

Torre Central del Paine— El Regalo de Mwoma

PAUL PRITCHARD, *England*

THIS IS THE STORY OF four friends, myself, Simon Yates, Noel Craine and Sean Smith and our new climb on the east face of the Central Tower of Paine.

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My ascender hits a fraction point, a peg in the corner that I am in, and I am shocked back into the night. Yes, this is outrageous. It's two A.M. and I've been sliding up this line of fixed rope since the previous afternoon. The headlamp beam forms a mirror upon the wall. In this mirror I see the past, no present and appalling visions of the near future. Below, the rope fades, limp, into the darkness. Above, the rope disappears, taut as a hawser, into the constellations of the southern night sky. Way below, Sean follows. I know he's thinking about the state of the fixed line. In this dark, it is impossible to see how much more damage our violent and eternal companion, the wind, has made to our frail cords in the past five days of storm.

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Five weeks earlier, we had arrived in Chile's Paine National Park, joyful and naïve. We had partied with an American team. They had been successful on the south face of the Torre Central and gave us good advice about big-walling here. And we partied with Pepe, the local horseman who was to help us carry our kit to Base Camp. Pepe and his family live in tents in this grey and blue wilderness and as they say themselves, have no use for the law. Pepe, a man of great wisdom and few teeth, was to become our teacher of customs and politics in Chile. He had seen many expeditions come and go. "Very few climbers leave this place having climbed a summit," he had said.

Within three days, we had a snow hole dug below the 1200-meter-high east face of the Torre Central. We knew now where we wanted to go. The steepest, smoothest and highest part of the face was split by a fine crack for more than a kilometer. We were in awe, but we all agreed that we had to attempt this most aesthetic of lines.

In apparently typical fashion, the weather was diabolical, and we spent our first week doing battle with the initial 300-meter apron, which was out of sight beneath a lot of unstable powder snow. Spindrift and wind-blown ice made life very uncomfortable. It was obvious: we had come on holiday by mistake.

We clambered onto a sloping ledge, just below where the face gets really steep and set up a multi-story portaledge camp. We had been warned against using ledges in Patagonia due to fierce winds. Indeed, a past expedition to the South Tower was aborted when a large chunk of ice fell right onto a ledge camp. But we were much too lazy to walk continually up and down the valley and the overhangingness of the wall seemed to offer some protection. In fact, we hardly ever saw rockfall on this face and huge pieces of ice seemed to fall horizontally. The ledge was the high point for a Spanish team who had made two expeditions to get there. They had abandoned nine haulbags full of gear there: sponsorship flags, a barrel with hundreds of rotting batteries inside, transistor radio, fluorescent strip lights, very bizarre things. We thought—with this much gear it's no wonder they got no higher.

Noel and I set to work on the 100-meter spire above the camp. Although too overhanging to hold snow, there was much ice in the cracks. Noel took the first fall of the trip, a 30-footer, unzipping bashies on an aid section, and I ended up climbing an icefall in my Sportiva slippers.

The next day, while Simon and Sean worked hauling, we two crag-rats set about the great scoop, the formidable feature of the spire. Once again, Noel tried to climb in rock slippers, but the intense cold forced him to lower off halfway up the pitch and don double boots. Very little free climbing was done after this point. I led two consecutive pitches up a rotten, choked-up chimney, unzipping the second pitch twice. Each time I fell, I bounced off a ledge and landed on top of Noel. He was a little worried, for his belay was of the same wobbly pins as my placements. Most of the belays in this area were hanging on a blank shield, often without the slightest foothold, 50 meters above the last belay. The exposure was now beginning to be unreal.

Christmas passed in a series of hideous storms and epic retreats down frozen, ice-encrusted ropes. Weathering one 40-hour tempest on our unbelievably cramped ledge was to prove a particularly good insight into human relations when confronted with fear and poor personal hygiene. Through the maelstrom, Noel shouted quotes from his book of quantum physics and I made long cigarettes from its pages. As we pondered Schrodinger's cat, the ledge began to fly like a kite and the seams of the tent began to split. Cooking in a minute tent was a dangerous procedure and used up valuable oxygen. It was infinitely preferable to be the cook than the one who went outside to collect the snow.

I wriggled back into the tent with two pots of snow. "Come on, Noel. Eat your snow." "But, Daddy, we've had snow for the last three days!"

The day dawned calm and wondrous. Two carbon-monoxide-poisoned figures jūmared laboriously back to the high point. Noel led what was to be the most difficult pitch of the climb, a huge overhanging corner with a stack of loose filing cabinets neatly slotted above it. I was belaying directly below in the funnel-shaped corner. To pass these blocks, Noel first had to expand them from below with a pin, a very dangerous maneuver, and then delicately aid up on micro nuts. That pitch required eight hours. One of the mind games used in these periods of intense fear was totally to convince oneself that one had no body

PLATE 39

Photo by Olaf Södi

**East Face of TORRE CENTRAL
DEL PAINE. "El Regalo de Mwoma"
route is marked.**



weight whatsoever. With this form of meditation, even the most dreadful RUPP placement could be made to work. I ran out another pitch, a hairline crack up a smooth, overhanging shield and arrived at the base of an immense coffin-shaped chimney. It was getting late and we could see Sean and Simon starting the long jümar a couple of thousand feet below. It was time to switch shifts.

For three more days of varied leads up the coffin and a second corner system, we persevered in very bad weather. By now the 24-hour attention to knots, carabiners and general safety was becoming stressful. Everyone had his close calls. But the view over the ridges into the surrounding valleys got better by the day, a little like climbing the oak in the backyard until you can see into the next-door garden.

Sean added to the air-miles collected when he stripped his gear out of the iced-up chimney which split the monster overhang below our top bivouac. An air-fall without danger. As Sean and Simon prepared to spend the night up high, Noel and I rested at our portaledge camp, waiting nervously for a midnight start on the ropes. As we dosed and discussed relativity, we were startled by twanging on the fixed rope a few feet below our bed. This was weird because, aside from our friendly condors, we hadn't seen a soul in this valley for a month. The smiley face of our American friend, Steve Hayward, popped up and we all laughed. He'd jümaled 350 meters to come and have a big-wall party. We salivated as he unpacked wine, beer, chocolate, bean burritos, real cigarettes and mail from our Base Camp manager and coach, Hanneke.

The middle of the next morning we joined the other half of the team at the top bivouac. Simon was leap-frogging bashies up a thin seam above. We were pitifully low on carabiners and had nowhere nearly enough to clip every piece. At last, 140 feet out, Simon found a good friend placement and weighted it confidently. For no known reason, it instantly ripped and Simon bounced and somersaulted down the corner to come to rest upside down and just above our heads. He was angry, shaken, and more than a little battered. Noel re-led the pitch, throwing caution through the window (in Paine the wind is too strong), and I swung through into the grossly overhanging chimney above. Massive bands of water ice hung above us and demanded care to surmount. And suddenly, all was different. I was confronted with the summit block and lesser-angled ground. Euphoria set in. I screamed and yelped and sent Noel up the next pitch, a hidden crack which took some penduluming to find. In darkness, we fixed our haul line and a lead rope and returned to the bivouac with tidings of great joy. Dinner was cold porridge and rehydration salts.

The day dawned unusually warm but very windy. Water was dripping onto us. We didn't pay much attention to this retrospectively ominous sign and within an hour a massive thaw was upon us. We jümaled through waterfalls in the overhanging chimney. The nylon gardening jackets which we had found in Noel's mum's garden shack had worked well until this point but were no match for this torrent of melting ice. Simon led half a pitch and retreated bitterly cold and in pain from the previous day's plummet. Sean, who had decided to go to the top in his canvas hiking shoes, now had frozen feet. Also, the fact that we had no

PLATE 4

Photo by Bud Pritchard

Simon Yates jumaring above the
portledge camp on East face of the
TORRE CENTRAL DEL PAINÉ.



food or gas, fuelled our decision to bail out. After sliding down a kilometer of deteriorating rope, we sprinted for Puerto Natales, a fishing village, only a day away.

It was a depraved team of hillbillies who hit town. Manic stares behind scruffy beards and innane gruntings passing as language worried the restaurant staff, who timidly placed endless plates of salmon in front of the savages, fearful of losing their hands. Sean and I visited the Mylodon Disco (a sound mountain-eering decision). It was here, I think, when reality became an obscure concept. A short while earlier, we had been 150 meters below the summit of the Torre Central with all its sickly heights and violent winds. Now we were jumping to throbbing music below spinning lights of all colors. Velvet mylodons on the walls, señoritas, fluorescent liquids. All I was capable of was screaming.

And so, sated, we headed back to our mountain.

Noel was becoming increasingly agitated. He had told his Oxford University bosses that he was going on a short holiday to Chile. He wanted to get back to his laboratory, pronto. I stole his passport in an effort to get him to stay, but he played his trump card and pulled out a second passport. Damn! We were sad to see him go. He had done more than his fair share of the graft and he deserved another crack at the top. True, the chances were slim. Simon also made a decision not to go back to the mountain. He wasn't happy with the state of the fixed rope and his fall had shaken him. Fair enough, I thought. There's no honor in death, only image enhancement.

When my ascender hit the fraction point in the corner, I wearily removed the top clamp and replaced it on the rope above the peg. I raised my leg in its foot loop and slid the clamp upward. With an effort, I took my weight on my leg, unclipped the chest clamp and replaced it above the peg. And so on and so forth.

At nine A.M. Sean and I were both together at the top of the ropes. The wind blew hard, making shattering cracks as the gusts exploded through the gendarmes above. At this moment, the sky was blue. We had left our cabin in the forest a day earlier at 3:30 P.M. We had been moving fairly continuously ever since. Over a few hours I led another 60-meter pitch of aid with some tenuous free climbing in plastic boots. I took a large air-fall from a roof when I stripped a nut from a rock-ice sandwich. There was no place for emotion here, only judgmental corrections and an awareness that any injury could have catastrophic consequences. Since the monster thaw, all the cracks had become choked with hard water-ice, making the placing of gear difficult and frustrating. At the end of the pitch, I arrived at a snowfield and above I could see old fixed ropes running up toward the summit. Ecstasy set in once again, but this time it was certain. Just below, condors contoured the wall, shadows flitting from corner to face. Sean led through, and after an hour of mixed gullies and frozen, frayed lines, we wallowed onto the top.

How odd! After 21 days on the wall we could, at last, look west. Lago Paine, La Fortaleza, El Escudo. They appeared as hurriedly as they disappeared while the clouds shunted past with a fast-forward velocity. We were unable to stand and our eyes watered, from the wind rather than with tears of joy. On the

first abseil, the ropes stuck fast and so Sean had to reascend the top pitch to release them. This wasted a lot of time and we didn't get back to our top bivouac ledge until midnight. I instantly dozed off while Sean made endless brews to rehydrate us.

With the first light came a horrible storm, which made the already desperate task of cleaning a kilometer of rope and dismantling a camp by only two people even more desperate. Our ropes spiraled and twisted above us in the updrafts, searching for crevices and flakes to hook onto and forcing us several times to cut them.

We descended the glacier in the night, front-pointing on 20° ice to avoid being swept away by the wind. It was two very addled boys who staggered back into the forest in the early hours. Rejoicing didn't commence until five days later.

We named our climb "El Regalo de Mwoma" (The Gift of Mwoma) after the Tehuelche god who lives in those frozen steeples.

And we do feel honored to be granted such a gift.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Paine Group, Patagonia, Chile.

NEW ROUTES: Torre Central del Paine, 2460 meters, 8071 feet, East Face between the 1991 German and the 1974 South African Routes. Summit reached on January 16, 1992 (Pritchard, Smith).

Paine Chico, 2670 meters, 8760 feet, West Face, February 12, 1992 (Lloyd, Pritchard). (See *Climbs and Expeditions* Section.)

Torre Norte del Paine, North Summit, c. 2200 meters, 7218 feet, West Face to the right of the Italian 1992 route, February 14, 1992 (Lloyd, Pritchard). (See *Climbs and Expeditions* Section.)

PERSONNEL: Noel Craine, Paul Pritchard, Sean Smith, Simon Yates, *British*; Philip Lloyd, *South African*.

