

Infinite South

An infinite journey on an infinite wall

by ERMANNO SALVATERRA

In the early days of October we confront the south face of Cerro Torre where, the year before, we had ascended nearly 200 meters. On that attempt our friend, Fabio Stedile, had died descending the Maestri route. Our morale had plummeted; consequently it was impossible to keep up the concentration necessary to go forward on such a wall. With heavy hearts, we, too, had returned to Italy.

My decision to return to Patagonia to attempt the south face alpine-style had reinforced itself every day. The long wait to recommence had taxed me heavily. I was even more disillusioned when, at the end of winter, my partners told me that they would not be returning to the Torre.

At first it wasn't easy for me to think of returning to Patagonia with anyone else; the thought of living for a month on a wall, with the difficulties, the hostility of the area, and a mere two square meters of aluminum box with two other people had me worried. And could I find anyone else as strong? But simply being a strong alpinist wasn't enough, and was probably less important than internal strength, which allows you to avoid crises that would otherwise make the long existence on the wall even more difficult.

I had proposed the project to different friends, and even to some who had never been too consumed by Patagonia, but for one reason or another they all turned me down. But when I proposed the idea to Roberto Manni and Piergiorgio Vidi and saw their enthusiasm, even my morale began to rise again. What mattered most was the fact that they had an abundance of ability and desire to try this new experience together. Robi was studying to be an apprentice guide and had been in Peru once before many years ago. Piergiorgio knew Patagonia from a trip two years earlier. On the *Compressor Route* on Cerro Torre, he had gotten 350 meters from the top. We would return to Patagonia 25 years after the opening of Maestri's line, where Piergiorgio's father, Pietro Vidi, had made up part of the expedition.

We're ready to go as early as October 10, but the military helicopter on which we were counting to transport the box and gear to the base of the wall is undergoing repairs and unavailable. We reconsider carrying loads ourselves, but decide again that it will be too risky. Because of the enormous quantity of snow that accumulates at the base of the south face, leaving the gear at the base for even a couple of days could mean that we'd never see it again. We resign ourselves to a private helicopter. On October 26, after more



than a few difficulties, everything is more or less at the base.

We are forced to re-climb sections where the fixed ropes from last year have rotted, and so ascend some demanding pitches to reach the point where we'll put the box for the first bivouac. From there on we will remain on the wall. In five days of work, between transporting loads and storms, between blasphemy and torment, between sun and wind, we succeed in raising the box and the haulbags 250 meters higher to our first bivouac, which we call *Pensione First Rose*.

November 3. The first light of the sunrise accompanies us on the glacier. Our mountain is completely enveloped in mist; it will snow before long, and the wind won't be far behind. Even though the weather isn't perfect, we get on the wall in the hopes that it will improve in the coming days. As we ascend, we gradually retrieve the fixed lines, reaching the box in the midst of a big storm. We bring along a video camera to document our climb, resolving the problem of recharging the batteries with a 16-pound generator.

The first night it snows, and the wall incessantly unleashes enormous quantities of snow. Still, it passes better than expected. It's 5 a.m. when the alarm goes off, a shrill bleating that we would rather ignore. It will make itself hated throughout the ascent. When we open the door, it is to the eerie feeling of an abyss beneath our feet. But we will get used to even this, knowing that the last and only place we can put our feet down is before we leave the box.

The bad weather continues, but slowly, meter by meter, pitch after pitch, we manage to climb 200 meters of the wall in four days. Every night we return to our aluminum house. We move the box every 200 meters. Although it causes many problems, we are convinced that it is the only solution to climbing the south face in alpine style.

November 8. Two long pitches await us. We perform the translocation: two of us work on the winch, while the other climbs with the box, holding it with a rope to keep it from spinning. It's like holding a dog on a leash. The lever of the winch has an extension, but the strain is nonetheless considerable. At every "pump" the box rises two centimeters; 100 meters requires 5,000 pumps. Rarely do we succeed in pumping the extension more than 50 consecutive times.

By now we're at the base of the big slate, and above us looms an enormous overhanging slab. The atmosphere is very tense but also decidedly fascinating. The weather might be improving, which buoys us further.

We have with us two radio transceivers, indispensable for the translocation maneuver, and with these we are also able to keep in contact with El Chalten, the village at the entrance of the park. Many days pass before we're finally able to establish radio contact with Miguel, who cleverly puts us in contact with Italy. It's hard to believe we're calling from the south face of

Cerro Torre!

Now the climb becomes more difficult. No longer do we climb in plastic boots and crampons; now we climb in shoes made specifically for this climb by Boreal. An initial pitch leaves me deeply committed, first because of the awful rock quality, but then because the granite becomes extremely compact. Above me, a white dihedral. I want to put on my Bambas to free climb, but the cold gets the upper hand and I change my mind. Though the weather is decidedly better, it is still snowing or blowing every day.

There are no features on the wall here and I'm forced to drill to proceed, placing a cliffhanger or a rivet in holes five millimeters in diameter and one centimeter deep. After three pitches we reach a crack that brings us to a comfortable (!) sloping ledge we call the Main Square Hotel.

Only after we've retrieved the box and the haulbags do we realize how overhanging the wall is. A descent from the preceding bivouac would have been problematic, but now.... Better not to think of it. We must think only of ascending, without looking too far beyond, only the next meter or, at most, the next pitch. In the evening, wrapped in our sleeping bags, we're assailed by terrible cramps from fatigue.

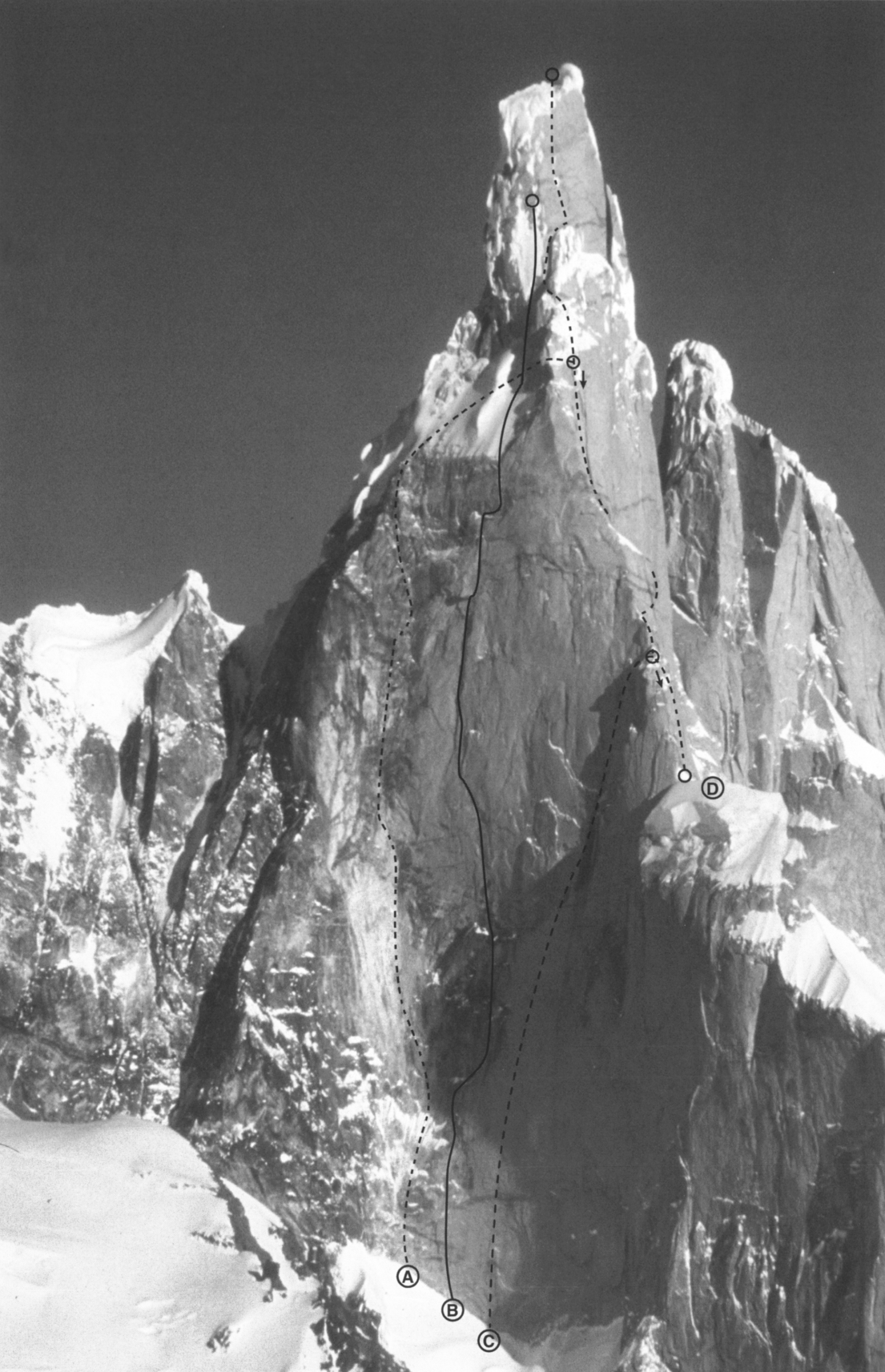
An incredible flake, a small dihedral, then a thin crack, and we are at the right limit of the Great Roof. Then, finally, home. Tea, soup, bread, cheese, dessert, sleeping bag, the next day's schedule, journal.... We almost always talk of pasta and hot chocolate!

In the morning, after a brief translocation to avoid making tomorrow too grueling, we reascend our fixed ropes to the end of the roof and proceed another 150 meters. Below to the left lies the Col of Hope, and still farther down the Continental Ice Cap. The weather is marvelous and the view splendid. Finally we savor the three hours of sunlight the wall receives. It's already dark when we reach the "Flying Hostel."

One... two... three... 10,000! Our small house rises in an incredible void and finally we're in the "Hotel Hope" with all our stuff. I look at our box. Each time it seems like a dream — which indeed, in part, it has been.

Now the atmosphere is less hostile, and the gorgeous weather contributes to this. In two more days we ascend the final vertical rock face, reaching the ice slope just before the final headwall. Halfway up the slope, we rig the last bivouac, dubbing it "Hotel Freezer." The summit of the Torre is just above us! We are relaxed; however things go, the south face is below us. Again it hardly seems real that we're still living. Only now that we're out of there are we able to joke about the impossible return across the south face.... Only now, though!

The southeast ridge is close enough; the descent will be elementary. We could try to ascend the middle of the headwall, but it doesn't seem like there are any cracks, while to the right of the ridge the rock is more broken up.



After the translocation we climb another three pitches. The weather is changing.

The night passes quickly. The next day it snows, though the wind isn't too strong. We jug the lines and proceed. The climb is delicate and the rock friable, the wind grows and the cold stings. We're 100 meters beneath the summit mushroom, and all that remains is two more pitches, one crack pitch and the other quite a bit harder that would climb through a tunnel in the mushroom, through which yesterday you could see blue sky. Unfortunately this is a hole we will not see anymore.

We return to the Hotel. If tomorrow the weather is like it is today we will probably arrive on the summit. But the weather cursedly changes for the worse; I've never felt the wind this rabid. The hours pass slowly inside the box. Sometimes I have the impression that the anchors won't hold and I fear we'll be spit off the wall. Even the inside of the Hotel is covered in rime, and it seems that we're really in a freezer. We have problems with oxygen. The smallest chinks are clogged with ice, and the lighters sometimes won't work. We are running out of food, but still we wait for better weather. The altimeter shows signs of a change.

I put out the last cigarette of the day. After five minutes the alarm goes off. It's 2 a.m. We reascend the first 150 meters of rope with difficulty. They are iced, the diameter swollen to 10 centimeters. The strong wind spins me like a top, beating me violently against the rock. I can't continue. My Jümars slip continuously on the iced-up rope. I look over at Pier, 20 meters below, and descend to the belay. Even he is numb. We talk, and, a little after, return to the box. Tomorrow will be our last chance.

November 26. We've been at the mercy of the elements for eight days. The last soup; the last try. We go one last time for the top, then pay the dear price of renunciation. We don't have anything more to eat, we've been on the wall for 23 days, and for the last eight the weather's been ugly and shows no signs of letting up.

Some hours of work are necessary to prepare the box for its descent. Finally, all is ready: the parachute is fixed to our house, there's a little break in the sky, a gust swells the parachute and the box leaves. Unfortunately the descent is fast, one tumble after another, all the way to the end of the ice slope, after which we can't see anything more. The flight surely continues at breakneck speed vertically all the way to the base. The experiment of sending the box down with a parachute has failed.

At 4:30 p.m. we traverse to the southeast ridge. We descend in now-familiar full conditions where the English ascended in 1968, then quickly down along the Maestri route. It's a completely different world, almost fun. The wind doesn't seem to diminish, but by now it isn't cold. At around 3 in the morning we're in the warm hut of basecamp.

After two days we return to the base of the wall to retrieve the box; unfortunately all we find is a haul bag. Of our magnificent home, there's not even a shadow.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Patagonia, Argentina.

NEW ROUTE: *Infinito Sud* (VII 5.11 A4, ca 1350 meters, 36 pitches) on the south face of Cerro Torre (3128 meters), November 3-26, 1995 (Ermanno Salvaterra, Piergiorgio Vidi, Roberto Manni).



Raising the box on the first pitches.
Ermanno Salvaterra