

THE ALPINE JOURNAL 1996

Volume 101

Before Alison Hargreaves reached the summit of K2 and tragically perished in a storm on the descent, she wrote an account of her magnificent solo climb of Everest in May 1995. The article was written at K2 Base Camp and sent out by runner. It is included in this volume by kind permission of Alison's husband James Ballard.

The 101st volume of the *Alpine Journal* celebrates the 40th anniversary of the first ascent of Kangchenjunga in 1955, with a group of articles about the history of the mountain.

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Jacket photographs:

Front Taweche (Nepal), 6542m.
Bivvy site on the North-East Buttress.
(*Mick Fowler*)

Back Guanako in Southern Patagonia.
In the background the Towers of Paine.
(*Marko Prezelj*)



ISBN 0 948153 43 1

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MARKO PREZELJ

'Born Under a Wandering Star'

(Plates 47–50 and back cover)

Lee Marvin's song 'Born Under a Wandering Star' perfectly describes the life of an alpinist, so this was the name that Andrej and I chose for our route on Paine North Tower. For us, Patagonia was a wonderland where there was something strange and new waiting to be discovered around every corner, above or below ...

Before I set off for South America, I knew very little about Patagonia. My knowledge extended to some terrible stories about the weather, and I also knew that there was a peak there by the name of Cerro Torre – an extraordinary spike of rock and, apparently, one of the most beautiful mountains in the world. Nearby stands the peak of Fitzroy, which Slovene alpinists have not so persistently conquered as they have the neighbouring Torre. Otherwise, I knew precious little about Patagonia. Well, to be honest, I had heard of the Towers of Paine. But these few somewhat inadequate pieces of information were all I had managed to put together. In the avalanche of errands and arrangements for my journey, I did not have time for a more thorough preparation.

I had first seen photographs of the Towers of Paine in foreign climbing magazines. They looked extremely interesting and, at first glance, similar to the Cime di Lavaredo in the Dolomites. While I was getting better acquainted with the Himalaya, fellow Slovenians Edo, Matjaž and Ivan were climbing these Patagonian towers. In particular, they were attempting an adventurous new route to the northern summit of the Northern Tower. No one had yet reached that summit. But lack of time and the usual terrible weather forced them to turn back after completing two-thirds of the route, and after they had climbed practically all the most difficult pitches. Their high point was six pitches short of the top edge of the rock wall, with a further 250m (approx) of ridge to the summit.

A visit to Yosemite was my first step towards Patagonia. In autumn 1994, Andrej Stremfelj and I wanted to go back to Tibet. But the extremely high costs involved drove the possibility of climbing in those magical mountains out of our plans. Our thoughts of climbing remained, however. Indeed, our old desires burnt even more fiercely. I felt capable enough and ready to tackle a region which our alpinists had ranked as extreme, if not diabolical, so I suggested to Andrej that we should visit Patagonia. After discussing the project in detail, we found that we were both on the same wavelength and we made a joint decision on the exact mountain and

route. We agreed that each of us would cover his own share of the costs. Somehow we managed to scrape together what we needed.

The two of us were setting out for a country about which we knew almost nothing. Our knowledge of Spanish was nil and we expected big problems in organisation and, in particular, logistical problems in climbing the rock face. The tales we had heard of dicey jagged peaks and terrible weather filled us with awe and no small fear – the result of ignorance and perhaps a rather too literal acceptance of these stories. Our first contact with Patagonia was in fact quite appropriate for two 'Himalayans'. The bleak and wind-swept airport at Rio Gallegos seemed like the most desolate place on earth. We were met by Mr Ivo Bronzovic, born in Patagonia, who noticed our looks of dismay. He attempted to reassure us:

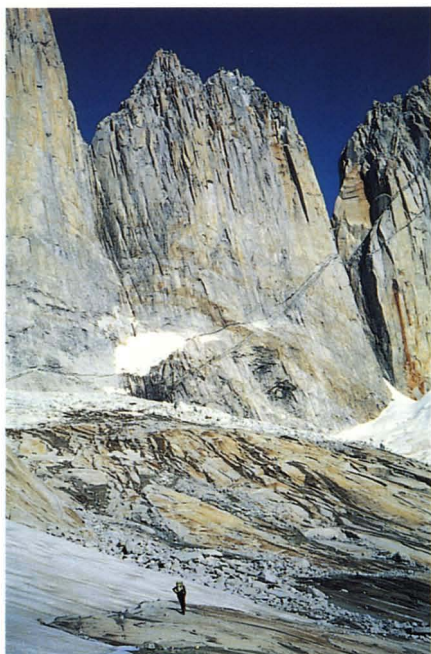
'Hey, lads, this is Patagonia. The wind! Always the wind!' Later I was to remember his words several times.

After a tough time acquiring outrageously expensive climbing permits for the Paine National Park, we hired horses for transporting our gear to a clearing fifteen minutes below Base Camp. This was as far as the horses could go. But Pepe, an agreeable Patagonian, delivered our equipment so late in the evening that we were still carrying it up to Base Camp well after midnight. Finally we fell exhausted into our hastily erected tent. In the morning we continued carrying gear up and arranging our humble abode. In the afternoon we were roused by a welcome visit from an old acquaintance of mine from El Cap – Brad Jarret, a typical American, and his team.

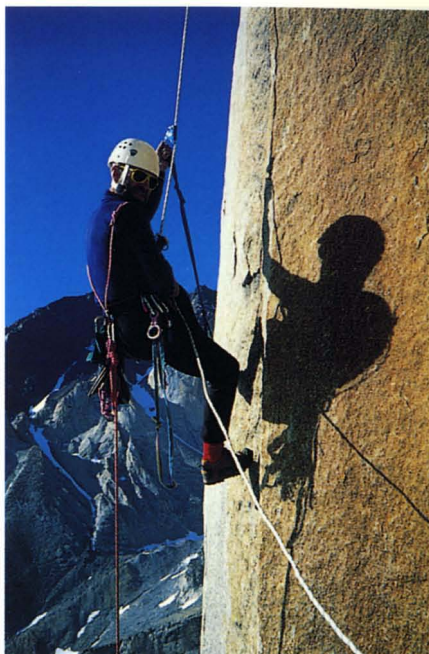
There are currently three huts at Base Camp. From the outside they look desolate, but on the inside they offer a cosy shelter from the weather. When we arrived, they were all occupied, so we were quite happy to accept an invitation from some easy-going Basques to come and cook in 'their' hut.

We spent the first day arranging our dwelling and equipment, and the second doing two carries of our heavy rucksacks up to the great cracked rock on the edge of the glacial moraine. The towers of Paine slowly worked their way into our blood. The awe-inspiring impression made by our first view of the three towers was gradually replaced by the conviction that the two of us would indeed be able to climb the route started by Edo, Matjaž and Ivan right to the finish, even though this was our first visit to Patagonia. As we stood at the foot of the wall, we made the decision to climb in classical rather than Alpine style. The edge of the wall was high, I mean hi-i-i-i-igh above us, the weather was bad, some pretty hefty stones and rocks came careering down the face during our approach, and our heavy rucksacks weighed us down.

We climbed the first pitch, clinging on disagreeably with our hooks, and returned with mixed feelings to our tent by the rock on the moraine. In the morning, rain drove us down to Base Camp. We had experienced our first taste of the true Patagonia and we decided to make good use of every possible moment of tolerable weather. Over the next three days we climbed seven more pitches on what was in places very crumbly-loose rock.



47. Patagonia: the approach to the North Tower of Paine. (*Marko Prezelj*) (p90)



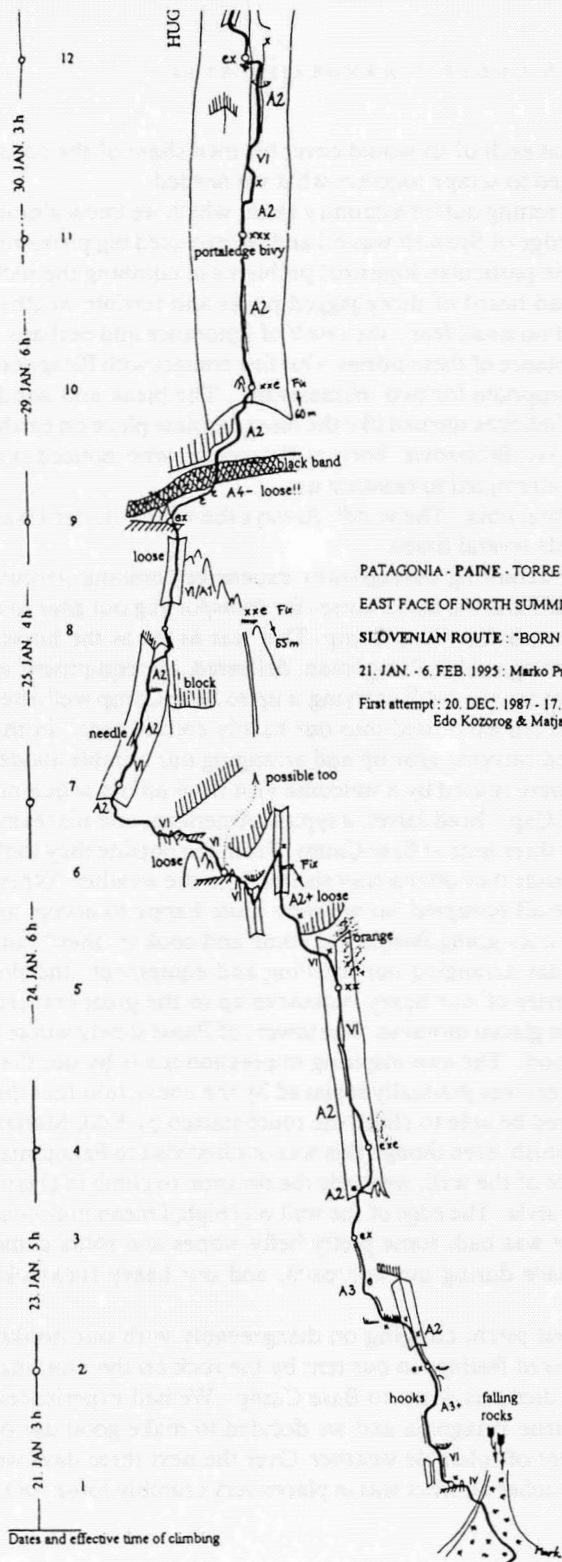
48. Andrej Stremfelj jumar up the fixed ropes on the new route 'Born Under a Wandering Star'. (*Marko Prezelj*) (p90)



49. Andrej Stremfelj traverses across the steep face of the N Tower. (*Marko Prezelj*) (p90)



50. On the windy summit of the North Tower of Paine. (*Marko Prezelj*) (p90)



summit : 6. 2. 95 - 17:30



6. FEB. 5 h



5. FEB. 12 h

21

20

19

18

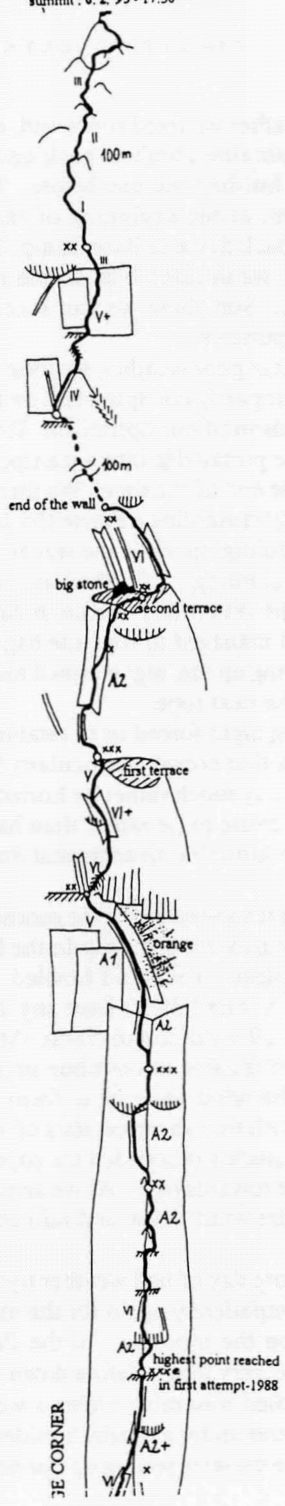
17

16

15

14

13



JE CORNER

highest point reached
in first attempt-1988

In changeable weather we fixed ropes and, every evening, returned to our little tent on the moraine, climbing back next morning, rope after rope, up to where we had finished the day before. This had started to get a little monotonous when, at the beginning of the fourth day, some truly foul weather drove us back down to Base Camp. Fortifying ourselves with huge amounts of food, we decided that on the next attempt we would try to reach the summit. Somehow we had succeeded in infecting each other with unrealistic optimism.

After a day's rest in poor weather, we took additional gear – a portaledge – and set off for our partly-collapsed tent on the moraine. The crystal clear morning further inspired our optimism. We packed food, water, clothes, equipment and the portaledge into a transport bag, and alternately lugged it up the wall to the end of the rope. We then faced the most difficult pitch of the wall – a truly crumbling traverse through a coal-like black band into a huge corner. Hauling up made me warm, at times even hot, so I started the pitch in light clothing. I finished an extremely awkward and rather nerve-racking climb on an airy stance in cloudy and windy weather. So before Andrej had managed to rope the bag and start climbing, I was frozen stiff. But hauling up the 'pig' warmed me up so much that I was able to belay Andrej on the next rope.

The approaching night forced us to establish a good bivvy. Setting up a portaledge is a task that nobody particularly likes. We usually have to do it when we would really much rather be horizontal. The darkness and wind only add to one's desire to lie rather than hang. However, we quickly set up a reasonably comfortable arrangement for the night, albeit for rock face conditions.

During the night it snowed but in the morning the ground was clear. The equipment that we had not put away in the bag, and there was a lot of it, was drenched by sleet. The wind howled. We packed up the bed and started climbing. At first I didn't have any difficulty, but after a while the wind blasted away all my desire to climb. At the end of the rope I decided that it was just not feasible to continue in such a wind. Andrej did not contradict this. The wind was true to form – Patagonian, gusting irregularly, and armed with tiny sharp crystals of snow and throwing us around on the ropes. We quickly descended the ropes and, without any feeling of guilt, scurried back towards base. As we arrived at Base Camp the weather really broke, and the wind, snow and rain convinced us of the wisdom of our decision.

We spent one more day of bad weather trying to recover our motivation, then we took off impatiently again for the mountain. Once again we had to pitch the tent on the moraine. In the Patagonian wind, normal tent poles don't hold for very long. Before dawn the tent finally collapsed irrevocably. We huddled miserably under a wet tarpaulin until it was light enough to find shelter under a nearby boulder. Everything we had was wet or damp. But while we were setting up our new shelter, we noticed that the

weather was improving slightly. The wind had not abated, but then neither had our impatience. We wanted to finish what we had started as soon as possible.

By the time we had hopped across the gentle cracks in the glacier beneath the wall, and had avoided the veritable craters pounded out by massive falling rocks, the weather had again turned foul. I mean absolutely foul. In spite of this, we started – instinctively rather than with serious intent – to climb up the ropes. Snow stung my neck. I was cold. The wind tossed me about on the ropes, which were seriously damaged in some places, and I asked myself what on earth I was doing there. It was just as well that the two of us were a couple of dozen metres apart, otherwise we would certainly have turned around. Somehow we pulled ourselves up to where our equipment and bed were hanging. Before nightfall the wind settled down to a more supportable level. We used this opportunity to remove all our gear from the final pitch and set up the bed.

The windy and snowy night dawned into a clear morning. We quickly climbed another pitch, which ended at the place where the others had turned back in 1988. After three more long pitches we reached the end of a huge corner. It was already dark when we came down to the bed and set it up, and we did not finish our best day of weather on the expedition until after midnight.

Towards morning it started snowing heavily, so we lay there for some time deciding what to do. We still had enough food, but barely enough water for one day. Around 11am the weather improved enough for us to decide to continue to the end of our fixed ropes. With every metre of rope the weather improved, and our enthusiasm grew. We climbed another three pitches and the route ended on a shoulder which joined up with the route *Armas Y Rosas* from the West Face. After a gentle ridge, we climbed quite quickly in a strong wind. We arranged another three stance points on the last 250 metres, which brought us to the summit which is a kind of 'needle' with a sharp ridge behind it. Near the actual summit there was just enough flat area to stand on, but the strongly-gusting wind prevented us from standing upright on it. The best we could do was to lean over the sharp ridge, *à cheval*, and literally put our nose on the summit! This was the first peak which I truly experienced. But the fantastic view and our feelings of satisfaction at accomplishing a difficult task were checked by our anxiety over the descent. There were no transcendent emotions, just a simple enjoyment of the moment.

We descended slowly, with the wind constantly blowing the rope around. By dark, we had reached the fixed ropes and, as we went down, we removed them from the rock face. In pitch darkness we again set up the bed. After a bite to eat and a final gulp of liquid, the wind quite literally rocked us off to sleep. Presently it began to snow again. By the morning we were wet through, and the weather showed no sign of improving, so we stayed put and waited the whole day. Soaked, without food and water, we waited

there until the following, slightly more promising, morning. But in half an hour the rays of the rising sun were obliterated by a real blizzard. That half-hour gave us just enough time to pack up the bed and, heavily loaded, to start down the wall. The descent was very time-consuming. The harnessed equipment continually dragged us downwards, while we had to negotiate numerous traverses. But somehow we managed to get to the bottom of the wall, from which we removed everything bar the stances and a few pitons. Tired and dehydrated, we carried some of our gear down to Base Camp, and brought down the rest a day later when the bad weather had let up just a little. After that the weather was continuously bad for a week.

The route which we had completed follows a logical line up the face, although the rock is very loose in the lower part. A three-man rope would have been quicker. It might even have been possible to achieve in true Alpine style, or to free climb most of the route. But given the crumbling rock, strong wind and appalling weather, free climbing would certainly require considerably more time. And the problem of climbing in true Alpine style on a rock face such as this would lie chiefly in finding or transporting enough water.

We concluded our expedition without any major problems. On the wall we didn't complicate matters unnecessarily, and in the end we realised that it had been right for us to remain alone. We had needed to keep alert all the time, and this had given us a more intense perception of all the events there. In this way, we acquired a considerable amount of useful long-term experience. Before setting off for home, we took a look around all the other interesting possibilities for extreme alpinism in the Paine group, and toured the foot of Cerro Torre and that of Fitzroy. In this way, we finally created our own myth of Patagonia.

Summary: Between 21 January and 8 February 1995 Marko Prezelj and Andrej Stremfelj of Slovenia completed a new route on the 800m East Face of the Torre Norte del Paine. The 22-pitch route *Born Under a Wandering Star* is approx 750m high, averaged VI, A2 with one pitch of A3+ and one of A4- (UIAA grades). The first attempt was made in 1987/88 by Edo Kozorog, Matjaž Ravhekar and Ivan Rejc. Following the original line on the first 13 pitches, the pair took 6½ days to reach the high point of the first attempt. They climbed a further six pitches (300m+) to the shoulder. On 4 February they started the final push, jumaring up 11 pitches and sleeping in a portaledge. On 6 February, after a further 3 pitches, they climbed to the shoulder and the junction with the route *Armas y Rosas* coming in from the West Face. In 1½ hours they climbed the final ridge to the summit which, owing to very strong winds, they attained *à cheval*. The same day, they removed all ropes as they descended to the portaledge, where they remained for two nights and one day, hoping for better weather. On 8 February they finally descended in bad weather to the foot of the face, having removed all 500m of fixed ropes and gear.