ermannoooooo!" I heard a frightened voice calling. I was upside down, attached to the step of the aider with my sling. I had fainted!

I climbed back up again and when I was at the height of the door, where you usually give yourself a shake to clean yourself of snow before entering, I called out, almost in a death rattle, to Walter. My vision was blurry, my head was spinning, I felt like I was going to vomit, the faces of people I love flashed before my eyes, and then Walter pulled me forcibly inside.

He took care of me as if I were a child, warming my hands. I was quickly better. After, he reopened the fly and stuck his head out, barely able to breathe. I knelt to help him, smelled gas, and immediately threw away the two guilty gas cartridges.

Walter still felt sick; only after a quarter of an hour did his breathing return, barely, to normal. I laid his head over my legs and together we rejoiced in being alive after such a close call in such a remote, far-away place.

We were very high on the route; 800 meters lay below, the hardest part was over, now only one hundred amusing meters awaited us—if the weather were nice.

The body was still good, but the cabeza wavered. We felt like domino pieces standing in precarious balance. Thus, after eight days on the wall, after eighty-five hours closed up in our portaledges, one domino lost its equilibrium, and all the other pieces fell to the ground. ∎

Mauro Giovanazzi, Walter Gobbi, and Paolo Calza building character on the east face of Cerro Torre. Ermanno Salvaterra

Downtime

You come down from ascents—or, more often, from attempts—on the Patagonian spires to be greeted by the stunted beech trees of the forest. It seems quiet here, after the winds up high. The trees remind you of krummholz, wizened, but vibrant and lush after the stark architecture above. Expectant faces peer out from ramshackle huts of tarps and logs and rocks and mud, trying to see how you got on. Drinks are offered, camaraderie, the sympathy of your peers. Everyone smells of sweat, and smoke. People bake bread in stoves made from five-gallon barrels. Between the branches, you snatch glimpses of the clouds flying past the peaks. Always there is the roaring of the wind through the beech trees like a train bearing down. The weeks and months go by, and you wait, fogged in, drenching wet, always trying to dry things out. You brew up drinks in the morning, scratch down words in the journal, read thousand-page novels on consecutive afternoons. Here, your conversations are not punctuated by glances at the watch. You boulder. Whittle. Day hike. Do pullups. Life, stripped to its elements, comes unplugged. The forest is sanctuary, a safe place to get one's head together, to regroup and repsyche for the next effort. In time, life in the forest takes on a meaning of its own.

Over the next few pages, we offer a visual tribute to the downtime, to the restorative powers of doing nothing at all. The climbing gets the glory, but the lull between climbs offers a disconnect from the digital world. In our opinion, that deserves some credit, too.

Captions: Kristen Rost

When the malt whiskey runs out, the expedition is over. - Andy Cave

Argentine haute cuisine.
- Thomas Ulrich

The Team Cerro Torre
Winter Harpy Expedition.
- Thomas Ulrich

The usual suspects. Beating out the rhythm in Camps Madson.
- Nathan Martin

Michael Pennings, with a sign of things to come.
- Jeff Hollenbaugh

Dean Potter taking the smaller stone.
- Steph Davis

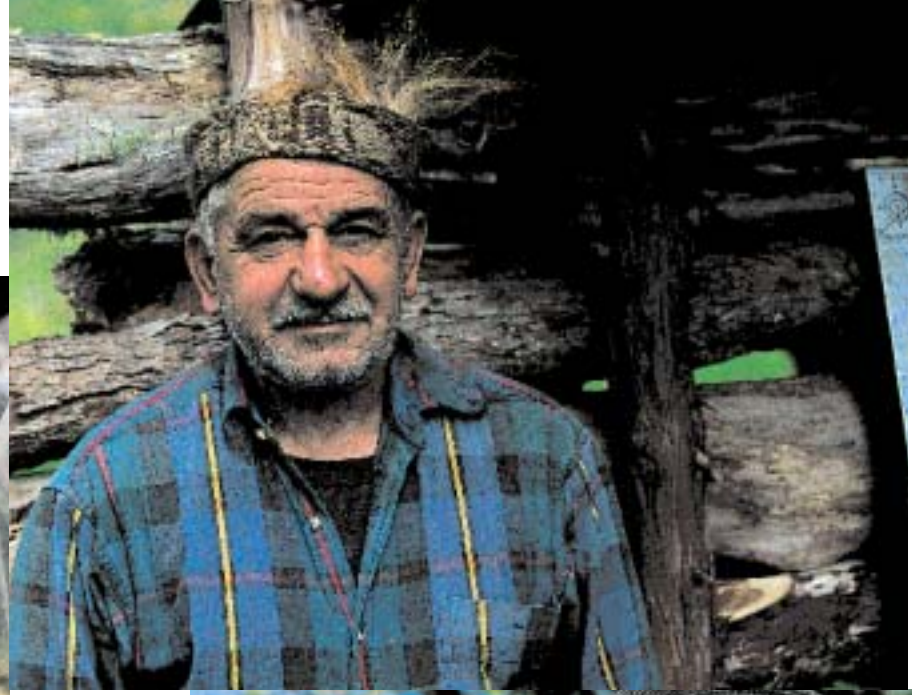
Dylan Taylor trying for a connection, Piedra del Fraile.
- Jonathan Copp

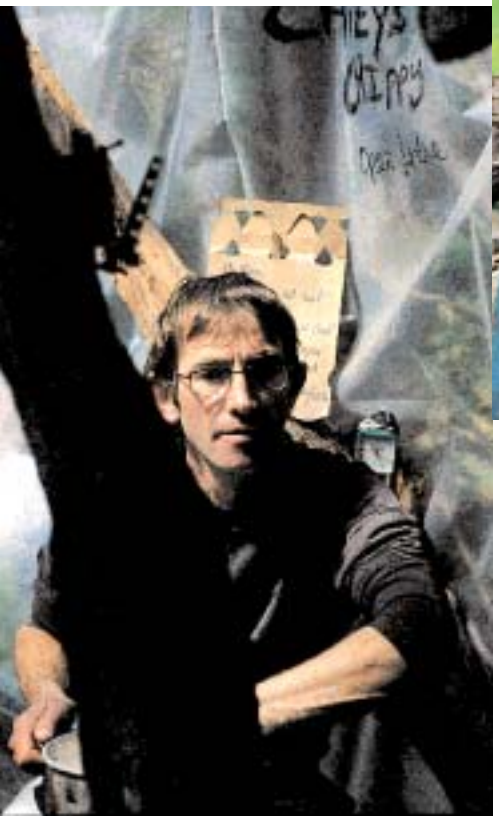
Roberto Nuñez holding court in Campo De Agostini after a storm.
- Eddie Sonda

Don't you people have any climbing to do? - Thomas Ulrich

Jim Karl tieing the line in Camps Madson.
- Kristoffer Ericsson

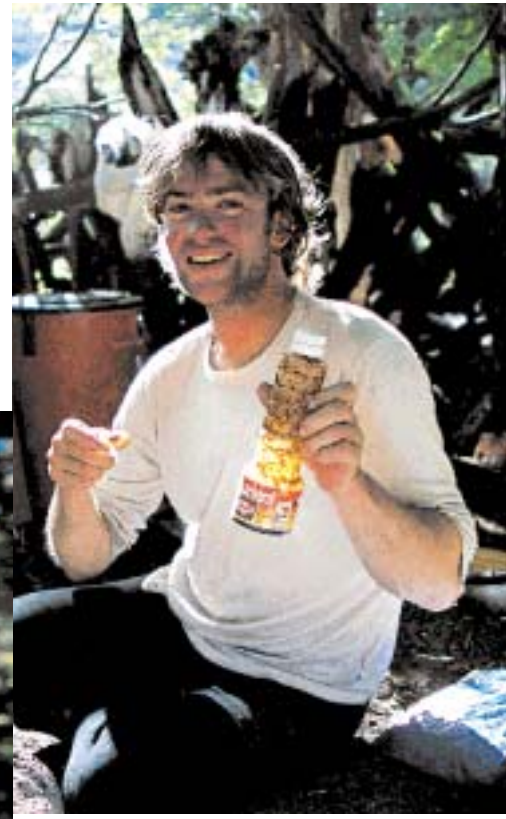
"The Hermit," on a mediocre hair day.
- Christian Santelices



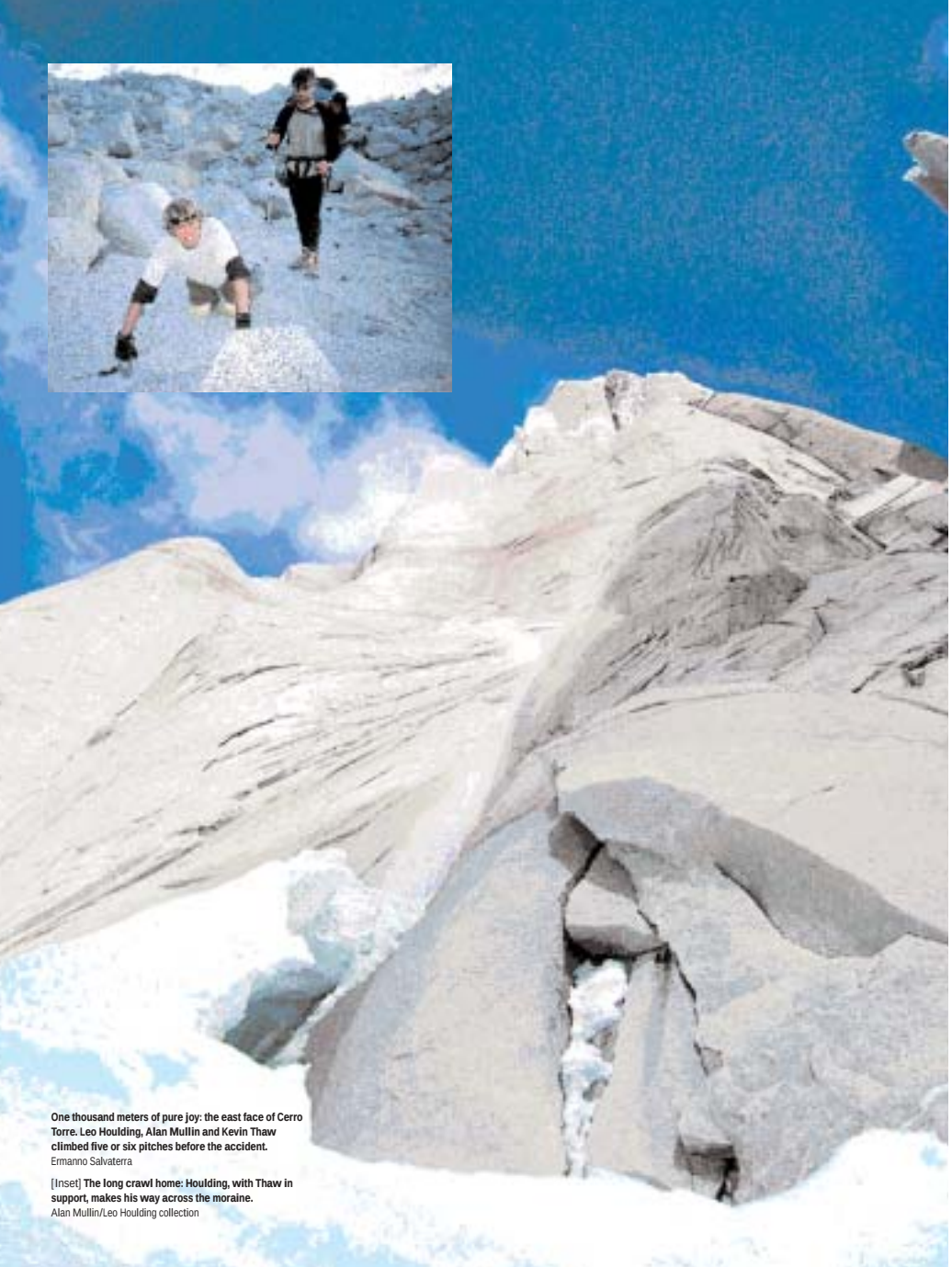


Fish and chips served daily.
Andy Cave in the Rodeo Valley.
- Ross Purdy

Salmonella, anyone? Paul McSorley adds some spice to the mix.
- Steph Davis



Don't rock the transition, yo.
Beau Bowers in Rio Blanco after climbing Poinsenot.
- Kristoffer Erickson



One thousand meters of pure joy: the east face of Cerro Torre. Leo Houlding, Alan Mullin and Kevin Thaw climbed five or six pitches before the accident.
Ermanno Salvaterra

[Inset] **The long crawl home: Houlding, with Thaw in support, makes his way across the moraine.**
Alan Mullin/Leo Houlding collection

Forbidden Fruit

Leo Houlding

We are climbing fast, really fast. I feel as strong and fit as I have at any point in my life, and better prepared for such an adventure. I know the rack well and my systems are dialed.

There I hang, with Kevin Thaw and Alan Mullin, two of the best partners I can imagine, amid unbelievably perfect weather, attempting to free, in an almost continuous push, one of the most tried (and failed upon) routes in climbing: Cerro Torre's so-called "Egger-Maestri Route."

Kevin hands me the rack and ropes whilst I reluctantly extinguish my umpteenth cigarette of the morning. My partners are ready. It's still my block. Here I go again.

Five pitches into it, a thin crack up the overhanging sidewall looks the way. Now, it isn't that hard—perhaps E5 6b (5.12a)—but climbing overhanging rock with any kind of weight on your back is not cool. Pulling through the crux section, I power out quite seriously. I manage to reverse to an unlikely kneebar, where I ditch my pack, though not without getting it well and truly clustered on my harness, costing me more valuable energy.

I regain my high point and manage to fiddle in one of those new Wild Country key-ring cams before struggling through some really rather difficult moves made all the more insecure by a running wet streak in which I can't avoid soaking my foot. I am getting tired, though we have only been climbing for three and half hours. Eventually I find a couple of good pieces a fair distance from some fixed pegs, and utilize the two ropes to equalize them all to one stance.

Then it occurs to me—I had noticed this the first time we examined the wall at close quarters, but had successfully banished it from my mind: a fixed rope runs over my head and directly down our route, right down to the bergschrund. In fact, there are multiple abandoned lines littering cracks and ledges everywhere. One black static line in perfect condition is fixed at every belay with a commercially logoed quickdraw and a wire-gate carabiner. Anybody who knows about bold free climbing will be aware that the proximity of a fixed rope completely changes the nature of a pitch.

Kevin and Alan have been on their belay for longer than usual. They are a long way down to my left when I hear the now-familiar "swoosh" sound made by large masses of snow when they part company with the summit mushrooms. Only this sounds louder, closer. An ice cube hits my helmet. Another… another. Oh, shit.... There's nowhere to hide as garbage cans' worth of increasingly large blocks of ice pummel my unprotected back and helmet. I wish I hadn't ditched my pack. I am terrified as I wait for the baseballs to turn into TVs to turn into God-knows-what.

But it stops.

Ropes fixed, Kevin arrives in minutes. As ever, he is completely unfazed by my trauma.

"It's just a bit of slough," he assures me.

Between us and the easy ground above lies a steep wall perhaps 40 feet in height split by a knifeblade crack. Thirty feet up, a mess of pegs marks the point where the crack widens and the climbing eases off.

I leave the belay and make some flamboyant, balancy moves to attain the crack. "A1," I immediately think—an unusual thought for me as a free climber, but it looks desperate. I consider exploring possibilities way to my left, or Gore-texing up and trying the waterfall. It even crosses my mind to give in and pull on a few damn pieces of gear.

I look up the crack. No way. In these boots, above that gear (two large RPs, equalized), on this mountain… don't be stupid. But stupid I am, the treacherous black serpent intoxicating my judgement with temptations of forbidden fruit.

I set off up the wall left of the crack with the fixed line right in front of my nose. I consider clipping into it, but know this would cause discontent. Though the climbing is of a standard rarely attempted in such environments, I am making good progress, with every difficult move interspersed by a balance rest sufficient to regain strength and composure. Several times throughout this 20 feet of climbing I consider retreat, but each time I'm tricked into the false sense of security offered by the fixed rope.

Eventually I reach the ultimate move. By now the holds are so small that the climbing hurts my fingernails. I am relying completely on the edges of my boots. A monumental rockover onto a small, sloping edge looks like it might let me regain access to the distant crack, which is wide enough at this point to offer a good finger lock. But it looks too hard. At home, one pitch up, or even on El Cap, I'd consider it. But not here, no way. This is definitely a "no-5.13 X" situation.

I am a long way above my trusty RPs; I could still reverse, but it would take some time. One move away, temptation gets the better of me. I take the fixed line loosely in my right hand and begin to rock over, over, over; my right leg feels like it's going to explode. My left foot is off; I am pushing with two fingernails on my left hand. Everything, all my body weight and every bit of force I am capable of generating, is focused on my right big toe. I am almost at the hold. My balance is going; I'm nearly there....

NO!

I tweak on the rope and get the crack. Done. Bomber gear, easy climbing to the end of my block.

But no! I cheated—cheated myself. I narrowly blew a complete onsight ascent of El Cap a few years ago; for this I've kicked myself ever since. I wanted to do this clean, and I was excited by the fact it was so hard—yet I *almost* did it.

Without placing any gear in the fucking crack, I swing back across on the fixed rope, release it from my hand and go for the rockover.

I am inverted, accelerating quickly. A dizzying pain, worse than any I've experienced, emanates from my right foot and grips my whole body from bowel to brain. Small ledges are approaching rapidly.

"I've broken my ankle!" I scream. The fixed rope burns into my hands as I gain control of the fall. The rope snaps tight, and I am next to Kevin and Alan.

I know I've fucked it. Kev and Al know I've fucked it. I clip into the belay and cry in pain. I mumble about going down alone and apologize a thousand times, but my friends reassure me that their—our—objective has changed from reaching the summit of Cerro Torre to getting me to the hospital safely.

Alan provides me with some powerful painkillers. The descent begins. ∎

SOUTHERN CROSS

Jonathon Copp

"Damn, I wonder if that splitter is big enough to get our hands or fingers into? Looks like it goes on for a thousand feet!" The delicate fissure soars through the west face of Poincenot. Dylan Taylor and I gaze whimsically at it through binoculars as if squinting at a Hollywood supermodel. The splitter is frustratingly tantalizing yet inaccessible—and possibly not even there.

We rack up on the Torre Glacier and unload the bivouac gear while the afternoon opens up to promising skies. We wonder about the thousands of feet of steep rock below and above that splitter crack. By the time our pre-slumber chatter ebbs, words increasingly muffled by down and nylon, we have given up on the ephemeral line.

Dylan's snoring nudges me awake, so I look at the watch and then at the sky. It is 3 a.m., and the Patagonian weather window is here, now, arriving with such fearful importance in its impermanence. Our stove's blue flame wraps around a pot of oats, and we chew on ideas for our next push. In the darkness, even the thousands of feet of technical "approach" to the crack system seem nebulous and suspect. All we know is that we are heading up, and probably onto, the northwest face of Poincenot, the towering mountain above.

Simul-climbing out of the pre-dawn darkness—alternating from rock shoes to boots and crampons as terrain demands—we find ourselves at the base of an enormous, leaning corner system. This feature, dissecting the west face of Poincenot, rising from the north and peeling around to the south side of the mountain, begs to be climbed.

"Jonny, we don't even know where that goes—if it goes at all," blurts Dylan.

"Exactly," I say. "But imagine where it could take us!"

"Exactly," Dylan fights back. "Imagine where it could take us!"

The weather window caught us off guard and out of position, leaving us just enough time to scrape gear together and run for the high country. Now, with only a faint memory of the system we had seen briefly through binoculars, Dylan and I, with two ropes, one pack, and no bivouac gear, surrender to the draw of uncharted terrain.

Above the mixed approach, the first 1,000 feet of rock go by quickly. The giant dihedral reaches into the sky and whispers no secrets about what is to come. Finally, upon pulling around a buttress and onto the southwest face, the direction becomes apparent. The distinct line we had mused about is real, more prominent than imagined, and more flabbergasting than a Hollywood supermodel recounting her sordid celluloid days. My block of leads begins, and I feel an elation I've only ever been able to connect with exploration.

After brawling with an offwidth, I find that the fissure bends out onto the middle of a shield-like headwall, and pitch after pitch of impeccable free climbing falls away. I spend all of my larger cams low on one pitch, before a fist-sized section has me gunning for the next hand jam. Unbelievably, there is not a ledge, corner, or flake to worry about slamming into. Hanging there at one of the belays, Dylan yells, "This is the wildest place in the world!"

I pendulum off the terminating splitter just as the headwall gives way to a slight step. Here we leave the only fixed gear of the route—a Stopper and a 'biner—like a funny little trinket lost in the Sahara. With the wind, it will soon be gone.

Night falls, and we prepare for an open bivy by chipping out some ice to melt for hot drinks. We spoon in all of our clothing and a restless sleep finds us. By midnight the wind is picking up; it eventually shakes me awake. I force my eyes closed again, this time falling into a dreaming sleep.

Volatile images and scenes play havoc with my head until a frigid gust finds its way under my jacket. Shocked awake, I shine my beam at Dylan's back as a slight shiver runs through it. I try to tighten the drawstrings on my shell, but the tempest is now keeping us both from precious rest. Though the sun has yet to show, we decide to begin climbing.

Energized by the turbulence, we climb efficiently, simul-climbing when possible, jugging when steep, and pulling on gear when necessary. Sunlight finally drenches our mountain, a golden coating falling from the summit and then over everything. Portraits of friends cycle through my head: some on other continents, lounging in the desert or grabbing a coffee, and others only miles away, like Timmy and Nathan, who are finding a path into their own unknown.

We climb into a bizarre cave, and then rappel out the back of a tunnel. Gusts spiral into concavities, sweeping snow off plates of ice, which are in turn sliced over knife-edge gendarmes into terrible ripping sounds. After a few hundred more feet we have no higher to go.

The surfboard summit of Poincenot is magnitudes more rewarding than we had imagined it could be. Looking out to the west, we see a renewed storm returning, but this time at a seemingly moderate pace. We have time to eat our last Snickers and gaze into the panorama, all the while trying not to be consumed by frightening thoughts of the forth-coming descent. In a quirky, dry-throated howl, Dylan breaks into Crosby, Stills, and Nash:

"When you see the Southern Cross for the first time, ya understand now why you came this way...." ∎

[Facing page] **Dylan Taylor jugging the splitter headwall on Poincenot's west face.** Jonathon Copp

[Left] **The eyes of God upon him, Taylor raps out of the tunnel.** Jonathon Copp

Tower Slayer

Steve "Shipoopi" Schneider

[Left] **The South, Central and North Towers of Paine, as seen from the east. In the background rises Paine Grande.**
Olaf Söot

Left to right: the South, Central and North Towers of Paine, and Peineta (the "Comb"), with the Shipoopi Traverse marked.
Olaf Söot

What do you get when you cross a blonde, a huge granite spire, and some of the worst weather on earth? An epic, of course. In this case I was the blonde, the granite spire was the Central Tower of Paine in southern Chile, and the weather was, well, some of the worst weather on earth. Near the Central Tower's summit, halfway through my first open bivouac of the season, I realized that trying to make a solo traverse of the Towers of Paine was a sure recipe for misery.

When I finally looked at my watch it was 4:30 a.m. I reached over to my water bottle for a drink; it was frozen solid. So was I, for that matter. With no sleeping bag, bivouac sack, or stove, and no cuddly partner to snuggle into, I hadn't slept a wink. It was time to bail for base camp.

I battled my way down, buffetted by burly winds and horizontal snow. Occasionally I would get kited—actually blown off the rock into the air—only to have a lull in the wind slam me back into the wall. I was scared for my life, and made a promise to the gods of Paine that if they would release me from their stormy grip I would never again return to Patagonia. This was a lie.

After twenty harrowing rappels, and using every survival trick I knew to keep it together, I reached the foot of the wall and staggered into Japanese Camp, base to a host of American climbers. They were relieved to see that I was still alive.

My vision was to climb, traveling north to south, all three towers by their original routes of ascent—more than 6,000 feet of technical climbing. I had four more weeks left in the region. I would need two full days of good weather for the traverse. I would also need to be lucky.

On my next attempt I awoke at 2 a.m., fired down a cup of Peet's coffee, and began the 4,000-foot approach to the Monzino Route on the North Tower. Familiar with the route, and choosing to eschew a belay after the initial seventy meters of easy 5.10, I summited in forty-one minutes. A quick descent soon put me on the Bonington-Whillans Route on the Central Tower. Clouds began forming near the summit. Soon they were surging with vitality. After climbing one pitch, I bailed—it just didn't feel right. I stashed my rack, water, and food, and high-tailed it for base camp.

On my third attempt I made it forty minutes out of camp before the sky opened with a deluge of rain.

I was starting to get a little burnt with this whole tower-traverse thing, and scheduled a road trip into town. After a few days of R&R in Puerto Natales, I headed back into the park amidst clearing skies.

The next morning, after two hours of sleep, I was back on the Towers. I banged out the North Tower in thirty-five minutes, descended, and started on the Central Tower, rope-soloing everything but a few short sections under 5.6, which I free-soloed. The views intensified as I gained height, with the great Patagonian ice cap coming into view to the west, and the vast pampas of Argentina to the east. I marveled at the Red Dihedral, a corner so perfectly angled and crimson red that it seems made by an architect. The weather was great. I was moving fast and enjoying myself immensely. I felt vitally alive and athletic in my efforts.

I passed my bivouac from my first attempt at around 5 p.m. From there, the route wanders onto the massive east face, following a system of ramps and cracks to the summit ridge. I free-soloed the first 200 feet or so, making good time, then got scared and again roped up.

Nine hours and thirty-two minutes after starting up the Central Tower, I crested the final summit amid more perfect weather. I was pretty stoked. I felt sure I was going to send this traverse right here and now.

I now had to descend the Central Tower's south face. This involved a 2,500-foot voyage down a face that I had never seen before.

I rappelled off the summit horn, then worked my way down lower-angled rock. At times I scrambled down unroped, but whenever it got steep, I rappelled, using Stoppers, blocks, and threads for anchors. Although I was supposedly going down the Kearny-Knight Route, I found only one anchor. Was I lost and off route?

Eight hundred feet below the summit, I found a piton anchor at the top of an overhanging wall. It was 10:30 p.m., and turning dark. I chose to stay the night, making another sleepless open bivouac.

Early the next morning, as I prepared my first rappel, the wind turned on as if a switch had been flicked. The early light revealed a wall of clouds coming my way. My rope got stuck almost immediately as I pulled it on the first rappel. With over 1,500 feet to descend to the ground, and a fast-moving storm gearing up to obliterate me, I was hopelessly committed.

I rope-soloed up 100 feet to find the rope ensnarled in a crack. Fixing the mess, I continued my descent. Three hundred feet lower, my rope snagged again. This time it was not retrievable, and I cut twenty meters off my seventy-meter rope with a sigh of resignation. Now, I brought out my second rope, a fifty-meter, six-mil, lightweight security blanket. I continued on, making double-rope rappels.

Throughout the day, the wind blew about fifty miles per hour, with much harder gusts. Each rope pull was a harrowing, heart-wrenching experience as the winds blew the rope sideways amidst a sea of flakes and knobs. Again, I vowed to never climb in Patagonia. This time I meant it.

Eventually the ground loomed closer, and the wall became slabbish. I was within three rappels of the ground when the rockfall hit. It had been too warm, melting the ice that bonds together much of the exfoliating rock. That, coupled with the ferocious winds, was spelling disaster.

The first rock hit 100 feet to my right, disintegrating into a big puff of granite dust. The next one hit fifty feet to my left. It was zeroing in on me. I looked up to see a shower of rocks headed my way from 1,000 feet above. Some were the size of vans. There was nothing I could do. In the next few seconds I would live or die. Tears welled in my eyes. No, not like this, I prayed. Please let me live.

The rocks hit the slab above me and assumed their final trajectories. They passed me by; I was left with a few pebbles of shrapnel on my shoulders to remind me of what a lucky blonde I really was.

When I reached the ground an hour later, I was mentally spent. The Towers had won. There was no way I was going to go through that again. I put everything in my pack, and humbly walked off the mountain.

Once again, my friends in base camp were glad to see me return in one piece.

When I woke up the next day, my motivational meter was wavering. I knew I needed another road trip into town.

As I descended the all-too-familiar Rio Ascension Valley, I thought about all I had been through that season. I realized there was only one way to properly finish off the season, and that was to keep trying the traverse. But how to get the motivation for another go? I began thinking of all the people who inspire me to achieve: Lynn Hill, Hans Florine, Scott Franklin…. As I sipped lattés in town, I felt myself drafting off the laurels of these great climbers. Slowly, I felt my motivational batteries recharging.

And then there was Dean. Reports had wafted down from the other park that Mr. Potter had soloed Fitz Roy and Cerro Torre, and had done so in record time. Hell, if Dean could send that proudly, why couldn't I at least give it one more go?

I had one more week before my ticket home was due. It was now or never.

I walked up to base camp for the final time. After a day, the weather looked promising, and I went to sleep at about 8 p.m. My alarm woke me at two, and I began the usual ritual of coffee, breakfast, and packing. I was first out of camp. It was February 16, 2002.

I picked up my pack at the base of the talus. My voyage would be completely self-supported, with no caches of any kind. The North Tower went down again in forty-one minutes. I then cut two hours off my Central Tower time, sending the Bonington-Whillans in 7:19, free-soloing the summit ridge now that the moves were familiar.

This time the descent off the Central Tower's south face went without a hitch. At 10:30 p.m. I landed at the huge ledge that cuts across the west face. I hunkered down for my third open bivy of the season.

In the morning, the skies dawned gloriously clear. I took three caffeine pills, packed up my belongings, and pioneered a rappel down a final 500-foot face to bring me into the notch between the Central and South towers. Locating the start of the route, I promptly got sketched out on 5.10 climbing and took a twenty-foot grounder into the talus. I was climbing in sticky rubber approach shoes; they were great for everything but this one section. Luckily, nothing was broken. I shook off the fall, and climbed up more carefully to the right of my original whipper. Soon the ground faded away as I made fast progress through the initial pitches.

A few hours later I was on the final 1,500-foot ridge of the South Tower. I reveled in the immaculate orange granite and my fast progress. Finally, the angle eased off and I could look ahead to the summit slopes. I left everything behind and made a mad dash for the summit, which I reached twenty minutes later.

The view was incredible. The South Tower stands at the apex of four glacial valleys in the center of the park, and for fifteen precious minutes I took it all in from a stellar little perch just five feet below the true summit. It had taken me nine hours and twenty-five minutes to make my last ascent.

At 2 a.m., after six hours and many rappels in the dark, I reached the base of the South Tower. I finished off what little food I still had and fired down three more caffeine pills. Four hours later, I pulled into the warmth and security of base camp and crawled into my tent for a much-needed break. I found a farewell note from Mike Wolfe, one of the many fun Americans with whom I had shared good times in camp. In his letter, he wished me luck in my quest. "I imagine you are slaying the Towers at this very moment!" he wrote. I liked the sound of that, as if one could take a sword and cut a swath through all the demons of bad weather, stuck ropes, and motivational glitches that Patagonia has to sling at would-be conquerors.

It began to rain. The best weather window of the season had closed, but it didn't matter. It was time to go home. ∎

Steve Schneider near the top of the Central Tower during his enchainment. Michael Pennings

The Other Half of the Climb

Tim O'Neill

Timmy drops in: the initial rap into the Supercanaleta. Nathan Martin

We're finally standing atop the Patagonian giant Fitz Roy, the sun engulfing our bodies. This is our fifth such summit together, and our first in daylight; it is made even sweeter by a crystal-clear, windless sky. Nathan beams beside me with hard-won satisfaction. United by our efforts on the west face, we spend almost an hour simply smiling, trying to absorb what drops away below our feet. An insect—or is it a flake of lichen?—floats past.

"Come on, let's get out of here."

The summit is only the halfway point. If you remained, your work would be left incomplete, an unfinished symphony. These granite spikes soar out of a frozen, lifeless landscape. Walk-offs don't exist in this world.

We've no fixed ropes to guide us down, the sometimes-steep price of alpine style.

"Let's rappel the Franco-Argentine. It's cruiser," I implore.

"No," Nathan answers flatly. "Our gear's on Sitting Man Ridge. Relax, it will be fine."

I am unconvinced. A feeling of dread wells within. I sense acute suffering, loathing, compounded by an inability to escape. Once we begin that first rappel into the ugly gash that is the Supercanaleta, there is no turning back.

We ascended via a new route, and as I drop over the edge of the unknown north face my sole desire is to complete the task ahead of us as quickly as possible. We start with one sixty-meter rope, halved due to massive stacks of teetering blocks and troublesome snags. Nathan took the lion's share of the rappels a couple of weeks earlier on the Egger and now it's my time to pilot us down, this time in foreign terrain.

The initial raps run smoothly, but exfoliating rock dropping off the summit into the couloir alarms me. What the fuck? I look back up hundreds of feet and want desperately to climb out, but know there's no choice.

I begin to pilfer pitons and cord from anchors that I pass on rappel. Nathan collects wooden pitons and surreal black crystals for his Moab museum. I stop to pick up a hat that must have blown off someone's head and stuff it in my pack. At dusk, we stop on a series of shattered ledges and eat the remains of our food. We aren't sure of the descent and scramble around, searching for a sign—a fixed anchor, something that will help us decide. I traverse across a snow-choked chimney to a rusty pin and smash it deeper into the rock.

I look below and notice something incongruous, a strange silhouette. It's neither rock nor ice, though I desperately want it to be either. Intuitively, I know it's Frank Van Herreweghe, who disappeared two weeks ago near the summit while rope-soloing the Californian Route. His hair sways in the wind; he seems to be resting. An arm protrudes, outstretched, while the other supports his head. On rappel, I study him, transfixed. Nathan's shouts of "Come on! Get going!" bring me back. I had searched for Frank after his disappearance; now we've found him. Two persistent thoughts will occupy our minds for the rest of the descent: rockfall and Frank's long, blowing hair.

Below the Bloque Empotrado we locate our lamps and begin double-rope rappels. We hardly speak. Our dialogue consists of "I'm off," meaning that we've either found or constructed an anchor. I will place more pitons on this descent than I have on all my previous climbs combined.

From below rises the sounds of running water, and I'm not thirsty. I crave simple things, like heat and rest and life. Smoking cigarettes calms me, allows distraction. For the second time in my life I chain smoke. The consistent sunshine has reduced the couloir from alpine conditions to a nightmarish brook, a slip-and-slide chute that saturates everything. The ropes are swollen with icy water and grit sticks to them like flies to a spider's web. We saw through three carabiners each, flipping them over as the grooves in the aluminum get too deep for comfort. My sole belay device is wet-sawed to so fine an edge that it seems as if it might slice the rope. If it does, I know that I could never catch myself.

Nathan takes over the lead. I watch his weak lamp disappear into the void as I pull warm smoke into my lungs. I think about him rapping off the ends of the ropes, leaving me alone, marooned. I study the anchor we are clipped to and unclip from it, then instantly clip back in. We've been through too much together to part ways now.

As I search a slice of sky brilliantly adorned with a million stars, the Southern Cross materializes and I feel my girlfriend Morning Glory's eyes upon me. She's looking over us. The constellation moves across the sky with every rappel. I never lose sight of it.

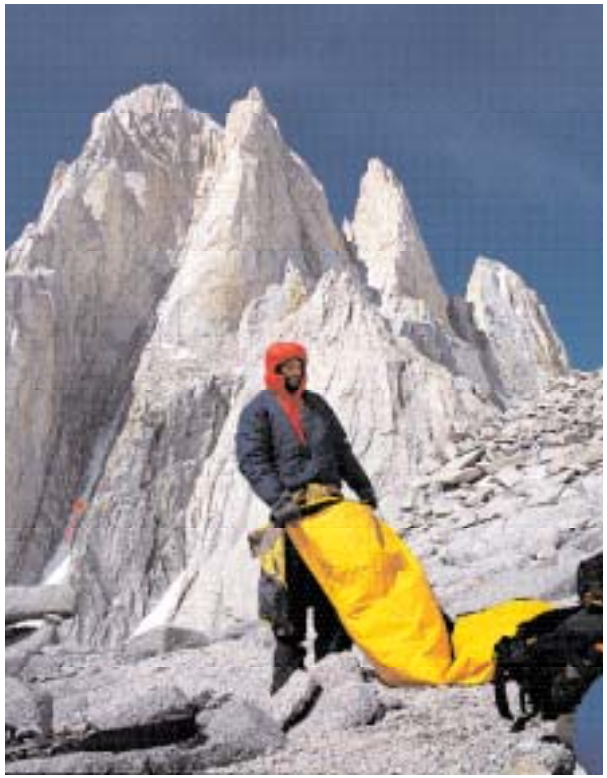
I judge our distance from the glacier. We never get closer. Will we ever be out of harm's way?

Our ropes finally snag on a rock or a honeycomb of ice.

"I hate this fucking place!" I shout to no one.

Frustration and anger fuel me as I slap my jumars on the rope and pull with all my strength. We have two meters of rope at our feet; either the ropes come down or I go up. Nathan's clipped into a cam and I am clipped to him. He checks my wild tugs on the fixed line.

"I think I felt it slide."



Tim O'Neill on Sitting Man Ridge. The Supercanaleta is indicated by an arrow.
Nathan Martin

The ropes lay cluster-fucked around our feet; we are exhausted beyond belief. We crumple onto a sloped ledge and celebrate the freed ropes with a rest. Time has no significance. My body relaxes, and I dream.

Frank comes to us on the ledge. No words are uttered, and I cannot see his face, obscured as it is by his hair. His presence tells me that we will not remain here, that the couloir has him and that's enough.

I wake into dawn and see that we still have ten rappels to reach the bergschrund. I lead us down, smashing, trusting, stealing pitons. On the last rap, rocks explode a thousand feet above our heads and I hear Nathan scream to take cover. Missiles whiz past me and Nathan is peppered by several shards. I slip off the end of the ropes and call out "Off rappel!" for what I desire to be the last time in my life. I scan the glacier below for cracks, then charge down it: it's better to escape the rockfall than wait for a rope.

Nathan pulls the ropes with him as he glissades to me. We are utterly destroyed and finally able to speak about the ordeal.

"That was worse than I ever thought possible."

"What a fucked idea…."

"What the fuck was Lorne talking about?"

"I would be thinking about finishing the kitchen and then the next thing I know the dead guy walks in…."

"All that for some equipment."

On-sighting the descent, we miss the turn for Paso Cuadrado and hook a left down the "Valley of Despair," then spend twelve brutal hours descending treacherous talus and gaping, melted-out crevasses.

Eventually we reach life, something else alive besides us, a small prickly bush bejeweled with red berries. We devour them, hoping to digest their life force, celebrating the fact that we can finally let down our guard, finally drop our packs and bodies to the ground.

Patagonia will fucking rock your world. It is not concerned with your hopes, goals, or loves. It offers sunshine and triumph with the same indifferent hand that slaps fear and humiliation into your face. I am convinced that I come here seeking answers. I know that I am no closer to having them. ∎

Argentine and Chilean Patagonia, 2001–2002

An overview of the season's significant ascents

ARGENTINE PATAGONIA

Cerro Torre (3102m)
Southeast ridge, Compressor Route (VI 5.10b A2 70°, 900m, Alimonti-Angeli-Baldessari-Claus-Maestri, 1970), third solo ascent, Dean Potter (USA), on January 23, 2002, in approximately eleven hours from the glacier at the base of the peak to the summit. A bivy was made at the Col of Patience during the descent.

Torre Egger (2850m)
East face, linkup and variation (VI 5.11 A2 WI6, 950m), Nathan Martin and Tim O'Neill (USA), on January 22-24, 2002. The pair started by climbing the lower six pitches of the Italian Route, followed by a five-pitch variation established two days earlier by Austrians Peter Janschek and Much Mayr. They then climbed an eight-pitch variation of their own to join the upper portion of Titanic for its last fourteen pitches. It took Martin and O'Neill fifty-nine hours roundtrip to complete their climb, including the descent, which was conducted in a storm.

Aguja Standhardt (2730m)
North ridge, Festerville (V 5.11 WI5, 550m, Martin-O'Neill, 2000), second ascent, Lorne Glick and Mark Davis (USA), on February 6, 2002, in approximately thirty hours roundtrip from the Noruegos Camp.

Cerro Domo Blanco (2507m)
North face, Son of Jurel (V 5.11 A2 45°, ca. 600m), new route, Jonathan Copp and Dylan Taylor (USA), on January 30-31. Ascent was made to the top of the wall and the end of the technical difficulties; after climbing through the night into a storm, Copp and Taylor chose to forego the snow slopes to the summit in favor of a descent to the west.

Cerro Pollone, East Summit (ca. 2480m)
Lower south buttress of the East Summit, Beg, Borrow, or Steal (IV 5.10, 400m), new route, Mike Schaefer and Blair Williams (USA), in late January 2002. The pair climbed to the top of the buttress, where their line joins Mastica Sputa ca. 250 meters below the summit. The east summit of Cerro Pollone remains unclimbed.

Aguja Guillaumet (2579m)
East face, The Gambler (V M7 WI6+, ca. 580m), new route, Topher Donahue and Jared Ogden (USA), December 6, 2001, in twelve hours. The Gambler ends on Guillaumet's summit ridge, between two prominent gendarmes.

Rolando Garibotti

The east faces of Cerro Torre, Torre Egger, and Cerro Standhardt, showing:
the Compressor Route (VI 5.10b A2 70°, 900m, Alimonti-Angeli-Baldessari-Claus-Maestri, 1970; first integral ascent, Brewer-Bridwell, 1979).
Attempt, Calza-Giovanazzi-Gobbi-Salveterra, 2001.
Attempt, Houlding-Mullin-Thaw, 2002 (marks the scene of Houlding's fall).
Martin-O'Neill linkup and variation, 2002 (VI 5.11 A2 WI6, 950m).
Festerville (V 5.11 WI5, 550m, Martin-O'Neill, 2000).

Rolando Garibotti

The north faces of Cerro Torre (visible as spire in background), Cerro Piergorgio (prominent wall center left), and Cerro Domo Blanco, showing Son Of Jurel (V 5.11 A2 45°, ca. 600m, Copp-Taylor, 2002).

Aguja Mermoz (2732m)
East face, Padre Viento (V M6 WI5+, ca. 520m), new route, Topher Donahue and Jared Ogden (USA), on December 2, 2001. Padre Viento reaches a notch on the far side of Mermoz's south ridge; the ridge sports several blank gendarmes that would require extensive drilling to climb.

Northwest Ridge (VI 5.10 A0 70°, ca. 1000m), new route, Zlatko Koren and Vasja Kosuta (Slovenia), on November 23, 2001, with the help of David Pehnec. Their line begins from the Fitz Roy Norte Glacier and ends at a prominent col on the summit ridge, about 100 meters from the summit. This summit ridge has several blank gendarmes along the way that might not be climbable without heavy drilling.

Fitz Roy (3405m)
West-southwest face and southwest ridge, "California Roulette" (VI 5.10+ WI5, ca. 2133m), first integral ascent, Dean Potter, on February 5, 2002. Starting from the Polacos Advanced Camp in the Torre Valley at 4:20 a.m., Potter climbed the Bianchi/Frasson Couloir (first climbed by Argentines Köpcke, Vieiro, and Naccachian in 1969), then continued up via the Californian Route. Potter free-soloed both the Couloir (in 7:35) and the Californian Route (in 2:50). This is likely the Californian Route's first free ascent. Descent was made via the Franco-Argentine Route; Potter reached the Rio Blanco by 5 a.m. the next morning. He called his enchainment of the Couloir and the Californian Route "California Roulette," a play on the latter route's name. Since 1969, the integral ascent has been attempted at least four times. The Californian Route has been soloed three times before, but never free-soloed.

North face, new route (VI 5.11a A3, 1200m, plus 200m to the summit), Jérôme Arpin, Sylvain Empereur, Yannick Ponson, and Lionel Pouzadoux (France), in January 2002. The team fixed around 800 meters of rope over six days, then summitted late in the evening of January 22, 2002. They descended the route, so anchors are in place.

West face, Supercanaleta (VI 5.10 A2 85°, 1600m, Comesaña-Fonrouge, 1965), first solo ascent. On January 17, Dean Potter (USA) made the first solo ascent of this route. Climbing free-solo, he summitted at 10:14 a.m. for a base-to-summit time of 6:29. He descended the Franco-Argentine Route, reaching Campo De Agostini at around 9 p.m. the same day.

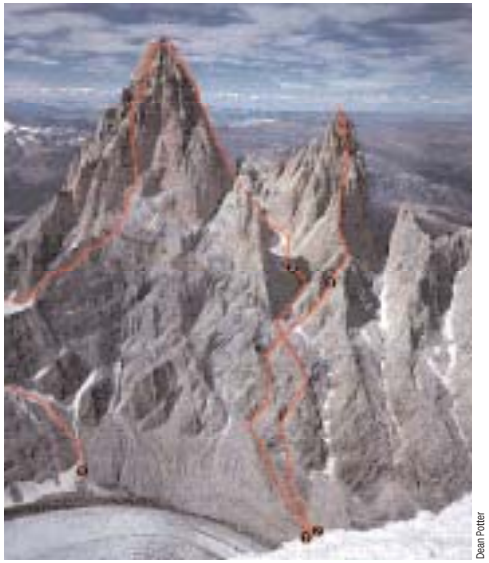
Southwest face, Tonta Suerte (VI 5.11 A1, 1200m), new route, Nathan Martin and Tim O'Neill (USA), on February 16-17, 2002. Tonta Suerte ("Dumb Luck") combines the lower portion of the Slovak Route with a series of steep dihedrals and offwidths to gain the west crest of Fitz Roy, where it joins the Supercanaleta for its last seven pitches. In all, Martin and O'Neill climbed seventeen new pitches and completed their ascent in fifty-seven and a half hours roundtrip, with one open bivy upon reaching the crest. They descended the Supercanaleta.


Bean Bowers

The east faces of Aguja Guillaumet and Aguja Mermoz, showing: Padre Viento (V M6 WI5+, ca. 520m, Donahue-Ogden, 2001). **The Gambler** (V M7 WI6+, ca. 580m, Donahue-Ogden, 2001).


Rolando Garibotti

The north faces of Aguja Mermoz and Cerro Fitz Roy. The Northwest Ridge of Mermoz (VI 5.10 A0 70°, ca. 1000m, Koren-Kosuta, 2001). **The 2002 French Route** (VI 5.11a A3, 1200m, plus 200m to the summit, Arpin-Empereur-Ponson-Pouzadoux, 2002).


Dean Potter

The west-southwest faces of Fitz Roy and Aguja Poincenot, as seen from the summit of Cerro Torre. Routes shown are as follows. Tonta Suerte (VI 5.11 A1, 1200m, Martin-O'Neill, 2002). **"California Roulette" (an enchainment of the Bianchi/Frasson Couloir and the California Route)** (VI 5.10+ WI5, ca. 2133m, Potter, 2002). **Southern Cross** (V 5.11 A1, 950m, Copp-Taylor, 2002). **(All route lengths are the estimations of the climbers.)**


Andy Cave

The east face of La Mascara, showing: Ilusiones (VI 5.10b A3+ or 5.11d, 700m, Alonso-Martos-Pelaez, 2001). **Duncan's Dihedral** (VI 5.11a A1, 700m, Copp-Merriam, 1998).

Aguja Poincenot (3002m)
North face, Old Smuggler's Route (V 5.11 A2 35°, 750m, Crouch-Donini, 1996), second ascent, Jim Earl and James Bracken (USA), on February 6-7, 2002.

West and southwest faces, Southern Cross (V 5.11 A1, 950m), new route, Jonathan Copp and Dylan Taylor (USA), on February 17-18, 2002, in fifty hours roundtrip. They descended via the north face, rappelling a line 100 meters left of Old Smuggler's Route.

CHILEAN PATAGONIA

Torres del Paine National Park

La Mascara (1850m)
East face, Ilusiones (VI 5.10b A3+ or 5.11d, 700m, Alonso-Martos-Pelaez, 2001), first free ascent, Andy Cave and Leo Houlding (UK), early January 2002. After fixing an initial 140 meters of the route in inclement weather, the free ascent was made in a single push in thirteen and a half hours roundtrip.

South face, Duncan's Dihedral (VI 5.11a A1, 700m, Copp-Merriam, 1998), second ascent, Dave Hesleden and Simon Nadin (UK), early January 2002. Hesleden and Nadin freed one previously aided pitch at 5.11c.

Paine Towers
North, Central, and South Paine Towers, first solo enchainment and traverse, Steve Schneider (USA), February 16-18, 2002, in fifty-one hours base camp-to-base camp.

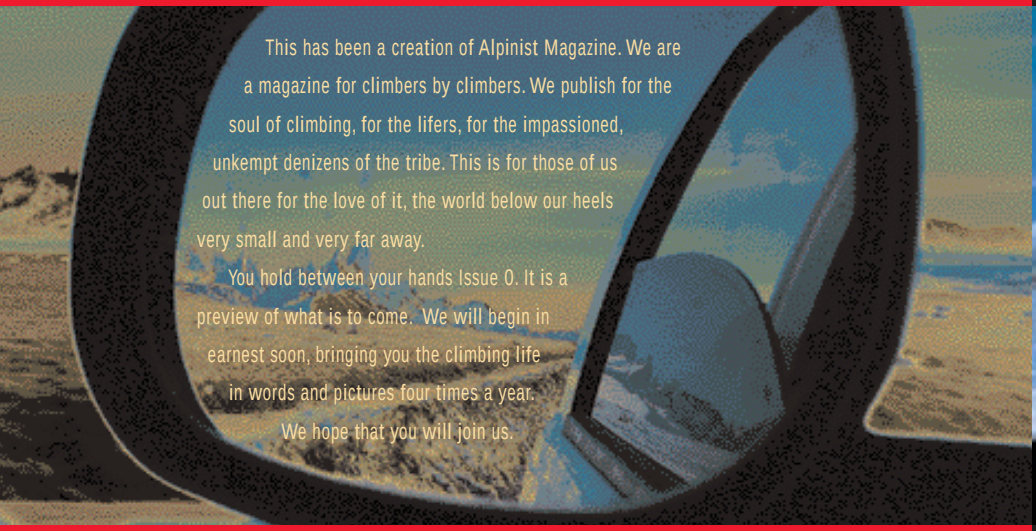
North Tower (ca. 2260m)
North Summit, new route, Ralph Ferrar and John Rzeczycki. Further details are lacking.

North Summit (ca. 2200m), west face, new route (IV 5.11+, 460m), Allison and Mike Pennings, February 17, 2002. The route followed the first three pitches of Adrenalina Vertical before moving left for five or six new pitches.

Central Tower (2454m)
East-northeast face, Bonington-Whillans Route (IV 5.10a/b A1 or 5.11, 650m, Bonington-Whillans, 1963), first free ascent, Sean Leary and Zack Smith (USA), mid-January 2002. Allison and Mike Pennings (USA) climbed the route all free on February 16, 2002 (with a slightly different variation). Allison was likely the second woman to summit the Central Tower.

East Face, Riders on the Storm (VI 5.12d A3, 1300m, Bätz-Dittrich-Arnold-Güllich-Albert, 1990-91), probable second ascent, David Šťastný and Jan Kreisinger (Czech Republic), January 30-February 7, 2002. Out of twelve days on the wall, four and a half were spent in the portaledge due to bad weather.

Off Belay



This has been a creation of Alpinist Magazine. We are a magazine for climbers by climbers. We publish for the soul of climbing, for the lifers, for the impassioned, unkempt denizens of the tribe. This is for those of us out there for the love of it, the world below our heels very small and very far away.

You hold between your hands Issue 0. It is a preview of what is to come. We will begin in earnest soon, bringing you the climbing life in words and pictures four times a year.

We hope that you will join us.

Hasta luego, amigos. Thomas Ulrich

Alpinist Magazine. We'd rather be higher.