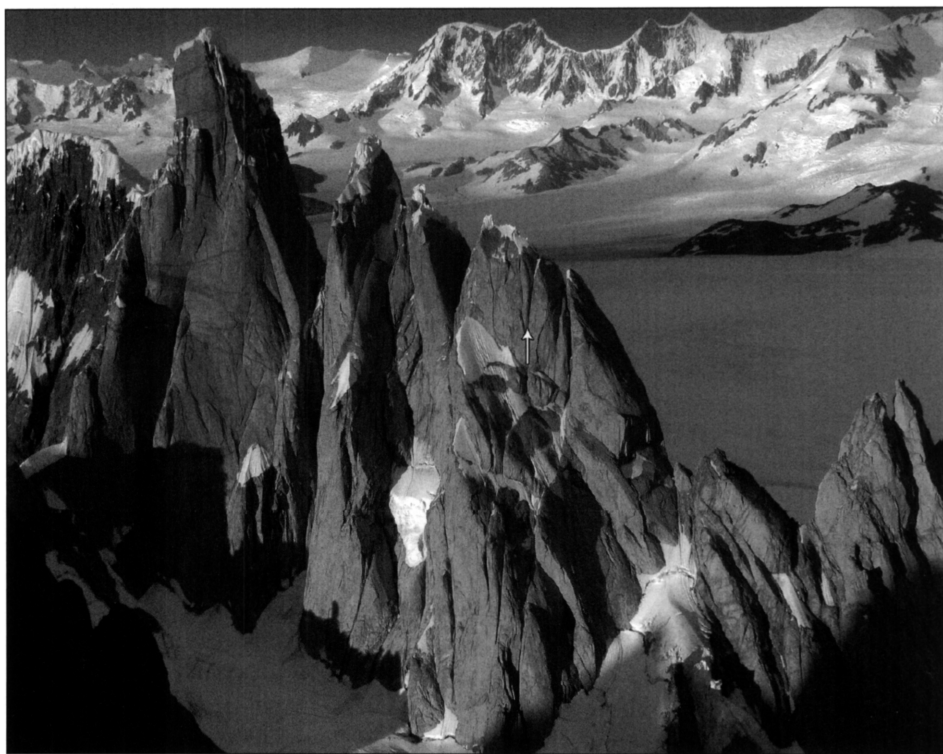


# THE TORRE TRAVERSE

*A two-decade-old Patagonian dream is realized.*

ROLANDO GARIBOTTI



The Torre Traverse follows the skyline from right to left (north to south), beginning at the saddle below Cerro Standhardt, in center right. Rolando Garibotti and Colin Haley traversed to Exocet, a chimney in the center of Standhardt's east face (marked with arrow), and then continued across the summits of Standhardt, Punta Herron, Torre Egger, and Cerro Torre. They descended Cerro Torre's southeast ridge, near the left skyline. In the background, across the ice cap, are Cerro Dos Cumbres (left) and Cerro Dos Cuernos. *Rolando Garibotti*

**T**wenty years ago, when I first hiked up the Torre Valley, the steep towers of the Cerro Torre massif loomed as if they were the cathedrals of a foreign religion. They looked distant, cold, and unattainable. Initially, merely hiking up the glacier seemed difficult, and although later during that visit I managed to climb nearly to Cerro Torre's summit I spent most of my time marveling at the mountains' majestic beauty.

During that first expedition to the Torre Valley, I became aware of the so-called Torre Traverse, a climbing line that crosses the skyline comprising Cerro Standhardt, Punta Herron, Torre Egger, and Cerro Torre, from north to south, with more than 2,000 meters of vertical gain. Back then, as a young climber from Bariloche, a town in northern Patagonia, it did not occur to me that I would ever try such a project, but as it turns out reality far surpasses imagination.

The traverse was the brainchild of Italians Andrea Sarchi, Ermanno Salvaterra, Maurizio Giarolli, and Elio Orlandi, who tried it on several occasions in the late 1980s and early '90s. The first real attempt was in 1991, when Salvaterra, with Adriano Cavallaro and Ferruccio Vidi, managed to climb as far as Punta Herron, completing what was likely the first ascent of that peak. Salvaterra climbed Herron via the north ridge, an aesthetic route called Spigolo dei Bimbi.

It wasn't until early 2005 that Salvaterra's "high point" was pushed farther, when German Thomas Huber and Swiss Andi Schnarf completed the Standhardt-to-Egger traverse. Having only intended to climb Standhardt, via the route Festerville, they decided on the summit to continue toward Egger. Moving light and fast they completed the first three peaks of the traverse in a 38-hour round trip, descending from Torre Egger via the Titanic route on the east ridge.

In late 2005 Salvaterra, Alessandro Beltrami, and I solved the last remaining puzzle of the traverse when we climbed Cerro Torre from the north via a new route, Arca de los Vientos. After this, the full traverse finally seemed plausible. Now, trying the traverse was not a choice for us; it was our fate. I knew I would never again have the chance to seriously attempt the first ascent of such an aesthetic line, and I decided to do everything within my reach to capture it. Since good weather periods in Patagonia seldom last longer than three days, we knew the traverse would require fast, efficient climbing, but, riding high on our Cerro Torre success, Ermanno, Ale, and I felt confident. Unfortunately, bad weather in 2006 prevented us from getting farther than Standhardt, and later that season a back injury kept me from further attempts.

Unfazed, Salvaterra returned in late 2007 with Beltrami, Mirko Masse, and Fabio Salvodei. On this attempt they climbed Standhardt via Ermanno's own Otra Vez, making the second ascent of this route, and continued to Herron and Torre Egger. They descended to the south, to the Col of Conquest, and climbed one pitch on Cerro Torre before retreating. During that same good weather window, Hans Johnstone and I began the traverse via Standhardt's Festerville, climbed Herron and Egger, and continued past the Col of Conquest, completing half of the upper tower of Cerro Torre before being turned back by a huge rime mushroom that proved impassable.

Having now done all the pieces of the traverse, I decided to stay in Chaltén for the remainder of the season to give it another try. Knowing every meter of the Torre Traverse changed my relationship with it. The original romance was replaced by a need for closure. I no longer felt like an artist but like a builder who needs to complete his contractual obligations, in this case obligations with myself, with my own dreams. I teamed up with a number of other partners, including Bruce Miller and Bean Bowers, but it was not until late January 2008, when I asked Colin Haley to join me, that a good weather window finally provided the opportunity for another attempt. At 23, Colin is one of the most active alpinists in North America; the previous January he had completed the much-tried link-up of Cerro Torre's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* with the upper west ridge, with Kelly Cordes. On scarcely a moment's notice, he put off a semester of university studies to stay in Patagonia and attempt the Torre Traverse with me. I had never roped up with him, but I knew him enough to appreciate his energy and sense of humor.



Ermanno Salvaterra and Alessandro Beltrami near the summit of Punta Herron during an attempt on the traverse in November 2007. In the background is the summit of Cerro Standhardt. *Rolando Garibotti*

On January 21 Colin and I climbed to the col north of Cerro Standhardt, ignoring the wind and clouds. When Hans and I retreated in November, it had been because we didn't have enough time to find a way around the humongous snow blob that blocked our way. This time, Colin and I decided to get a jump on the predicted good weather so we'd have an extra day on Cerro Torre if we needed it. Because it was still stormy, we chose to climb Standhardt via the route Exocet, which is well-protected from the wind. Colin led thin ice through the Exocet chimney, and we reached the summit sometime past midday, taking less than seven hours from the col to the summit.

Above the Col de Sogni, between Standhardt and Herron, rime coated much of the Spigolo dei Bimbi, our chosen route up Herron. For a moment I thought the conditions had once again made the traverse unclimbable. Partway up the second pitch, I placed two nuts, lowered about 60 feet, and pulled the rope. Colin worried that I might be giving up, but in fact I was searching for an alternate line. I had spotted a discontinuous crack system to the east while rappelling from Standhardt, and now I hoped this would allow us to avoid the rime-covered rock on Spigolo dei Bimbi. While the wind tried to strip me from the face, I smeared, crimped, and ran it out until I reached the alternate line, with which we bypassed the second, third, and fourth pitches of Spigolo del Bimbi.



Haley follows the second pitch on Punta Herron during the first day of the traverse in January. For several pitches the two men climbed about 20 meters left of their planned route, Spigolo dei Bimbi, to avoid rime-covered rock. *Rolando Garibotti*

Although the conditions were not great, we were willing to put up with them. I had been waiting for another try since November, and that translated into extra drive. This is not unusual. Often on trips I wait until shortly before I have to go home to put out my best effort. This same thing happens in many sports, not least in soccer, where the last few minutes of a game often are the most active.

All day we had fought the cold and wind, putting in one of the best efforts I can recall being part of. That night we spent an hour digging out a ledge below the Herron mushrooms, and then sealed ourselves against the wind inside our single bivy sack. We lit the stove and melted ice for a time. Then the stove fizzled out. A new canister didn't help, and our lighters didn't work either. Suddenly Colin said, "No oxygen!" He unzipped the bivy sack to flood our tiny home with fresh air.

On January 22, feeling unusually tired, likely because of our carbon monoxide poisoning, we climbed on in perfect weather. Colin led us up and over the Herron mushrooms, and from the summit a short rappel brought us to the Col de Lux, between Herron and Egger. Again, we found much more snow and rime than I had seen in November. After the first easy pitch, rime forced me to climb a couple of variations to the Huber-Schnarf line. Nevertheless, we soon reached the summit mushroom. Luckily, from this side the Egger mushroom is fairly easy, and Colin quickly led us to the summit.

Back in November I had been apprehensive about descending Torre Egger's south face.



Nobody had touched that face since the peak's first ascent in 1977. But now I knew the rapel line precisely, and it went smoothly. The face was entirely covered in rime, and so was the first pitch from the Col of Conquest up to a small pedestal where we joined El Arca's line.

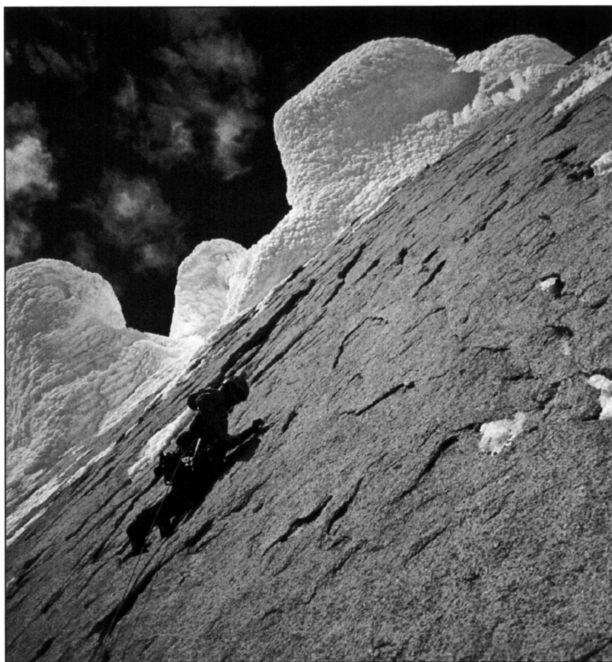
Then, suddenly, it was too warm. Ice fell around us, crashing against the rock with the sound of waves. For the next two hours we climbed as fast as possible, ducking our heads, until we found a rock prow under which we could find shelter. It was only 5 p.m., but we decided to stop and bivvy. Looking up we saw that the rime mushroom that had halted my attempt with Hans had fallen off. But El Arca did

not seem to be in great condition; there was much more ice than in 2005. I was eager to try a different line I had spied on the north face, but Colin cautioned against navigating uncharted terrain and convinced me that El Arca was the better option. It was this decision more than any other that ensured our success.

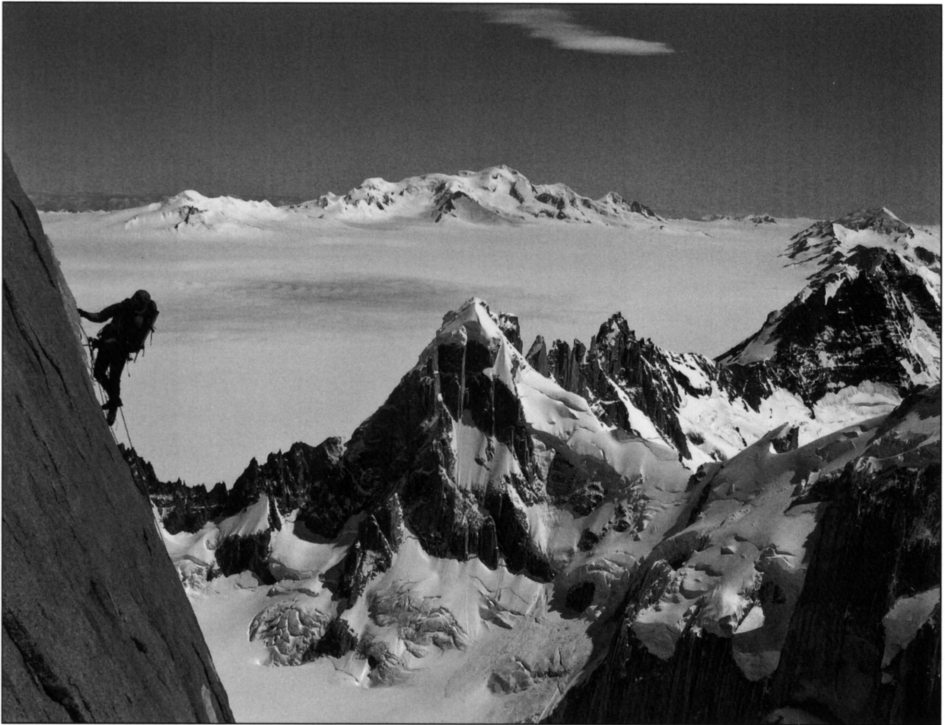
In the morning I charged up Cerro Torre's northwest face, leading pitches on El Arca that I had already climbed twice. In many places the cracks were choked with ice, and that slowed me considerably. Early in the season the lower temperatures seem to keep the melt-freeze cycle at bay on this face, so one can quickly clean off the rime and find clean cracks; in January the rising temperatures cause the rime to melt and refreeze deep in the cracks. At a key pendulum, another ice mushroom stood in the way. Unable to climb high enough, I took two 40-foot sideways falls. Tired and drained, I hooked a few moves and at last, sinking in shame, pulled courage out of my pack and drilled Arca's solitary non-belay bolt. Since El Arca was my own route I felt I had the "right" to drill, but I am less than proud of having done so.

(On the entire Torre Traverse there are five non-belay bolts: one on Spigolo dei Bimbi on Punta Herron, placed after the first ascent by an unknown party; three on the Huber-Schnarf route on Torre Egger; and my single new bolt on Arca. Considering the 2,050 meters of vertical gain, this is not a significant number, but given good conditions it should be possible to climb the traverse without using any of them.)

We turned onto the north face and found that the first three pitches were fairly clean of rime, but the last pitch was covered in ice, and I spent almost two hours climbing it. When I finally pulled up to the last belay on the north face at around 5 p.m., I breathed deeply with relief.



Garibotti links flake systems to climb the Huber-Schnarf line on Torre Egger during the second day of the traverse. *Colin Haley*



Haley silhouetted against Torre Egger. The Hielo Continental spreads to the west, with Volcan Lautaro in the distance. *Rolando Garibotti*

Colin led a short mushroom pitch, and then we lowered and downclimbed about 100 feet to join the 1974 Ferrari route on the west ridge. He then led two more pitches, climbing through natural rime tunnels, to reach the base of the final pitch. Both Colin and I had led this pitch before, but this time we discovered vertical rime as smooth as a pool table, devoid of any weaknesses.

It was 7 p.m. when Colin started his lead. The evening sunshine made the rime shine like gold and warmed it into a spongy, humid mess. For nearly two hours Colin dug and dug, burrowing a 40-foot vertical half-pipe. Then, too wet and tired to continue, he decided to retreat. The last time I'd climbed this pitch I had promised I would never lead it again, and I didn't offer to now. It was Colin's lead block, I rationalized, but I also was scared. We decided to bivy. After carving a small ledge out of rime, we lay down in a fantastic setting: We were 50 meters from the summit of Cerro Torre, with the enormous Southern Patagonia Ice Cap at our feet, and mountains and glaciers extended as far as we could see, from San Lorenzo in the far north to the Paine group in the distant south.

I lay awake most of the night, revisiting the 24 years of climbing that had brought me to this point. I thought back to my first visit to this massif in 1986, when, young and inexperienced, I'd needed three days to climb Agjua Guillaumet, one of the area's smallest spires. The experience then had been as rich as the Torre Traverse was now.

Colin had gotten soaked during his attempt on the final pitch, and it took him a long time to warm up in the morning. We didn't get moving until 9 a.m. Colin had none of his usual



Haley follows El Arca de los Vientos, high on Cerro Torre's north face. The two had previously descended Torre Egger's rime-covered south face, in the background. *Rolando Garibotti*

eagerness, but he geared up and started upward decisively. At the top of the half-pipe he'd carved the night before, instead of continuing to trench up the outer surface of the rime (which is what most leaders, including me, had done in the past), Colin brilliantly started digging a tunnel inside the rime wall. Progress was slow, but any progress at this point was welcome news. After more than three hours of methodic labor, he popped out 20 meters higher, climbed back into a higher natural tunnel in the rime, and emerged onto the summit plateau.

At midday we stood on top and linked into a long embrace. There was no sense of accomplishment or feeling of elation—there was still too much work ahead for that. I thought of Nadina, my four-year-old niece, and deflated like a punctured balloon. How could the rewards of this quest justify the risks I'd taken and the sacrifices I'd made? I'd seen my wife for only ten days in five months, and ignored my nephews and nieces for as long. The creative work behind the Torre Traverse had mostly ended before Colin and I even started; apart from a few variations forced by rime-covered rock, I'd climbed every meter of the traverse before. This time the greater challenges had been the complications of life itself: arranging enough free time, being injury-free and fit at the right moments, and finding a balance between desire and contentment. After so much recklessness, so much effort, so much time, I felt a crushing sense of responsibility to get myself down safely.

After a short rest we started the seemingly endless descent of the Compressor Route on Cerro Torre's southeast ridge. By evening, hungry and exhausted, we gratefully reached the glacier. As we slid and ran back to our camp, jumping over crevasses and crossing under seracs one last time, I broke into a grin, full of appreciation and eagerness for the challenges that lay below. Such a long and arduous journey to attain such a simple joy.



Haley begins the first of three mushroom pitches on Cerro Torre's west ridge. Natural rime tunnels led through these mushrooms, but Haley had to burrow his own tunnel through the final headwall. *Rolando Garibotti*

#### SUMMARY:

AREA: Cerro Torre Massif, Argentinean Patagonia

ASCENT: The first ascent of the "Torre Traverse," climbing Cerro Standhardt via Exocet (700m, VI 5.9 WI6), Punta Herron via Spigolo dei Bimbi (400m, VI 5.10 MI5), Torre Egger via the Huber-Schnarf route (250m, VI 5.10 MI3), and Cerro Torre via the upper portion of El Arca de los Vientos (700m, VI 5.11 A1 MI6), January 21-24, 2008, by Rolando Garibotti and Colin Haley. (Note: The MI grade stands for "mushroom ice.")

#### A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

*Rolando Garibotti has visited the Fitz Roy and Cerro Torre massifs more than 20 times, starting at age 15 when he climbed Aguja Guillaumet. His finest ascents in the area include the first complete ascent of the north face of Fitz Roy in 1995 and the first ascent of the north face of Cerro Torre in 2005, both alpine style. Born in Italy, raised in Argentina, and currently living in the United States, he considers himself a national of Bariloche, a town in the Lake District of northern Patagonia, as this is the place where he developed his passion for the mountains and where, one day, he hopes to enjoy his old age.*



Haley (left) and Garibotti on the summit of Cerro Torre. *Rolando Garibotti*