

Central Tower of Paine

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THE WIND is steadily increasing as my watery eyes behold an incredible scene. To the southeast enormous ice-age lakes glitter in the morning sun as the somber browns and greens of the Pampa stretch far to the Atlantic Ocean. To the north the Northern and Southern Patagonian Icecaps creep for hundreds of miles, frequently allowing unclimbed peaks to thrust their sharp summits through the blanket of ice. Somewhere in a bank of clouds over a hundred miles away hides Fitz Roy.

This is our fortieth day in the Towers of Paine of southern Chile (51° South Latitude) and after three previous alpine-style attempts, with two spare ropes destroyed by wind and our physical and mental strength worn down to a nubbin, Bobby Knight and I are now the fourth party to ever stand on the summit of Central Tower. Our new route up the unclimbed 3000-foot south face was a truly alpine-style ascent with a high standard of rock climbing under superb weather.

Where the trip began is hard to say really. Perhaps it started eleven years ago when I first saw a photo of the Paine Towers and said to myself, "Someday I'm going to go there and climb." By November 17, 1981 we had flown from Portland, Oregon and a week later were in "Tierra Del Viento," (Land of the Wind).

November 23, 1981. I first noticed the wind in the form of whitecaps in the Straits of Magellan from thousands of feet in the air on our approach to the airport at Punta Arenas. It has been with us ever since.

November 29. On so many trips in the Northwest and California if the weather was bad and you couldn't climb, you simply hopped in the car and drove off to climb somewhere else. Here in the beech forest thousands of feet below the tower and thousands of miles from home there is nowhere to run to.

November 30. In our snow cave this evening we sorted gear for our first attempt on the tower. While cooking, I spilled scalding shrimp creole on my hand, burning myself. I thought of Don Peterson's stories of hot Yosemite free climbers who wore gloves on their hands during

PLATE 49

Photo by Olaf Söðt

**Central and South Towers of Paine and
Paine Grande from the West.**



PLATE 50

Photo by Olaf Sjööt

**South Face of the Central Tower of
Paine on the left.**



mealtime in Camp IV to prevent just this type of injury. The alarm was set for four A.M., but I hardly slept at all I was so wound up over the climb.

December 1. We rose to the second day of clear, calm skies and were soon moving towards the gully as a band of brilliant orange light illuminated the tower's southeast face. After stashing ice gear at the col, I led across steep snow-covered rock only made difficult by my heavy pack laden with bivouac gear. The rest of the day was spent climbing four more pitches to a large ledge, (Terror Terraces), 600 feet above the col. Although the increased wind was signaling the oncoming storm, not wanting to lose ground by going down, we chose to "try" to bivouac, thinking we could continue up in the morning. A frightening several hours in our little bivy tent persuaded us that digging a small hole in the meager snowbank would be our only means of surviving. An exceedingly miserable night passed with no sleep and constant shivering. Dawn finally came.

After several rappels we fixed the two 8mm haul lines and then our spare 11mm rope and started down the last rappel. Right above the col the wind was really nasty and I grabbed at flakes and cracks to keep from being blown sideways. I ran out of rope ten feet above the snow and spent a half hour clutching a flake while gusts blew my body in a 45° position, knocking my feet out into space. All the while, I tried to fix the bottom of the rope and extricate myself from the rappel. Our first attempt on the south face was over.

December 4. Down at Base again. The beech-forest camp is no longer a novelty. Fingertips still ache from the cold morning on the wall.

December 5. Man, did it snow like crazy down here. The beech trees when laden with snow take on an enchanting appearance. Their small delicate leaves shrouded in white against the darker trunks create beautiful patterns. Near camp I found a small flat area with a dozen tiny yellow flowers blooming, each one dusted with snow as if sprinkled by a fairy in the night.

December 7. My mind is barely on the climb at this point. It isn't even worth thinking about unless we see weather that will favor our "lightweight" alpine-style blitz. This cave is so damp and the ceiling keeps melting lower. Dismal place. Right now I get those aching feelings to be somewhere else with someone else.

December 11 Woke up on December 8 to clear, calm skies. Since we weren't sure what to do, we went back to bed and got up again at eight A.M. This time we ate breakfast and packed up for our second attempt. We took no sleeping bags but did have one bivy sack, stove and food. Wearing EBs inside of double-boot outers, we hoped to save weight and free-climb more of the route.

Our first fixed rope showed numerous signs of wear from wind abrasion. In fact in the first twenty feet the sheath was completely gone

for a section six inches long. I ascended the rope on belay and placed protection on the way up. The second rope survived. The third rope looked as though it had been through a wood chipper. It hung lifelessly with several sections completely severed.

We climbed steadily all day over two long, hard, aid pitches above Terror Terraces and a long free pitch. At midnight I donned a headlamp and in the next hour completed a hard free-and-aid pitch to the top of the tenth lead, over halfway up the wall.

Our luck fizzled as the wind began to increase once again. It was obvious I would freeze if I didn't get into more clothing, which was 150 feet below me. I rappelled and we cooked up a hot dinner and drinks on a tiny sloping ledge, with headlamps blinking drowsily.

The telltale pattern of wind gusts was all too familiar and in the morning we did nine more rappels, cut and tied our only usable fixed rope and left it hanging above the col. Upon returning to the cave, which had been hit by an avalanche, we decided to abandon it completely. About this we could at least be happy.

December 14. We both took off separately down to Lago Nordenskjold on a three-day hike. Early this afternoon I moved camp to where the Río Ascencio flows into the lake. What a peaceful place. Lush grass grows beneath large beech trees, small birds twitter in the branches above, and the sound of waves beat against the rocky shore. Skies are still gray over the towers. I hope they stay that way until we are in position to climb again.

December 16. I almost wish I could fall asleep, Rip Van Winkle style, and wake up when the trip is over.

December 17. Thoughts of Christmas. No bustling shoppers, no lighted store windows, no unwrapping gifts, no Salvation Army bells clanging, no smell of turkey, and no warm gathering of families. No sitting around a warm fire with a companion and a mug of eggnog. Only thoughts.

December 20. Rose at two A.M. on the morning of the 19th and under starry skies drank cocoa and ate oatmeal. My knee didn't feel too good from the hard hike the day before and I was awfully grumpy, wishing the weather had stayed bad for one more day. I really did not want to hike all the way up the talus to the "boulder," posthole across the soggy glacier and then start climbing. We left the boulder with several quarts of water, lunch food and clothing. No other gear because it's impossible to bivouac anyway.

The one fixed line was still intact and Bobby led up first. He then started to reascend the second aid pitch above Terror Terraces and the next thing I knew he was upside down, hanging fifteen feet below his last nut. Slightly rattled, he finished the last bit to just under the roof and at nine P.M., with the wind rising, we fixed our only spare rope, having decided it would do us more good up high than right above the

PLATE 52

Photos by Alan Kearney

**Climber approaching the South Face of
the Central Tower of Paine.**



col, and started down. Back at the boulder we watched as the tower became plastered in wet wind-driven snow. Climb today and die, or live to climb another day.

December 22. The wind sometimes sounds like a freight train or the crack of a whip. At Condor Col gusts seek out pockets on the leeward side and bound off the wall like a rifle shot or high-pitched cannon. Around five P.M. a French couple showed up to do some filming and hiking. The high point of our stay in Base Camp was being able to talk with Jacques and Jeannine instead of ourselves.

December 24. Man! With mosquitoes buzzing, avalanches thundering down Paine Grande, and the mild weather it surely doesn't seem like Christmas eve. For now we can look forward to hiking up the Francés Valley tomorrow and chatting with John Bald and Pat Simmons, the two Northwest climbers trying to climb the Cathedral.

December 29. We're back at Base now for the duration and the way things stand we can start up the tower no later than the morning of January 10 when the food is gone and we must catch a ride back to Puerto Natales. As always, only the weather will dictate our fate. We're both run down in brain and body and our energy is at a low point but we'll give it a fourth and final try before throwing in the towel.

December 30.

*To stiffen into stone to persevere,
we long forever for the right to stay.
But all that ever stays with us is fear,
and we shall never rest upon our way.*

—Hermann Hesse

Hiking up the talus to the boulder, I wanted in the worst way for this trip to be over. I yearned to be home, listening to music or rooted in front of the T.V., a beer and bowl of popcorn within easy reach.

December 31. I looked out from under the boulder at high wispy clouds glowing orange from the early morning sun and went back to sleep. I woke at nine A.M. to a cloudless sky devoid of wind. It must be a trick; it couldn't possibly stay good long enough to climb this sheer hunk of granite.

At eleven A.M. it was still clear and calm and we had begun to organize. Our plan was to take only lunch food, 2 quarts of water each and foul-weather clothing, and to climb as fast as possible. We would leave the boulder at 2:30 P.M., climb to Terror Terraces by eight or nine o'clock and bivouac without gear, though we would fix a hot dinner. From there we would go for the summit nearly 2000 feet above, climbing into the dark if necessary.

From the time we left the boulder and started up, we began talking out loud. "This is the last time we'll climb to the terraces and descend.



PLATE 53

Knight on South Face of Central Tower
of Paine.

If we don't make it this time we're going home." So with those we're-almost-finished carrots dangling in front of us, we had more enthusiasm than on our third attempt.

January 1, 1982, 4:30 A.M. It's New Year's Day and after a wild night of singing at the terraces, we are moving and finally climbing, with a cold but gentle breeze blowing. Clouds are everywhere, but they are not the telltale long thin luminous clouds that bring wind. We are skittish, though we are still certain it will only be a matter of hours before the wind will peel us from the face like the skin off an orange.

Ten A.M. I am determined to push upward until that point where high winds block our progress.

Four P.M. Four huge condors swoop close to the wall. We feel like pieces of meat hanging in a freezer while hungry customers scrutinize us. Still no wind.

Midnight. The angle has finally eased and we are able to scramble unroped over easier ground. We leave day packs, remaining food, water and extra hardware sitting on a ledge. The summit is 700 feet above us in the darkness. We are running on adrenalin now and nothing else.

January 2. Two A.M. Too dark to climb. We huddle and shiver for three hours.

Five A.M. We're climbing again now across ice-filled gullies and snow-filled cracks.

Eight A.M. In the rising wind we stand on top. We can hardly believe it. Few times have I really been euphoric in my life but this is what it feels like. The British have left a fixed pin, (19 years old), the Italians a 6-inch lead Virgin Mary, the South Africans a cannister with their names, and we scratch our names on a #9 hex and wedge it in a crack. A dozen or so photos and we begin the twelve-hour descent.

It took forty hours to climb the south face and fifteen minutes were spent on the summit. A month and a half of living, climbing, frustration, and hoping melted into nothing. The Central Tower of Paine could destroy us at any moment, but for fifteen brief minutes we were "immune" from death. Life never tasted so good.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Southern Patagonia, Chile.

NEW ROUTE: Central Tower of Paine, South Face, final climb from December 31, 1981 to January 2, 1982, NCCS V, F10, A3 (Alan Kearney, Robert Knight).