

Badlands

At the mercy of the Torre god

by CONRAD ANKER

New Year's Eve. Steve and I pace between the hut and the bench. The hut is sanctuary; the bench opens up to the mountain. What is the weather doing? Are the clouds coming from the south? Is the ice on the north bank of the lake? The weather looks like it's clearing, but the barometer hints that, if so, it will be brief. "The clouds are on a clearing pattern," I say to Steve as the innocuous cumulus evaporate over the dry *pampa*. "Let's go!"

Fifteen minutes out of camp, all the clouds have left the sky. The peaks are alone. I stop and feel the wind: still and dry. It's just the nature of the Torre god to have the clearest days when the finest *asado* of the season is warming up. If we go to town the weather will clear.... Can't run the risk. I'd hate myself if the weather was stellar while we gnawed on roast sheep and drank cheap wine.

At this point our packs have been fine-tuned for two days. We grab them and enter into the inner sanctuary of the Cerro Torre massif. Our plan is to go non-stop to Cerro Stanhardt. If we summit we will have climbed all three towers; if we do it on New Year's Eve I will have pulled it off in a year.

This is our 14th trip up the glacier. We pace ourselves, trying not to sweat, but the clear weather fires a sense of urgency. We're lucky: the ice in the glacier is dry and sticky; our crampons cut like cat claws. We reach our depot at quarter 'til midnight, and, under the stars and the soft light of our headlamps, toast the arrival of the New Year. Chocolate and a swig of bug juice — a far cry from New Year's revelry in Times Square.

In our ice cave we fire up the stove, brew a strong batch of coffee and dine on a few snacks. As we head out to the climb, streamers thicken, depositing a light snow on the glacier. We keep climbing. Heck, we figure, it's no worse than a good powder day at the ski resorts. The traverse (the third time I've lead the 5.10 mixed pitch) goes quickly, and at 11 a.m. we are at the base of the *Exocet* chimney.

My usual optimism can't override the fact that the weather has gone bad. It is snowing hard and periodic spindrift wraps me as I stem the features of the granite chimney. At the first hanging belay I holler to Steve. He jugs up. The fast-moving snow has increased its intensity. We look into each other's eyes. It's obvious: the Torre god wins again. We bail.

The idea of an enchainment of Cerro Torre, Torre Egger and Cerro Stanhardt is an easy one to grasp. All the towers are part of the same granite

Conrad Anker before the retreat.
Jay Smith (Courtesy of The North Face)



pluton; the Cerro Torre, a rod of granite capped with a dollop of ice, says it all. The core of the three-tower plan, however, was the Egger, the elusive middle summit of the Torre massif. Steve Gerberding and Jay Smith had had a successful season in Patagonia in 1992, climbing the Cerro Torre; that same year Jay and I visited the frozen interior of Antarctica and hatched plans to climb the Torre Egger via a new line right of the Slovenian Dihedral. For my first expedition to Patagonia, it seemed like the logical climb to choose.

Torre Egger is named after Toni Egger, the Austrian who perished on the descent from the 1956 north ridge attempt with Cesare Maestri. First climbed by Jay Wilson, John Bragg and Jim Donini in 1976 via the Col of Conquest, it is seldom visited, even today. With only four prior ascents, all via new routes, the Egger was the link to the chain of the three towers.

Jay, the Patagonia master, had all the plans lined out. He and Steve had eyed the direct line on the southwest face on the descent from Cerro Torre. The route would involve steep aid climbing for the duration of the wall. We opted for fixed ropes, a tactic we had shunned on all of our previous alpine endeavors. Why? The weather, which makes the summits that much more elusive, would be atrocious. To pull the ropes each time we were forced to retreat would be time consuming, and waiting out a storm in a portaledge would be worse than solitary confinement in a gulag. The scorn we might receive for using fixed lines was worth it. And as our Italian friend Ermanno says, "You go alpine style from the top of the fixed line, no?"

When we arrived in Base Camp Steve and I realized Jay, with his perpetual log of wind patterns and barometric trends, was *the* man in camp. Other climbers ceased to watch the weather. They simply tuned into Jay. We would march out of camp and our comrades would follow suit. We toyed with the idea of heading out in a storm, hiding in the forest and watching the climbers head up the glacier.

We began the route by digging a snow cave at the base of the east face of the Torre as a sanctuary from the storms that continually brewed on the ice-cap and poured over the towers. When we were in Base Camp, watching the barometer and practicing our culinary skills, a storm snapped the one-inch-diameter green bamboo wand marking the entrance clear in half. We could only imagine what it would have done to us if we'd been in a tent.

The first pitches followed the Slovenian route up the couloir that divides the Torre and the Egger. We spent as little time as possible in this feature, which funnelled all the snow, ice and rocks from both of the peaks down its gullet. Three pitches up we veered to the right and began following steep cracks. Swinging leads, we made rapid progress. By our third time on the wall we had fixed ropes to the base of the sweeping granite crack, the defining feature of the route. By the second week in January we felt confident that we would summit on our next attempt.





Alas, the Torre god had different plans. The weather changed for the worse. The storm we figured would last one week went on for five. At the first signs of what appeared to be good weather we reascended our ropes, but the storm had taken its toll: we passed numerous core shots and found the ropes encased in a sheath of ice three inches thick.

At our high point Steve began leading the Century Crack. The weather had turned the cracks into icy nightmares. Ice expanded out of them like the top crust of a loaf of bread. They were too wide for our pin selection and too icy to use cams. The vertical walls were wrapped in a layer of ice three inches thick. We looked at each other and accepted defeat. We descended our fixed lines, vowing to return at a later date.

We were fed up with the weather. Jay and I had been on expedition for three months. Steve recited the “Joshua-Tree-warm-rock” mantra. As we packed up camp and headed home we made a pact to return to the Egger the year after next.

At home we avoided the topic of our expedition. To have our friends ask us how the climb went was painful. To recount the retreat was like adding salt to open wounds. We shied away from discussing the climb, allowing it to grow in our minds as the project that wouldn’t rest.

Perhaps I’m a slow learner; perhaps I enjoy the difficulty of the climbing in Patagonia. Either way I returned nine months later to climb the *Compressor Route* on Cerro Torre with John Middendorf. As we climbed I kept looking to the north and planning on our return to the Egger. When we summited on New Year’s Eve the drive to climb the Egger only grew stronger.

The following spring Jay and Steve attempted the west face of Middle Triple in the Kichatna Spires of Alaska. They climbed some of the finest granite in the range and experienced the worst weather imaginable. The net result: they got hammered. When we met in Yosemite that July, they had serious doubts about a return to the Egger. In my mind there was no question — we had to return. A combination of enthusiasm and motivation got the better of us, and before we knew it flights were booked for a November return to the Egger.

Back in Base Camp, life was an enjoyable respite from the trials of work in the States. But we had come to finish off the route we had started 20 months earlier, not to relax. Soon enough we were ferrying loads up the glacier and constructing a new ice cave. This time we created a deluxe cave, with three sleeping rooms, a kitchen and a gear closet. Our European compatriots laughed and remarked about the Yankee penchant for all things big.

We started up the climb again with renewed determination and a sense of familiarity. We had stripped the lower portion of the route of fixed lines to prevent people from jumping on a free but dangerous ride. The climbing went smoothly and after two long days we had attained our previous high point. We

reset the lines we had placed in 1994 and planned a quick ascent of the remaining pitches. Steve led the overhanging Century Crack in his quick efficient style, finding it free of the ice that had thwarted us 20 months earlier. On our third journey up the ropes we hauled bivy sacks, sleeping bags and a stove, planning on a bivy on the ice ridge below the summit mushroom. Jay led a fine aid pitch that involved A3 down-nailing that placed us below the Edgar Winter ice pitch.

A pun on the name “Egger,” The Edgar Winter pitch was one of the key unknowns of the climb. From photographs it appeared to be a free-hanging ice dagger. It was my lead; I had been dreading the task since we first saw it. As Jay put me on belay the weather started to deteriorate. We said nothing to each other, confident the weather was going to improve. None of us were willing to allow an indication of defeat.

After leading the WI 4 stalactite I anchored the rope to several textbook Hexentrics and Steve and Jay ascended the rope to the belay. The weather wasn’t fooling any of us at this point. We chopped a ledge out of the dense ice for four hours, lay down and pretended to sleep, each of us wrapped tight in our nylon cocoons. The snow piled onto our legs, sending cold clammy chills up our spines. The stove was unusable, we were running out of water and patience was paper thin. At one point we all started packing up to head down the wall. There was no discussion — it was a matter of survival. When the self-preservation instinct says BAIL, logic follows in a split second.

The following morning in camp the weather lifted slightly and we wondered if our decision was the right one. As the clouds parted we saw three climbers descending the Torre via the east face dihedral. Who are these guys? we wondered. Were they an apparition, ghosts of deceased climbers sent to us by the Torre gods to taunt our retreat? After a while we pieced together the puzzle — it was the French team descending from the west face route. But why were they descending the Slovenian dihedral?

We started the stoves, preparing tea and soup for our friends. They arrived at our snow cave exhausted with hollowed-out eyes that had been subjected to too much too fast. They had made a mistake while rappelling from the head-wall; in missing the rap stations of the *Compressor Route*, they had made the first traverse of the mountain.

So close, so far. We arrived at camp at dusk, avoiding questions from our fellow climbers by retreating to our tents. We didn’t talk to each other; we knew full well the whims of the Torre god could bring on a five-week storm similar to the one we experienced in 1994. For three days we operated on our own schedules, eating alone, doing our own thing. By talking to each other we would have had to face up to the reality that we still hadn’t tagged the summit after four months of effort spread over two years.

On December 12, 1995, we sensed a break in the weather. The trek up the



glacier had changed from a fun walk to a penance for this obsession to obtain an elusive summit. I wondered what sort of Faustian pact I had entered into with the Torre god.

Five hours later at camp the weather was indecisive. If we only had a clear signal! We resigned ourselves to the Torre god and began reascending the fixed lines. The weather cleared at dawn: not a cloud in the sky. By the time we were at the base of the summit mushroom, thin wisps of clouds loomed on the horizon. We ignored them, knowing that to debate the weather was a waste of precious energy. It will do what it will do.

The summit ice formations of the Torre massif make up the most bizarre landscape I have ever seen. There is nothing like them in the mountains I frequent on a regular basis. Overhanging snow with gargoyles of ice defied gravity and mocked our existence. Fortunately the atmospheric conditions create wind tunnels that allow the climber passage. Steve and I set a belay and watched as Jay tunneled his way up the snow off-widths. The rope inched out of the belay device as Jay muttered about how wet he was getting.

The final section to the summit was a snow hike. We couldn't believe it: we were almost there. On the summit we sat, enjoying the view of the north face of the Torre and the expansive Continental Ice Cap to the west. The streamers that had announced a storm had changed into a high thin cloud. The Torre god let us enjoy the few moments of summit wonder without his wrath. We burst into smiles as we realized our dream was fulfilled.

As we began the descent the weather deteriorated. With each rappel we realized how lucky our timing had been. We had been awake and moving for 38 hours; the damp snow cave was a welcome refuge from the storm.

With the completion of *Badlands*, Jay had climbed all three towers. Though he was keen to go home, forget the tribulations of the climb and relish the joy of success, he wasn't going before he primed Steve and me for the Stanhardt. Which brings us back to the beginning of this story. Steve and I did summit the Stanhardt with Rolando Garibotti on January 15, releasing the monkey of the three towers from our backs. The only thing is, there remains the chimpanzee of them all: an alpine-style traverse of all three peaks.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Patagonian Argentina.

NEW ROUTE: *The Badlands* (VI 5.10 A3 WI4) on Torre Egger (2730 meters), summit reached December 12, 1994 (Conrad Anker, Steve Gerberding, Jay Smith); *Tomahawk* (V 5.9 A2 WI5) on Cerro Stanhardt, via a new variation, summit reached January 11, 1995 (Conrad Anker, Steve Gerberding, Rolando Garibotti).