

CERRO TORRE'S NORTH FACE

Putting to rest the 1959 mystery.

ERMANNIO SALVATERRA

Thirteen long years have passed since I first tried to climb Cerro Torre from the north, with Guido Bonvicini and Adriano Cavallaro. We made our first attempt during October, and we managed to reach the base of the so-called English Dihedral, climbed by Phil Burke and Tom Proctor in 1981. We had climbed 550 meters to that point, but were turned back because the face was covered in snow. While we waited for better conditions, we climbed the Franco-Argentinean route on Fitz Roy and the Compressor Route on Cerro Torre. In November we made a second attempt and slept at the base of the dihedral, inside the box portaledge left by Burke and Proctor. The following day the weather was terrible and my partners wanted to descend, but I asked them to give me at least a couple more hours to climb a little higher. I wanted to get to the Col of Conquest, simply because I was curious to see it. There, the storm forced us to retreat.

In 1994 I made another attempt on the same route with the Austrian Tommy Bonapace. He had already tried this line half a dozen times. By afternoon we reached the base of the triangular snowfield, some 300 meters above the glacier. After an awful bivouac Tommy told me, "Finish, Ermanno, never more." I knew then that his relationship with this line had come to a definitive end.

The years passed and every now and then I was seized by the memory of this line. For a long time I had defended Cesare Maestri, who claimed to have climbed the north side of Cerro Torre in 1959 with Toni Egger, who was killed during the descent. I had done so in public debates and bar conversations, and I had argued tooth and nail with Maestri's most determined accuser, Ken Wilson, the editor of the English climbing magazine *Mountain*. But little by little I started changing my mind. I reread and studied everything that had been said and written in defense of Maestri, and I started to have some serious doubts. I had no doubt, however, that I still wanted to climb his supposed "route." This dream of mine never died. In November 2004, I returned home from Patagonia after completing a new route on the east face of Cerro Torre, and two months later celebrated my 50th birthday. For the first time I realized that time was passing. Yet my desire to climb the north face remained strong.

Toward the end of winter, my friend Rolando Garibotti wrote to me proposing a project. He had suggested before that we climb together in Patagonia, but I had always declined, feeling he was much younger and stronger than I was. The idea that he proposed intrigued me, but I responded that first I'd like to try the north face of Cerro Torre, Maestri's supposed route. At first Rolo didn't seem convinced, but finally he accepted enthusiastically. Alessandro Beltrami, with whom I climbed the east face in 2004, also accepted.

Throughout the summer, controversy brewed in the Italian press. During an interview,



Rolando Garibotti starts up the first pitch above the triangular snowfield, racing toward the Col of Conquest. The summit of mighty Torre Egger looms to the right. *Ermanno Salvaterra*

I was asked what I thought about Maestri's supposed ascent, and I responded honestly that I thought it was "pure fantasy." Since I live only about 10 kilometers from Maestri, the local press had a field day with my answer, and the controversy grew. Despite this, I decided to carry on with our project.

While I was excited to look for signs of Maestri's purported ascent, my principal motivation was the climb itself. The idea of climbing a line that reached the summit of Cerro Torre without using the bolts on the Compressor Route that Maestri and partners established in 1970 had haunted me. And not just me. Austrian Toni Ponholzer and his partners had tried the north face more than a dozen times; they were stopped on two occasions just 250 meters from the summit, after climbing a direct line up the right side of the north face. Burke and Proctor, after climbing the big dihedral in the east face, traversed into the heart of the north face and stopped just 30 meters shy of the west ridge. Our original objective was to follow the Austrians' line, but we found it very iced up, so we were forced to look for an alternative. As the great Bruno Detassis once said, "One must look for the easiest solution through that which is difficult."

We arrived at El Chaltén on October 14 at 5 p.m., and 10 minutes later we met up with Rolo, who had just arrived from Bariloche. The weather was good, and by the following afternoon we were standing at the base of Cerro Torre. We were ready to begin the climb, but at dawn the following morning it was snowing, and so we went back to El Chaltén. We returned to the base of Cerro Torre three more times and climbed the first four pitches, fixing our three



Ermanno Salvaterra just above the Col of Conquest, with Cerro Rincon (foreground) and Volcan Lautaro (back) rising from the Continental Icecap. *Rolando Garibotti*

climbing ropes. One morning, carrying our whole kit, we jumared to the top of the fixed lines, but it began to snow again. We couldn't attempt a climb of this magnitude in those conditions. The fourth time we left early, and at 5 p.m. we reached a small pillar just above the Col of Conquest, between Torre Egger and Cerro Torre. From there we made a short rappel that allowed us to access the northwest face, and after a few pitches we found a good place to bivouac. The following day the wall steepened, but Rolo, despite having to clear snow to find the cracks, climbed very quickly.

By late afternoon we had arrived at a small ledge on the very edge of the north ridge. We had a good look at the north face, above and to our left, and it looked feasible. We were encouraged. The summit of Cerro Torre was only about 300 meters above us. Across a gap and only about 50 meters higher, was the impressively beautiful summit of Torre Egger. Toward the north we could see Cerro San Lorenzo, more than 200 kilometers away. We decided to chop out a ledge so we could sit comfortably through the night. Unfortunately the weather started getting worse. Black clouds approached from the west and strong gusts of wind buffeted us. What should we do? Go down or continue? We knew that turning back meant that we wouldn't return. On these peaks it's common to climb 200, 300, even 400 meters, and get turned back by bad weather. But after getting this high it's difficult to find the physical and mental strength to return for another attempt.

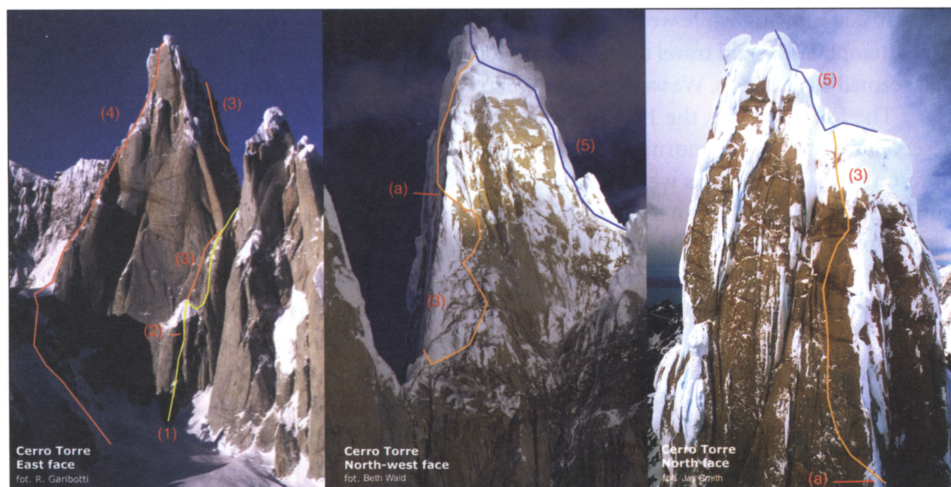
At eight in the evening, with a lump in our throats, we decided to descend. It was snowing hard and the wind blew intensely. First we rappelled the northwest face, then we did three



Like visitors to another planet, Ermanno Salvaterra and Alessandro Beltrami traverse Cerro Torre's northwest face. *Rolando Garibotti*



Looking down Cerro Torre's north face at the belayer and the top of Torre Egger. *Rolando Garibotti*



(1) Bragg-Donini-Wilson line (1977) to the Col of Conquest. (2) Maestri gear cache below the triangular snowfield. (3) El Arca de los Vientos (Beltrami, Garibotti, Salvaterra, 2005). (a) Bivouac site. (4) Southeast ridge (Compressor Route), 1970. (5) Ragni di Lecco Route (Chiappa, Conti, Ferrari, Negri, 1974). Left to right, Rolando Garibotti, Beth Wald, Jay Smith.

rappels along the north ridge to get to the small pillar just above the Col of Conquest. In total darkness we continued descending another 200 meters past the col. At about the same height as the bottom of the English Dihedral, we decided to stop and wait for the dawn. Our headlamps weren't working well, it was 1 a.m., and we were quite tired. We dug out a platform with our axes to make the wait more comfortable and to be able to prepare something to eat. At 5 a.m. we set out again. We were half-asleep, and we descended carefully in order to avoid mistakes. We recovered all the gear we could because we had decided against another attempt. Four hours later we got to the snow cave. The weather wasn't too bad, but we could hear how hard the wind was blowing up high.

We decided to stay until the following day before descending to El Chaltén. In the afternoon, around 3 o'clock, an incredible buzzing startled us. I looked up and yelled. An enormous avalanche was thundering down the wall. Ale grabbed the shovels and fled inside the cave. Rolo, barefoot, began to run down the glacier. I thought he was just going down to get photos, but he had fled fearing the worst. Having seen this type of avalanche on the wall before, I managed to stay calm, found my camera, and took a few pictures. Probably a huge ice mushroom had detached from the uppermost part of the tower, sweeping down the east face and covering it entirely. The resulting spectacle was terrifying, but the strong winds that day began to blow the enormous white cloud horizontally toward the south, and only two small cascades of snow arrived at the base.

At four in the afternoon, after discussing the avalanche, I went to sleep. At midnight, Ale gave me a piece of cheese and some crackers. Then I got up and went outside to smoke a cigarette. The sky was clear and I was overcome with a heavy sadness. I cried, and the clear sky hurt me deeply. We had taken everything off the wall and all that remained was to return home. Around 2 a.m. I fell back asleep. When we woke up, I proposed to my partners that we make another attempt. There was a moment of silence, but soon enthusiasm took hold of them and they agreed.

It was snowing while we hiked back to El Chaltén, and as we descended we planned our next attempt. We would travel as light as possible. We would leave behind absolutely everything that seemed superfluous. We were quite tired, so we knew that we would need a few days of rest.

The following day, the 10th of November, the weather was bad and we enjoyed a well-deserved rest day. In the morning, the sky seemed to be clearing, and although we had wanted to rest a couple more days we decided to go back up. We didn't talk much during our walk, but our legs felt good and in less than six hours we arrived at the cave. We quickly prepared to climb. Rolo and I started up the wall and, as before, climbed the first four pitches and then fixed our three ropes. Ale stayed behind to work on the new snow cave, which, for security's sake, we had moved underneath Torre Egger. In little more than two hours, Rolo and I returned. The weather was turning out to be fantastic, without even the tiniest breeze.

The alarm went off at 3:45 a.m. Breakfast was just a few morsels. The weather was perfect, and there wasn't a second to lose. At 4:45, with headlamps on our helmets, we began to jumar the ropes we had fixed the day before. We climbed another two pitches and soon arrived at the triangular snowfield. The rising sun began to warm us up. We moved fast, reascending meter by meter the stretches we had climbed just a few days before. Rolo climbed quickly, short-fixing to gain 10 to 20 meters each pitch while Ale and I ascended the ropes behind him.

The slabs above the triangular snowfield are difficult, but because we knew exactly where to go we were able to move fast. The snow that covered the ramp up to the pillar above the Col of Conquest was in better condition than before, and again we were able to save a lot of time. It was barely noon when we got to the pillar, 50 meters above the col.

On the northwest face the cracks were still clear of snow from our previous attempt, and we reached the small terrace on the edge of the north ridge at around 4:30 in the afternoon. It had taken us two days to get there on our first attempt. We decided that this would be a good place to bivouac, but with a few hours of light left we decided to fix a couple more pitches. After a short pause I set out. The wall was now in shade, and the cold bit our hands. Rolo and



Beltrami trenches through the ice mushrooms of the second to last pitch. *Rolando Garibotti*

Ale then climbed one more pitch, also fairly hard. While we were busy on the north face, the northwest face began to release huge pieces from the frozen mushrooms above, but on the ridge we were safe.

The bivouac spot was phenomenal: in front of us Torre Egger, to the right Fitz Roy, and to the left the immense Continental Icecap and its mountains. The cold was sharp and penetrating, but the sky was filled with stars. The night passed quickly, and we even managed to sleep a bit.

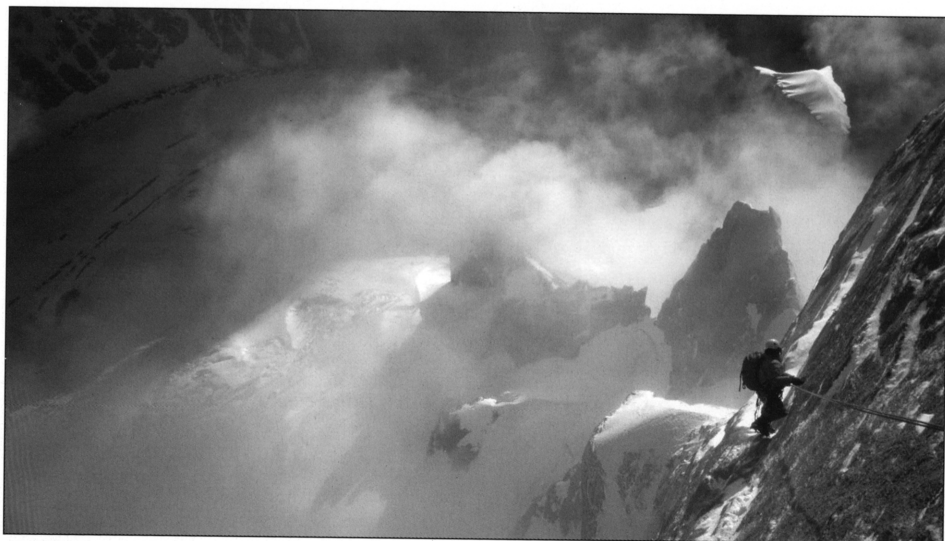
The next morning, November 13, I felt like I was in a movie or a dream. We started getting ready at six in the morning, but weren't ready to begin climbing until eight. Luckily, the sun soon began to warm our frozen bodies. The wall was nearly vertical and quite difficult. From the top of the ropes we had fixed the day before, Rolo climbed another two pitches, zig-zagging between ice mushrooms to arrive at the end of the north face. When I got up to Rolo at the last belay, we hugged each other with emotion. We spoke breathlessly. Now below us, the north face was no longer a problem. With another pitch on perfect ice we joined the Ragni di Lecco Route (the west face), climbed in 1974 by Daniele Chiappa, Mariolino Conti, Casimiro Ferrari, and Pino Negri.

It was around one in the afternoon, and above us huge, unconsolidated ice formations promised to make progress difficult. The summit of Torre Egger was now far below us, but we still couldn't see Cerro Torre's summit. We began a series of pitches that took a lot of effort. The ice wasn't solid or consistent, and sometimes we had to dig more than 50 centimeters before we could find ice or snow that was solid enough to climb. We only had two snow pickets, and, since ice screws were useless, protection was nearly nonexistent. But we weren't about to surrender. The sky had clouded over, and it began to snow and blow a bit. We did the last pitch in sections, each of us going up a little. The cold once again became penetrating, but at 11:15 p.m. we all reached the highest point on Cerro Torre. Ale reminded me that exactly one year before we had arrived on this same summit, after climbing a new route on the east face. It was a profoundly emotional moment. After taking a few pictures, we descended the mushroom and sat under a snow overhang to wait for night to pass. The next morning we descended via the Compressor Route on the southeast ridge.

We decided to name our route *El Arca de los Vientos* (Ark of the Winds). In all, we climbed 37 pitches, 21 of which were new. We dedicated our route to the memory of two dear friends, Spaniard Pepe Chaverri and Argentinean Teo Plaza. Back in 1994, these two amazing youngsters made a great alpine-style ascent of the east face of Cerro Standhardt. Unfortunately, not long afterward, Teo's beautiful life was cut short by an avalanche. A few years later the mountains also claimed Pepe.

EPILOGUE

Above Maestri's gear cache at the top of the initial dihedral, some 300 meters above the glacier and 20 meters below the triangular snowfield, we did not find any trace of the passage of Egger, Maestri, and Fava, their other partner. During the ascents and descents of our first try and successful climb, we covered three-quarters of the north ridge, one of three lines that Maestri described as his line of ascent above the col. (Maestri described three different lines in different accounts: in the newspaper *L'Europeo*, published in April 1959, the magazine *La Montagne*, published in April 1960, and the *Rivista del CAI*, published in 1961.) In this 450-meter section above



Salvaterra traverses during the descent via the Compressor Route. *Rolando Garibotti*

the col, Maestri says he placed 60 bolts, and yet we found nothing. Toni Ponholzer's attempts and our ascent covered three-quarters of the ground on the three different lines described by Maestri as his supposed line of ascent. Neither Toni nor we found any trace of Maestri's passage. Based on these observations and other reasons, we are convinced that the first ascent of Cerro Torre was done by the Italians Chiappa, Conti, Ferrari, and Negri in 1974 via the west face. For anyone interested in this history, I suggest reading "A Mountain Unveiled," by Rolando Garibotti, in the 2004 *American Alpine Journal*.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Cerro Torre, Patagonia

ROUTE: First ascent of El Arca de los Vientos (1,200m, 37 pitches, VI 5.11 A1 90°); the route follows parts of the Bragg-Donini-Wilson (1977) Torre Egger line on the lower east face to the Col of Conquest, then moves onto the northwest face, climbing a few sections in common with the 1994 Giarolli-Orlandi-Ravizza attempt, and then moves onto the north face, which it ascends to the west ridge and then follows the Ragni di Lecco Route for three pitches to the summit; Alessandro Beltrami, Rolando Garibotti, and Ermanno Salvaterra, November 12-13, 2005. Descent via southeast ridge (Compressor Route).

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Ermanno Salvaterra, 51, lives in Pinzolo, Italy, and works as a mountain guide, ski instructor, and hutkeeper of the Rifugio Dodici Apostoli in the Brenta Group of the Dolomites. He has completed two new routes to the summit of Cerro Torre, a 1,350-meter new route that ended 100 meters below the summit, and the first winter ascent.