

Cordillera Sarmiento in Winter

JACK MILLER

The islands, fjords and mainland along the southwest coast of South America are legendary for collecting storms. Rolling off the Roaring Forties and Furious Fifties of the South Pacific and Antarctic oceans, they dump precipitation in enormous amounts (one station commonly reports over 8 meters—more than 300 inches—per year). This results in lush rain forests at sea level and healthy glaciers that lie not much higher. Some of the world's fine mountains are found there—when they can be found.

My travels and climbs in this wet zone, over the last 30 years, have ranged from the Darwin Range in Tierra del Fuego to San Lorenzo, 15° of latitude further north. Over time I learned there are pockets within this wet zone that are even wetter, viewed as a perpetual cloud cap, and sure to be centered over some orographic attraction. The Cordillera Sarmiento* is one. Of the several hundred days I'd been, theoretically, within sight of the range, I had glimpsed its peaks only twice, in 1974 and 1976. Even camping during our three-week siege, in January 1976, across the Fjord of the Mountains from these peaks failed to reveal more than their lower escarpments and tongues of glaciers that must descend from massive fields of ice (see *AAJ 1977*, pages 57-72). Ridgeway and party in November, 1989 (*AAJ 1991*, pages 95-98) reported the same unceasing overcast.

Then, one day in February 1990, as I was driving a road some 55 miles to the east, they came clear! I dropped all else, rented a plane and overflew the range, all 40 miles of it, both sides. The photos created an excitement that resulted in grants from The Shipton/Tilman Fund of Gore and Associates and *National Geographic Magazine*. With support from Ladeco Airlines, several equipment manufacturers and donations from friends we raised enough for a modest expedition of six men for six weeks.

Over the years Patagonian locals told me that austral *winter* offered the best chance of clear days and low winds, and the scant climate data bore that out. The trade-off would be short days and colder temperatures. In the winter of 1992 we

* Not to be confused with well-known Monte Sarmiento, south of the Strait of Magellan.

arrived in Puerto Natales, a fishing village 120 miles north of the Straits of Magellan, to learn that June and July had brought some clear, some calm days, even some clear *and* calm days. We were on the right track.

As companions in these explorations, I'd chosen Pete Garber, Rob Hart, Phillip Lloyd, Gordon Wiltsie and Tyler Van Arsdell. Although they had climbed widely in mountains around the world, only Pete had experience in this climate. They were astounded when first stepping ashore into the super-rain forest. Gordon declared "I've never seen a place like this!" which quickly translated to "How the hell do we stay dry?"

That was August 16. We had arrived from Puerto Natales on a 50-foot wooden motor sailor, the *Trinidad*. Early in our 70-mile voyage we abandoned "dry" Patagonia and all of man's activities, except fishing and some rudimentary logging. Even place names on the map stopped, at the edge of "wet." Every map, every book, every person we consulted gave us reason to believe the range was essentially unknown.

Base Camp centered around a smallish 8x16-foot tent that could withstand Antarctic winds, but not, we soon learned, Patagonian rain. We mounted it atop a plywood platform on posts; thus we'd brought our own level and firm ground with us, for such clearly was not to be found anywhere in those boggy forests or along the steep ridges which soar directly off the beach. Our sleeping tents were draped over planks on the bog or on bedrock too exposed to support soil and its spongy mosses. Large stands of old growth *Nothofagus*, or southern beech, protected us from the ferocious winds.

Our 1990 air photos suggested not only this location but also the best ridges for approaching the icefields which overhang the fjords. By August 29, we were camped at 4000 feet, three in a snow cave and three in a Himalayan Hotel tent, until it blew away. By comparing our air photos with views during open moments between storms, we located the route through the lower icefalls and crevasse fields.

Of the 45 days in the range we were graced by several brief periods of clear weather but only had four days which might be called "good." August 30 was one. We rapidly skied our flagged route, and beyond, up steep but trouble-free glacial slopes. Before noon, we topped "The South Face" and stood in awe at the view.

Those readers who have been atop an unclimbed peak in a virgin range on a clear day can imagine our ecstasy. Magnificent peaks spread out to the south and north of us, none with names, or even mapped. The block-faulted nature of the mafic olivine/serpentine bedrock, anomalous throughout the Andean cordillera, resulted in peaks mostly steep-sided, often vertical. By dint of weather and remoteness, all will be difficult climbs; some, such as "Angel Wings"—two overhanging summits in the form of shadow-hands wings—will push mountaineering limits.

Once our initial rapture passed we took surveys with compass and a compact Garmin G.P.S. (Global Positioning System) computer which read our position accurately off military satellites. Then our afternoon passed in a virtual orgy of

PLATE 41

Photo by Jack Miller

**“Fickle Finger of Fate,” Spire Fjord,
Chilean Patagonia.**



peak-bagging, our skis taxying us across the glaciers to “Gremlins Cap,” “Jaco,” and “Elephant Ears,” summits encrusted in rime. Even as dusk came on, young Pete mirrored our reluctance to descend out of this paradise by scrambling around on vertical ice with his front points. The perfect mountain day ended with our ski descent down the rolling glaciers to camp.

The following day, also good, allowed us to split into two groups, Gordon and I went south to scout the route up the ranges’s highest peak, “Peak 66” (given by previous estimates as 6600 feet, although our surveys put it closer to 7000). This we accomplished as the wind was coming up and cumulus lenticulars were building. Given just one more good day, we could climb the peak—but we never got it.

The other four came in at dark, having skied several miles across the entire northern icefield of the range to climb two peaks, named tentatively “Taraba I and II.” Their summit views looked almost straight down into Taraba Sound, the large inland sea which borders the Sarmiento range on the west.

Storm held us in the snow cave for five days, frustrating any further exploration. One attempt aborted abruptly just outside our cave when winds picked up 220-pound Pete and tossed him like a rag doll. Finally we descended in hellish winds and nasty rappels to the fjords, then motored in our small inflatable boat to Base Camp on treacherous seas. We made it in time for our radio schedule with the *Trinidad*.

As we sailed out of the Fjord of the Mountains, the weather lifted and gave us clear views of the range. For the first time I saw the one peak that Dan Asay and I had climbed, blinded by storm, in 1976. It was the highest of three rock towers we called the “Three Furies,” with an altitude of approximately 4000 feet. Rounding Cape Earnest into the shipping lanes, we had full view of Monte Burney, climbed by Eric Shipton in the early 1960s on his third attempt.

Sailing into the unknown Taraba Sound, we explored all five major fjords that pierce the range from the Sound. At the head of one we discovered a glacial lake whose emerald green waters captured icebergs that calved off two immense piedmont glaciers. Gordon pointed out that if this were the Himalaya, thousands of pilgrims would pay homage to it each year for its sheer beauty.

We eventually settled on one fjord, “Spire Fjord” for locating our second Base Camp to explore the range’s central icefield and attempting the spectacular spire that dominates the fjord. We came to know it as the “Fickle Finger of Fate.”

Moderate scrambling on ice got the team to the base of the vertical “Finger.” Only 50 meters of climbing remained to the top, but the infamous “hongo” ice (which we dubbed “elephant ears”), the lacy rime inter-lensed with wind-blasted snow, frustrated Phillip’s first attempt to lead it. It was nearly three weeks before weather permitted another try. On October 1, in an eleventh-hour attempt, he and Pete reached the summit. The following day the *Trinidad* motored in and returned us to civilization.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Cordillera Sarmiento, Chilean Patagonia.

FIRST ASCENTS: (All names are unofficial and altitudes are estimated) South Face, 2125 meters, 6970 feet, August 30, 1992.

Jaco, 2039 meters, 6700 feet, August 30, 1992.

Gremlins Cap, 1992 meters, 6550 feet, August 30, 1992.

Elephant Ears, 1920 meters, 6300 feet, August 30, 1992.

Taraba I and Taraba II, 1890 meters, 6200 feet, August 31, 1992 (Garber, Hart, Lloyd, Van Arsdell).

Fickle Finger of Fate, 1342 meters, 4600 feet, October 1, 1992 (Lloyd, Garber).

PERSONNEL: Jack Miller, leader, Peter Garber, Rob Hart, Phillip Lloyd, Gordon Wiltsie, Tyler Van Arsdell.

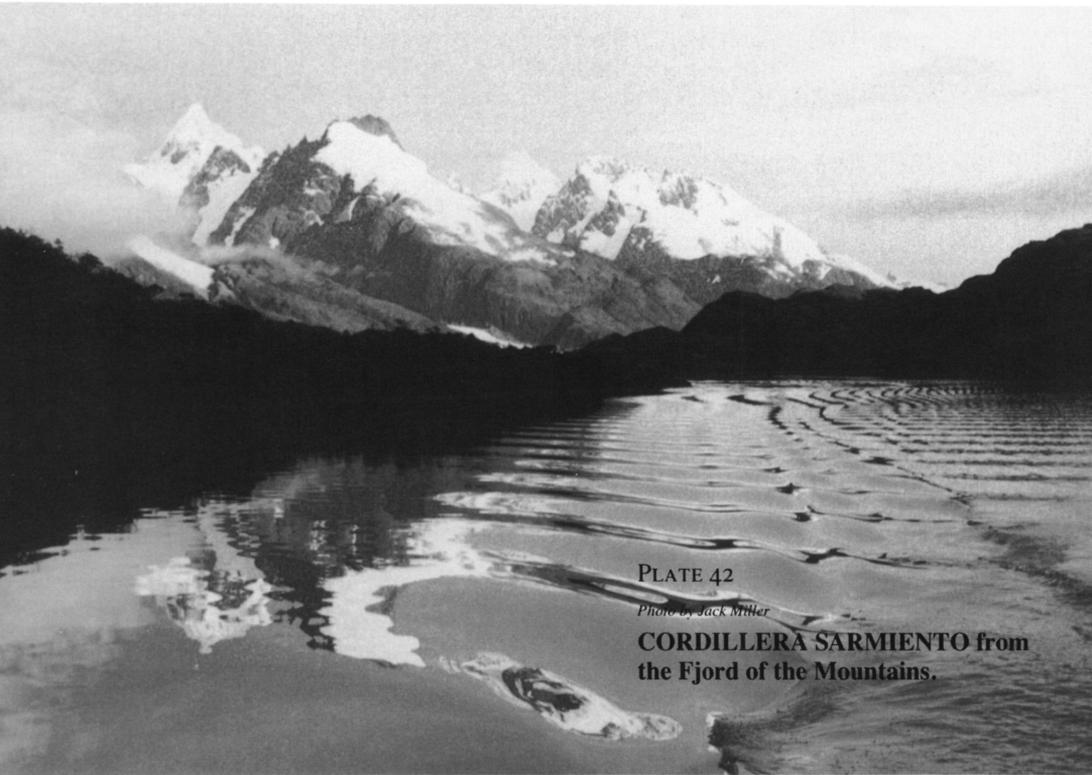


PLATE 42

Photo by Jack Miller

**CORDILLERA SARMIENTO from
the Fjord of the Mountains.**