

# Fitz Roy's Southeast Buttress

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FEW OF THE world's great mountains impress one with their majesty and beauty as much as Fitz Roy. Its magic caught us so strongly that we were moved to make the rash decision to climb it, despite being small children in comparison to the great climbers that had measured themselves against the peak. And so five of us left Buenos Aires at the end of 1983 for Fitz Roy. We were Eduardo Brenner, Marcos Couch, Werner Lion, Alberto Bendinger and I.

We had scarcely descended from the airplane in the tiny town of El Calafate when we were given a furious greeting by what was to be our scourge for the next three months during our stay in Patagonia, the wind. None of us had even vaguely imagined what dimensions it would take on. Later, when we stood in clouds of dust kicked up by violent gusts looking at our vehicle that had been tipped over by the frightful condition of the road, we realized that Patagonian climbing involved more than scaling vertical, ice-clad walls.

Without exaggerated optimism but determined to do our level best, we prepared for a long stay and constructed a comfortable hut in the forest. We were to spend many long days of rain and storm there. We would dry our clothes and carry on long, deep conversations under the light of a cheerful little lantern hung from the roof. Unfortunately Lion had to return to work at the end of the first month.

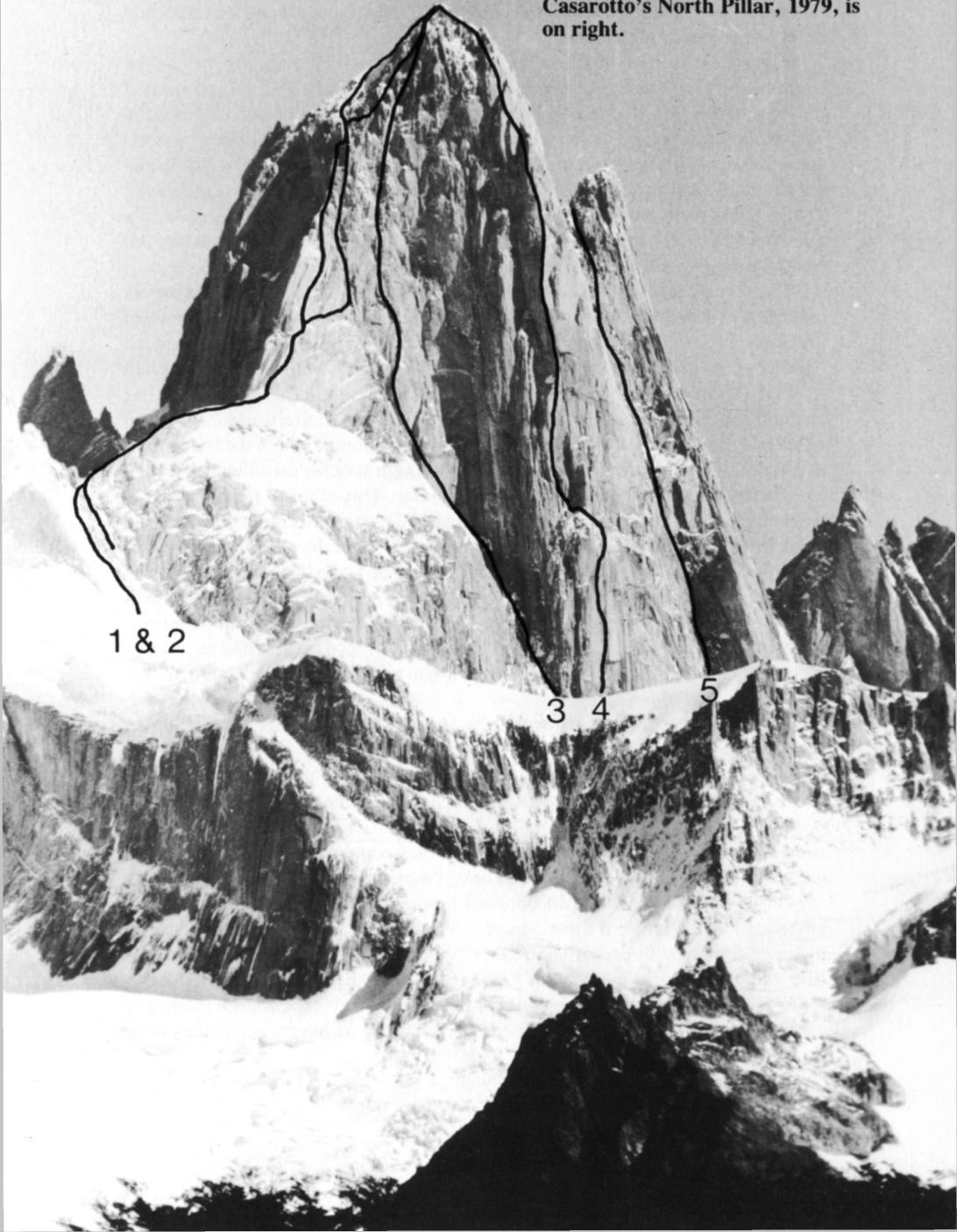
On the few windless days in January and February, we lugged rope, climbing equipment and food to the "upper pass," where we dug a cave in the ice big enough to house a four-man tent. This was the only way to protect ourselves effectively from the constant wind. Even though the cave was humid and cold, we quickly got accustomed to living in the "deep freeze" and prepared to wait here for brief periods of calm weather in order to fix ropes toward the French Saddle, where the real face climb would begin.

Our first obstacle was the bergschrund, which this year fortunately had only ten feet of rotten overhanging ice. Once the rope was fixed above, we could all climb over it with our heavy packs, but rockfall kept damaging the rope. Therefore, the first one to ascend each morning had to climb this section without relying on the fixed line. More than once, the rope was hanging by a thread.

PLATE 11

*Photo by Peter Friedrich*

**FITZ ROY's East Face. Route 1 = Argentine, 1984 (where Routes 1 and 2 part, the Argentine route is left); 2 = French, 1952; 3 = Spanish, 1984; 4 = Italian, 1977; 5 = Yugoslav, 1983 (not to summit). American route, 1968, is on left skyline and Casarotto's North Pillar, 1979, is on right.**



The terrain above was mixed and mostly fourth-class though there were sections of ice up to 60°. Once in the couloir, the *Brecha de los Italianos*, we could catch momentary glimpses of the fantastic silhouette of the Cerro Torre before it was devoured by clouds that rose with incredible speed from the Continental Icecap. From the couloir to the French Saddle, the ground was easy and belays were rarely necessary.

The saddle itself is really a thread of blue ice which ends just below the beginning of the French route. We stopped fixing ropes there. As we approached the legendary 150-foot crack where Terray and Magnone had placed 30 wooden wedges and pitons, we could see suspended from the top of the crack a steel-cable ladder with aluminum treads, unfortunately destroyed by the wind. When we placed stoppers and Friends into the crack, it ceased to be a bad obstacle even though there were moves of considerable difficulty. The first stance gave us a good belay and a chance to fix a temporary rope for the others to jümar on. All our stances were secure, although not always comfortable.

The second rope-length began with difficulty and after some friction moves on a very exposed, leaning slab, it led to the second stance. The climbing went without great problems to the foot of a short chimney full of ice and somewhat overhanging, which led to a good platform. It was there that the French had traversed to the right for 350 feet, but we decided to continue straight up. [After the first three rope-lengths, this Argentine route was entirely new—*Editor*.] After two moderately difficult pitches of mixed climbing, which we found hard to protect, we got to the bottom of a 250-foot-high spectacular dihedral, which led directly to one of the lower legs of the *Spider*. This dihedral is easily visible from afar and lies somewhat below the crest of the southeast buttress. A classic crack furrows the whole face; it is about an inch wide at the bottom and ends up three inches wide at the top. Since both the crack as well as the faces of the dihedral were strongly rime-coated, it was necessary to climb principally with artificial aid (A2). We had a good belay stance for the upper half although we were totally suspended in our harnesses with 3500 feet of void below us. At that moment I couldn't even imagine that we should have to spend the night like that up there in the *Spider*, hanging.

Suddenly night caught us in the *Spider* and those 3500 feet of emptiness were wrapped in total darkness. The night was long and frigid. Without sleeping bags, we were numbed by the cold, but when the sun's first rays lit up a fantastic blue sky, we knew that today we should reach the summit!

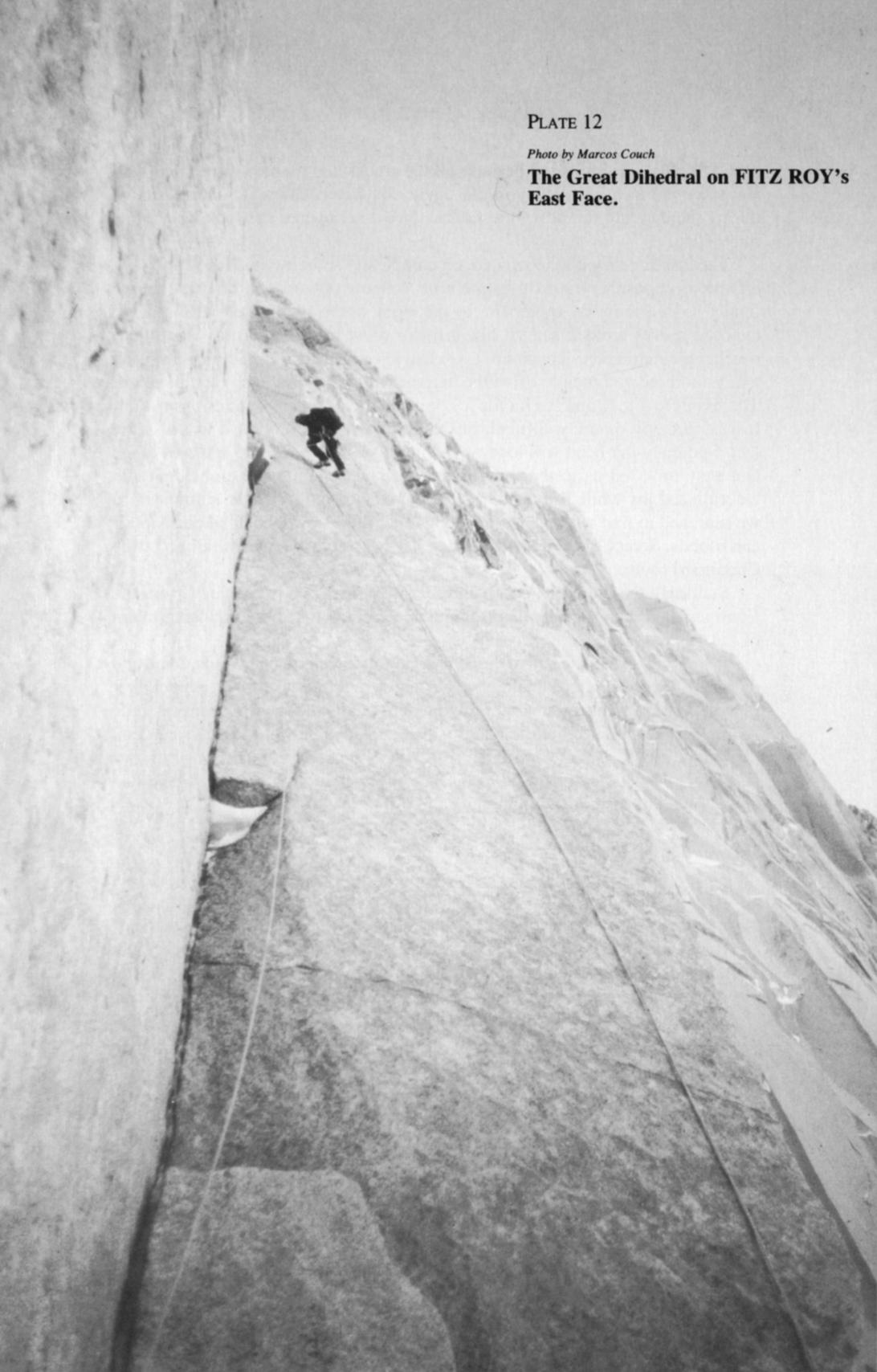
The remaining eight pitches almost straight up the buttress were generally somewhat easier than the previous ones, but they contained hidden moves of the greatest difficulty, rime-laden pendulums, cracks and chimneys.

On leaving the *Spider*, we climbed a wide chimney full of huge blocks embedded in the ice, but there was also much loose rock. After that, we surmounted a narrow thread of snow directly onto the crest of the southeast spur from which we could look across to the left to see the upper part of the British route, where we could spy some bits of blue rope. We climbed more pitches of considerable difficulty which demanded acrobatic maneuvers, pendulums, etc.

PLATE 12

*Photo by Marcos Couch*

**The Great Dihedral on FITZ ROY's  
East Face.**



The difficulty was increased because all the cracks and fissures were filled with ice; since the face was totally in the shade, the water which had melted above during the day had run down the sunless face and covered the rock with a fine film of ice.

The last three rope-lengths were on completely smooth, crackless rock with enormous exposure. It took us some time to figure out these difficulties but we finally solved them by traversing to the right where we skirted with athletic exposed moves a block shaped like a ship's prow to gain a narrow, ice-filled, overhanging chimney. To get up it, we had to hang from our hammers to reach a tiny foothold and then to drive the hammer in higher and hang from it again. The fissureless rock and the fragile ice prevented placing any type of protection. It was probably the most difficult pitch of the whole climb, but it was also the last. Suddenly my head was level with the ridge, which with 25 minutes of ice and easy rock led us to the long-dreamed-about summit. We embraced with emotion and joy while Brenner captured the magic on film. In the summit cairn we searched to find with pleasure among other things evidence that our American friends, Scott Cole and Scott Backes, had been able to make the climb by the Chouinard route.

Suddenly the wind picked up and fear-inspiring clouds appeared from the Continental Icecap, swallowing up with spectacular speed the imposing totem of the Cerro Torre. The storm had arrived!

It was 7:30 P.M. We had to descend all night, enveloped in clouds, wind and darkness. Our headlamps could have been seen descending slowly, rappel after rappel, coming together, separating again until finally the four lights met at three A.M. on the saddle to huddle under a slab and spend a third night, sleepless.

With the first light of day, under a brutal storm of wind and driving rain, we started the last stage of descent to our hut down there in the forest, which had already clad itself in its autumn garb.

#### *Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Patagonian Andes, Argentina.

NEW Route: Fitz Roy, 3375 meters, 11,072 feet, via a route on the Southeast Buttress which followed the first three rope-lengths of the French route above the French Saddle and then continued entirely separately to the left of the French route; summit reached March 10, 1984 (Alberto Bendinger, Eduardo Brenner, Marcos Couch, Peter Friedrich).