

Sea-Going Climbers in Southern Chile

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I N mid-November, 1974, the four of us, William Rodarmor, Peter Bruchhausen, myself, and our inflatable boat Huap Huap,* more affectionately known as Fat Martha, arrived at Otway Sound, 80 kilometers north of South America's southern tip. Our starting point on this inland sea was the same as for our 1966 explorations (see *A.A.J.*, 1976, 15:2, pp. 326-333) to Isla Santa Inés, where we discovered several new fjords and climbed various peaks. During storm-bound days there, with little to do but stare at the charts, we discovered the route of this year's travels, a sea voyage that would carry us right through the most unknown mountains of Fuegia-Patagonia.

The Otway Water was a full week in calming down to the point where we could load our 900 kilograms between Martha's sleek neoprene flanks, crank up the Evinrude, and set out. Seizing the moment of good weather, we traveled 95 km. in 13 hours, arriving just at dark near the head of Condor Fjord, a large opening off the Otway where water pours out through Jerónimo Channel into the Strait of Magellen.

Here began our first series of portages, four of them connecting inland lakes with the sullen Gulf of Xaultegua. This passage was surely investigated by seamen of sail, as an alternative to the tempestuous Strait, but the terrain is difficult enough to make us doubt that any earlier party carried a boat across.

Golfo Xaultegua, by nature of its inaccessibility and the continual storms lashing its steep-sided fjord walls, was threatening—at the same time extremely intriguing to us. We had gotten ourselves into one of Fuegia's hidden corners and were fully aware of being cut off from the rest of the world should anything happen to Martha. The Gulf offered access to the north slopes of Mount Wyndham, sister to Mount Wharton across the Strait that we climbed in 1966, but we opted to use a rare period of calm to sail rather than climb, mindful that the prevailing west wind could keep us locked in indefinitely. As it was, rough seas caught us crossing Xaultegua, but Peter's astute handling of the boat (backed up by the happy quality of inflatable boats of being unsinkable when full of water) got us through then, as always. The potential horrors of Xaul-

* Fuegian for "Outback"

tegua were never actualized for us; indeed, the gulf presented us with a wondrous variety of wildlife—albatross, penguins, terns, petrels, condors, ducks, geese and seal.

We entered the mysterious Canal Gajardo, a long, narrow sea channel that some incredible accident of nature, or perhaps scouring glaciers, laid right through the mountains for us. The largest peak, Gran Campo Nevado, was our primary goal. This great mesa-like mountain with its icecap of 230 km² was one that did exist on a map, and probably the largest untravelled ice mass remaining in Patagonia.*

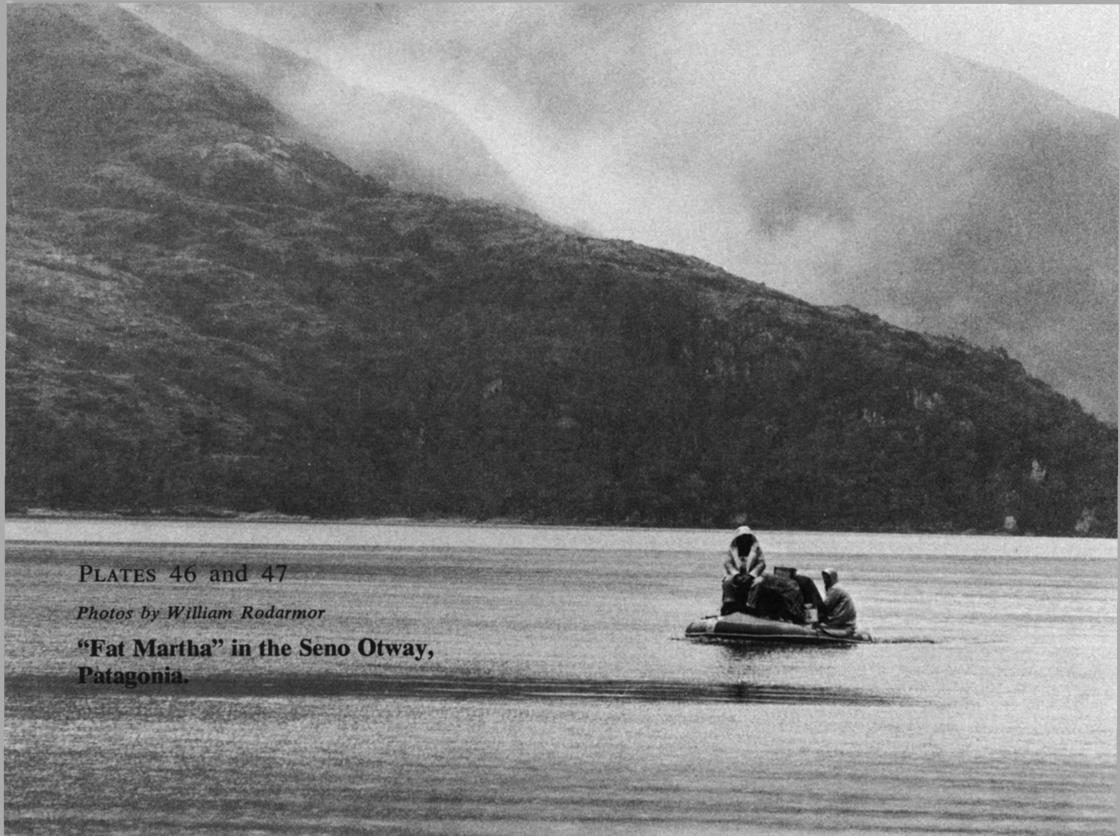
Climbing above the narrows of the Gajardo, we worked out an intricate route, involving a high camp and a pitch of direct-aid ice climbing right onto the ice plateau. Now, as ants on the banquet table, we had to decide whether the salt shaker, the sugar bowl, or the coffee cup was the true summit. The triple summit we chose was as high as any, although it meant more than 10 km. of flat icecap walking to reach it.

The view from "Triad," as we three called it, was revealing. Our exceptionally clear day showed up peaks in all directions, peaks that are indicated only vaguely, when at all, on the rough maps that exist for this part of the world. We saw as far as the Paine Towers, and we learned that they are by no means the only spectacular rock towers in the region. Nor is Eric Shipton's Mount Burney (*A.A.J.*, 1974, pages 129-130) the most noteworthy summit: lying near the shipping lanes it is simply the most obvious. Mountains bearing the name "Molar" (Muela) and "Watchtower" (Atalaya), as well as many of the unnamed and the unmapped ones, would each be worth an expedition. We had come expecting Gran Campo to be the last prize and learned it was only one of several.

We were nearly swept away by a spectacular event. Warm weather and almost continual calving of the ice sheet had filled the fjords adjoining the narrows with icebergs. The tide, surging twice a day through this channel only 60 meters wide to fill 1400 km² Skyring Sound, was carrying a load of churning icebergs. We had nearly driven the inflated and vulnerable boat into it all, unwittingly. As we watched from the banks, the giant grinding mill slowed, stopped, and began running the other way, dramatically depicting the exact moment of the turn of the tide.

Foul weather prevented further climbing of our newly discovered plums, but allowed us to pass through Skyring Waters and over "Shipton's Portage" and two others into Obstruction Sound (it is rumored that Indians have made these portages) and into a new system of canals. Tchaikovsky could not have written a finer finale, as, during the last days,

* British, led by John Ridgeway did approach the edges of this glacier in 1973 but accomplished little on it.



PLATES 46 and 47

Photos by William Rodarmor

**"Fat Martha" in the Seno Otway,
Patagonia.**



we sailed through a ballet of black-neck swans and dolphins which gracefully guided us into more known waters, and at last to the frontier port of Natales.

Our trip, with its seven portages and 583 km in the canals was, if nothing else, a prolific testimonial to Shipton's 1962 demonstration that a climbing team can operate without reliance on outside help in these wild canals. His recent use of naval ships and a helicopter to climb Mount Burney casts a few doubts; we are relieved to find that in fact a determined, self-reliant party can climb wherever it wants, in Fuegia. That is, with the aid of gracious ladies, like Fat Martha.

PLATE 48

Photo by Peter Bruchhausen

**On the GRAN CAMPO NEVADO,
Patagonia.**

