

# FitzRoy by the Supercouloir

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As IF the Pampa, tired of meekness, were kicking up its heels to shake off its centuries-old pace, the fantastic pyramid of FitzRoy rears up and pierces the sky under glimmering sun or fleecy storm clouds. This ideal of all mountains casts a spell on the climber and is worthy of his greatest efforts. Having beaten off numerous earlier attempts, its virgin summit was finally attained in 1952 by Lionel Terray and Guido Magnone, who had to surmount enormous difficulties. The fierce Patagonian wind, the continuous bad weather, coupled with the precipitous walls and steep glaciers, repelled others who tried to repeat the French feat. The search for new routes reached this mountain, too, and thus it happened that an expedition of the Club Andino Bariloche in the winter of 1962 attacked the huge west face where they fixed hundreds of meters of rope. They used as a key to their attempt an ice-incrusted slash which would come to be known as the Supercouloir (*Supercanaleta*) of FitzRoy. Severe storms drove them back and they retired removing the fixed ropes.

Our dream was to reach the summit by this same lovely route. Three good friends, also from the Centro Andino Buenos Aires, accompanied us in our undertaking: Antonio Misson, tireless trainer of many a CABA climber, who had already attempted FitzRoy, as well as Martín Donovan and Jorge Ruiz Luque, who, despite their 18 and 20 years of age, already had several difficult Patagonian summits to their credit. It was not difficult to convince ourselves that we should use different tactics from those of the 1962 Bariloche climbers. We preferred a sustained attack with several bivouacs on the wall to the delay which fixing ropes entails, although we are far from deploring the security they offer, particularly on the descent.

After the usual preparations and crises, food and equipment were shipped off to Patagonia. On December 22 we set out. Over 2000 miles separated Buenos Aires from our goal. Finally, one dawn, there was Fitz-

Roy and its satellites. This colossus of sheer verticality overwhelmed us. First, the immense walls appeared gloomy, frightening, and then they sparkled, gleaming in the sun.

Long days followed while we transported equipment to Base Camp on the Río Eléctrico, a short distance from the Glaciar Marconi. From January 7 to 10, during a raging storm, we finished a log shelter and moved in. Fine weather returned and the 11th dawned clear and still. Our plan was simplicity itself. We two should attempt the Aguja Guillaumet for the necessary conditioning and then pit ourselves against FitzRoy. Our three companions, meanwhile, would reconnoiter the Marconi valley, trying to reach the base of the Nevado Rincón, a handsome peak on the edge of the Continental Icecap.

All day long we climbed beautiful slopes on the northern side of the FitzRoy massif and after ascending a short way up the glacier, arrived in the afternoon at the foot of our wall. The Aguja (Needle), a magnificent satellite north of giant FitzRoy, is of the same granite and rises to 8212 feet; the final pyramid is 2000 feet high. Taking advantage of a steep snow slope, we gained 500 feet before we roped up. The route continued along the north face and then directly towards the summit. Leaving our ice axes behind, we climbed several rope-lengths of moderate difficulty and bivouacked just as the sun hid behind the line of the Moreno Peaks. Thirteen hundred feet of granite between us and the summit eloquently announced the hard work that lay ahead. From our platform we watched avalanches gnawing away at the icy spires which rose above the Continental Icecap and its neighboring valleys and listened to the infernal roar as pulverized ice hurtled down the slopes. Then, drugged by fatigue, we slipped into a strange drowsiness.

On the morning of the 12th, after a shot of energy from peanuts and candy and warmed by the sun, we roped up. A short dihedral that called for nailing brought us onto a classic slab. We passed beside a tower and after several rope-lengths which set us to rights on the rock, we headed towards a smooth, deceptive slab. A new dihedral, some 85 feet high, demanded the utmost in artificial aid. The exit, a difficult move, took us to an exposed traverse to the left, which we crossed with an immense vacuum under our heels. Abundant use of pitons and wedges was necessary on a 130-foot dihedral, not so vertical as before but slick and without holds. We climbed in complete contentment, enjoying the sun and the granite, which we grasped with affection, not abusing it with careless movement or haste. Words were hardly necessary as we felt an inner communication. Five rather laborious rope-lengths, in which all the classical diffi-

culties appeared to be combined, led us to a steep névé terminating at the summit.

Without crampons, we climbed the last few feet with care and reached the top, a colossal granite block which dropped off behind to a fantastic precipice. The landscape was incredible. From this angle, FitzRoy rose smoother and more vertical than ever. At 5:30, a half hour after our arrival, we turned to descend. Fifteen 120-foot rappels brought us to the lower snow slope. Exhausted, we reached the Eléctrico valley floor at midnight and were soon in Base Camp.

The next day, January 13, was one of relaxation. Antonio bestirred himself and his vegetarian recipes were a delight; Jorge completed the menu for those of us who were carnivorous.

The 14th produced an unexpected turn of events. The deteriorating weather changed for the better under the effect of a promising south wind. The clouds vanished. We two headed up the Eléctrico valley against only a slight breeze, rare weather in Patagonia. We were in good form and felt that strange sensation which precedes a grand effort. Brilliant with ice, rock and snow, that fascinating eternal universe of summits gave contrast to our fleeting human passage. We were heading for a great and beloved mountain. We yearned for the tension of combat and the striving toward a goal which makes concepts of space and time vanish. We wanted to confirm that in us too there exists something indestructible; only the summit under our feet would prove it. Finally, leaving the Eléctrico, we turned south and climbed laboriously up the North FitzRoy Glacier. On the delicately balanced, steep moraine the slightest jar unleashed veritable rock avalanches. Two hours. The north wall of FitzRoy rose like an immense rent in the curtain of the blue sky. We crossed huge ice barriers, and skirted open crevasses, seeking snowbridges. Unavoidably we passed under gigantic tottering séracs. Great ice blocks creaked ominously. Nonetheless, everything was beautiful. Four, five, six hours. It was already getting dark when we reached the approaches of the Supercouloir at 5500 feet about ten miles from Base Camp. FitzRoy dominated everything. At its side rose two inaccessible and colossal towers with walls thousands of feet high. FitzRoy is a real fortress. It was pitch black when we finally placed our hammocks in a bergschrund. The icy night passed slowly.

Dawn found us with breakfast eaten, stowing bivouac sacks, pitons, wedges and the rest into our packs. Even with only the indispensable, our loads were heavy. The first few hundred meters did not worry us. We knew that regardless of the difficulties, this section had felt the hand of

man. We wanted to climb quickly in order to struggle against the virgin wall. Neither cloud nor breath of wind marked our departure. Beyond the schrund, the ice steepened to perhaps  $45^\circ$  or  $50^\circ$ , and like a huge open mouth the Supercouloir swallowed us. We climbed at maximum speed, both moving together, rapidly, rhythmically, and confidently. Avalanche danger was real, perhaps excessive, but the risk was worth it. Small pebbles and tiny chunks of ice fell, distinguished by their whir. A thousand feet up, at the branch, we took the left fork and surmounted a steeper bulge. Mechanically as we climbed, we had counted the Bariloche party's rappel pitons on the left wall, but above the branch they ceased. The others must have continued up the rocky spire that splits the couloir. Avoiding the rock, we stuck to the ice, making faster climbing possible. The ice became steeper but was hard and good. The incessant rock bombardment which funneled down the Supercouloir was worrisome, especially when a deeper zoom announced the passing of a big block, but our helmets and down jackets gave at least a feeling of security and confidence. By midday we touched virgin wall. The incredible pyramid soared like a fairy castle towards the sky in a gigantic sweep. Dark, frost-covered slabs and colossal dihedrals surmounted by roofs offered difficulties greater than any we had yet faced. The two branches of the Supercouloir varied notably. Divided into two channels of ice, the left fork was continually swept by rockfall while the right one, although relatively well protected, presented a series of chimneys and walls often overhanging. We left behind ice axes, overboots and one pair of crampons, saving the other pair for icy passages. Then we attacked the rock. The packs, which had not bothered us much on the ice, now became hard to handle and kept knocking us off balance, jamming in cracks and hindering us on artificial aid. Stuffing ourselves into one chimney after another, we retrieved every last piton and tried to do the same for the wedges. Hours passed and the constant difficulties offered no respite.

Day drew to an end as we struggled upward, searching for a bivouac spot. After a hair-raising artificial-aid exit, a short traverse to the right led us out of the Supercouloir at ten o'clock and marked the last feet gained that day. We hung our hammocks from a rock wall and ate something hot. At midnight, well belayed to the wall, we finally relaxed. We had climbed 3000 feet above our previous bivouac and had long since been higher than previous attempts. A rapid calculation showed that some 2400 feet still lay between us and the summit. The night was peaceful and temperate. Our dreams were disturbed only by the fascinating vision of the abyss from which we had climbed.

Soon the first light of dawn awakened us. Why move when knotted muscles and rock-shredded fingers were so painful? Finally the call of the summit and the will to struggle became stronger, and slowly we maneuvered delicately out of the hammocks. Leaving behind our bivouac equipment and carrying only the climbing gear, we returned to the ascent. If we wished to reach the summit, speed was essential. The early morning cold still conspired against agility. We again attacked the chimneys but had to retrace our steps for two rope-lengths in order to climb back to the right, almost directly above the bivouac. We yearned for the sun. The Supercouloir, deep and gloomy, deprived us of its warmth. Above, the granite was bathed in light.

The struggle continued on ice over the smooth slabs so hard that our ice screws hardly penetrated. Artificial aid on rock, artificial aid on ice, cracks and overhangs, an incredible succession of sixth-class climbing. Bleeding hands turned numb from grasping, clinging and pulling at the rock. The uncertain promise of a platform behind a chockstone rapidly vanished. The route was in doubt. How could we get past that phenomenal dihedral which soared above for 650 feet, bearded with coarse, frozen plumes of ice? Our scanty supply of pitons was diminishing alarmingly, as it became impossible to retrieve them. Still 1300 feet separated us from the summit. How many pitons should we still have left for the descent? We avoided the dihedral and traversed upward toward the top of a tower which rode astride the right wall of the Supercouloir. Thirst and hunger gnawed with increasing intensity. After a few difficult feet, we traversed upward for some distance along the upper edge of a solid flake. A stirrup in an angle piton permitted us to work twenty feet horizontally along an exposed crack — and then the sun.

Now nothing could stop us. Climbing was a real pleasure and our bodies responded to the demands like well-tuned motors. Later we paused for peanuts and candies. The route was not clear and we descended a little to force our way up the other side. By five o'clock, we had reached the shoulder of the tower and could for the first time look out to the south and east. Two hours of difficult climbing put us onto the summit of the tower. From there we rappelled rapidly to reach the easy boulders up which we could gain the summit of FitzRoy itself. A thin layer of powder snow gave the rocks a smooth, cottony look.

We climbed feverishly now that the tension had ceased and the summit was within our grasp. Before, concentrating on the climbing, the top had seemed secondary, but now, there it was! Everything changed and took on a new dimension. The little crest which joined the two summits seemed

unreal, suspended in the sky and lighted by the sinking sun. The shining light of the heights, the view, the realization that this was the moment, everything, built up to a brand new pitch of emotion. Never had a summit affected us in such a way. There were no words, only tears of unbounded happiness. We embraced each other. There we were, in one piece, mentally alert, with Patagonia at our feet. Then followed the summit ceremonies. We picked up the carabiner left by the French and replaced it with our proof, an Argentine flag. We took photographs, ate candies and turned to descend.

It was already nine o'clock when we regained the Supercouloir, where we set up rappel after rappel automatically, this time straight down the dihedral we had avoided on the ascent. Night fell, bringing the first signs of storm. Ten rappels exhausted our supply of pitons. Then and there we made our third bivouac. Almost without shelter, we shivered through the night.

Dawn brought the storm. Equipment, stirrups, hammer cords, and ice screws fell sacrifice to a series of desperate rappels. The wet rope weighed double and, stiff from the cold, was hard to pull down. Our clothing oozed water. Cold, wind, and snow! Clouds cut visibility to fifty feet. Twelve ghastly hours of descent through a world of hallucinations. A thousand feet above the bergschrund the rope jammed and refused to budge. At least it had not happened higher! We cut off the end and each descended separately. We were not men, but machines, fleeing desperately from the trap the Supercouloir had become, a veritable cascade of water, rocks and ice.

Everything has its end, even the Supercouloir. At six P.M. we reached the glacier which would lead to Base Camp. We moved like automatons with a glazed stare and a fixed obsession: to flee this gale-raked place. We no longer walked; we ran past the crevasses, the séracs and, lower down, the interminable rolling stones.

At ten o'clock we found Base Camp and fell into the arms of our companions. The story had finished. It was FitzRoy that had written it. *Summary of Statistics.*

AREA: Patagonia, near Chilean-Argentine frontier.

ASCENTS: Aguja Guillaumet, 8212 feet, January 12, 1965.

First ascent (Comesaña, Fonrouge).

FitzRoy, 11,289 feet, January 16, 1965.

Second ascent by a new route, the Supercouloir (Comesaña, Fonrouge).

PERSONNEL: José Luis Fonrouge, Carlos E. Comesaña, Antonio Misson, Martín Donovan, Jorge Ruiz Luque.