

# TASTE THE PAIN

*Thirty-four days alone on a big wall in Patagonia.*

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DAVE TURNER



Dave Turner contemplates the east faces of Cerro Escudo (right) and Fortaleza. Before Turner's solo new route in 2008, no one had climbed the east face of Escudo and then continued up the long, broken ridge to the peak's 2,450-meter summit. *Dave Turner*

Wiping the rime ice from my goggles, I could barely make out the glacier far below. I stepped higher in my aider, gaining a few inches onto the poor hook placement. “Don’t blow it now,” I thought. Just a little higher and...pop! The hook went and I went with it. Gold and gray rock accelerated in front of my eyes as I involuntarily headed back toward the belay. I heard the reassuring but somewhat scary sound of nylon ripping apart as a screamer clipped to a beak ripped open. The beak popped and I kept falling, now swinging wildly. Another screamer activated on the next beak placement, and then I rattled to a halt.

My belay anchor was just below. I debated ducking into the portaledge for a minute or two, to let a snow flurry pass and collect myself. It was my eighth day on the wall, and it obviously was going to be a long one. Instead I reached to the back of my harness for a jumar to go back up and finish the pitch. As I clipped the jumar to the rope, I noticed a squishy feeling inside my left glove. When I took it off, blood poured out. Apparently the hook had ripped open my knuckles when it sheared from the edge above. But the bleeding soon stopped, and I knew I could take care of it later; inside the portaledge I had pain meds and stitching materials, and later that night I could play doctor.



Turner's custom-made double-fly, triple-pole portaledge is a tiny dot in a sea of granite, one pitch above the big snow ledge near the bottom of the face. *Michael Rayner*

I started back up to finish the pitch, but after one move with the jumar the beak that had held my fall decided it had had enough and I crashed down against the portaledge. Shocked, I glanced over to the belay anchor, half expecting to find a partner to whom I could yell, "Did you see that?" But I was alone.



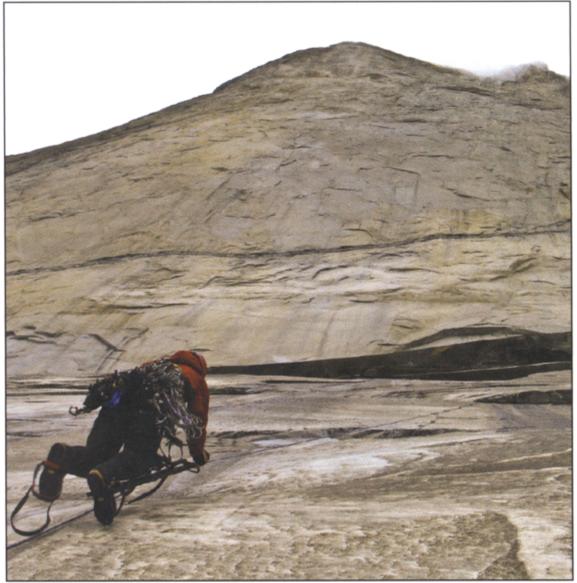
Sitting upstairs at Café Andino in the Peruvian town of Huaraz, sipping Americanos and browsing climbing mags, I came across an article about Cerro Escudo. Three Americans had climbed a route up the east face of this colossal peak in late 1994 and early 1995, and two other lines nearly reached the summit ridge, but no one had climbed the steep eastern and northern aspects all the way to the summit. Seeing the pics of the Americans in Gore-Tex suits and plastic boots, battling up this wall amid legendary Patagonian storms, I was hooked. I made plans that day to attempt this alpine big wall.

January 2007 saw me at the foot of Cerro Escudo. I had not come to climb; this was a reconnaissance trip to figure out the logistics and scope a new route on the east face. I found a potential line to the left of the American route: steep, beautiful gray and golden granite, and over 1,200 meters high. Just what I was looking for.



In November, I flew from my hometown of Sacramento to Buenos Aires, Argentina, paying \$700 extra for all of my bags full of gear and supplies—everything I needed to stay in Patagonia for four months and solo a big wall. In the terminal in Buenos Aires, I got into a dramatic fistfight when a man tried to rob one of my backpacks, but eventually I got the gear back and made my way to the Torres del Paine region of southern Patagonia.

Once I arrived at the park, the real work started. From the beginning I was against the idea of hiring horses or porters; I found it more rewarding to bring in everything alone. The approach to the wall was a 24-mile round trip from where the minibus drops you off. I made this approach 11 times, carrying gear, food, and fuel, for a total of more than 260 miles. But soon I was established at the base of the route, with a nice camp out on the middle of the glacier.



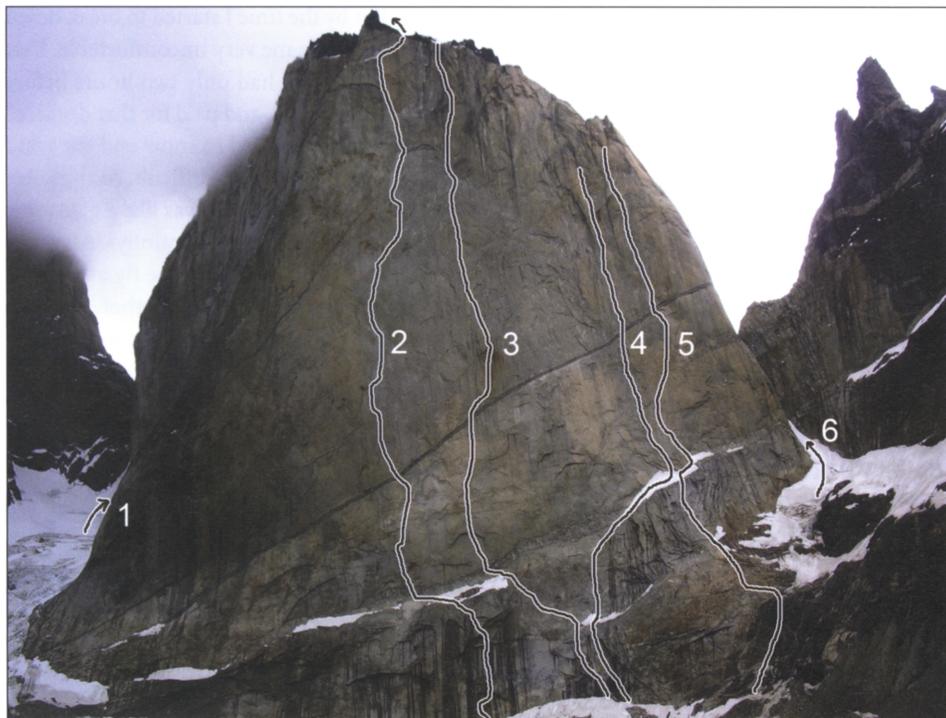
Turner juggling low on the 1,200-meter wall. During most days, he felt lucky if he could lead and clean a single long pitch. *Dave Turner*

The climb started with a 150-meter slab that went pretty easily, mostly 5.6 and A2+, which brought me to a large, sloping snow ledge. It took almost two full days to haul all of the bags to this ledge, due to the heavy loads, bad weather, and a slight accident. As I was hauling the bags one by one, the sun made a rare appearance. All of a sudden the wall thawed and started to drop ice and stones all around me. I quickly made it back to the ground, unharnessed at the base, and walked to my glacier camp 10 minutes away. When the wall went into the shade two hours later, I returned to find that my gear deposit at the base had taken a direct hit from a large rock. My harness, aiders, daisies, jumars, Mini Traxion, and some biners were all destroyed or damaged. I had spares for everything except the harness. The swami belt was cut nearly halfway through, but luckily the Yates big-wall harness had so much remaining material that it seemed sufficiently strong. I daubed some Seam Grip over the cuts, sewed on some new gear loops, and called it good.



Once all the gear was on the big snow ledge, I blasted off on what was guaranteed to be the biggest adventure of my life. The next 1,000-plus meters would be steep and very difficult. The rock type and style of climbing seemed like a mix of El Capitan's Tempest and Zenyatta Mondatta routes, only much harder and longer. Most days, I would be lucky if I could climb a single long pitch, clean it, and prepare the rack and ropes for the next day. On average the leads took five to eight hours, as they usually were very long (65 to 70 meters) and the fierce weather made it difficult to climb quickly. Many times, wind and snow forced me back to the portaledge, which I almost always had set up and waiting. I had chosen to make this ascent starting in December, a bit earlier than most other big climbs in the park, so I would experience snow rather than rain. This way I would stay much drier, but it also was a lot colder. To me, the trade-off seemed good, as a vast majority of the climb was on direct aid and it doesn't make such a big difference if it is cold.

As I made my way up the wall, I usually moved my portaledge camp every two pitches. I



The 1,200-meter east face of Cerro Escudo, with routes and significant attempts marked. (1) Southeast couloir attempt (Banbolini-Jover, 1996), halted 200 meters below ridge. (2) Taste the Paine (VII 5.9 A4+, Turner, 2008), continued to summit of Cerro Escudo. (3) The Dream (VII 5.10 A4+, Breemer-Jarrett-Santelices, 1995), descended from ridge. (4) Via de los Invalidos (6c A3, German Alpine Club, 1994). (5) Et Si Le Soleil Ne Revenait Pas... (VI 5.10 A4, Nicolet-Zweiacker, 1997). (6) North ridge (5.10 A2, Gore-Perkins, 1992), 12 pitches of mixed climbing followed by 12 pitches on the north ridge, with a high point near the top of the Dream. *Dave Turner*

chose to climb the wall this way rather than to fix long strings of rope to the ground or between widely spaced portaledge camps. The camp-moving days were the most nerve-wracking parts of the ascent. I had so much equipment and weight, it would take me the better part of a day. The storms would come quick and strong, and I was very exposed to getting pounded while on the move. Setting up the next camp was always time-consuming and difficult. I used a Cliff Cabana ledge with a custom double-wall, triple-pole system, and I anchored this to three different points at all times. The updrafts on the wall were so severe they would lift even the haulbags, and I tied those down too. About half of my anchors used no bolts.

Inside my little home I had everything I would need for the climb and then some. I brought not only two rainflies, but also duplicate stoves, sleeping bags, Gore-Tex jacket/pants, sleeping pads, and just about every other essential item. Just getting everything in and out of the portaledge and the bags in the fierce winds was a mission.



Four pitches of difficult and increasingly steep climbing brought me to the first and only natural ledge above the big snow ramp near the ground. The afternoon I arrived there, the weather was quite unstable. At about 5 p.m. I decided to move everything up to the three-foot

by eight-foot ledge. All went well while I hauled the bags, but by the time I started to break down the portaledge below, the storm was building at a pace that made me very uncomfortable. I sat in the portaledge for five minutes, debating whether to move it. I had only two hours before nightfall, which at that season and latitude is 11:30 p.m. I went for it—and paid for that decision.

Almost as soon as I lowered out the kit on the haul line, it started to snow and the wind picked up. It was blowing so hard it was almost funny. Even jumaring was difficult. At the ledge I fought to set up the Cabana; this was the biggest portaledge made, and it was like a giant sail. Once I got the portaledge set up, then came the crux: putting on the double rainflies. An expedition fly doesn't simply pull over the ledge like a tent fly. You have to open the fly and insert the ledge through the open door; if you don't get it just right, it won't fit together. Halfway through this stage, I heard an approaching gust of wind that sounded to me like it was ripping open the fabric of time. I had only one second to grab the corner of the ledge, and then I was airborne. The updraft picked up the portaledge and pulled me up with it until my feet were an honest two meters above the rock ledge. My daisies snapped up tight against the anchor, and the portaledge and I rode the wind for more than five seconds. I could not let go or the wind would beat the ledge against the rock and me until we were smashed to bits. So I just held on for the wild ride! After what seemed like an eternity, the gust passed and dropped us onto the ledge.

Over an hour later, I was safely inside the bivy. During the next two and a half days, three meters of snow fell and washed over the camp as Patagonia tried its best to remove me from the wall. After I made it through this I was quite content because I knew that my bivy system was sufficient for even the worst storms.

Pitch after pitch of long, thin, difficult cracks and seams presented themselves at just the right times. When the crack I was following would start to blank out, another was usually not far away. Most of the time I would pendulum to another crack just before I would have to drill. But, of course, sometimes rivets were needed: a time-consuming and mentally draining task, the dirty deed of big-wall climbing. Since most of the steep established routes that I'd done on El Cap and other walls had 100 to 200 holes, I carried more than 200 rivets. But in the end I drilled only 80 lead holes on the climb. In 25 pitches, I averaged only three to four holes per pitch. Nothing really blank stood in my way—a miracle, actually.

Near the middle of the route, I was climbing above my camp when a shower of small stones and ice bore down the wall, right at me. I tried to make my profile as small as possible and waited for it to come, watching intently. I dodged left and right as the volley went past, only to hear one large piece make a direct hit on the portaledge. After I finished the pitch, I returned to the belay to find a softball-sized rock had torn through the portaledge. Another session of sewing and gluing ensued, a constant task on a wall as pissed off as this one.



Once I had two pitches fixed above my highest hanging camp, I started thinking about my summit strategy. I loaded my alpine pack with ice tools, crampons, butane stove, bivy sack, and other gear. On day 33, I made my way up the two fixed ropes, intending to fix one last hard aid pitch, which would get me to an easier ramp that led to the summit ridge. An amazing, Shield Headwall-type pitch brought me to the ramp by 11 a.m. Early enough, I thought, to climb the two-pitch ramp and get a peek at the long summit ridge. Before long I was sitting in a notch atop the ridge, one leg draped over the east side of the massif, and the other over the west. A huge



A storm that dumped an estimated three meters of snow trapped Turner for several days at a camp more than 400 meters above the ground. *Dave Turner*

vertical tower blocked my view of the ridge ahead. It was still early, around 1 p.m., and a thought crossed my mind: Why not just go for it? I had not brought my pack with those essential items, food, or water. But I was excited and the weather seemed to be holding. I tied a 70-meter lead line onto my back, clipped some pro to my harness, and started free soloing.

On the ridge, the rock turned from beautiful, solid granite to loose, fractured metamorphic rock. Occasionally I self-belayed short sections with a loop of rope clipped to protection. I climbed up or around a seemingly endless series of towers and gendarmes, usually passing the steepest

ones to the right (west). Eventually there was nothing higher, and my dream had come true. No, I made it come true. All of my experience, commitment, and drive had been focused over the previous years on this exact moment. I ducked back into a small notch directly below the summit and took some pics and video. I found a small trickle of water in the back of a crack that I could sip from. The weather was still good, but I was far from finished.

Almost as quickly as I had fallen into the magical summit mindspace, I returned to the reality of getting down. Without hesitation I turned my back on the summit and started soloing

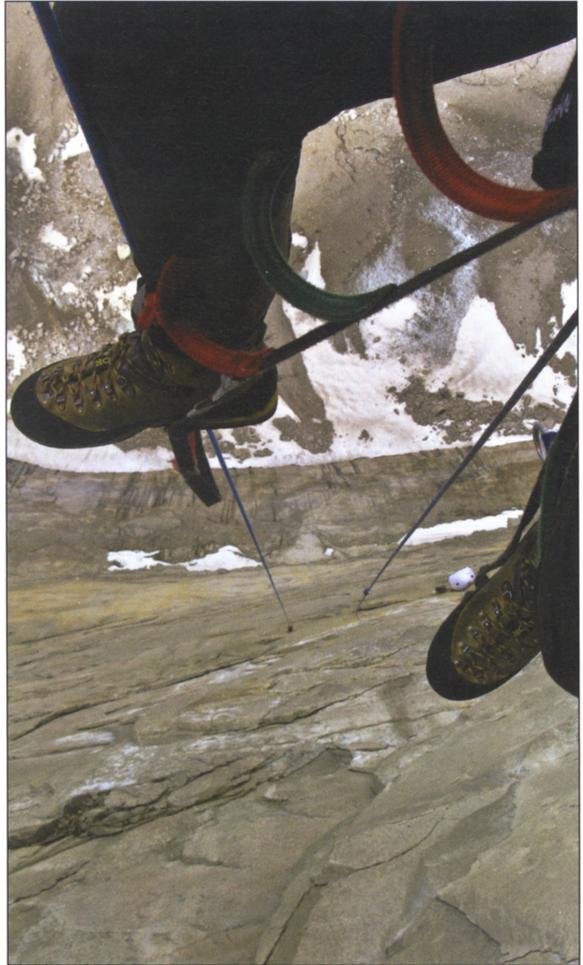
back down the ridge. I had to climb back up or around most of the towers I'd passed on my way up, making a few short rappels from slung horns. By 11 p.m. I was back in the ledge, stuffing my face with chocolate and hot drinks, with the iPod on full blast with my victory songs. The party didn't last long, but I remember waking up the next day with chocolate all over my face.



Remarkably the weather was still holding, and I started moving early to take advantage of it. I had 1,000 vertical meters to descend, and, believe me, rappelling an overhanging wall alone with about 250 pounds of gear is quite difficult.

First I would tie my four ropes together and down-swing and down-aid my way to the belay anchors, fixing a rope at each anchor. Then I would jug back up to the bags, removing all of the directionals except the belays. Back at the high anchor I would lower all of the bags onto my belay loop and then rappel with the bags down the four ropes. Finally I would jug back up, taking the lowest rope with me, and then rappel again, pulling the ropes one by one as I made my way back down. I repeated this process for more than 18 hours straight, until I was headed down the last rope on the last set of rappels.

By this time the ropes were in bad condition, with numerous core shots and severe abrasions. About 60 meters above the glacier, one of these damaged sections passed through my specialized rappel system (a Grigri feeding a double-carabiner ATC extended from the harness), and suddenly the rope seemed to break. As the damaged rope hit the overheated ATC, the sheath either broke or burned, and I plunged the scariest two meters of my life. As the sheath stripped its way down the core, I started to smell burning nylon; the hot ATC was now beginning to burn through the core strands. I desperately reached to the back of my harness for my knife to cut away the heavy bags, but couldn't find it. So I just watched as the ATC burned its



Although relentlessly steep, the wall was surprisingly well-featured, and Turner averaged only three to four drilled holes per pitch, far fewer than he had expected. *Dave Turner*



Turner pauses for a photo just below the summit of Cerro Escudo. Leaving behind most of the gear he had planned to take to the top, Turner climbed the last three pitches of the wall and the shattered summit ridge, and then returned to his high camp, all in a single long day. *Dave Turner*

way into the core, until finally the device cooled sufficiently and stopped melting nylon. But now I was stuck. So much sheath had bunched up below the ATC that I couldn't budge it. Eventually I found my knife and cut my belay loop from my harness, freeing myself from the ATC. I dropped a bit onto the Gri-gri, which was now clipped to my two tie-in points, and then I pulled the handle as fast as I could and slid down the slab until my feet hit the glacier. I let out the biggest monkey call ever, and it echoed through the Valle del Silencio. A few other climbers who had been watching me for weeks started to flash their headlamps and holler from their high camp above the other side of the glacier. What a moment!

Unfortunately, that rope's core was so damaged that it would have been stupid for me to go back up to retrieve my ropes, and the other climbers and park guards talked me out of trying. I have been beating myself up over leaving this junk on the mountain; it was the one flaw in an otherwise perfect ascent. Many people believe the weather will remove the ropes, but I have a few rounds of drinks waiting for the next team (or soloist) who, when making the second ascent, cuts these ropes from the wall and piles them at the base for me to carry out.

#### SUMMARY:

AREA: Torres del Paine, Southern Patagonia, Chile

ASCENT: First ascent to the summit of Cerro Escudo by the east face, via a new route called Taste the Paine (VII 5.9 A4+); solo ascent by Dave Turner. The big-wall portion was 1,200 meters and 25 pitches, and the long summit ridge gained approximately 300 vertical meters with difficulties up to 5.9. Turner spent a total of about four days climbing the first 150 meters and hauling his equipment to a big snow ledge at that height. He left the snow ledge on December 23, 2007, and returned to the ground 34 days later, on January 25, 2008.

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Dave Turner spent his 26th birthday on Cerro Escudo. Based in northern California, he has made more than a dozen solo ascents of El Capitan, including three solo new routes, and has completed five expeditions to South America. Turner thanks the American Alpine Club and Cascade Designs/MSR for generous support of this expedition through a Lyman Spitzer Cutting Edge Award.*