

Torres del Paine*

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IN PUERTO NATALES WE SET ABOUT GETTING PERMISSIONS. The Chilean officials try to explain that problems are to be solved without haste. Our anxiety accelerates the slowness, but at the end of two days there we are with permission in hand and six containers of food. The weather is clear enough to let us see the Towers. They look like hallucinations, more or less what we had expected. The landscape is indeed Patagonian, like the Fitz Roy region, but a little greener. To the southwest rise the Cuernos but we can't see them. In front, hiding the South Tower, is Paine Chico or Almirante Nieto, a blotch of black granite full of hanging glaciers.

The park rangers look at us intrigued. Who are these mischievous Argentine kids? [Diego Luro is 17 years old. The author is 18. Teodoro Plaza is 20.—*Editor.*] They immediately tell us about the other impressive expeditions and ply us with the usual questions. Diego Luro gets on with arrangements for the horses and Teo Plaza goes to the Park Administration to complete the bureaucratic side.

By afternoon, the horse packer Javier, along with Pepe, has deposited our loads to within a quarter of an hour of Base Camp, as far as the horses can go. We complete the carry that same day and install ourselves in the slums of Base Camp, where the two huts are already occupied. In the next two days we settle in and carry one load to the foot of the Torre Norte. We sleep there but descend the next morning in falling snow to get more food.

The following day, the weather is better and we dry things. That night, we head out and at three A.M. sack out for a bit at the Bonington bivouac. Peering out from our sacks at clouds, we finally make a decision and at ten o'clock start upwards doubtfully. At eleven o'clock we are at the foot of the northwest face. The first pitches, of UIAA IV to V difficulty with some V+, are up cracks and dihedrals. It is snowing a bit and there is some wind. Then, we traverse north a little to the bottom of a chimney, seen prominently from below, which proves to be the crux of the climb. A short A1 pitch, followed by a couple of pitches, gains us the summit.

The Torre Central catches our imagination as we begin to rappel down the normal route. After two rappels, we lose the way in the dark. The wind keeps

*Excerpted with permission from *Escalando* of June 1993.

snagging our ropes but we do get down in 12 rappels and traverse around the wall to our bivouac. Eat, drink, sleep and finally back down into the forest. We called our new route the *Capachin Tórtola*.

In Base Camp, we met Frenchmen, Englishmen, Spaniards, Italians. The Italians were heading home after climbing a new route on the west face of the Torre Central beside Manicà's dihedral and ascending the normal routes on the Torre Sur and the Torre Norte. With powerful stews, chapatis and other dishes, prepared with classical simplicity and good taste by Teodoro, we spent a number of days in the rain in Base Camp before the sun and the towers reappeared.

In the afternoon, we set out, hoping to climb the normal route on the Torre Sur. We ascended to bivouac at the foot of the face. The conditions were ideal: no wind, not a cloud, nothing but mosquitoes, and at night a full moon. It must be a dream, but a cold one.

We started again at four A.M. and were on the col between the Central and South Towers below the face at six. We knew the route began at the Spanish cache, but our first impressions were bad.

"What's the trouble?"

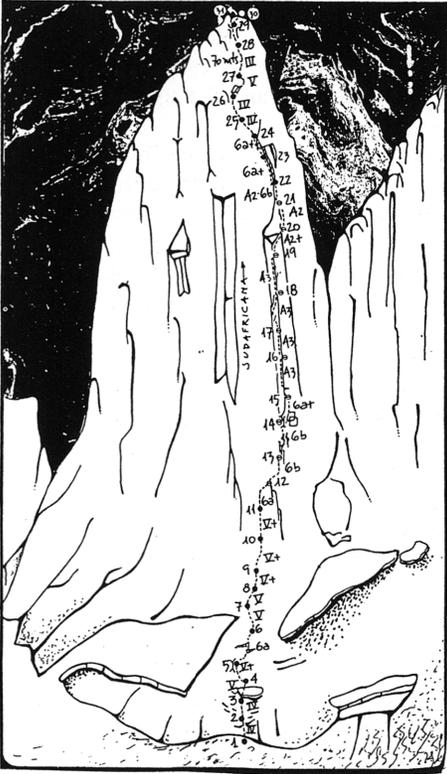
"I don't know. It's tough! And the rock is rotten."

Somehow Teo's A3 lead and an eight-meter fall didn't stack up with the UIAA IV difficulty on the route sketch. We set up a rappel.

After a few moments of observation in the col, we saw something was possible, late as it was and with still 1100 meters to climb. At that moment, the Spaniards arrived. They insisted that the A3 was nearly on the route. We decided to join up and climb to the shoulder together, the most difficult part, and fix the route with their ropes.

At 11:30, we faced the wall. The day was incredible, the kind that almost never happens. The first pitches went well, easy but on nasty rock. The fourth was the toughest: A1, where the pitons stayed loose and the Friends wedged out great blocks. Two more pitches and we were on the shoulder. We scanned the wall above and begged the rock to stay good. We fixed the route and returned to the bivouac to recharge our batteries, terribly run down after our initial mistake. We ate a mush together with the three Spaniards. They decided to rest another day before attacking the route.

At 3:30 A.M., the confounded alarm went off. The conditions had changed but it looked as if we could weather it out. We were back at the top of the shoulder at 7:30 and continued up another 150 meters unroped. Then came an abrupt change. The rock stopped being an obstacle and became a wonderful granite. The weather was disgusting: wind and spindrift. We climbed the first pitches simultaneously until we reached slab and a little A1 roof. These went rapidly. After a few dihedrals we entered a chimney, which was running ice-water. After a few more meters, we got to the easy part, but we were dog-tired and the wind was ferocious. We gained the 300 meters to the summit by three P.M. A video, three cameras for panoramas and shots of each other from every possible angle. On the descent, one rappel after another while it rained buckets.



**Torre Central del Paine,
Northeast Face, "Una Fina
Línea de Locura."**



**Torre Norte del Paine, West
Face, "Capachín Tórtola."**



**Torre Sur del Paine, North
Buttress, Aste Route, 1963.**

We climbed down the 150 “easy” meters with great care and hooked onto the fixed ropes. We loaded as much as we could into our packs at the bivouac and descended to the forest and Base Camp.

We slept, gorged and hatched plans with Yankee Peter Garber and South African Phillip Lloyd*, whom we had met the year before in Bariloche. The idea, which at the beginning seemed insane, was to open a new route on the east face of the Torre Central, up a dihedral to the right of the South African route. It was 1300 meters high and they had already climbed 500 meters of it. Well and good! We had the time and the desire. We could combine our hardware and each of us put US 100 dollars into a common fund for fixed rope. The only problem was that they had the obligation of guiding a trekking group for the next three weeks, an obligation they couldn’t get out of. We agreed to work on the route until they returned.

Before dawn on December 12, 1992, Teo, Phillip and Peter headed up. With a friend, Diego and I went to pick up what we had left on the Torre Sur. At nightfall, the others returned. Teo and Phillip had done three more pitches, the hardest of 6b and A1. Peter, meanwhile had traded for some “excellent” yachting rope, which was no longer to be trusted even for tying horses. The weather was awful and promised to get worse. On December 14, Phil and Peter descended to the flesh-pots of Punta Arenas and their trekkers. The rest of us dedicated ourselves to rounding out our bellies.

The weather was foul. When it got a little better, we carried gear and food to Camp I. We kept on to the base of the dihedral with its 500 meters of fixed rope. After jümaring for two and a half hours, we got to a ledge where we cached our whole arsenal. That was where our tiny dihedral began and seemed to soar up to infinity. We calculated that there were 200 meters or more of hell. Our greatest worry at that moment (aside from the narrow calibre of the dihedral) was the final roof, which jugged out some six meters into space. We didn’t even start up because of the late hour, the foul weather and the lamb that was awaiting us below at the farewell feast for the Galicians. We finished the feast and got into the Christmas spirit, drinking so much that no one has a clear idea of anything.

Idleness fed us up. We made a load carry, and as we descended, the faint sun began to peer. The next day, we ascended. There was a breeze, but nothing serious. We jümared the 600 meters and stood face to face with the dihedral. While Teo struggled, I changed the rappels and adjusted the ropes. The picture was gloomy: 20 meters in four hours.

Disheartened, we rappelled and slept in Camp I. At 4:30 the next morning, we breakfasted well and returned. I began where we had left off the day before. The climbing was at a snail’s pace and fatiguing. I made 15 meters, set up a belay and brought Teo up to finish the pitch. I left him with Diego at Camp I and descended to Base Camp for more food and a drill. They forged on and

*The remarkable South African climber died tragically on the Torre Norte del Paine on December 14, 1993.

PLATE 4

Photo by Ramiro Calvo

**Teo Plaza on "Una Fina Línea de
Locura" on the TORRE CENTRAL
DEL PAINE.**



PLATE 5

Photo by Ramiro Calvo

**Teo Plaza leading and Diego Luro
belaying on "Una Fina Línea de
Locura."**



began the second pitch of A3 until Teo took a 20-meter flight, stopped by a micro-stopper. He climbed back up, set up a rappel and the two descended.

The alarm clock sounded and the routine began again. I set out at five A.M. and at eleven o'clock caught up with the fellows, who were finishing the second A3 pitch with snub-nosed pitons and micro-stoppers. Diego went down and I stayed on with Teo to do the third A3 pitch. Teo climbed out of the dihedral and traversed left to a vertical crack. Where the crack ended just under the roof he set up a belay anchor, fixed the rope and descended, cleaning the route. This was the third continuous pitch of A3. It was New Year's Eve, but we were in no position to celebrate. Just then I caught sight of a yellow speck moving up the glacier. Little by little, it took on the form of Peter. His enthusiasm elevated our spirits and we filled our stomachs with fresh rolls.

The weather was incredible: no wind, no clouds! I sacked in early since it was my turn to head up the next day with Peter. Early as always, we headed for work. I led up over the first little roof in fine style. I placed a Friend, but above it was blank. I had to swap the Friend for all the rest of my pitons and micro-stoppers. Peter came up to give me more hardware. I kept on up until I could place some protection. I examined the roof with care and found it completely smooth to the left. I leaned out from the wall and there to the right I spied a tiny fissure that split the roof from bottom to top. My joyous shout to Peter pulled Diego and Teo up rapidly from below. They were loaded with more rope and hardware. I draped myself with stoppers and micro-Friends and advanced toward the roof. Hanging from one Friend suspended from the overhanging crack to another, I swung over the abyss and finally over the edge of the roof. I had made it! Diego jumared up and descended, cleaning the route.

It dawned clear, but with signs of change. Peter and Teo ascended. I descended to bring up more food and joined an Argentine friend Nicolás Benedetti. We scanned the Central Tower with binoculars from Base Camp and found the others already 100 meters above the roof. We dedicated ourselves to serious eating and in the afternoon trudged upward to Camp I. Diego had organized camp into a real community. The boys descended late, exhausted. "We've done all the tough aid climbing!" announced Teo.

The next day, we did two pitches of A2 and 6b up to the base of a little dihedral. Above were flakes, slabs, other stuff and the summit. That afternoon we descended in a pelting rain and thought things over. All we needed was one good day.

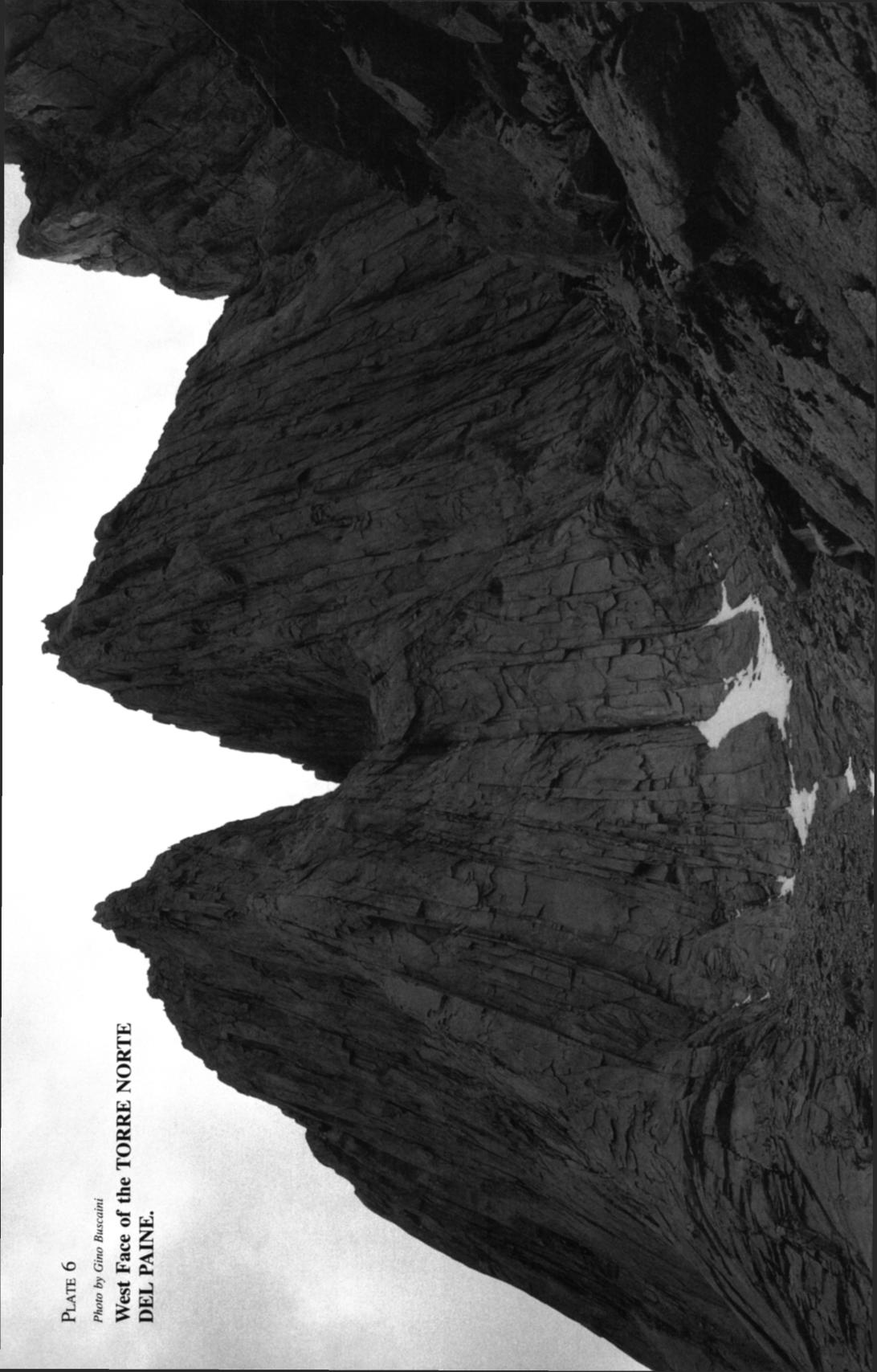
Eventually we left Base Camp one night a half-hour before midnight. There was a little wind, but we could see the mountains perfectly. The only problem was a coating of snow.

We began to jumär at five A.M. Peter waited in Camp I for Phillip, who was still at Laguna Amarga. The ascent was tough. Teo did the hard work, skating out in places. At eleven o'clock, we got to the end of the fixed lines and began the final climb. Diego led up the little 6a+ dihedral and up another pitch, but

PLATE 6

Photo by Gino Bascaioni

**West Face of the TORRE NORTE
DEL PAINE.**



he headed left to some slabs because the rock wasn't very good. We heard shouts from Nicolás Benedetti, who was climbing solo the normal route on the North Tower.

"You're almost up, but bear a little left."

"Great! Good Luck!"

We took photos of each other on our respective towers and followed Nico's hints. Finally, we came to a nasty step and there belayed with three or four slings and some carabiners because most of gear was spread out over the wall. We surmounted some blocks to a dihedral and climbed to the easy part where the angle lay back. We climbed some 70 meters unroped up to the final buttress, where we roped up again but climbed simultaneously. We found some of Bonington's wedges, fixed ropes of all kinds and even a Friend. There were delicate passages and then the summit—no, the foresummit—and finally the real thing. We couldn't believe it after all the hard work. The only thing amiss was that all five of us hadn't arrived together.

Luckily the six rappels to the fixed rope went smoothly. We left the rappel rope fixed on the last pitch for Peter and Philip to help them on the way up. We descended under light snowfall. Finally, all five of us were assembled in Camp I. It was two A.M.

In the next days, Phillip and Peter made an attempt, but the weather turned bad. Peter had to leave to return to work. Phillip and Nico joined up for another attempt and made the summit on a spectacular day along with Diego, who climbed to the summit for a second time. The next day, we all went up and cleaned the route.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Chilean Patagonia.

ASCENTS: Torre Norte del Paine, 2260 meters, 7415 feet; New Route, Capachin Tórtola, West Face just to the left of the Piola-Sprungli Route; 11 pitches, 500-meter rise, 6a, A1; December 3, 1992 (Ramiro Calvo, Diego Luro, Teodoro Plaza).

Torre Sur del Paine, 2500 meters, 8204 feet; Normal Route on the North Spur; 17 pitches, 1100-meter rise, V+, A1; December 9 and 10, 1992 (Calvo, Luro, Plaza).

Torre Central del Paine, 2460 meters, 8071 feet; New Route, Una Fina Línea de Locura, Northeast Face starting to the left of the 1974 South African route which it crosses 250 meters up and following to the right of the South African Route until it joins the 1963 Bonington Route 200 meters from the summit; 31 pitches, 1300-meter rise, 6b, A3, 31 pitches; Summit reached on January 10, 1993 (Calvo, Luro, Plaza) and on January 17, 1993 (Nicolás Benedetti, Phillip Lloyd, Luro).