



The GMHM team after completing the traverse. From top left clockwise: Lionel Albrieux, Dimitry Munoz, Sébastien Ratel, Didier Jourdain, Sébastien Bohin, François Savary. (GMHM Collection)

lasso². He is returning the old Yendegaia estancia to its former wild state, riding a horse for a few days in the mountains and bringing back animals alive to sell the fresh meat to fishermen. For three days as we wait for a boat we are lost between two worlds, so well received by this man from another time. We need this gradual return to civilization, time to reflect on the beauty of this long day of thirty days and those rare bright periods that revealed the spectacle of Darwin, as splendid as it is unknown.

Summary: An account of the first lengthwise traverse of the Cordillera Darwin in Tierra del Fuego (Chilean sector) on skis in September/October 2011 by six members of the Chamonix-based *Groupe Militaire de Haute Montagne* (GMHM). The range is 130km long on its east-west axis, however the team covered some 250km during the 30-day traverse. Total ascent was 17,400km and the difficult terrain required them to travel roped up for 26 days.

Team: Captain Lionel Albrieux, Chief Warrant Officer Sébastien Bohin, Lieutenant Didier Jourdain, Dimitry Munoz, Corporal Sébastien Ratel, Staff Sergeant François Savary. (For note on the GMHM see page 71)

2. Jose Alvarao's often solitary life at the Estancia Yendegaia is well described by Simon Yates in his book *The Wild Within* (Vertebrate, 2012).

DEREK BUCKLE & PHIL WICKENS

Peaks and Penguins

The 2013 AC Expedition to Antarctica



Antarctica team members on the Belgica glacier approaching the north side of Pk 1475. (Bjorn Riis-Johannesson)

Few places in the world today are truly unexplored, yet there remain regions with whole ranges of unclimbed mountains, little in the way of bureaucracy, no acclimatisation requirement and an amazing collection of wildlife. The Antarctic Peninsula is one such region, although even this is gradually yielding to the attention of yacht-based mountaineers who regularly cross the Drake Passage from South America. Most of these, however, either repeat ascents of the more popular mountains or simply focus on coastal peaks that are suitable for single day forays. It is relatively unusual for expeditions to venture further inland to explore more distant unclimbed objectives, leaving these ripe for more enterprising souls.

The 2010 Alpine Club Expedition¹ and the 2011 Eagle Ski Club Expedition² (both led by Phil Wickens) are two recent notable exceptions. Even so, these and nearly all other exploratory expeditions have concentrated on

1. *AJ116*, 179-190 (2012)

2. *ESC Yearbook 2012*, 32-38



Bjorn Riis-Johannesson (left), Derek Buckle and Mike Pinney starting the ascent of the Trooz glacier after disembarkation. (Jamie Goodhart)

the northern Peninsula and its accompanying islands as persistent, impenetrable pack-ice rarely allows exploration south of the Argentine Islands at a latitude of 65°15'S. Even Phil, a regular Antarctic visitor, had not yet managed to get this far. It was this area that the 2013 AC Expedition chose as its priority objective. Terrestrial and satellite maps showed several interesting mountains around the Trooz and Belgica glaciers to the east of Collins Bay.

Although these mountains and glaciers had not previously been explored on foot, the majority were charted and named more than a century ago by either the Belgian Antarctic Expedition (1897-9) under Gerlache, or the French Antarctic expeditions (1903-5 and 1908-10) under Charcot. Together with names applied by Rymill's British Graham Land Expedition (1934-7), the features in this area provide a fascinating record of the members, sponsors and events of these pioneering expeditions. Charcot's team managed to access and explore the glaciers 15km further north, but



Map: The Trooz Glacier region.



Hannah Baker, Mike Pinney and Jamie Goodhart high on the north-east spur of Alencar Peak. (Phil Wickens)

access to the glaciers that flow from Valiente and Alencar peaks is guarded by a hazardous coastline of unstable ice cliffs and steep rock faces.

Everyone other than Phil had to get to Ushuaia where we were due to meet Antoine Busiaux and Julie Herault who were to crew our yacht, *Spirit of Sydney*, to the Peninsula. This was the same boat that we had used on the previous expedition; owners, Daryl Day and Cath Hew, now owned a second yacht, *Icebird*, that would be going to the Peninsula independently around the same time. After the long flight from Europe to Buenos Aires we immediately transferred to an internal flight to Ushuaia where Phil was on hand to facilitate our arrival. With several days spare before our departure we took the opportunity to explore the mountains surrounding Ushuaia culminating in a climb of Cerro Roy (1239m). We also took one of the day cruises in the Beagle Channel to visit the historic Estancia Harberton, the first ranch established in Tierra del Fuego in 1886 and now a museum. The cruise was our first opportunity to see sea lion, cormorant and Magellanic penguin colonies. More importantly, this time was essential in order to stock the yacht for the four-week trip and to sort the expedition food into convenient two-man packages for when we would eventually leave the sanctuary of the boat for on-shore camps.

On 3 January the Prefectura cleared our departure from Argentina allowing us to motor down the Beagle Channel to Puerto Williams, the Chilean port on Navarino Island from where we would begin the crossing



Expedition leader Phil Wickens, north-east spur of Alencar Peak.
(*Jamie Goodhart*)

to Antarctica. Unfortunately it was too late for formal registration by the time that we arrived at Puerto Williams so the hardier among us spent the evening drinking pisco sours in the Micalvi yacht club, the most southerly public bar in the world. Continuing along the Beagle Channel the next morning we passed returning penguins and watched dusky dolphins surfing the wake of the boat. This was to be the forerunner of a wealth of wildlife that we were to see in the Drake Passage and later along the Antarctic Peninsula. The three hours on – six hours off routine of watches over the next three days passed in a sleepy haze as anti-sickness tablets took their toll on consciousness, but at least they worked! On the 2010 expedition two of us, dubbed the ‘chuck-up team’, suffered constantly from nausea and vomiting that made the crossing a humbling, not to say trying, experience. For 2012, the non-seafarers among us were determined that this time it would be different.

Albatrosses, Cape pigeons and petrels kept us company as we journeyed south, but eventually abandoned us as we crossed the Antarctic Convergence into the land of the all-night sun.

We first spotted land late on 7 January before passing to the seaward (west) side of Anvers Island and reaching the Ukrainian Vernadsky base on the Argentine Islands around midday the next day. The weather was glorious so after setting the anchor we took the opportunity to kayak in the complex archipelago where we encountered gentoo penguins and Weddell, crab-eater and leopard seals at close quarters. In the evening we were invited for a tour of the base by Nicolai, the commander, who was very pleased to entertain us.

Next day we motored south to Clapp Point at the head of the Trooz



Derek Buckle on the final steep section of the north-east face of Pk 1333.
(*Phil Wickens*)

glacier to check the state of the ice in Collins Bay and reconnoitre potential access to the glacier before returning to moor at Vernadsky. Despite large quantities of brash ice from the constantly calving glacier, an easy-angled wind scoop to the right of the snout that Phil had identified from the satellite pictures appeared to be free from objective danger and to offer a viable access point to the Belgica glacier. Several sightings of minke whales were an added attraction to the journey. On the 10 January therefore we returned to the point to be dropped off by Zodiac on the rocky shore. After depositing an eight-day emergency ration pack we then ferried skis and haul bags along the beach to the foot of the scoop before climbing steeply past the unstable glacial snout onto more amenable ground. From here six hours of easy skinning following the right of the heavily crevassed Trooz glacier led to our first camp at 525m at the junction of the Trooz and Belgica glaciers just below the northern tip of Alencar Peak (1592m).

Waking to a crystal clear sky on 11 January we planned to attempt Alencar Peak, some 5km from the camp. Leaving around 10.30am we skinned easily due south following a broad valley cirque to where the slope steepened before depositing our skis. From here we climbed the last few hundred metres of the north-east spur on foot to complete the first ascent in approximately 4 hours (Alpine PD+). From the snowy summit we had panoramic views over Beascochea Bay to the south, the Trooz glacier to the north and the Belgica glacier to the east, revealing a plethora of unclimbed peaks in all directions. Returning the same way, we ended the day with a

superb ski back to camp in ideal spring snow conditions.

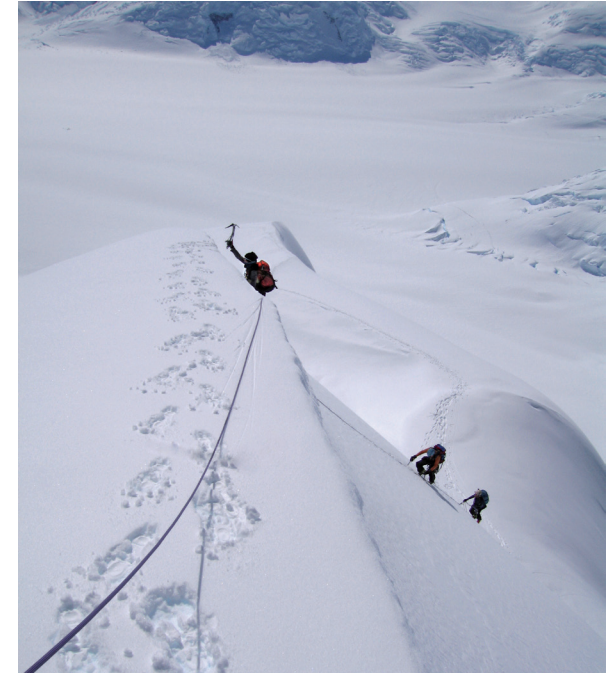
The morning of 12 January also dawned fine so our plan was to make the first ascent of the unnamed peak whose rocky north buttress dominated the camp to the south. Initially we followed a similar line to that for Alencar before making a right traverse onto the heavily crevassed north-east face of the peak. Faced with a massive crevasse at about 1000m we stashed our skis before making a short, but exhilarating, climb up a steep ice arête that conveniently bridged the void. Some 300m higher a short ice wall led onto the impressive compact summit (Alpine AD). Averaging GPS readings gave this peak a height of 1333m. With heavy cloud building up in the valley we lingered just long enough on the summit for the obligatory photographs before returning to the stash for an exciting ski back to camp in dense cloud.

Following a windy night we decided to relocate the camp higher up the Belgica glacier so as to give better access to Valiente Peak, our second major objective. Not long after leaving we were again enshrouded by heavy mist so that we travelled using pre-prepared GPS waypoints in order to avoid the extensively crevassed area seen from satellite pictures. Eight kilometres and 3.5 hours later we placed a second camp at 867m on a broad plateau below the north ridge of Valiente Peak.

After another wild night accompanied by surprisingly little precipitation we awoke on 14 January to a windless morning and considerable high cloud. Nevertheless, we planned to attempt the high peak south-east of camp in the hope that conditions would improve as the day wore on. Leaving just before 9am we skinned up the easy-angled glacier until it was possible to traverse right onto the NNE face through two major crevasses. From here we continued on skis to make the first ascent of the broad icy summit of Peak 2032m (Alpine F) that we have tentatively called the Belgica Dome. At this point Bjorn, Derek and Mike elected to return to camp while the remaining four continued to a higher peak to the west. This was climbed via its east ridge (Alpine F) and unexpectedly turned out to be Valiente Peak (2270m) itself as there were no other significant peaks visible from its summit. Having to re-climb Peak 2032m on their return to camp resulted in a hard, 12-hour day.

Lethargy and dense cloud the next morning meant a late start but eventually we made an attempt to explore the range east of the camp before calling it a day at a height of around 1450m. A combination of the featureless terrain, near-zero visibility and poor snow conditions finally convinced even the more enthusiastic among us that the probability of locating any summit on this rounded massif in the current conditions was vanishingly low. Even skiing back down the sastrugi-covered slopes on a GPS bearing was a trial and it was a relief to get back to the tents. Overnight the conditions improved markedly and we set off for the prominent peak due south of the camp via its heavily crevassed north ridge. Zigzagging through the crevasses it was possible to skin to about 1300m before reaching a wide crevasse that straddled the ridge just as it markedly steepened. After depos-

Hannah Baker, Phil Wickens and Mike Pinney approaching the summit of Peak 1333. (Derek Buckle)



iting the skis, a leftwards traverse allowed us to bridge the gap via a short wall before continuing up a narrow arête to make the first ascent of Peak 1475m (Alpine AD). The compact summit afforded superb views of Valiente and the surrounding peaks. We returned to camp the same way.

With a diminishing number of interesting peaks left in the vicinity of camp II we decided to break camp on 17 January and head back to the *Spirit of Sydney* to give us an opportunity to explore elsewhere. Mount Rio Branco to the west of Cape Pérez was high on the list, but to attempt this we needed to be further south in Beascochea Bay. Leaving soon after 8am we skied back down the Belgica glacier past the earlier camp and on towards Lancaster Hill to the



AC team on the summit of Peak 1333. Left to right: Hannah Baker, Derek Buckle, Jamie Goodhart, Mike Pinney, Bjorn Riis-Johannesson, Stefan Jachmich. (Phil Wickens)

south of the Trooz glacier. As it was still early, and the scheduled pick-up was not until 3.30pm, we stashed the gear in order to climb Lancaster Hill, which we believed had not previously been climbed. An easy skin up the east ridge led to the east summit (642m, Alpine F) from where a ski traverse of the whole 2km ridge to the west summit (616m, Alpine F) was



Camp II on the Belgica glacier with Valiente Peak (left) and Peak 1475. (Bjorn Riis-Johannesson)



made. While the lower of the two summits, the western top holds commanding views over Collins Bay and, being the more seaward, one suspects that it is probably the top for which the mountain was named. After traversing back towards the east top, an easy ski descent led back to the stash from where we followed our upward tracks back to Clapp Point. Back on board the yacht we learned that the French guided party based on the yacht *Podorange* had successfully climbed Rio

Hannah Baker surmounting the crux crevasse on the north side of Peak 1475. (Phil Wickens)

Branco from the north three days earlier and that another guided party, based on *Icebird*, had climbed the prominent peak terminating at Cape Pérez the previous day. We still felt, however, that an approach of Rio Branco from the south would be a valid objective even though, if successful, it would no longer be a first ascent. As a result we sailed into Beascochea Bay to establish whether a viable landing site for such an approach existed and to investigate other potential targets from the bay before returning to safe harbour at Vernadsky.

With poor weather forecast for the coming days, Antoine and Julie were justifiably concerned about returning to Beascochea Bay the next day for fear of becoming trapped in the vulnerable cove by pack ice. Fortunately we still had plans for other major objectives near Paradise Harbour to the north so we planned to sail to the UK Antarctic Heritage site at Port Lockroy where we would make a final decision. During the long journey we spotted humpback whales at close quarters before making a short stop to visit the well-established Adélie penguin colonies at Yalour Island. Rather disappointingly, low cloud reduced the magnificent scenery of the Lemaire Channel to mere truncated stumps but this was largely offset by the appearance of a pod of humpback whales.

Persistent heavy cloud on 19 January limited our options while at Port Lockroy although we did take time to visit the museum and gentoo penguin colonies during the day before joining the French team aboard the *Podorange* for a lively, alcohol-fuelled evening. Heavy snow fell during the festivities but there was still hope that we might get a small weather window in which to make another climbing foray before returning to South America. With no imminent opportunity to spend time ashore, wildlife spotting became our main pre-occupation while sailing north to Paradise Harbour – and it did not disappoint. In addition to several orca pods foraging close to the yacht the highlight was undoubtedly the inquisitive humpback that spent 30 minutes swimming alongside while we rushed from side to side with our cameras. At one point Jamie looked as though he was going for the closest encounter award when he nearly fell overboard onto its back.

On arrival at Paradise Harbour we were immediately invited by the Chileans to visit the Gabriel Gonzales Videla base where we were given a tour round the museum and provided with welcoming pisco sours – not bad for a military establishment even if its function is civilian. The base is also home to large colonies of gentoo penguins and three extremely rare leucistic (white) penguins. A fourth, apparently, fell foul to a hungry leopard seal. Unfortunately, the weather forecast for the coming weeks was still not looking good and a major storm was predicted round Cape Horn about the time that we were due to return. Understandably, Antoine and Julie were not enthusiastic about crossing the Drake Passage and rounding the Cape in the face of an oncoming storm and wanted to return to Chile while the conditions were still favourable. Not being masochistic there was unanimous concurrence so we planned to leave early and hopefully explore the Darwin range further west along the Beagle Channel from Ushuaia.



Phil Wickens below the steep ice wall on the north side of Pk. 1475. (Hannah Baker)

Crossing the Drake was remarkably calm (the lull before the storm possibly?) and several days later we anchored at Caleta Martial on Isla Herschel before continuing to Puerto Williams to obtain a permit to visit the Darwins. Motoring up the Beagle Channel we later anchored in Caleta Olla beneath the Francés glacier descending from the cirque between Mts Bove and Francés. While here we were rather surprised to see Simon Yates suddenly emerge from the undergrowth after an abortive attempt on Mt Francés; he and his group were promptly invited to join our impromptu beach barbecue. Poor weather persisted during our stay in the Darwins and we managed very little actual climbing. Once again, however, we were recompensed by the prolific wildlife, including Magellanic woodpeckers, kingfishers and condors as well as the non-indigenous beavers and their extensive handiwork of dams. With our stay now coming to an end there was just time for a spot of horse-riding at



Phil Wickens on the crux steep ice arête of Peak 1475. (Derek Buckle)

Yendegaia before our return to Ushuaia and thence the long flight home.

Summary: During January 2013 seven Alpine Club members under the leadership of Phil Wickens sailed to the Antarctic Peninsula on the yacht *Spirit of Sydney*. From two inland camps on the Belgica glacier various members of the team made first ascents of Alencar Peak (1592m), Valiente Peak (2270m), Peak 1333m, Peak 2032m and Peak 1475m. The party also made the first ascent of Lancaster Hill east and west summits (642m and 616m).

Participants: Derek Buckle, Hannah Baker, Jamie Goodhart, Stefan Jachmich, Mike Pinney, Bjorn Riis-Johannessen and Phil Wickens.

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