

CERRO TORRE FREE

By an accident of timing, the long-coveted first free ascent of the southeast ridge of Cerro Torre takes place without Maestri's bolts as protection.

DAVID LAMA



David Lama on Cerro Torre's headwall during his free ascent. *Lincoln Else-ASP Red Bull*

I returned to El Chalten on January 12. My goal of free-climbing Cerro Torre's southeast ridge hadn't changed, but over the past few years I have changed quite a bit, and so had the way I looked at my project.

To be honest, I had no idea of what was ahead of me when, in 2008, I came up with the plan. I was sitting in Chile's Cochamó Valley looking at a photo of Cerro Torre's headwall and thought, "I want to free-climb this peak." It was not like I didn't know anything about climbing. I had won several World Cup competitions and onsighted routes to 8b+. Nor was it as if I had no idea about alpine climbing. I had put up new routes in the Alps and been on a few expeditions. But I had a lot more to learn before my dream of free-climbing the Torre would come true.

My first attempt came in 2010. It was a tough year. After Patagonia's fierce winds blew me off the tower before I could summit, I was faced with a lot of criticism. The film crew that was with me had placed bolts, and their fixed lines could not be removed due to the bad weather. It took me a

while to come around to my own opinion, and the discussion got out of hand. I'm not usually the kind of guy who listens much to what others say about me, but I felt that I had made a mistake.

A year later I was back in El Chalten. Despite the critique, I didn't want to give up my dream of free-climbing the southeast ridge. The film crew was with me again but this time with no bolts or fixed lines. We cleaned up everything from before. (In 2010 Argentines removed most of the gear, while Rolo Garibotti took out most of the added bolts.) My partner, Peter Ortner, and I climbed three peaks: Aguja de la S, Cerro Poincenot, and, at the end of our trip, the Compressor Route on Cerro Torre with aid.

We arrived in Patagonia in January 2012 to the baffling inverse of everything I'd experienced before: sunshine, no wind, no rain, and no snow. It was a little surreal. If I hadn't constantly checked weather maps before arriving, I would have been shocked.

Peter, my close friend and partner from last year, joined me again. As we were walking along the road, talking about free-climbing the Torre, I knew he was as confident about our endeavor as I was. Nothing would stop us this time.

A few days before we started our attempt, we heard that Hayden and Jason had chopped most of Maestri's bolts from the headwall on the Compressor Route. This would not make free-climbing the route easier, but we were still confident. We brought a few more nuts and pitons, but it didn't otherwise affect our rack. We revised our strategy, though. Our original plan had been to climb from Niponino, the first camp, to the Col of Patience, bivy there, and climb the route the next day in a single push. Instead, for safety, we decided to climb to the Col on our first day, rest for a few hours, continue to the start of the ice towers, bivy there, and climb to the summit the next morning.

At 3 a.m. on January 20, we started from Niponino. We made good progress and reached the Col of Patience at 7:30 a.m. and rested. Peter and I had climbed from the Col to the bolt



David Lama belaying on the headwall during his free ascent. *Lincoln Else-ASP Red Bull*

traverse numerous times already. On one attempt last year the conditions were so bad that the first two pitches took us nearly two hours, and after seven hours we gave up. This time the conditions were great, and it only took three hours to reach Maestri's traverse, a line of bolts that traverses right across a blank granite wall for three pitches. There's no way to free climb this section, so I had to find a variation to the left, on the southeast ridge. After a couple of big falls on the arête left of the Salvaterra crack, I began to doubt that this section would ever go free. But I tried again—what else could I do? There is no other way up. Two more attempts (and falls) later, I figured out the sequence and sent the pitch from the belay. A few pitches higher we reached the ice towers, where we picked a small ledge on an icefield to bivvy.

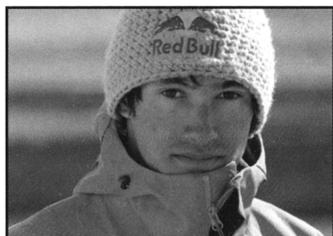
We crawled into our sleeping bags and sat. After a long night we started again at 6 a.m., swinging leads through the ice towers. At 9 a.m. we found ourselves at the beginning of the headwall. I put on my climbing shoes and started the first pitch. Not really difficult but demanding because of loose flakes. For two more pitches we followed Maestri's line. Then I diverged to new terrain that led the last pitch, which was probably the most difficult to protect. At first I climbed five meters straight up. There I could place some good cams and traverse right. After 10 meters I placed another good cam and climbed straight up again, into very run-out terrain. From time to time I tried to place gear, but I didn't trust it. Ten meters below the summit icefield I placed a piton (it's still there), two nuts, and a cam, which I tied together with a sling. That construction might have held a fall, but I sure didn't want to test it. I climbed onto big, loose blocks to reach crimps that led to the summit icefield. Peter and I climbed the mushroom to the very top. After 24 hours of climbing, we began to rappel down.

I have been asked a lot about rating the route, but a free ascent of Cerro Torre's southeast ridge goes far beyond grades. Everybody who has been there knows what I mean, and I think that's all that has to be said. For me this project has been a personal milestone and an emotional adventure. The experiences and memories I take from Cerro Torre are more valuable than all the other things that have happened in my climbing life so far.

SUMMARY:

Area: Chalten Massif, Argentine Patagonia.

Ascent: The first free ascent of the southeast ridge of Cerro Torre, by David Lama and Peter Ortner, summiting on January 20, 2012. They followed most of the variations to the Compressor Route taken by Kennedy-Kruk (January 12, 2012), with two new pitches on the headwall. Lama feels a route like this is beyond rating, but elsewhere he has estimated 5.13b.



David Lama. Corey Rich-ASP Red Bull

ABOUT NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

David Lama, 22, was born to an Austrian mother and a Nepali father. His talent as a climber was first spotted at age 5, by Peter Habeler, who took him under his wing. A few years later he started climbing competitively and won World Cup competitions. He then turned to alpinism, including first ascents in the Alps and the Himalaya.