

Fitz Roy, 1968

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How did five able and intelligent California Funhogs get involved in the Expedition Game? Shouldn't we have known? Sure. It happened by accident really; we hadn't planned it that way. It all began one sunny morning in Ventura, California. I was visiting Yvon Chouinard to do a little surfing near his beach-side home. It was already hot that morning and the talk soon turned to colder regions. An Argentine climber, José Luis Fonrouge, had been in California and shown us slides of Patagonia. One needs only to see a single mediocre color slide of the Fitz Roy massif to want to go there. Yvon mentioned having read the book of the first ascent of Fitz Roy by the French in 1952 and added that in his autobiography Lionel Terray had called it his hardest and finest climb. Plans were made that morning. Who else? How? When? We could work it out. . . .

Finally it was decided to leave in mid-July. We could travel slowly and get to the mountain in time for Patagonian spring, hoping to catch a possible spell of good weather before the famous summer winds. Besides, we wanted to change the tactics of the Expedition Game and an appropriate physical and psychological build-up had to be planned. Finger bells and chanting "Om" would not be enough. We could replace such passive conditioning with surfing, skiing and a steady sampling of international cuisine. We would approach our mountain by land, driving from California, surfing on the west coast of Central and South America, skiing for a month in Chile and then, on to Patagonia. In general, we were going to "hog fun" as much as we could for six months. Plans were piled on plans, fantasy on fantasy; by nightfall we had concocted the trip of trips. We were like boys who sneak into an ice-cream shop at night

PLATE 1

Photo by José Luis Fonrouge

FITZ ROY from the west. The Funhog Route rises from the col up the right skyline.

to make themselves a gigantic sundae or banana split; it's all free and the soda jockeys are always so stingy with the syrups. To protect ourselves from the risk of overindulgent guilt we decided to make a film of the whole trip and pass it off as a business venture.

Dick Dorworth, a veteran ski racer and one-time holder of the world speed record on skis, had joined the group; and Chris Jones, in Peru on another expedition at the time, wrote us that he could join the Funhogs in Lima. Lito Tejada-Flores who had just finished working on a film of *El Capitan* in Yosemite was delighted to come as photographer. The Funhogs were ready, Lito and I left San Francisco with a van full of climbing, surfing, skiing and cinema equipment on July 12th. We picked up Yvon and Dick in Ventura and made for the Mexican border in sweltering weather. The *First California Funhog Expedition to Patagonia* was underway.

At Bariloche, we were generously taken care of by new-found friends at Club Andino Bariloche. Expedition food was bought and last-minute equipment preparations made. Bariloche is the Jackson Hole of Argentina with lakes, mountains and plains very much like Wyoming. It offers skiing, climbing, fishing, and superior steak dinners. We began to adopt the same strict steak diet boxers do, anticipating lean times ahead.

Four days later, after numerous flat tires and a gruesome 20 M.P.H. pace, we were rewarded at sundown with our first view of the Fitz Roy massif. We weren't prepared for it. 16,500 miles of driving, three and a half months on the march wasn't enough! Had we somehow made a mistake? We hadn't known it would be like this! So big, so beautiful! So scary! This was a gigantic Chamonix, a gargantuan Bugaboos. Huge was our only impression and we were sixty miles across the plain. To the south of the range, at the end of Lago Viedma, spilling into this lake, more than sixty miles long, was a Himalayan-sized glacier! Those first few minutes were perhaps the most mentally debilitating of the whole trip. A strong fear, a sense of losing confidence came over me, similar to the way you feel when coming to Yosemite to climb a big route on El Cap; you drive in and suddenly see the wall. I'm going up there, you ask? Wait a minute. Should I? Can I? Our hearts rose and sank. This was quickly covered up by nervous laughter, jokes, talk, anything to get the mind off the central problem—fear??? Our talk turned to smaller peaks, lesser objectives. However, intimidated as we were, we all knew that Fitz Roy was the undisputed king of the massif. Even the sharp, steep pinnacle of Cerro Torre sat in its shadow. Fitz Roy was a peak *to* climb, the terrible Torre one *to have* climbed. The script, however, was written

the moment we first saw the range, our film notwithstanding. It had been a long march; the ice cream and syrups were spilling over the edge of the dish; it was time to find the spoon. I believe we all felt that way. The objective now, having made the greatest sundae which that shop would ever see, was to eat it all, to finish everything in order to justify our escapade. We could see it was going to be a test, a long meal. Had we made the sundae *too* large?

As we drove the last forty miles to the river where we would leave our car and transfer our equipment and food to an Argentine Army truck to be taken the final fifteen miles, the peaks never seemed to grow larger. Our spirits soared, the weather was flawless and we slept under a huge moon. The next morning a most knowledgeable army lieutenant, Silveira, took us into the National Park at the edge of the Río Fitz Roy. The following day, breaking a tradition of Patagonian inefficiency, we set out, with military horses hauling our gear, for Base Camp in the woods by the confluence of two small rivers, the Ríos Blanco and Chorillos. Our objective: Fitz Roy, of course.

For the next eight days we had reasonable weather, though not good enough for high up on the mountain. We were approaching the mountain from the east as the French had in 1952; this is perhaps the most difficult approach, for it demands expedition tactics with a string of camps. We were backing into the expedition business very nicely. We had wanted a taste of glaciers, couloirs, ice caves—the Total Alpine Experience! (Remember, we are now five Funhogs inside the soda fountain late at night and are heaping on chocolate syrup, whipped cream and *all*!)

Those eight good days of weather carried us with all our equipment for the summit as far as the couloir leading to the Italian Pass. We had by this time bypassed neatly the great east buttress of Fitz Roy that rises vertically out of the *Piedras Blancas* Glacier for 5700 feet to Fitz Roy's summit. Virtually a Half Dome stacked on El Cap! This climb, we were to discover, belongs to the next generation or to someone ahead of his time. Its foreshortening from the glacier was to keep us speculating until ten days later when we saw it in awesome profile from the col or *Silla* beneath the French route. The eastern side of the Fitz Roy cirque of granite peaks (comprising St. Exupéry, Fitz Roy, Mermoz and Guillaumet) is generally protected from the strong winds that blow from the west, across the Continental Icecap. The winds are made out there on the icecap; the storms from the Pacific, only fifty miles away, bring the snow. This icecap lies behind all the true stories of terrible Patagonia weather. We found feet of deep snow, dropped on the leeward side of the range,

to be the rule. Eight days of bad weather forced us back to Base Camp and sobered us to the fact that the good weather was not about to last indefinitely.

We reascended during the first break in the weather and spent two days filming and climbing the couloir leading to the *Brecha de los Italianos* or Italian Pass. We established our second ice cave, called the Cado* Cave, at the base of Fitz Roy's southeast buttress, about 500 yards west of the bottom of the French route. On the final day of that four-day good weather spell, Yvon and I began an investigation of the French route, only to be turned back on the preliminary ice slope when Yvon, our ice specialist, inadvertently chopped a step in his knee; we had to hospitalize him during an entire week in the Cado Cave. The same afternoon, in search of alternatives, Lito and I crossed the small glacier that drops away into the Torre canyon, and reached for the first time a small col between the unclimbed *Pointe du Cinéaste* (or *Aguja de la Silla* on official maps). From there we could see a practical route, more reasonable than that of the French in that one could see approaching weather from it; also it seemed much less iced-over.

We returned to the ice cave with good news; but just as this was a spirit-lifter, so was the ensuing 15-day bad-weather period spent in the Cado Cave a downer! Fifteen days in an ice cave without books or cards can wear heavy on the minds of even the most stable Funhogs. Yet we became strangely secure; our future was assured as long as we could hear the wind roaring outside. Finally, however, as the M & P's (mental and physical decay) set in and our food diminished, we were forced out into the wind on a semi-lull afternoon and retreated in the storm to our first ice cave. The next day we went down to Base Camp.

We had been in the area five weeks and had completely exhausted our food. The script had been written but the wind was blowing away our lines; we couldn't act out the final scene. It was there waiting, a new route, the third ascent of one of the most inaccessible summits of the Americas. We knew it was within our grasp, but as we drove out in our van the 100 odd miles to the nearest western-frontier-style trading post in the lonely pampas in search of more provisions, Lito and I also knew that we were really not much further along than the first day we had seen the peaks. We had not seen more than four continuous clear days, and only a couple that would have been suitable for the summit; right between two seasons, the weather appeared worse than ever. . . .

* Anything that is screwed up (origin: The Psychedelic Avocado Man).

Lito and I managed to buy and then tote 150 pounds of new supplies up to our Base Camp where Yvon had kept himself busy baking honey-tasting bread in an oven the French had thoughtfully left us. Chris was drying clothes and sleeping bags as best he could. Dick was looking for his mind, lost somewhere in that 15 days of solid ice-cave living. We were now up to 25 straight days of storm when, unbelievably, the weather broke. Yvon, Chris and I had taken an overnight hike down to the historic Madsen ranch in the *Río las Vueltas* valley, but in one strenuous day we made it all the way to the first cave to join our companions with all our new supplies. The next day saw us back in the Cado Cave with six days of food. No luck! Six days of solid storm later, after many elimination rounds of the 1968 Patagonian Invitational *Truco** Championships, we were once again in the couloir going down for more food. A familiar routine! However we climbed back up to the upper cave that same afternoon, this time with almost three weeks of food—we were there to stay!

You can't second guess the weather on Fitz Roy; the very next day dawned almost perfectly clear. My enthusiasm encouraged a bit of trickery on my companions as I had set the alarm an hour ahead to help with the delays in getting breakfast and leaving the cave. We were away at 2:30 and did the first snow pitches rapidly despite the dark, arriving at the base of the rocks on our route at five A.M. We climbed mixed free and aid pitches until noon, gaining altitude rapidly. Yvon and I had reconnoitered the route to a point level with the *Pointe du Cinéaste* several days before during a false start in inclement weather, and we thought the climbing difficulties might ease off above us in a couple of pitches. Our need for encouragement had left us open to deception, but we found new walls above each crest. Yvon and I led alternately while Lito filmed on Jümars; Dick, only in his first year of climbing, followed fourth, and Chris cleaned the ropes. We climbed extremely fast for a rope of five, the back-up team doing a great job, never letting the leaders wait, always keeping the party moving. As for the climbing, it was delightful; we hadn't yet seen granite as nice as this, rough surfaced with fantastic cracks. Fingerless wool gloves were the order of the day—our finest piece of gear!

By two P.M. we reached a notch overlooking the Super Couloir. The evaporation clouds formed over the Continental Icecap had been set into motion by the ceaseless wind, and they shot into the Super Couloir where up-drafts sent them firing on over the summit. The weather was bitterly cold and the route appeared blocked by a ridge of snow-plastered

* Argentine card game played with tarot-type cards.

gendarmes. A hard lead took us around the first tower. Four hours and four towers later, we reached the final snow and boulder slope. I had to rappel one pitch and do a short 20-foot section before I could unrope. My enthusiasm to see if there would be any more technical difficulties caused me to set off ahead while the others finished their pitches. I climbed third-class until I could see we had it, then I walked out to the lip above the top of the Super Couloir and saw my companions appear and disappear in the clouds below. This couloir, the second ascent route (*A.A.J.*, 1966, 15:1, pp. 75-80), is the most practical and forthright route yet done on the mountain. It calls for no expedition tactics as it rises directly from the Base Camp on a glacier 6000 feet below. It took two days originally and is a big mountain route in every aspect. As I stopped to wait for the others (so we could go together to the summit), I knew that we were going to finish the banana split that evening. It was seven P.M. and we were almost there. Shortly, one by one came Yvon, Lito, Dick then Chris. We had Lito, our hard-working photographer, go first and reach the summit ahead of us as a gesture of appreciation for his thankless job of filming, and we joined him for our chance to savor that cherry on the whipped cream topping. It was eight P.M., and the long rays of sun gave us a view beyond compare. Cerro Torre was below us, enveloped periodically by clouds; it looked just as unclimbable from up there; the great ice-mushrooms, just as cold, just as frightening. The Aiguille Poincenot, over a thousand feet below, looked friendlier and very climbable.

After twenty minutes on the summit, we began the descent. The rising wind poured clouds in from all sides. Nervous about being caught out in a Patagonian bomber, it was not until two A.M., that, exhausted and having at last found a ledge, we cut short our pitch-black rappels and bivouacked. It was a miserable bivouac, but very short, with incredible cold and wind. By dawn we were ready for any kind of movement and resumed the descent in ferocious winds; rappel ropes refused to fall; the noise of the wind in the *Col de la Silla* cracked like a whip at a circus lion. We arrived back at the Cado Cave at eleven A.M., worn out and cold, and after a victory *flan** dropped off to sleep until late afternoon. The lines of the script had been spoken correctly, we had our film; Lito had managed to shoot 1000 feet on the climb the day before, summit and all. We were proud of ourselves.

In the following days we cleaned out our camps and found ourselves free men again, with no excuses for anyone, especially none for ourselves.

* Custard, the *only* high-mountain pudding.

The sudden change in our fortunes was too much for us. We found ourselves watching our food allowance when we had an immense surplus; we still awoke at three A.M. to check the weather. The old dreams of frustration persisted. Slowly our minds adjusted to our success as we hauled our gear out to the van. Flowers, animals, singing birds, green grass and full streams greeted our return to the valley. Summer had arrived. Prospects of a lamb *asado* (barbecue) spurred us along under our absurd loads. It was Christmas day and what were we doing? Carrying 100-pound packs! We looked back at "Old Fitz," as we now called it, being on familiar and equal terms. We looked back, not as artists for we weren't artists, just five tired Californian Funhogs finishing up the trip of trips, licking the dish with a smile from ear to ear, and mustaches full of ice cream saying one to the other—"I believe we've done it! I do believe we have!"

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Patagonian Andes, Argentina.

ASCENT: Fitz Roy, 11,289 feet, third ascent by a new route, the Southwest Ridge; Summit reached by whole party on December 20, 1968 in a 30-hour round-trip climb from Camp II after a 60-day struggle; NCCS VI, F9, A2, good ice climbing, weather unstable, wind ferocious.

PERSONNEL: Yvon Chouinard, Rafael Tejada-Flores, Richard Dorworth, Christopher A. G. Jones, Douglas R. Tompkins.

