

VENAS AZULES

An ice climber's dream line reveals itself on the south face of Torre Egger, Patagonia.

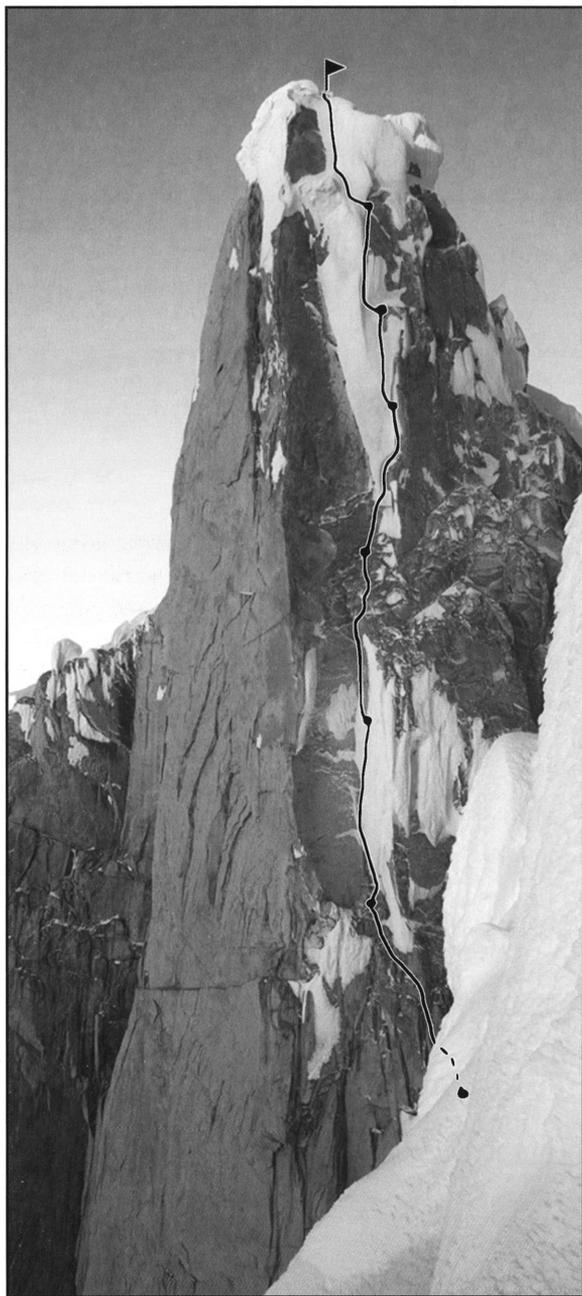
BJØRN-EIVIND AARTUN



Aartun on the way to the A1 crack on a route that was otherwise all ice. *Ole Lied*

I was suspended in the shade, clenching my upper ice tool with both hands. Behind me, the north face of Cerro Torre beamed in the sun. Deep down below me, the vast icecap met the fjords of Chile, far, far away. The ice vein that we'd followed up the south face of Torre Egger had just shut down and forced me out onto this gigantic, whale-shaped mushroom. There was no fear in me, only presence. I focused and breathed and looked up for a solution. It was a sublime moment: way above me at the end of the pitch, the steepness eased back to vertical, and a pencil-thin ice vein appeared a little to the left—an invitation to go on.

As I sat in my home back in Norway, trying to recall our climb, it became once again clear why climbing is so alluring to me. Apart from the obvious reasons—the scenery, the thrill of the void below, the ambivalence of danger and the feeling of connection to nature—there is the moment of absolute presence, the state of stillness when all my senses are aligned. It is like a well-written haiku poem; the flow of energy is clear, simple, and to the point. This feeling has, of course, to do with the severity of the situation. If we climbers do not focus and pull ourselves together, our life is in imminent danger.



The south face ice line was first commented on by Ermanno Salvaterra in 2005, first seen by Bjørn-Eivind Aartun in 2008 from the Ragni Route on Cerro Torre, and first climbed by Aartun and Ole Lied in 2012. *Bjørn-Eivind Aartun*

This state is like a drug to me. It is something I want in my life. Sometimes I feel envious thinking about people who master the art of meditation because this is what it is: a deep and meditative state. Still, at the same time, I feel that my world is richer. I feel privileged to be out in the wild, connected to something bigger than I am, and to have this experience there.

Climbing Torre Egger had been my dream for quite some time. I'd seen the line back in 2008 from the Ragni Route on Cerro Torre. It was fuel for my imagination. I like to see improbable lines. Many times, they are just fantasies that are too far out to try, but they give me energy to go climb routes that are within my reach. The south face of Egger was, to me, perfectly suspended between the realm of realistic and fantastic.

When I planned my trip to Patagonia last autumn, the Egger line was at the top of my list. Originally, I had some plans with an American friend, but when they fell through, I was lucky to convince the Norwegian Ole Lied to go. He is a great and strong partner, always willing and keen. He also knows the area well from earlier visits.

On December 22, we climbed La Silla from Paso Superior on a very cold day after a chilly bivy in the remnants of an old snow cave. We climbed the whole time in crampons and gloves, while the sparks from steel against granite ricocheted around

us. Back in Chalten in the evening, we could see that a two-day weather window was due shortly. Still tired from our climb the day before, we started repacking for Egger. There was no discussion about this: two good days would give us enough time for an attempt on the Egger dream line. On the 24th, we shouldered packs and headed for the Niponino camp.

We intended to climb up to what I'd like to name the "Col of Truth" (I'm convinced that Cesare Maestri never reached this point, and I prefer to stop calling it the "Col of Conquest") via the Donini-Bragg-Wilson route of 1976 (the first ascent of Torre Egger) with El Arca de los Vientos variations to access our planned new line. We knew that some runout slabs and 5.10+ climbing awaited us on the east face of Cerro Torre and that we would need to wear rock shoes and climb with bare hands. Recalling our cold experience two days before on the other side of the valley, we slid into a 9 a.m. start on December 25—to get the best out of the morning sun.

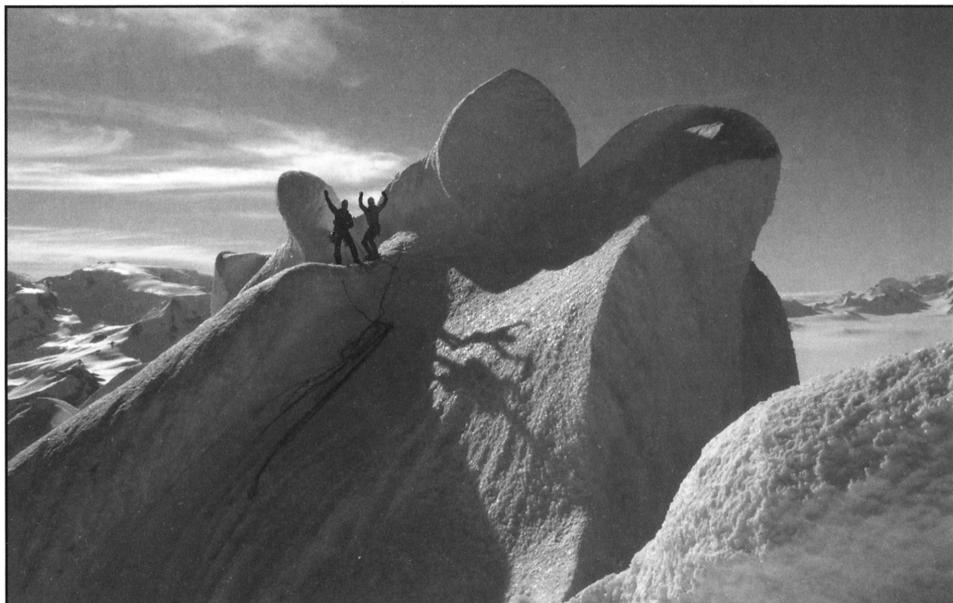
This decision proved to be a classic mistake. The weather was now warm, and we "got the best of the sun" in an ironic way. The triangular snowfield 300 meters above the start of the route heated up quickly, turning the big dihedral into a stream of water. Small slush avalanches pounded us every five minutes.

It was a relief to get above the snowfield and onto the slabs. Eventually, my pants dried out quite well. My boots were still wet upon arrival at our bivy site, and some of the contents in our packs were affected, including our one sleeping bag. Since Ole had been jumaring with the heavy pack, he'd avoided the worst of the water and slush, but we both had wet feet. Before going to sleep, I placed the soles of my boots inside my fleece, put on dry socks, and pulled the wet ones on outside of them. Thus, I woke up the next morning with everything in reasonable condition. Spooning inside our little bivy bag, turning around in perfect sync now and then, we stayed comfortable and got some good rest. *We could probably join the national team of synchronized swimming*, I thought.

In the morning, Ole led the first block. I was so excited that I had problems standing still. "How does it look? Can you see it?" I shouted up to him several times. We couldn't see the line from the col, and there was some mixed climbing around a corner to get to it.

Finally, I heard his voice: "It looks straightforward." When I followed the pitch and arrived at the belay, I realized what an understatement he'd made. Sure, it looked possible. Actually, it looked damn fantastic, but anything other than *straightforward*. Ole had anchored himself right below the start of this enormous rime sausage. To the left was blank, vertical granite. Only a thin sheet of ice led around the rime to a possible upward path. Ole began up this tricky pitch, entering a halfpipe that spiraled out of sight. His nickname in Chalten has been "El Caballo" ["The Horse"—Ed.] ever since Rolando Garibotiti met him on the headwall of the Ferrari Route on Cerro Torre. It was early in the morning, and Ole was climbing the vertical ice without gloves. Rolo was left speechless at the sight of this big, broad-shouldered Viking climbing ice barehanded—as Rolo himself was descending from a cold bivy on the headwall. Ole's big frame and strength certainly lives up to the nickname.

Above us, on what would be the third pitch, I could see an ice tongue going up a red dihedral with a small crack. The crack went at A1, steep and beautiful. While I jumared, I looked forward to taking over the sharp end. Soon we would be close to halfway. I didn't dare think about how this day would end yet. I just wanted to be in the present and climb as high as we could manage. It was impossible to get any idea of the terrain higher up. We could only see half a pitch, never more.



Aartun and Lied celebrating on the summit of Torre Egger. *Colin Haley*

It was now my lead block, and the big rime whale towered above me. I felt small, and I didn't see any good solutions yet, except to venture out into the middle of it. To do that would mean 100 meters of severely overhanging face climbing on rime-covered ice. I kept going. Up close, my heart jumped. On the right side of the mushroom, a bluish halfpipe appeared, winding its way upward. During my climbs in Patagonia, I've learned that very often, where the strong wind forms mushrooms, it also grinds out halfpipes and tunnels. I felt like singing to praise this brilliant solution. But would it go on like this?

I shouted some happy words. Ole didn't understand, and I didn't care. In a few minutes, he would be at my side on the belay anyway. Before the next curve, I stopped and searched my harness for a short ice screw. The ice was good here, and a stubbie would do. The terrain was dead vertical. Putting my body in balance with my feet in every move, I still felt relaxed. Around the bend, I saw it: the runnel shut down. Of course, it couldn't be this "easy." My heart sank a little. The runnel completely closed.

Above me, a three-meter, forty-five-degree roof of rime led out into the blue sky. Then I remembered the option I'd seen from the start of the pitch—a bluish glint on the very belly of the beast. From my now much higher position, if I ventured out onto the face, it wouldn't be long before the really steep stuff eased off. At least, that's what I thought. I shouted down for Ole to follow, and as the optimist I am, I started chopping a hole in the rime fin to my left. Leaning out as far as the belay allowed me, I could only see rime cover and steepness. I decided to traverse left and find the blue gold. We were not going down yet!

The next 15 meters may be the most exhausting bit of ice I have ever climbed. Cleaning the rime as I went and working to get good, safe placements took all my energy. Then this perfect moment came: I reached better ice and saw the inviting, thin, light blue inversion of rime that stretched way up into what would be the start of the sixth pitch.

Naïve as I am, I felt invincible and strong again. *This is the key*, I thought. Craning my neck, I even thought it looked as though there were possible exits on the seventh pitch to both the left and the right.

The thin, divine one still looked intimidating. I was a bit burnt, and I hoped Ole would take over the lead. He was also very tired. Actually, he admitted, he had, for a split second, even doubted our chances of success. Anyway, it was still my block, so I had to pull myself together. As is often the case, if you just enter into the difficulties and deconstruct them, they become manageable, and step by step, there is room for advance. I found I could stem the small rime ribs on the sides of the vein, and the narrow strip of blue ice felt solid for screws. But there was no way I could place both tools. I couldn't even cram my shoulder in there. The right side of it turned into a smooth, red rock wall. But after a few more meters, it transformed again into a work of art. Small, sloping edges for my right foot appeared in the granite one after another. The rest of the pitch was pure fun. We'd proved ourselves worthy, and now it was time for indulgence. I passed a crack and was given a perfect offset nut placement. Safe and confident, I floated to the belay. Both exits would work. The summit was now a pitch away.

A couple of tears wet my eyes. How important can a climb be to me? I was deeply touched by this one, humbled by the beauty and exposure around me, by my luck to live these moments with a friend in this place. After spending some time on the summit taking it all in, we descended by the rappels established on the Torre Traverse. Down at the col, we could enjoy a last meal in the setting sun.

SUMMARY:

Area: Chalten Massif, Argentine Patagonia.

Ascent: After bivying on the Egger-Torre col, Norwegians Bjørn-Eivind Aartun and Ole Lied climbed a new route, Venas Azules (350m, 6b+ A1 AI6), on Torre Egger. To reach the col they followed the Donini-Bragg-Wilson Route with El Arca de los Vientos variations for a complete ascent of 950m.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Bjørn-Eivind Aartun (45) and Stein-Ivar Gravdal died on February 9, 2012, on a new ice route on the big wall of Kjerag in southwest Norway. They were discovered hanging upside down on their ropes, apparently having been hit by falling rock. Both climbers have reported regularly in these pages. Aartun's feature article about his new route Dracula on Alaska's Mt. Foraker appeared in the 2011 AAJ.



Bjørn-Eivind Aartun (left) and Ole Lied on the summit of Torre Egger.