

Ensueño

The northwest buttress of Fitz Roy

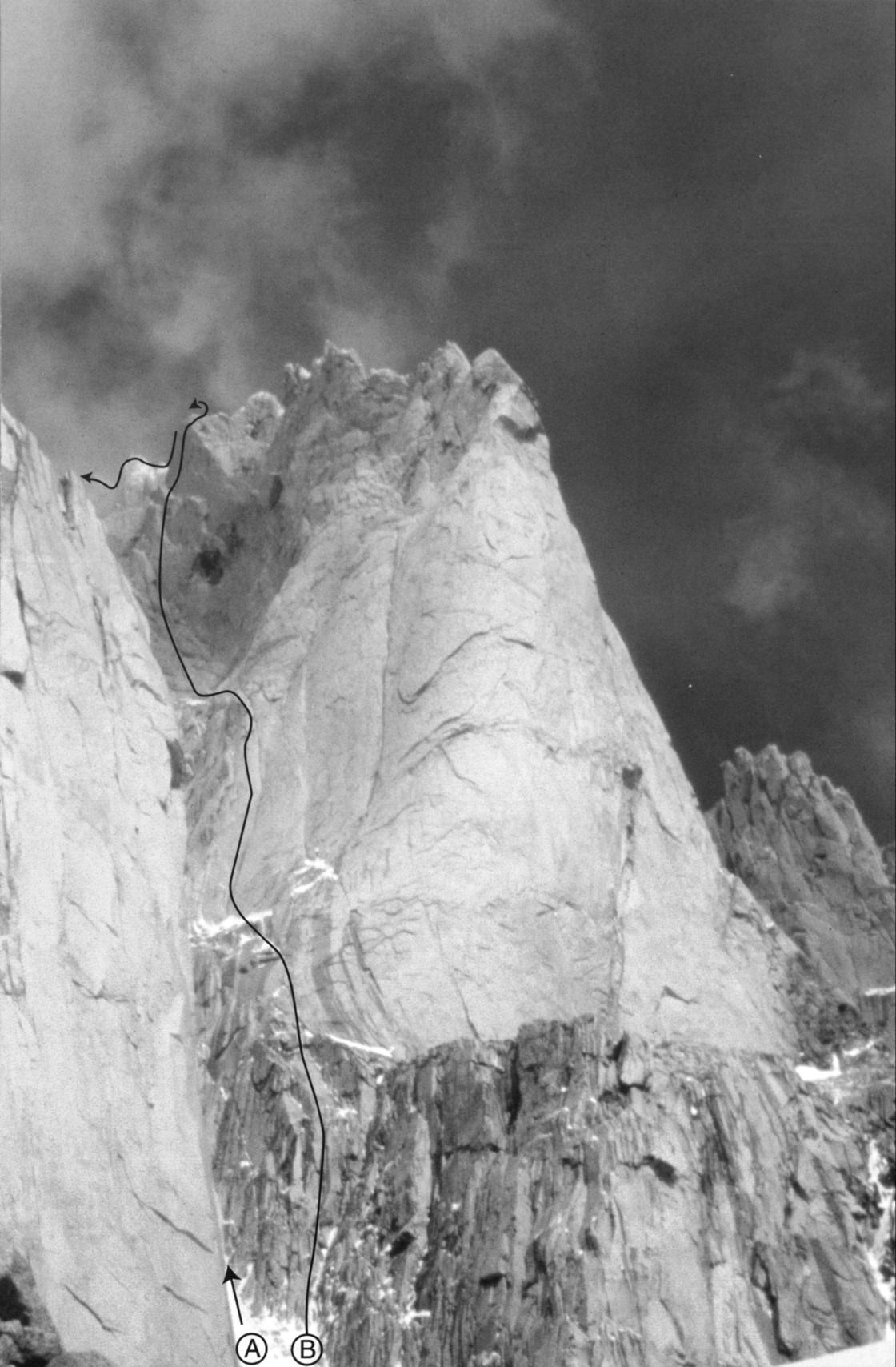
by ANDREA SARCHI

Twelve years have elapsed since my first journey to Patagonia. The first time I arrived in that place, it rained, the mountains were wrapped in the dense mists of the south and everything seemed difficult and foreign: fording the Las Vueltas River, where years before Poicenet drowned, barefoot and with his trousers rolled up to his groin; advancing in those gnarled and contorted woods, folded and refolded from the force of the storms; living in the tents of advance base camps in the manner of Robinson Crusoe; resisting the absolute power of the wind. We drew close to those bewitched and inaccessible mountains with the fear of being clutched and dragged away forever.

Between the many stories and legends told at night, in front of the eternal campfire, the affirmation hit me of a Spanish alpinist who maintained that in Patagonia the stories were *todo o nada* — all or nothing. I hadn't yet grasped the concept, but my intuition told me that this must be the terrible secret of this place. I have been at the base of Torre, Fitz and Piergiorgio every year since then, and finally, after all these years of expeditions, adventures, delusions, successes, wasted time and sorrow, I have understood that famous saying. *Todo o nada*. All or nothing.

In November, 1995, Pietro dal Pra', Lorenzo Nadali and I, after having crossed a part of the Continental Ice Cap, landed at the haunted bay of the Cirque of Los Altares and tried to climb the west face of the Torre Egger, a blackboard of granite furrowed with slender veins that interrupt the smooth and polished spaces. Though the line of ascent was improbable and ephemeral, our presumptuousness prevailed — but after interminable days in the ice cave waiting for scraps of good weather and a few attempts on the wall, we realized with delusion and sorrow that the climb was for us, in that moment, pure utopia. The sensation that enveloped me after months of fantasy and dreaming was like knowing that you were to be the sole inheritor of a great fortune only to find out at the last moment that the will was changed in someone else's favor. *Todo o nada*. The discomfort stayed and it became difficult to find the desire to do the simplest things. I closed myself in my sleeping bag and ceased to think.

After an attempt of the Torre via the Ferrari route, clipped short at three-quarter's height by the absolute cruelty and insensibility of the weather, we arrived at a unanimous decision and resigned ourselves to defeat: not a



(A)

(B)



defeat by points, but rather a flooring by a KO punch. And Fitz, upon noticing he'd floored us, lacked even the minimum sense of respect. The day that we loaded the heavy sledge with tens of kilos of still-unused gear and struggled along toward the Marconi Pass, Fitz presented us at the base with a small spectacle of blustery winds, mist and leaden hail, smoke and absolutely impenetrable vapors, rain and sinister howls.

When we finally arrived late at night at the basecamp hut, we looked at each other; it was as if we'd just stepped off the moon. *Enough*, I thought, *that was the last time, at least for me*. I said it in a loud voice, with the certainty of at least once having said something wise. Yes, by God, I wouldn't spend my vacations far from my house and family any more, playing hide and seek with Fitz who was so often better, stronger, omnipotent. I'd had enough of getting my cheek slapped purple; I would no longer play the part of the poor mouse between the paws of a sadistic cat.

Yes, I swore: next year I'd go with my wife and kid to the sea, and I wouldn't feel even the faintest desire to do a single pitch of climbing.

The days passed and the return home drew closer at a quickened pace. And without my even having noticed it, a small invisible worm of doubt had fixed itself between the valves of my heart.

In December I was supposed to return to Patagonia to accompany a group of clients for a brief tour of 15 days. Was it realistic to stop for a few extra days and try again? In no time, the fire was rekindled, hope began recirculating in the veins and a real reason to have the desire to continue was born again. We talked it out among ourselves, and gave ourselves an extra 15 to 20 days, and no more.

Folly, pure folly! I, who had waited months (and then months more!) for a decent chance to ascend, now satisfied myself with nibbling at a few miserable days, hoping for who knew what! I returned to Italy with my tail between my legs and the heart heavy with that famous little worm of doubt that in the interim had fed itself and gained weight.

I hadn't talked with anyone about it and it held me apart; wrestling in silence with my sense of guilt, I was secretly convinced that I was a fool. At times, however, it's simply enough to put rationality aside, and certainly in that moment I had disrupted reason and had no desire to put it aright. Christmas arrived with all the traditional trappings, and for me it was also time to leave again for far-off lands. During the trek (a completely new experience for me) the days followed one another slowly but surely. I looked from down low at peaks and mountains which, in some way, we had always sought to dominate. Fitz granted us a miserly few days of sun, still others with wind, and many more again of rain. The mountains of clouds followed their own preordained plan and from the west they thickened up against the spires, passing over and inundating them without even dispersing on the lim-

itless plains of the *pampa*.

There comes an end even to vagabond times, and Lorenzo and I found ourselves at the point we'd left off two months before. We had cut out for ourselves a small space to attempt the northwest buttress of Fitz Roy — and there it had to be. For me this objective was an old acquaintance. The year before Pietro and I had immersed ourselves in that world of infinite slabs, dihedrals and cracks and we'd gotten scared that we wouldn't be able to catch a glimpse of the end. Fitz had mocked us as usual, abundantly regaling us with a few hours of warmth and sun at the start, but after a bit becoming resentful and holding the muzzle for many days on the Piedra del Fraile.

Halfway through January, 1995, we found ourselves in camp with Mauro Girardi, an alpinist from Mezzocorona on his first experience in Patagonia and with a great desire to reach a summit. We willingly accepted him into our team and commenced.

We had transported everything necessary for a climb of several days to the base of the *Super Couloir* and spent the first night at its base.

"I know," I thought to myself. "You'll screw us this time, too, but by now I have developed such antibodies for the gnawing worms of doubt that I won't suffer as much. I know the situation; you play your game, and we'll play ours!"

Sunday would have been a splendid day to pass in bed listening to the pattering rain and the howling wind, but we stirred ourselves up and by the time evening fell we had finished hauling the loads and had already left the lines of our web up on a nice piece of wall.

Suddenly, as seldom happens, there was a bit of clearing. Though we were weak from the long carries, we rallied and began climbing, reaching the large ledge at the base of the pillar itself, where we established our first camp.

The pitches of the first day of climbing followed one another with moments faster and exhilarating, and others slower and more trying. In little time we had reascended our route from the preceding attempt, and with strong emotion we rediscovered our lines, which had awaited us for over a year. In the evening, tired but content, we found ourselves in our tent recounting amongst ourselves the sensations of the day and the expectations of the following. The sky stayed clear, but I didn't dare believe in such a gift, thinking it was only a trick to get us to climb up a bit more before we got slammed.

By the third day we were on virgin ground and the climb offered us ever grander surprises. That which we had thought would be surmountable only with laborious aid revealed itself as being free-climbable and of great quality and satisfaction. Before the sun had followed three-quarters of its long journey we arrived on a ledge that would certainly host us for the night.

Mauro, our technical wizard specializing in bivouac spots, occupied



CHALTÉN - FITZROY

3441m
SOUTHERN PATAGONIAN ICE CAP
NORTHWEST FACE

"ENSUEÑO"

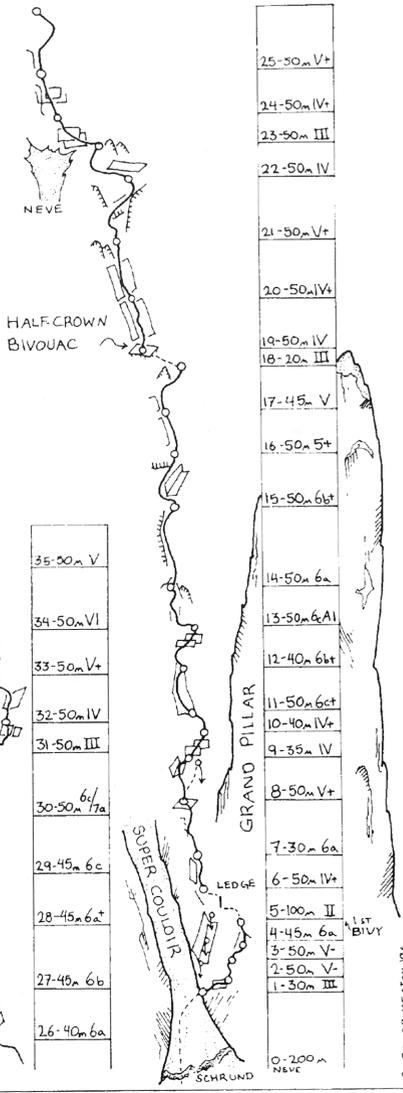
"THE DREAM"



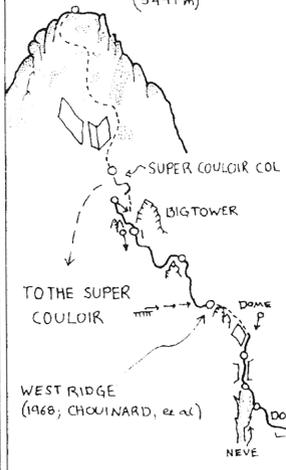
ANDREA SARCHI
LORENZO NADALI
MAURO GIRARDI

ITALY

- FROM 22/1/95 TO 26/1/95, 26m AND 27 FOR DESCENT
- 1500m RELIEF
- 2500m DEVELOPED
- 340m IN COMMON WITH SUPER COULOIR
NEW ROUTE = 1710m + 450m ICE & MIXED
- ALL BELAYS WITH ONE BOLT
- DIFFICULTY: 6a/7a-A1 (5.11 a/5.11 c-A1)
- TOPO RATINGS ARE UIAA/FRENCH COMBINATION
- ♣ = BELAYS AND RAPPELS OUTSIDE THE ROUTE



CHALTÉN/FITZROY SUMMIT (3441m)



SUMMIT	
250m EASY MIXED	
44-15m	A
43-50m	III
42-50m	V+
41-35m	IV
40-50m	V
39-40m	III
38-50m	V-
37-50m	V+
36-50m	V+

IN COMMON WITH SUPER COULOIR



himself with organizing the place and making it as comfortable as possible. Lorenzo and I spent the last part of the afternoon and the evening fixing all the lines we had. By now we were very close to the *Torre Rossa*, profound heart of the wall. Suddenly we realized that even if we were miserably low, the final ridges were a only gunshot away.

The excitement was super high, and that night, in spite of the fact that Mauro had performed a bona fide miracle of engineering, making the bivouac really comfortable, I couldn't keep my eyes closed. My mind went frenetically here and there on Fitz Roy. The wind that night howled its furious disapproval; the portaledge tent must have been pushed to its limits not to be overwhelmed. The morning was announced by frayed clouds that arrived from the wild west, and intense gusts battered the mountain and her creatures.

We had decided to give ourselves a day of rest to try and recuperate a bit of the strength lost here and there on the buttress in the preceding days. But that evening a light and sparkling breeze arrived from the east, and we all hoped strongly that the good weather would recompose.

The next morning the air was frigidly cold, and an absolute silence enveloped us, closing us up in our shell. But by now there wasn't any doubt: this was to be our grand day. We got going very early with excitement and impatience. We got over a pillar that we baptized the "Red Tower," then found ourselves in a vast amphitheater and climbed cracks and dihedrals all day long. In the late afternoon we were on the east ridge which, with another seven or eight pitches, would put us in the vicinity of the summit. We untied, and after another 200 meters of not difficult mixed climbing reached the top, happy and almost surprised at our success.

Joy, emotion, apprehension, fear, incredulity, stupor, confusion: we knew all too well that we were living an absolutely unrepeatable experience. We turned to face the Piedra del Fraile and called out in unison to Ricardo, manager of the hut, hoping in our hearts that he could hear and see us. After all, only four kilometers separated us.

Then we had to reconcentrate and make a supreme effort to pull together our residual mental and physical energies; an interminable descent awaited us, a difficult return given our fatigue and the imminent darkness. While the night slowly advanced we three tiny points lost in a metaphysical universe did the best we could to get down as much as possible. After several absolutely risky rappels, traverses and pendulums, we decided to bivouac on a small ledge and wait for the next day. Thinking it all over when things had cooled down, something struck me from that situation: The fear had completely disappeared. Our reactions were slow and dreamlike. A few times I noticed I was off belay and it didn't worry me in the least.

On the ledge we crouched down exhausted and slept deeply for a few hours. When we opened our eyes the sun was high in the sky and the splen-

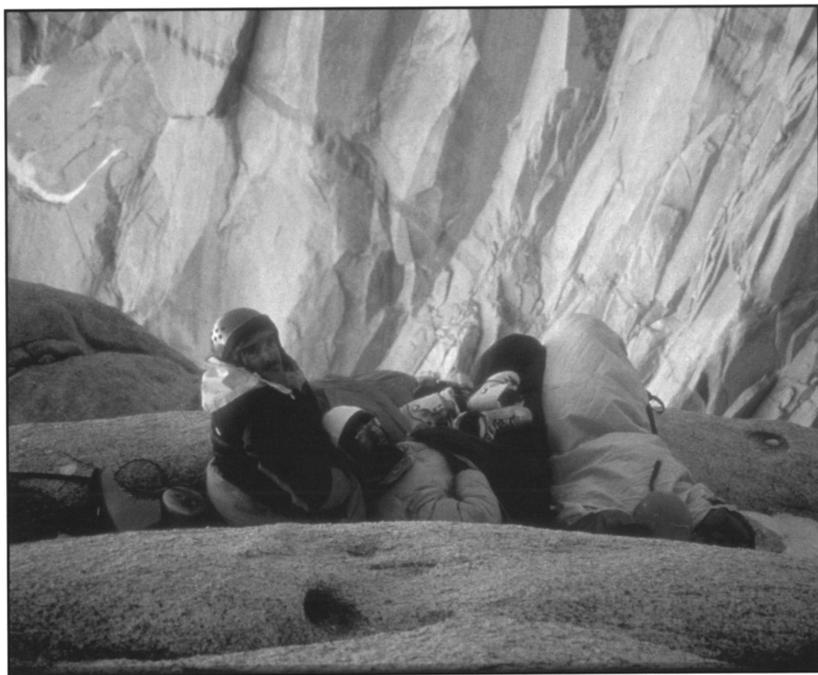
did day reflected violently off the Continental Ice Cap. We started descending again, thinking that before evening we would arrive at the tents of advanced camp, invisible points at the base of the buttress. But this day, too, lasted an eternity and only with the final light did we touch the last meters of the *Super Couloir*.

Fitz in the meantime had noticed us and what we had done. With a blind and dumb rage he blew us away toward our fragile hut. But this time we had won the game, and I'm sure that even he, at the base of his logic, begrudged us a secret and unconfessable credit. And so ended our "dream," and slowly and quietly we reclaimed our lives.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Patagonia, Argentina.

NEW ROUTE: *Ensueño* (VI 6c/7a A1, 2500 meters) on the northwest buttress of Fitz Roy (3410 meters), January 22-26, 1995 (Andrea Sarchi, Lorenzo Nadali, Maoro Girardi).



Bivy on the northwest buttress, with the *Super Couloir* below.
Andrea Sarchi