

# Welcome to Patagonia

**A primer for wild walls and wilder weather**

by Charlie Fowler



*The welcoming committee.* CHARLIE FOWLER

**N**ovember 28, 1997. I'm in Kathmandu, crippled by a 1,500-foot tumble down a mountain in west Tibet. Anatoli Boukreev, on his way to Annapurna, takes me to the airport and wheels me to the plane. I can't walk, but I dream of climbing again. We talk about climbing Shishapangma next fall, shake on it and I fly home. Exactly one year later, to the day, I'm flying south to Patagonia with Steph Davis.

It is a difficult year in between. By spring I can walk, sort of. Easy bouldering and lay-backing cracks at Indian Creek. In June I travel to Zion and do a couple of little big walls. By summer I can wear rock shoes again and go sport climbing. In the fall I go back to Indian Creek, jamming this time. The Himalaya will have to wait, though. The next step will be Patagonia.

I know the Fitz Roy area well, after several seasons there; returning will be a good test. In 1977, Mike Munger and I traveled to Patagonia on my first trip abroad. Jim Donini, like us a Boulder resident at the time, had recently done Torre Egger. He convinced us to go.

I trained hard and practiced aid climbing fast, like my hero, Kor. But Donini said, "Train to free climb well so you don't have to aid." I did not fully understand then the implications of climbing fast in Patagonia, but I took his advice.

Mike and I had intended to do a route on the west face of Fitz Roy, then unclimbed. Upon arriving we quickly realized that project was beyond our abilities. We opted for the nearby Super Caneleta, which had been climbed twice.

The weather, we discovered, is not as bad as people say—it's worse. You're always waiting, then more waiting. Even when climbing, you're just waiting for the weather to get really bad. You're always moving, too. There are few rest days, as you're preparing for when the weather does get good. You do a lot of walking. Welcome to Patagonia.

After three weeks of waiting and preparation, our turn came. On January 23, 1978, we stood on top of Fitz Roy in a gathering storm.

I wanted to return to Patagonia soon after that, but other projects and the lure of travel and adventure took me to other places—the Alps, Peru, the Himalaya. When I did return, the place had changed. There's now a bridge across the Rio Fitz Roy, and a town on the other side, El Chalten. Busloads of tourists come. In the high season, hundreds of tourists hike to the base camps every day. But some things never change—it's easy to blame the weather, but the climbs are still big and hard. Success is elusive, if reaching summits is your measure of success.

Steph and I arrive in El Chalten November 29 and establish base camp at Rio Blanco the next day. Two years before, we had spent almost three months in Patagonia, attempting several climbs and summiting a few. This time, Steph is only planning on spending three weeks, hoping to get lucky. Our goal is to climb the North Pillar of Fitz Roy.

On my first trip to Patagonia there were only a handful of climbers around. By chance, I met an Italian, Renato Casarotto, who was with a large expedition attempting this climb. They didn't make it. Like all successful Patagonia climbers, Renato was not put off by failure, nor intimidated by the tremendous amount of time and hard work required. He returned the following season and soloed the climb.

On December 4, in improving weather, we dig a snowcave at Paso Superior. We are not ready to commit to a multi-day project like Fitz Roy, but we are anxious to climb. We pack up that evening, wake up early and climb the regular route on Guillaumet. By Patagonia standards it's short and easy, hence very popular. A classic nonetheless. Glacier, snow, ice, mixed, then rock and more snow—my first summit since Tibet.

We turn our attention to Casarotto's route. The bergschrund guarding the climb is impassable, so we fix a rock pitch around it.

"Only 5,000 feet to go," Steph quips.

This proves to be our highpoint. As her time runs out, frustration increases. Pretty soon we're out of time for Fitz Roy. We approach the east pillar of Mermoz, a climb we can do in a day, but we bail—bad snow. Steph has had enough, and we pull our gear down from Paso Superior.

**T**here are two types of climbers that come to Patagonia: those who visit once and never come back, and those, like myself, who return often. Each season a crowd of regulars congregate at Campo Bridwell and Rio Blanco base camps. Just as Steph is pulling out, two of the regulars, Kurt Albert and Bernd Arnold, arrive.

The two Germans come armed with a gas-powered Hilti and a pile of fixed ropes and bolts. Their goal: the east pillar of Mermoz. This wall already sports two routes, but the finest line, the "Red Pillar," remains uncompleted. Attempted by several parties in alpine style, it was nearly completed by Americans Kennan Harvey and Topher Donahue in 1994. Over the course

of the next month, Kurt and Bernd make their way up the wall, placing bolt belay anchors every 30 meters and an average of three bolts per pitch next to perfect cracks. The season before they established *Condorito* on St. Exupery in the same style, and a few years before that, the monumental *Royal Flush* on Fitz Roy's east pillar.

"We put in three bolts every pitch, whether it needed them or not," Kurt told me of *Royal Flush*. He also told me it was the best climb he'd ever done. One can argue about their tactics, but you can't argue about the quality of the routes they open. I'd seen *Royal Flush*; it looks like one of the best climbs on the planet. In a few weeks, Nate Martin is going to meet me in El Chalten for an attempt on this line. We hope to do all 47 pitches free, in alpine style.

For now, I'm without a partner, but highly motivated. I go back up to Paso Superior with Kurt and Bernd. While they chip away at their project, I contemplate climbing Mermoz as well. On December 21, I leave my snowcave with a 100-meter rope and small rack. I drop through Paso Guillaumet to the west side of the range, then down over the west ridge of Guillaumet, from where I traverse to the west face of Mermoz and its original line of ascent. I leave my mountain boots, axes and crampons at the base. Climbing in rock shoes, I wander up.

Not only do I lack a partner, I lack a topo, too. Looking for the easiest way, I wander a lot and make some route-finding errors, but eventually find myself on top. The summit of Fitz Roy is in a cloud, and a massive storm spills off the ice cap, signalling the end of a three-day spell of good weather.

Days later, I move base camp to Campo Bridwell. Donini is there, with his wife and son. Warren, Russ and Sean are there, to do a big aid climb. First timers, they fail to even get to the base of the climb.

"Welcome to Patagonia," I say.

Toni Ponholzer is there, his eighth season down, to attempt the Egger route on Cerro Torre. Miles Smart, Trym Saeland and I head up the Torre Valley for Cerro Stanhardt. In perfect weather and by the light of a full moon we head for *Exocet*, the classic ice climb. But in the middle of the night it's a waterfall. Still too warm.

New Year's Day. Perfect weather again, so I trudge back up to Paso Superior, alone. Next morning I head back to Guillaumet, this time to do the left French Gully. When I arrive it looks dry and quite hard, so I start a line to its left. After some easy mixed, I break out the rope and self-belay four pitches of sporty ice and mixed that lead to the summit snowfield. From the top, I go down the route Steph and I had climbed.

Nate arrives, and so does a long spell of good weather (of course we don't know this). We hike up the Torre Valley to do a "warm-up." We leave high camp at 5 a.m. I punch a trail up a steep snowfield to the base of St. Exupery's north face.

Nate, breathless, asks, "Don't you ever get tired?"

Yes, I think to myself, when I follow you.

I lead the first five rope-stretching pitches. Starting left of the Kearney/Harrington route, we join the big ramp on that line after two and a half pitches. Nate takes over the lead as we exit the ramp to attack the north face directly. Five more 60-meter pitches, mostly hand and finger cracks, take us to the summit ridge. The climbing is superb and we are elated. I lead two more mixed pitches to the top. Too bad I left my boots and crampons at the base—it's terrifying in rock shoes.

We rappel the east ridge to a big ledge system. It's getting dark, the wind is whipping our ropes around and snow flurries fill the air. I suggest we wait it out till morning. After a while shivering on the ledge, Nate offers, "I've never done an unplanned bivy before."

Welcome to Patagonia.



*Steph Davis near Paso Superior. Behind can be seen Fitz Roy (left) and Mermoz (right).*

CHARLIE FOWLER

Days later, the weather is still good. Kurt and Bernd have finished their route on Mermoz, naming it *Vela y Viento*. Kurt, weary from hauling all that fixed line, says, “Maybe next time I’ll do a route alpine style.”

Nate and I head back to Paso Superior for a go at *Royal Flush*. Ironically, all the good weather is melting everything; Royal Flush is too wet to free climb. We go to Poincenot instead. The classic Whillans route is unusually dry. We do the ramp, now thin ice, at night. The mixed pitches above are all rock. We linger for almost an hour on top, watching a Swiss couple repeat *Vela y Viento*.

*Royal Flush* is drying out, but the good spell comes to an end nine days after it started. Then two Austrians, Heinz Zak and Peter Janschek, come to climb *Royal Flush* as well. We become fast friends. Unlike Nate and I, their plan is to fix the first 14 pitches, then blast to the top, resorting to “French free” for speed. Heinz is skeptical about our free attempt. “Everything must be perfect,” he says of that.

After more weeks of waiting, I begin to think Heinz may be right. I reckon we need at least three days of reasonable weather. It doesn’t look like that’s going to happen. We get a haulbag and gear up the first few pitches. The Austrians fix four more. Nate’s time is almost



up; on the last possible day, we go.

"We either do it or get royally flushed," I joke.

Nate leads three pitches above our highpoint. We descend to a stance and bivy on the wall. The climbing is awesome and we are psyched. We wake up the next day to wind and snow. We're outta there. As we drag our haulbag across the glacier, the wind whips up to a ferocious intensity. Lying flat on the glacier, terrified we'll be swept off, we can barely hang on. They don't call it La Escoba de Dios (the Broom of God) for nothing.

Back at the pass, we rest and dry out. The weather improves, but we only have one more day. The next morning is a go. Heinz and Peter head for *Royal Flush*, Nate and I head for *Vela y Viento*. It's only 16 pitches; we figure we can do it in a day.

I lead the first few pitches, but as the difficulties increase I let Nate take over. Kurt and Bernd, who had not freed the line, told us, "There's a lot of 5.12." I am climbing well, all things considered, but I struggle to follow Nate as he on-sights every hard pitch.

It turns out to be a blustery day, and we fight the cold as much as the rock. The climbing is excellent, but hard to enjoy with numb hands. At the top of pitch 11, a hex marks the spot. Topher and Kennan bailed. Another pitch up an ice-filled crack and we're on the north ridge. Kurt and Bernd went left from here, reaching the summit four pitches later. Nate and I go right, onto easier ground. We arrive at the summit just at dark. Rappelling all night is a slow, tedious process. We are back at Paso Superior 28 hours after we left.

Nate takes off. Five weeks in Patagonia is not enough time. Heinz and Peter manage 37 pitches up *Royal Flush* before wind and snow shut them down. A great effort, but they are disappointed, having missed the summit. I have another week in Patagonia. The weather slowly deteriorates and I'm reduced to bouldering at El Chalten.

At the end, an Argentine climber is stranded at Paso Superior with a badly broken foot. Heinz and Peter go up to help with the rescue. Just below the pass, the wind sweeps Peter off and he breaks his leg. I visit the two broken climbers, side-by-side in the hospital, then help Heinz wheel Peter to the airport.

"I'll be back," says Peter.

I know.

## SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

### AREA: Argentine Patagonia

ASCENTS: Right French Couloir (TD-, 5.9 60° ice mixed, 400m) on Guillaumet, December 5, 1998, Charlie Fowler and Steph Davis; Argentinian Route (TD, 5.10-, 500m) on the west face/north ridge of Aguja Mermoz, December 21, 1998, Charlie Fowler, solo; variation to the Pippo Fraison (line to the left of the French Gully) (TD, 80° ice, mixed, 300m) on Guillaumet, January 2, 1999, Charlie Fowler, solo; *Bienvenidos a Patagonia* (5.11b, mixed, 700m) on the north face of St. Exupery, January 10, 1999, Nathan Martin and Charlie Fowler; the Whillans route (5.8 mixed, ca. 650m) on Poincenot, January 21, Charlie Fowler and Nathan Martin; *Vela y Viento* (5.12 A0, 500m) (with new variant) on Mermoz, February 10, 1999, Charlie Fowler and Nathan Martin

LEFT: Nate Martin on Royal Flush (VI 5.12, ca. 1300 meters), east pillar of Fitz Roy. The route was established by Kurt Albert, Bernd Arnold, Jorg Gershel and Lutz Richter in 1995 with three-bolt anchors at every belay and an average of three bolts per pitch. The haul bag and fixed ropes are from an Austrian team. CHARLIE FOWLER