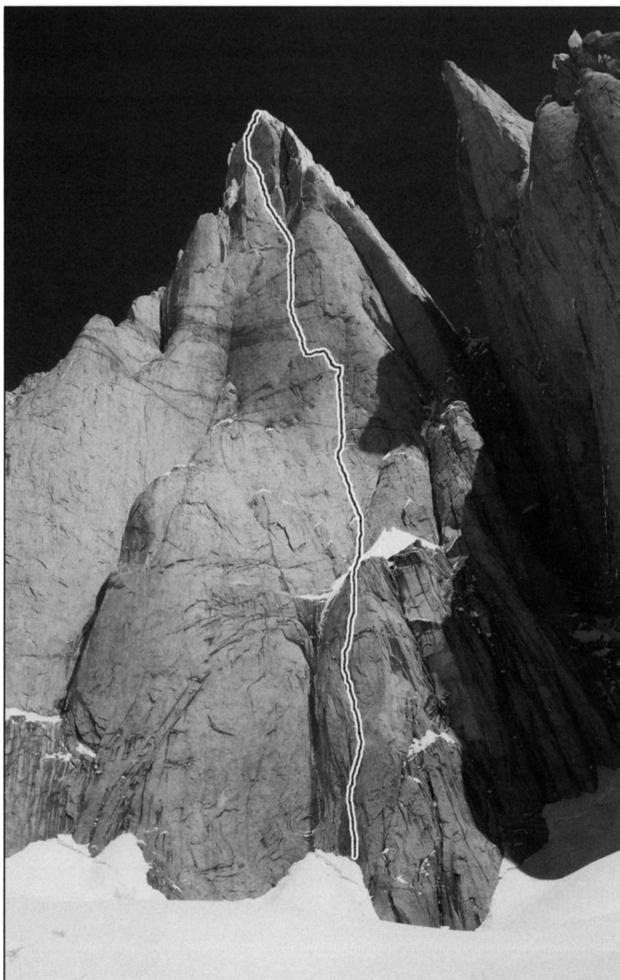


# MY PATH TO PARADISE

*Finally, a direct route on Cerro Torre's east face.*

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ERMANNIO SALVATERRA



The seriously foreshortened climber's eye view of Cerro Torre's east face, showing the direct line climbed in 2004. Torre Egger is the needle on the right. For a non-foreshortened perspective with all the route lines, see *AAJ* 2004, page 140. *Ermanno Salvaterra*



Alessandro jumarining on the 25th pitch. *Ermanno Salvaterra*

**I** clip another copperhead, then two rivets, and finally reach the last belay station of Cerro Torre's headwall. A few more moves up icy rock and I am there. Hard to believe, but we have done it! It is seven in the evening, and as I wait for my partners to jumar this last pitch I lean my head against the rock and cry, engulfed by happiness and emotion. My friends take longer than expected, for Giacomo has to descend 50 meters to free a jammed rope. I am almost happy about this, since it gives me more time to savor this special moment.

Once my partners arrive, we continue to the base of the summit snow mushroom, and calmly I lead the last pitch to reach the highest point of Cerro Torre. It's the fourth time I have had the pleasure of being here, but still we pause to appreciate the summit and it is close to nine o'clock by the time we take a few photos. The cold and wind quickly take their toll.

Five years it had taken me to complete this dream, to reach this, my very own version of paradise. The first to mention this project was Andrea Sarchi in 1985. It was a beautiful day on the glacier below Cerro Torre when he suggested that after completing the first winter ascent of the mountain we should give the east face a try. These are the type of things that one says when the weather is good and when one is fresh. However, after our winter ascent, which we carried out via the Compressor Route, we didn't speak again about this idea.

The English had already made a brave attempt in the prominent dihedral on the right

side of the east face (1981), and Slovenes came soon after with the “Devil’s Direttissima” (1986) on the left side of the east face, an ascent that helped further the myth of this dangerous face. In 1994 Conrad Anker and John Middendorf (USA) showed up pursuing a more direct line, and they were soon followed by Spaniards, Chileans, Poles, and some others as well. But none of these teams managed to climb very high. Years passed and the direct east face sat there, beautiful and virgin, waiting for somebody.

My dream took shape slowly, and when we were finally ready to depart on what would have been my first foray on the face, my partner broke his arm. This proved to be the first of many delays. In early October 1999, Mauro Mabboni and I finally stood at the base of the face. For me there is something special about this mountain; it makes me feel inspired and alive. We climbed 100 meters and then returned to base camp to wait for better weather. When we returned a few days later, we found signs of a large avalanche at the base of our proposed line. Mauro looked me straight in the eye. I immediately understood his feelings and did not insist on continuing. In 1994 Mauro had lost a close friend on Cerro Torre, and it was clear that he was hesitant to take on such an obviously risky enterprise on the same mountain. We quit and instead completed a major variation to the Compressor Route.



The portaledges at the final bivy (the “Last Sun Bivy”).  
*Ermanno Salvaterra*

Time passed and my dream refused to leave. I planned another attempt, and again, at the last minute, something didn’t work. There were many other ideas floating around, projects in the Himalaya and elsewhere, but my mind was fixed on that lovely east face of Cerro Torre.

In 2001 I found myself again at the base of the east face. This time there were four of us: Walter Gobbi, Paolo Calzà, Mauro Giovanazzi, and me. For eight days we climbed in atrocious conditions, clenching our teeth, but after 800 meters we were forced to retreat when Walter and I almost died of propane poisoning inside our portaledges.

This attempt, though unsuccessful, became the foundation of my dream. Two years passed, but from the moment we started planning our return, months in advance, I dreamed about each aspect of our ascent. In mid-August 2004, after many months of planning, I was told “no” by my partners yet again. I decided that I had waited long enough. I was nearly 50, but physically I felt strong and still keen for this kind of adventure. Perhaps in the future it wouldn’t feel the same, and so I felt that I couldn’t wait. In two days I found new partners, not caring if they didn’t have any previous Patagonian experience, or if in the end they didn’t even lead a single pitch. What



Alessandro on the first headwall pitch of the Maestri Route. The Maestri Route ascends from the right. The direct east face ascends from the left. *Ermanno Salvaterra*

interested me most was that they were enthusiastic about what we were about to try.

Matteo was strong and perhaps a bit crazy. I barely knew him, having climbed with him only a few times. Giacomo Rossetti, who initially wanted to come with us to help carry loads, proved himself to be a capable individual, available to do anything at any time. Alessandro Beltrami, having just finished the mountain guide courses, lived only one kilometer from my house, and, in spite of not knowing him well, I came to like his simplicity. He was strong and unfazed by hard work and physical fatigue.

I was pleased to have assembled a team so quickly, and we left Italy on October 29. By November 2 we were already climbing the first few pitches. Our plan was to climb to a triangular snowfield some 300 meters up, and from then on stay on the wall in our portaledge.

Things are going well; even the weather seems to be giving us a hand. On the 6th, after having ferried several loads to the base of the wall, Alessandro and I climb past the snowfield to a spot where we decide to set up the portaledge. We have all agreed that Matteo and Giacomo would haul the equipment to that point, but it is three o'clock and they have not yet arrived. We begin

to worry. Finally Giacomo appears over the lower lip of the snowfield. At the same time we see someone descending the glacier. Matteo has decided to retreat, but in spite of this Giacomo is more motivated than ever.

The alarm rings at four a.m., and at first light we are ready to go. By that evening we have managed to get all the gear to our first portaledge camp, just above the snowfield.

The next day, despite constant snowfall, we manage to climb 130 meters, returning to our tents satisfied with our progress. Next morning we reach the crux of the route, a steep section involving lots of difficult climbing. The weather makes climbing particularly difficult. On one of the harder bits I find a fixed rope that we left on our 2001 attempt. Tempted, I start jumaring up it, but after 20 meters, unable to protect myself due to the steepness of the wall, I decide to turn around. The rope is frayed and it's just too risky. Instead I climb the two pitches that take us to the "Dalai Lama," a flake of enormous proportions that is mostly detached from the wall ("lama" means flake in Italian).

By day's end we have been on the go for 22 hours, but we have managed to move our camp to the top of the flake. The following day brings beautiful weather, and we reach the 2001 high point. That time the weather was terrible, with wind so strong and violent, and with so much snow, that I could not tell where I was, or what was up and what was down. I cursed that whole day. I cursed Patagonia and everything that had led me to be here.

This time everything is different. Alec and Giac join me at the belay, and I continue upward with a difficult hooking move and some hard free climbing to reach a very comfortable belay station. The angle of the wall kicks back and that greatly encourages me. It feels like we are up on a sunny Mont Blanc. We eventually set up the portaledges at our high point, but before dinner I climb a further 30 meters. Dinner unfortunately takes a long time since our second stove died during the first bivouac.

The summit is not far now, and right above our heads looms the mysterious and intriguing chimney that could lead us to the north face, to a spot less than 100 meters below the summit, allowing us to complete a totally independent line. I climb a further two pitches until I can finally have a good look into this chimney. In the lower part the ice looks very aerated, and higher up there is another section that looks the same. I was hoping that this chimney would be like the one on Exocet on Cerro Stanhardt, but unfortunately this is not the case. It looks dangerous and very time consuming. When Alessandro arrives at the belay he has a good look as well and agrees that it seems too dangerous and that we should head up and left to join the Compressor Route at the base of the summit headwall.

I climb one more pitch under the constant bombardment of falling ice and manage to set up a belay under a small overhang. The following pitch is mixed and quickly turns into a full-on battle. In the second half I climb an ice smear that requires everything I have. The ice is porous and my tools keep popping off. One of the picks breaks, then I smash a finger, then I manage to drop a tool. Feeling very tired, I equalize three dubious ice screws and lower myself down to the belay. I convince Alessandro to give it a try, and he climbs a further 10 meters before we descend to our bivy. The weather has changed yet again and we are faced with constant spindrift. In the morning Giacomo suggests that we should take a rest day, but I know that on this mountain one rests only when one is safely on level ground.

We jumare up our ropes with the intent of pushing on to the summit. Alessandro finishes the pitch and then lets me lead on. One more pitch puts us at the base of the summit headwall, joining the Compressor Route. Now it feels as if we are in another world, one that is familiar

and almost relaxing. Very quickly we climb to the compressor itself, and, after taking yet another souvenir from that controversial machine, I continue up the so-called “Bridwell Pitch.” We have only one headlamp among the three of us, so we decide to spend the night in the vicinity of the summit. We dig a hole right under the mushroom and spend all night trying to keep our hands and feet warm. We have half a liter of orange juice, but it is one solid block. It’s a cold night, and the thermometer shows minus 13 degrees Celsius. The wind does the rest.

Early in the morning we rappel to our portaledges, stopping to rest, eat, and drink. The weather is terrible and we spend the night worrying about what is falling on us and around us. This is our eighth and last night in the wall. In the morning, carrying heavy loads, we head down, reaching the base of the wall by evening. Our adventure is finished, but only when we reach Chalten do we realize what we have accomplished.

Each of us had his own whys, his own objectives, and his own dreams. I had this particular one, my very own little bit of paradise.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Argentina, Chalten Massif

ASCENTS: Cerro Torre: First ascent of the east face direct route, “Quinque Anni Ad Paradisum” (6b A2 100° ice) Alessandro Beltrami, Giacomo Rossetti, and Ermanno Salvaterra, November 2-15, 2004.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Ermanno Salvaterra was born in Pinzolo, Italy, in 1955, and still lives there. His family ran the XII Apostles Refuge, at 2,500m, and for that reason young Ermanno spent his summers playing in the high mountains, sneaking off for his first climb at the age of nine. Naturally, he became a ski instructor and mountain guide as a young adult. He has been climbing in Patagonia since 1982, including new routes on Cerro Torre, Cerro Standhardt, Punta Herron, Aguja Rafael, on the east face of Central Tower of Paine, as well as ascents of Fitz Roy, Aguja Guillaumet, Poincenot and the South Tower of Paine. Salvaterra now runs the XII Apostles Refuge, and continues to teach skiing, guide climbing, and play in the Brenta. Salvaterra now runs the XII Apostles Refuge, and continues to teach skiing, guide climbing, and play in the Brenta.*



Giacomo and Alessandro on the top of Cerro Torre.  
Ermanno Salvaterra

*Translated from the Italian by Rolando Garibotti*