

# Cerro Torre—Alpine Style

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PATAGONIA IS A LAND where good weather is as precious and rare as water in the Sahara. With rapid weather changes and not infrequent 20- and 30-day storms generating winds well over 100 mph, the line between a climber's boldness and a climber's stupidity is razor-thin. In Patagonia, perhaps there is no distinction, and I questioned from the beginning whether we weren't playing a form of Russian Roulette with four chambers loaded. But I had become obsessed with climbing the beautiful rock tower called the Cerro Torre and was prepared to climb it at almost any cost. That's a dangerous frame of mind if it gets out of control, but while I was frustrated, I was also determined.

My frustration was rooted in the fact that after a year of organization, preparation, money making, equipment designing, sacrifice, traveling and team selection for this very climb, I had arrived in Patagonia only to have my two partners decide they had more important business elsewhere. They abandoned me to my own devices. Perhaps it was my resolve to do the climb, perhaps it was the climb itself, perhaps it was my stubborn personality, perhaps there was another reason; but after traveling all the way from California to Patagonia and seeing the problem in person, so to speak, my two mates decided the weather was better somewhere else. Who knows where the roots of determination are buried? All I know is that I was alone in Patagonia and I wasn't leaving until I got a crack at the Cerro Torre.

I was by myself now, sitting in the Fitz Roy Park surrounded by some of the most scenic mountains on earth, watching my thoughts and contemplating a solo attempt on the tower. Then I remembered the young American climber I had met the day before. Steve Brewer had hitchhiked into the park looking for an expedition to join. I went to him with the proposal of joining my expedition as the other half of a two-man alpine-style attempt on the southeast ridge of the Cerro Torre, one of the world's wildest mountains. Before thinking it over, he agreed and I was given a second chance.

At 3:30 A.M. we climbed simultaneously and quickly through the pre-

dawn darkness up the lower ice pitches, Steve in the lead. A strong ice climber, Brewer moved methodically upward, placing a token ice screw every 50 meters in order to give me practice removing them. Their security was purely psychological, but I appreciated the illusion and the rest they gave me while removing them.

Our hope was to reach the lower col by dawn; Cesare Maestri, who has had some experience with the Torre, once wrote, "Hope is a vain word in the mountains." Previous expeditions had placed their advanced snow caves on this col and from there seized the upper ridge. Our strategy was different. We carried the minimum amount of clothing: jackets, pants, sleeping bags; food: oatmeal, sugar, soup; equipment: 25 pitons and nuts, 25 carabiners, six ice screws, small bolt kit and two 9 mm ropes and, of course, courage in our rucksacks. I had spent three years planning this climb: studying photographs and magazine articles and talking with other climbers, designing clothing, doing extensive preparatory climbing and thinking. Nevertheless, I like to think that if you're not scared, you're not having fun; and, if that's true, the Cerro Torre is worth a couple of years at Disneyland. Treading close to the edge elevates the fear factor, but it also focuses the mind and, on one level, reduces the possibility of the dreaded slip of attention.

We were vain enough to reach the col a half hour after the sun bathed it in golden light. It was 5:30 A.M. when I took over the lead on the rock and headed up the first pitch, an overhanging chimney. At the end of the pitch, I tied off the rope so Steve could jumar, and I hand-hauled my pack, the pitches speeding by in the blue. Some were pure rock, some mixed rock and ice, and some had sections of aid. One nasty F10 ice-lined crack carved its impression into my memory. I drove my ice hammer into its icy depths for a couple of moves until there was no longer anything solid within hammer reach. I was forced against my peace of mind to use off-width technique on the quicksilver surface of the interior walls. Going for something that difficult with no protection is called a calculated risk. When I finally reached safety an eternity later at a loose chockstone, my arms were cramping and I was tired. "What had everyone else done here?" I asked myself. The mystery vanished when I checked the photo we brought along and discovered we were off-route. There was easy nailing to the right.

In time, the climbing and hauling took its toll on my arms, and I was forced to rest. We stopped under a small overhang at the base of a flaring chimney. Above, huge chunks of ice clung precariously to the smooth, steep walls. Our tranquility and rest were cut short by the resonant roar of ice rushing toward us. Steve and I smeared ourselves against the wall and molded our bodies to the underside of the overhang. The sky splintered around us with crashing ice. When it had passed, the silence was disturbed only by the pounding of my palpitating heart. Ice crystals

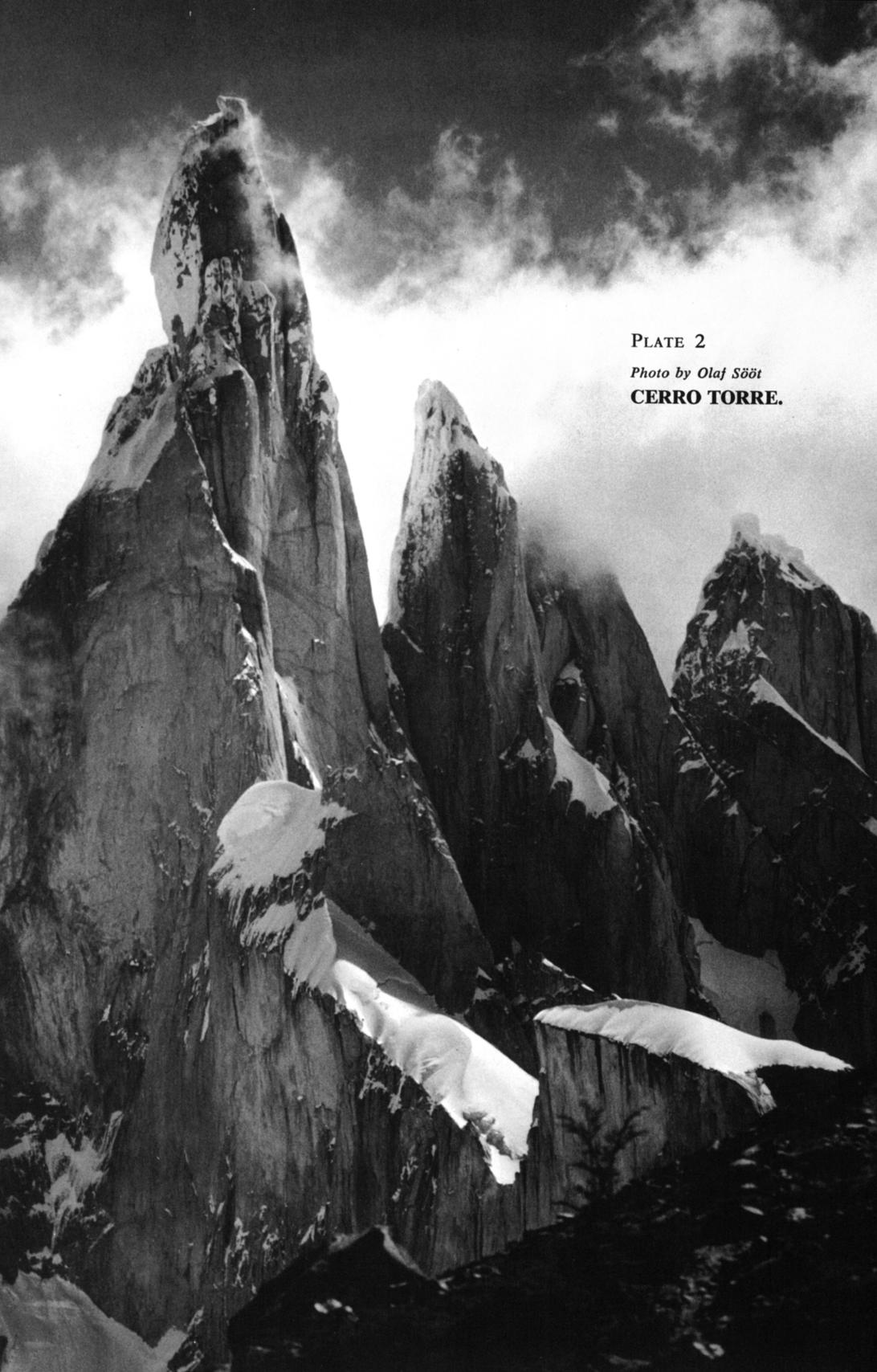


PLATE 2

*Photo by Olaf Sööt*

**CERRO TORRE.**

floated through the brilliant blue sky like tiny winged diamonds, all the richness and wealth we needed at that moment. I rocketed up the chimney as soon as the fall ceased with all the speed and skill at my command. Hungry, threatening white fangs of ice hung above. There was no telling when what might go. I reached a safe ledge.

I had but a few moments to enjoy safety and contemplate fear. As soon as Steve arrived, I tiptoed across awful icy slabs on the precarious balance of the bolts left by those who came previously. Steve joined me and we immediately began clipping up a long, diagonal bolt ladder toward the ice towers of the Cerro Torre. It was evening now, and bolts or no, I realized that we were higher on the Cerro Torre than anyone else had ever been in a single day. I knew that what Steve and I had just done was but a premonition of how fast and well the younger climbers will do the difficult technical routes in the future. We had probably climbed the fastest and farthest ever accomplished on any mountain of that *technical* standard.

Everything was going according to my plan. Our hopes had been met. Let us rephrase the great Maestri's words, "Irrational hope is a vain word in the mountains." I thought we would reach the bivouac in the ice towers by dark. Steve graciously and skillfully took over the lead finishing the bolt ladder. He gave me, as he always did, a much needed rest just when I needed it. I led another short line of bolts bypassing Dickinson's A1 fragile flake. Steve did another, and then he rappelled back down after fixing a rope.

We had climbed 3500 feet up the Cerro Torre that day. We were exhausted; we were also exhilarated. But we had to spend another hour and a half chopping a bivouac ledge out of the solid ice. We finished that around 11:30 P.M. and began cooking dinner. We used headlamps; eerie orbs flashed through the unreal sky illuminating an icy architecture of surreal but very real surroundings.

Meanwhile, far below, Giuliano Giongo, leader of the Italian Torre Egger expedition had his own surreal but real experience. He crawled out of his tent at Base Camp to see a star sitting on the face of the Cerro Torre. He thought his eyes were playing tricks on him. Incredulous, he suddenly realized the star was our headlamp far higher on the mountain than he believed possible. Giuliano called his mates out of their tents to view the rare spectacle.

I periodically awoke to check the weather. The wind had changed and blew from the west with hints of storm. The inevitable in Patagonia. To be caught in a storm on this mountain would be an ugly situation. No fixed rope. Food for one more bivouac. No bivy sacks. Only two ropes with us. We had a very careful decision to make.

Dawn arrived with puffy harbingers of an approaching tempest. How much time did we have? We circumvented the problem by ignoring it.

PLATE 4

**Steve Brewer on the bolt traverse.**



PLATE 3

*Photos by James D. Bridwell*  
**The bolt ladder before the Ice  
Towers on CERRO TORRE.**



Casting our fates to the Patagonian wind, we started climbing in a race with the famous predatory weather. Steve cramponed up the ice ridge past abandoned relics of former struggles. Coiled ropes, racks of hardware and carabiners hung from the wall, evidence of rapid departures. The early-morning ice was solid and we moved swiftly. Confidently, Steve led pitch after pitch, threading his way on the ice between blank pillars of rock.

The high point of the 1971 British expedition was fixed 40 feet short of a small bolt ladder up a short overhang. At this point the strain of the climb began to show. I dropped my north wall hammer and Steve dropped one of his *étriers*. He substituted a couple of runners tied together. From the top of this pitch another bolt ladder led up the edge of a huge overhanging tower. I took the lead and had to chop away six to twelve inches of ice to uncover each bolt. Steve dodged the ice I was knocking down on him. One more pitch and the final headwall loomed above us, beckoning.

The weather was rapidly deteriorating. Wispy clouds circled the summit, vapory, icy cobwebs moving in many directions at the same time. We clipped up the bolt ladder in unison to speed progress. No doubt most of the headwall could have been aided without the bolts, but it didn't matter since pitons would have been fixed instead.

Menacing clouds swirled everywhere as I climbed past Maestri's compressor, which he had used to bolt his way up. I marveled at it here near the top of this magnificent spire, and I thought that getting that hunk of machinery up here was a feat comparable to Hannibal's crossing the Alps.

Looking up, I saw seven broken bolts leading up and slightly right, but 80 feet of blank granite stretched between the last bolt and the summit snow. My God, I thought, Maestri must have nailed 80 feet of ice tenuously bound to smooth rock. It was a bad joke and inconsistent with the magazine articles. I took out the small bolt kit and went to work placing aluminum dowels, knifeblades and copperheads. I thought I was climbing very slowly. Steve boosted my morale by telling me I was moving fast and to go for it. Finally, I could almost touch the ice. One last copperhead and I was able to chop a groove in an ice-filled crack and place a friend. It held and I started free-climbing, traversing left with my feet on steep friction and the pick of my hammer in the ice above. I pulled myself onto the summit snowfield. Balancing on one foot and then the other, I carefully donned my crampons and finished the lead. The summit would be an easy walk, and I wondered why Maestri and his friend hadn't gone to the top.

Steve came up leaving all the pitons in place, and without stopping, he climbed past me to the summit. Together on the top of the ice mushroom we shook hands and embraced. We took a few photos and got the hell out of there. The wind blew about 60 mph on the summit, but a hun-

dred feet down it wasn't so bad. We wasted little time descending and we quickly reached the top of the ice towers. At that point, the rappel route had to deviate from the overhanging climbing route. It was necessary to rappel straight over the face of those ice-encrusted pillars with the giant fragile icicle swords hanging on God knows what. Fortunately, we reached the bivouac site without mishap and took the evening meal of oatmeal and hot chocolate. Storm dragons darted across the maroon and slate-colored sky. The wind is the stalker on the Cerro Torre, and the climber is a very tiny prey. We were trapped for the night 3500 feet above the glacier.

The diffused light of morning confirmed my worst fears. Snow covered everything. The ropes were stiff as steel cables, and we hung up the first two rappels. I jumared up to free the ropes, acutely aware in the claustrophobic emptiness of the sound of jet engines mixed with the roar of avalanches. The day seemed surreal and weirdly familiar, like some deadly dream of *déjà vu* experienced in another life. We finally reached the bolt ladder traverse and commenced the slow and methodical task of clipping back down each bolt, reversing the process of only two days before, though it seemed a lifetime before. I would move 50 feet and then bring down Steve, decreasing the immobile period so neither of us would grow too cold.

And then I clipped into a bolt with a small sling attached to my swami belt. I yelled through the swirling clouds that I was off belay. Suddenly the panic light in my head flashed red. The sling had ripped apart, but I didn't know it yet. I accelerated earthward at an alarming speed. Terminal velocity, no pun intended. "This is it," I thought, "the last act." Just like Toni Egger, my mind shifted into hyper-gear and became subtly disconnected, assuming the viewpoint of spectator. My thoughts were as clear and distinct as a computer read-out. What had happened? What was going to happen? Would I live to see my unborn child? Where is the end of the rope? Would I go all the way to the ground? I could hear myself screaming. "Shut up," I told myself. "Screaming doesn't do any good."

Wham! The end of the rope! God, it stretched forever before there was a wrenching jolt and I shot upward like a yo-yo on a string. After I finally stopped, it took a few seconds to collect my wits which were scattered all over the place. A certain amount of pain speeded reaction time, and I quickly yelled up, "I'm OK. Just slipped a bit."

Now that I was responsible for myself again, I had to climb up to get my weight off the rope so Steve could move. I stood on tiny, icy holds and held on while Steve clipped down and fetched my aid slings. It took forever. I had fallen about 40 meters, broken some ribs, chipped an elbow, badly bruised a hip and rearranged my mind. No serious damage. Just a great deal of discomfort. Pain is the main thing I remember about

the rest of the descent. There were endless rappels, but they passed without incident.

The weather treated us kindly and cleared as we reached the glacier. I stumbled into the Italian glacier camp ahead of Steve. I was warmly received with the congratulations of Italian exuberance. They were astonished with the speed of our ascent. "Muy rápido. Muy rápido," they exclaimed over and over, speaking Spanish for our benefit. I told them we moved so fast because we were so scared, and I was only half joking. We were pleased with ourselves, and it was wonderful to hear the praise. It was even more wonderful to be *able* to hear their praise. Our Italian friends made us soup and tea with rum for our weary bodies.

Afterward, I lay on the edge of sleep digesting the meal and the experience of a lifetime; and, secure within the satisfying knowledge that we had both met the challenge and gotten back to safety, I stepped out of consciousness.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Chilean-Argentine Patagonia.

ASCENT: Cerro Torre, 9908 feet, via southeast ridge; the summit was reached on the second day of the climb, January 4, 1979.

PERSONNEL: James D. Bridwell, Steven Brewer.

PLATE 5

*Photo by James D. Bridwell*

**Looking down on Cesare Maestri's  
compressor drill on Cerro Torre.**

