

# Patagonia—Dreams and Reality

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FOR SOME WEEKS, we had been enjoying our existence in a hut near the waters of Laguna Torre. We sat in front of the warming fire, alternately whittling on a stick of wood, reading a few pages of a cheap thriller or recording our thoughts on paper and drinking such colossal quantities of tea that each hour our bladders threatened to burst. Discussions about the weather met with complete apathy. We had been sitting here for weeks, waiting for the next fine spell. Outside, a wild snowstorm raged. We had been occupied for days trying to repair the roof and the smoke hole of the hut.

Both of us had had the idea of invading the Patagonian winter in order to reach long-sought goals. It is well known that it is easy to forge plans but carrying them out when you are on the spot is quite a different matter. My partner Toni Ponholzer and I were no greenhorns in Patagonian matters. We had already been here and could accomplish great routes “by fair means.” It was our fervent wish to climb without fixed ropes new routes or repeats in big-wall fashion or alpine-style. That was for us the only acceptable manner in which to climb.

From August of 1990 to March of 1991 we dwelt in the Laguna Torre hut, hoping to carry out the objective of our expedition. We had not really planned to spend so many months there. Our real goal was to make the second ascent of the much disputed Egger-Maestri route on the Cerro Torre. We were waiting with great hopes for a long period of favorable weather to carry it out. We set out dozens of times, but we never succeeded in reaching the summit. Foul weather forced us to retreat. Time and again we started off and in the end we were never further ahead than when we had started, but we fixed no ropes.

On September 2, 1990, we did succeed in making the first winter ascent and the third overall climb of the Bridwell route of Cerro Stanhardt. The chief difficulties lay in a 250-meter-high chimney, the interior of which was defended by a thick armor of ice. On a snow pulpit at the bottom end of the chimney, we carved a meter-deep bench in order to have a little shelter from the frigid wind during the long winter night. Crouched in his bivouac sack, Toni played on his harmonica some fragments of lullabies to coax us to sleep. Interrupted by periodic warm-up sessions, we put our thoughts on hold for short periods and dozed off.

In our rucksacks we had only the essentials to let us move quickly and save strength. I jūmared to the point where darkness the night before had turned me around and I attacked the overhanging ice bulge. The water ice was brittle and as hard as glass. You can imagine how the plate-sized ice projectiles shot into the abyss as I placed protection. Before they shattered, they whizzed past the stance where Toni cowered, trying to ward them off with the limply filled rucksack. My arms and calves turned to lead as I attempted to insert an ice screw into the ice. That was the belay where I could extract Toni from his sparsely shielded perch and where fresh blood could force its way into my rigid muscles. Toni banged his ice gear into a crack and climbed higher with his crampons on tiny rough spots. They screeched on the perpendicular rock as he straddled the ice hose, which was now broader. Delicately balanced, he set an ice screw. It was getting to be a programmed necessity to place protection in order to calm the nerves. Above Toni hung columns of ice, like walrus tusks. We climbed until the early evening hours before the summit area emerged. There, four huge ice mushrooms towered side by side. Neither of us could guess which was the highest. After we had decided on the the next to last one, we saw that the outermost mushroom was a little higher. It lay still another 40 meters from us. We traversed below the snow-white mushrooms the whole summit zone until we could climb up the last one.

Below us lay a dream landscape composed of an endless snow-covered surface of ice out of which glaciated mountain chains rose. In the distant horizon the sun gleamed like a glowing ball lightening the whole region with a reddish orange light. Behind us, the shadows of the Torre group were creeping over the granite needles of the Fitz Roy peaks with their cols, buttresses and gullies. Way beyond, on the edge of the Pampa, lay Lago Viedma. In the yellowish brown landscape, it was being fed by uncounted arteries as they snaked into it blood-red in the sunset. The sun began to sink, losing brilliance but gaining gorgeous color. An ice-cold wind blew up onto us from the Patagonian Icecap and seemed to sweep the evening glow before it and pull the shadows out longer. Suddenly, all the colors flowed away into a monotonous gray-black. We had arrived at the place where we humans without wings can go no higher. Here, where all the rising lines meet at a point was the summit mushroom of ice and snow, high above all rock. We had struggled for a day and a half up the Bridwell route onto the top of Stanhardt in order to experience this drama.

The full moon lighted the way down until we reached the inky blackness of the ice chimney and had to use our headlamps. We still had to endure a frigid bivouac before we got back to our little Paradise, our hut, the next day.

A surprisingly short period of bad weather—only ten days—was followed by a deceptively lovely morning. We hoped to ascend the unclimbed east face of the Cuatro Dedos. The whole day we struggled against a bitterly cold strong wind which late in the afternoon dragged in a cruel snowstorm. When we were just a rope-length from the summit, we were forced to retreat. There was no climbing technique we could use to gain more altitude and the lack of bivouac gear reinforced our decision quickly without second thought. At the foot of the



COLOR PLATE 7

*Photo by Tommy Bonapace*

**Steep ice near the summit of CERRO  
STANHARDT.**

face we sought our bivouac tent. Battered by the wind, it lay in ribbons on the slope of the moraine. The five-hour descent to our camp was out of the question. We were exhausted and staggering in the wind gusts like drunks. We spent an extraordinarily instructive bivouac that night; before we started up a wall, we should dig a snow cave. That is the only real possibility in this unreal desert of ice, snow, storm and wintery cold if you want to survive. All the next day, as a kind of bad-weather therapy, we grubbed out a snow cave, a real snow palace, which served from then on as an Advance Base close to the beginning of the climbs. We spent a total of a month of nights there. We often wondered if we hadn't lost the last spark of human intelligence in this lonesome wilderness.

Some days later, on September 17, we completed the ascent of the east face of the Cuatro Dedos. Climbing up a steep, icy couloir and snow-covered cracks and rock bands, we reached the summit late in the afternoon. In Spanish, Cuatro Dedos means "Four Fingers." The mountain got its name because of the remarkable appearance of the four granite needles. We climbed the highest finger and later got the idea that we should traverse the other three. It was nearly two months later, on December 13, before we could carry out our plan. No human foot had trodden on them and we were impressed by their unusual form, like the wings of a condor extending to the east. The south ridges of the middle two offer steep crack-climbing and with the conditions as we found them could be ascended free with nuts and chalk. On all the other routes we had to climb with ice gear, crampons and plastic boots. For that reason, it was a pleasure to be able to free-climb with nuts and chalk.

From the middle of September until the beginning of December, there was endless bad weather with much precipitation. On one of the many attempts we made on Bifida, which like the Cuatro Dedos lies on the main ridge of the Torre massif, we turned, because the weather suddenly went sour, to the Perfil del Indio. This is the peak to the left of Bifida. The climbing difficulties are not so great but it was challenging enough considering the weather. The date was September 23.

We were not able to ascend Bifida until December 7. From the ice cave at the foot of Stanhardt, we sought the way with headlamps through the labyrinth of crevasses to the foot of the peak. It dawned gray and we counted on a day without a storm, as much as one can do so in Patagonia. Deliberately, we climbed a snow-and-rock couloir to the col between Bifida and Perfil del Indio. A giant dihedral to the right of the south ridge offered a logical route to the head of a buttress from which we reached Bifida's south summit by ascending exposed cracks. The heavy icing of the crack system made this a treacherous and technically difficult mixed climb.

We attempted many other routes. We also spent a number of days on the Southern Patagonian Icecap, ending with a circuit around the Torre massif. And so our seven months in Patagonia came to an end. Despite hideously bad weather, we were happy with our successes.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Cerro Torre Region of Patagonia, Argentina.

ASCENTS: Cerro Stanhardt, 2800 meters, 9186 feet, Bridwell Route, V+, First Winter Ascent and Third Ascent of the Route, September 2, 1990.

Aguja Cuatro Dedos Main Peak, 2245 meters, 7366 feet, First Ascent of East Face and Second Ascent of the Peak, September 17, 1990.

Perfil del Indio, Probable First Ascent, September 23, 1990

Bifida South Summit, 2450 meters, 8038 feet, New Route via couloir on southwest face (400 meters) and 350-meter face, December 7, 1990.

Aguja Tres Dedos, Traverse of the Three Lower Fingers, VII-, December 13, 1990.

Circuit of the Cerro Torre Massif via the Southern Patagonian Icecap, Paso Marconi, Lago Viedma, Río Túnel, January 23-27, 1991.

PERSONNEL: Tommy Bonapace, Toni Ponholzer, *Austrians*.

