

Mala Pata in the Paine Towers, Chile

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AS SCOTTY'S MINIBUS turns the corner, I'm greeted by a stunning sight. Finally, after 8000 miles, we're here at Chile's Torres del Paine. Out of the flat pampa, countless ice and rock peaks, blades, and spires thrust into the sky in a climber's dream-come-true. The setting is completed by endless deep blue lakes in startling contrast to the barren brown of the pampa. We cross an ancient-looking bridge over the Río Paine and in a few more miles reach the Estancia Cerro Paine, our last outpost of civilization for the next few months. I am here with Dave Davies and Johnathan Gordon to attempt a new route up the unclimbed east face of the South Tower of Paine.

November 3 dawns clear and beautiful as the *estancia*'s caretaker, Bernardo, attempts to load 600-plus pounds of food and equipment on two skeptical horses. After a small epic of shifting loads and stumbling horses, we manage to get everything to the Base Camp used by the Italians in 1963, on the Río Ascencio. The rest of the day is spent organizing gear and showing several Chilean *andinistas* our odd collection of equipment. Their eyes widen in amazement when I show them my rurps, bashies, #0 copperheads, and hooks. "El Gringo es muy loco," they say, and they're probably right. Why else would I be attempting to climb a new route in the Torres del Paine?

Staggering up the trail again, Dave complains he has never done so much work in his life. He has climbed in the Himalaya, but here in Patagonia *we're* the porters. For five days we carry loads up the Río Ascencio valley, through *linga* trees, and up a giant moraine to the lake below the towers. Condors circle overhead as rocks crash into the lake, while dust clouds swirl around the basin—a primeval scene. With the lake camp established, it's time for five more days of trudging up scree and ice. We carry everything up the glacier to the base of the South Tower and dig a snow cave. The snow cave is far preferable to the lake camp as the sandstorms at the lake tend to permeate everything. We even set up a dome tent inside the snow cave for comfort. Now all that's left is to start climbing!

The weather until this point has been almost perfect. There have even been unbearably hot days as we crossed the glacier. It feels more like Miami Beach than Patagonia. Where is all that terrible Patagonian weather? I shouldn't have

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Photo by Craig Peer

PAINE TOWERS, Chile.

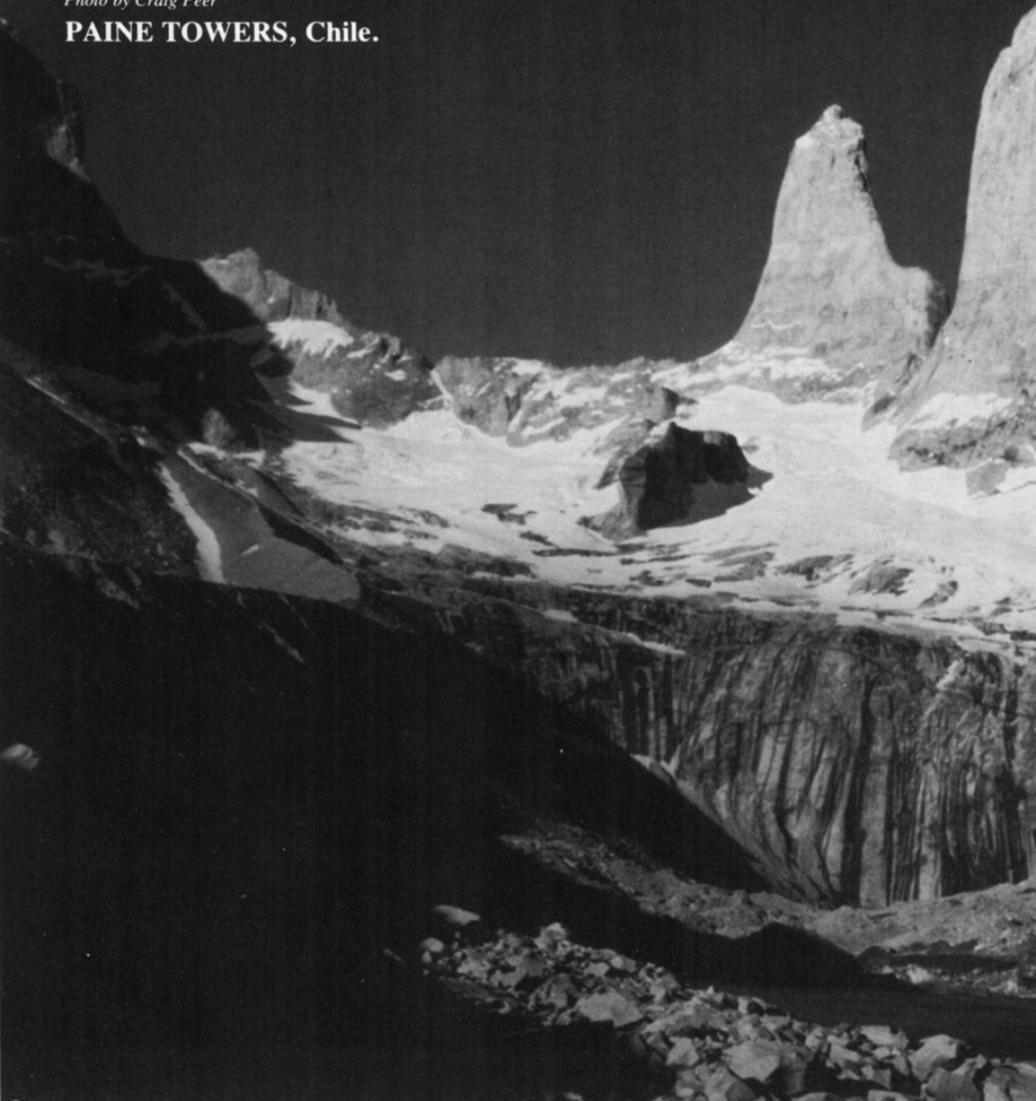




PLATE 37

Photo by Craig Peer

**East Face of the SOUTH TOWER
OF PAINE. X = accident; ● = high
point.**



asked! As we near the end of our first day of climbing, I find myself placing chocks on top of a 3rd-class ridge so I won't be blown away in the 70 mile-per-hour gale. A hasty rappel and we beat a retreat to the snow cave. Five days of snow and howling winds follow as we settle down to playing cards and reading books. It's perfect weather for learning to be a card shark or a speed reader. On the next two good days, we push the route another 650 feet. A 5.10 face-pitch led by Johnathan in double boots proved exciting as his knifeblade protection parted company with the rock before Dave could clean it.

Once on the snow ledge 650 feet above the glacier, we traverse towards the center of the east face. From here on, the climbing becomes predominantly direct aid in A2 to A3 seams, flakes, and expanding blade cracks. More blizzards, more reading, and more card games follow.

The weeks slide by in a blur of boredom punctuated by wild climbing. Wake up (yes, it's snowing again), eat, read, sleep. Some days we awake in our snow tomb to find the entrance buried under four feet of drifting snow. Just great for exercise! Dig out the entrance and rest while you watch it refill. But the climbing certainly isn't boring. It reminds me of a rotten version of El Capitan's Zodiac. Two pitches provide the key to reaching crack systems on the vertical-to-overhanging wall that hopefully will lead to the huge upper dihedrals. The first is a 150-foot aid traverse under thin, expanding flakes where we use everything from hooks and knifeblades to #4 Friends. This is followed by a triple-pendulum-to-hooks pitch which is almost as crazy to clean as it was to lead. Once the wall falls in shadow, the temperature drops radically, causing the belayer to dance madly trying not to freeze—which is a great incentive to lead. You can't wait to get back on the sharp end, scare the hell out of yourself, and sweat again!

Expecting the worst from the weather, I hike out to replenish our food supply for Christmas. Crossing the glacier below the Towers alone is dangerous and nerve-wracking. Dozens of crevasses seem to come and go with the storms. I fly down the trail to the *estancia*, say "Hi" to Bernardo, and a short time later reach the bridge across the Río Paine. Surprise, surprise! The river has flooded to the point where it looks more like an inland sea than a river! But a little screaming and the *guardaparques* are on their way to get me in a rubber raft. Going to Puerto Natales and back can be an expedition all its own. By the time I return, Dave and Johnathan have managed to climb several more pitches of A3-A4 rock using rurps, knifeblades, hooks, copperheads, and the usual Friends behind loose blocks. It now looks as if my death march to town and back might have been unnecessary. The weather is once again clear and warm—a rare phenomenon in Patagonia. On December 19, Johnathan and I jumar up to finish the pitch which Dave had started and fallen off the day before. I'm always a little hesitant to finish a pitch someone else has fallen off (I hate falling myself!). But soon I'm traversing under a roof on pegs and Friends as rocks and ice blocks whoosh by. One rarp and several pegs later and I'm off belay. Johnathan flies up an A1 ramp, and we fix the ropes and rappel. This is it: the weather's perfect, and we're

within reach of the final dihedral that leads to the top. After 9 days of climbing and 27 days of blizzards, everything is set for a summit bid.

December 20 proves to be another perfect day as we begin jümaring the 1500 feet of overhanging, wind-blown, abraded ropes, hopefully for the last time. We race as fast as possible on Jümars with our packs full of bivy gear. We're hoping to climb the next pitch before water starts pouring down it. It's been so warm for the last few days that water is running down the walls accompanied by the sound of rockfalls thundering around the valley. Unfortunately, we're a little late as Dave finds himself taking a leader fall in an ice-water torrent! Eventually, he nails, hooks, and shivers his way to a belay where he empties the ice-water from his boots. Now it's my turn to jümar upstream. I've never cleaned protection in a freezing vertical river before, and I must say that ice-water in your face encourages you to move quickly! By the time I finish leading the next pitch back across the top of the waterfall, my hands are frozen and my enthusiasm for more ice-water climbing has cooled. Instead of an A1 river corner, I choose a dry but rotten A3 face and after a rurb, hooks, and many blades we're on easy ground. Dave and I each lead another moderate free-and-aid pitch, and we rappel back to a good bivy ledge just above the waterfall. From the top of our ropes it looks like a couple of hundred feet of easy aid-and-free climbing to the summit cone. Now probably 1700 feet up the east face, we're snug in our sleeping bags gazing at the Southern Cross on a perfect night. Tomorrow, after weeks of hard work, we'll finally be on top of the South Tower of Paine.

I sense it coming in my sleep. It's like a bad dream, but it's real. Whoosh, whoosh—blam, whoosh, whoosh—crunch! Overwhelming, mind-searing pain. The crunch I heard was a rock hitting and breaking my leg. It's pitch black and I'm hanging on the rope below the ledge. "Aaahh, oh damn, my leg's broken!" A light goes on and someone says, "Calm down," as I drag myself back onto the ledge. The pain is intense. Dave and Johnathan come over to check things out. "Yep, it's broken; but don't worry, it's a common break." It was a good thing I didn't know anything about broken legs or I might have been worried. My foot wasn't pointing in the direction it should have been. And to make matters worse, my other leg, hit by the same rock, is so swollen and sore it seems as if it, too, could be broken. Johnathan is also injured with a bruised rib and leg and a splitting headache he received when, hearing something coming in his sleep, he sat up and got hit on the head by a piece of ice. Dave, fortunately, is uninjured as ice chunks landed all around him. He rappels in the total darkness before dawn to get the pain pills and inflatable splint we had brought. Johnathan and I wait on the ledge. Unable to move, I sit and chainsmoke my nerves to shreds, one eye pointed up looking for more rockfall, the other watching the deteriorating weather.

The day dawns grey and misty as an exhausted Dave returns with the first-aid supplies. I chew down three pain pills, bite on a piece of ensolite pad cowboy-style as the splint is slid over my crooked foot, and watch as a rock narrowly misses Dave and Johnathan. Time to get the hell out of here! The splint slowly leaks air as I'm lowered down the fixed lines on two 300-foot ropes. The splint

PLATE 38

Photo by Craig Peer

**Looking down on Pitch 9 on the East
Face of the South Tower of Paine.**



must be re-inflated from time to time, but luckily most of the wall overhangs, so I don't bump my leg too often. All except for the last 600 feet, that is, a low-angle slab that finishes off the seat of my pants as I slide over small ledges and overhangs. Six hours of rappelling and lowering gets me over the bergschrund and onto a goretex jacket on which I'm dragged to the snow cave. What a day! But now, how am I going to get to a hospital?

I am lying alone in the snow cave surrounded by every conceivable thing I could possibly need. Food, water, stove, stereo, smokes, and the all-important pain pills are within reach. Since the warm weather and rain have made the glacier a dangerous maze of creaking crevasses and séracs, both Dave and Johnathan will have to descend for help. But since misery loves company, I wish someone were here. It's two A.M. and exactly 24 hours since I was hit by the rock. Whoosh—boom, whoosh—boom! Tonight's rockfall activity is on a gigantic scale. Some snow falls off the ceiling as rocks and snow fly over the entrance. I feel like a target in a shooting gallery. The more the rocks fall, the more codeine I eat, as much for my nerves as the pain. I listen for the one direct hit that will collapse the snow cave and crush me. Finally the sun rises and the rockfall stops. Through my codeine-and-pain-induced stupor I hear something that seems out of place, mechanical. Since it goes away, I figure I must be hallucinating—too much codeine. A while later, I hear it again much louder and, thank God, it's a helicopter! The pilot had flown into a cloud and descended to wait for the clouds to clear which, thank goodness for me, they did! Dave runs in and blows up the splint. "Grab your money and your passport; no time to worry about pain, we've got two minutes to get out of here." Next thing I know I'm being dragged down the ice toward the helicopter which is perched on the edge of the 1000-foot rock buttress below the Tower. In my stupor, I notice a large crater in the snow 30 feet uphill from the cave, the result of last night's rockfall. Rocks are everywhere, imbedded in the snow. The weather is temporarily perfect, allowing the brave Carabinero pilot to finish what was later described as the most dangerous rescue ever made in Torres del Paine.

And so ended my first expedition to Patagonia. My leg was set by Christmas in a Punta Arenas hospital. Within two weeks the snow cave collapsed, our ropes were torn away by rockfall and winds, and all evidence of our expedition was destroyed by the Patagonian elements. Staring out my hospital window at Tierra del Fuego, it's hard to get depressed, even 8000 miles from home. My room is filled with newfound friends and fellow climbers from the Club Andinista de la Universidad de Magallanes. "Don't worry," they say, "it's just *mala pata*" (bad luck or a bad leg—in my case both!).

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Southern Chile.

OBJECTIVE: A new route on the East Face of the South Tower of Paine. The high point, some 500 feet below the summit, was reached in 9 days of climbing between November 14 and December 20, 1984.



PLATE 39

Photo by Jonathan Gordon

**Jümaring high on the East Face of
the South Tower of Paine.**

TECHNICAL DATA: 800 feet of 50° snow and ice to start the rock climbing; Pitch 1) 5.8, A1, 250 feet; 2) 5.7, A1, 250 feet; 3) 5.6 and 3rd class, 125 feet; 4) 5.10, A1, face-and-tension traverse, 300 feet; 5) 5.7, 175 feet to left end of major snow ledge, walk to high point on snow ledge; 6) A3 (knifeblades), 75 feet; 7) A1, 75 feet to sling belay; 8) A2, 5.4 traverse (knifeblades), 75 feet; 9) 5.7, 75 feet; 10) 5.9, A1, 75 feet; 11) A3 flake, roof (knifeblades and hooks) to sling belay, 150 feet; 12) A3 pendulum (hooks), 75 feet; 13) A3 seam (copperheads, knifeblades, hooks), 75 feet; 14) A3 (knifeblades and hooks to 2 bolts), pendulum, nail, pendulum to belay, 100 feet; 15) A4, nail, tension left and nail to sling belay (rurps), 80 feet; 16) A3+, seam and 4 bolts to roof traverse (rurp, knifeblades), 140 feet; 17) A1 ramp, 75 feet; 18) 5.6, A2+ waterfall (hooks), 100 feet; 19) A1 waterfall traverse, 50 feet; 20) A3 face, crack (hooks, rurp, knifeblades), 75 feet; 21) 5.5, A1, ledges and cracks in large upper dihedral, 100 feet; 22) 5.4, A1, 60 feet to good belay in main corner. Possibly two more moderate pitches to summit cone.

PERSONNEL: David Davies, Johnathan Gordon, *South Africans*; Craig Peer, *American*.

PLATE 40

Photo by Dave Davies

**Johnathan Gordon and Craig Peer
holding the leg-breaking rock at Be-
lay 21 on the South Tower of Paine.**

