

MOUNT SAN VALENTIN

[We are indebted to Mrs. Joseph Tavit for the following translation of the account of the ascent of this mountain published by the Club Andino of Bariloche. The original was written by Mr. Otto Meiling, a member of the successful party.]

SAN VALENTIN belongs to a chain of mountains which extends as far as the 'Paredes' in the south; but its glaciers terminate even further south, in the Steffen Fjord. The great glacier wedge between San Valentin to the north and Arenales to the south measures approximately 80 km. from north to south, and 30 km. from east to west. The range which rises between these two mountains runs from N.N.E. to S.S.W., culminating in a series of high peaks, several of which rise above 3,000 m. high, and are situated almost in a straight line. Towards the west, the glaciers descend gradually to the sea, or at least to its level. Towards the east and the north the walls of rock and the glaciers fall in an abrupt descent of 3,000 m.

The Glacial system to the west of the great ridge between Valentin and Arenales is an uninterrupted plateau of ice, the height of which varies between 1,100 and 1,500 m., and from which the glaciers of Guala, San Rafael and San Quentin move towards the west. According to the statements of Windhausen, this enormous glacier formation is a climatological phenomenon unique in the world—especially if one considers that the region lies in the same latitude as Switzerland, or if one compares it with the desert Steppe-like plains of Patagonia which extend on the eastern side of the Cordillera right to the Atlantic coast. These great masses of ice, sometimes called 'The Continental Icefield of Patagonia,' are considered to be the remains of the Pleistocene ice age, which have been maintained owing to the extreme dampness of the climate, with precipitation reaching as much as 5,000 m/m. per year.

The 'Andinistic' history of San Valentin began in 1921 when Dr. Frederic Reichert organised an expedition for the ascent of the mountain. Those who took part in the expedition were: Alfred Bachmann (painter), Dr. Fritsche (geologist, botanist), Presbyter Martin Gusinde (zoologist and photographer), Dr. Christopher M. Hicken (botanist), Martin Konopacki (artist), and Dr. F. Reichert (glacialist). The latter, accompanied by the Chilean native Antonio Llan-Llan, arrived in very bad weather conditions as far as the Nunatak, and on February 11, after a climb of three hours, reached another rocky promontory higher up.

In January 1929 Dr. Reichert with Mrs. Ilse von Rentzell, Captain Ihl and three members of the Chilean Club Andino explored the Leones Valley to the S.E. of San Valentin. Several lakes (which they discovered) prevented them from continuing further. During the



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CAMP IV. SAN VALENTIN IS THE FURTHERMOST PEAK.

summer of 1939/40 came the Swiss geologist, Dr. Arnold Heim, accompanied by Hermann Hess and W. Schmitt. By means of a collapsible boat they were able to cross Lake Leon and climb the glaciers to the west of the lake. At almost the same time Dr. Reichert, along with the two brothers Ihl, the engineer E. Hoffmann and Arthur Grosse repeated the attempt from Lake San Rafael where, at the time, the hotel was in construction. They installed their camp IV on the Nunatak, and on the 13/14 March, 1940, Hoffmann and W. Ihl, using skis, reached the depression in the principal crest to the west of Lake Fierro, that is as far as the 'divortium glaciarium.'

The year 1942 produced a further attempt at an ascent. Hermann Hess, Alig, Hoffmann and Mani launched a carefully prepared expedition. They arrived as far as the depression of 3,000 m. at the foot of the south side of San Valentin and were prevented from continuing by persistent bad weather. The results of this attempt were of the greatest help to the expedition of the Club Andino of Bariloche, both on account of the map made at the time, and on account of the erection of the tiny refuge on the Nunatak. Finally in 1945, Dr. Heim again made an attempt. He set out with Hess and three members of the C.A.B.—H. Schmoll, J. Studer and A. Vallmitjana—from Lake Buenos Aires. Lake Leon was crossed in a boat brought from Bariloche, and it was possible to accomplish the first ascent of the peak Tronco—2,400 m.—with skis.

The final attempt, the one which was to be crowned with success, took place in December 1952 with the following members constituting the expedition: Dinko Bertonec, Gregorio Ezquerro, Emilio Hernandez, Birger Lantschner, Otto Meiling, Dr. Juan J. Neumeyer, Tonchek Pangerc and Carlos Sonntag.

On December 1, 1952, the party set out in an omnibus for the journey of some 1,000 km. through Patagonia, together with baggage and 34 cases of equipment and provisions in order to reach Puerto Aisen on the west coast of Chile. The monotonous journey through the steppe-like plain lasted for three long days. From Puerto Aisen onwards our future journey had as yet to be organised, the which, in view of the innumerable difficulties and lack of co-operation, would need a chapter to itself; but on the third day after our arrival our direction changed suddenly first west and then south to Lake San Rafael. The journey through this deeply indented maze of islands was enjoyed much more on the return journey by a few of the group who did it in an open fishing boat, using oars and sails.

On December 8 we disembarked somewhat ill-humoured, through the waste of time on the part of the ship's management, but safely on the northern bank of Lake San Rafael, in the immediate vicinity of the gigantic glacier—the tongue of the San Rafael glacier, which descends in an unbroken line to the sea. The deserted tourist hotel, a typical South American structure, served us as base camp. On the following day we set out early, in order to advance by stages on the glacier itself and to establish the necessary camps. On the evening of December 9

Camp I was established at about 450 m., where we were able with great difficulty to make a fire with rain-soaked wood. The next day, in spite of bad weather, we found the site of Camp IV of Prof. Reichert, and Camp III of H. Hess, and set up there, on December 11, our Camp II. The advance group came down on December 12 to the Base Camp which was on sea level and provided themselves with food, tents and skis which would be absolutely necessary for a further advance on the eternal snows of the Continental Icefield. At 4 o'clock in the morning we set out heavily laden to reach Camp II in one day. We had to do about 20 km. of broken glacier, full of crevasses, with climbing equipment, heavy rucksacks and balancing our skis the while. By sundown, dead tired, we reached the camp; next day we set out again to establish Camp III on the higher reaches of the ice-desert which none of us had ever seen before. Appalling weather conditions rendered a bivouac necessary, but about midday on December 15 a tent was once more set up on a rocky island about half way up our icy way at a height of 1,150 m. The remaining members of the expedition trailed provisions and fuel to the already established camp, while the advance group provided for and built up Camp IV at a height of 1,500 m.—now within sight of San Valentin. The gods of the weather seemed to have mercy upon us and bestowed upon us some sunny days that became almost unbearable. The sun burned and was reflected unmercifully from the shadeless ice-waste, but it was on the whole to our advantage. On December 17 the rest of the men who had remained overnight in Camp III set out in the early hours of the morning to reach us in Camp IV. All necessary material for a more elevated camp was distributed, and the advance began along the route previously explored by myself the day before. Our intention was to advance as far as the depression reached by H. Hess, and there to establish Camp V from which in any kind of conditions we should be able to besiege the mountain from the nearest point possible. On this day the double journey that had to be made, difficulties in crossing crevasses and the piercing rays of the sun left our strength greatly diminished, and so we dug ourselves in about 150 m. below the depression in the flank of the mountain, establishing two tents and making a roomy ice cavern which was a thoroughly comfortable kitchen; sharp gusts of wind during the evening made cooking in the open impossible.

We had now arrived at a height of 2,850 m. and there remained another 1,200 m. for the next day, provided that the weather created no further difficulties for us. After a short night but after a really well prepared meal, three separate groups of men, each group roped together and each group seeking its own way, set forth on the morning of December 18 to try to reach the summit of the ice colossus. This was attained by normal ice-work by all three groups. Between 10 and 11 o'clock, elated with joy, we all shook hands over the success for the mountain club of our town. We hoisted the Chilean and Argentine flags, together with the pennant of the Club Andino of Bariloche, on an ice-axe, and afterwards buried them in an Ovomaltine tin in the ice.

A sharp north wind did not allow us to enjoy our hour on the summit. To the north, our gaze reached over endless ice-desert ; to the east, shimmered Lake Buenos Aires ; to the west, the calm ocean, while to the north extended the innumerable peaks of our as yet so little explored Cordillera. Below the top-most projecting summit, sheltered from the wind, we rested for half an hour in order to fix for ever in our imagination this unique moment. In separate groups, as we had made the ascent, we descended again to Camp V, where we were all happily reunited. Later the same afternoon, we struck this camp and withdrew to Camp IV which we reached with the setting sun. Whether from over-tiredness, or from our joy over our fine victory, hardly anybody had any desire for food but each one selected some little dish for himself and crept into his sleeping-bag.

On December 19 the good weather still held, so we withdrew to Camp III, and as the hottest hours of the day were over, we decided to evacuate this camp also, and to return to the security of Camp II. It was already growing dark as the last and most tired of us reached the shelter of the tent. During the night the weather changed completely ; but this we no longer minded, for nobody now could steal from us the success which had been made possible by the unheard-of good luck of four days of fine weather, so unusual in this region.

One group climbed down on the same day to the Base Camp, and a second group to Camp I ; the rest remained in Camp II to recover all the stores and to prepare everything for a smoothly running return on the first opportunity.

On December 22 we were all assembled in the Base Camp. On the 23rd we climbed up again to strike the remaining camps which, on account of bad weather, was not very easy. On Christmas Eve we gathered together in the Base Camp to celebrate Christmas and our success on San Valentin.

Our return journey to Bariloche lasted almost a month, working through difficulty after difficulty caused solely by the miserable stupidities of authority. How easy to-day seems the struggle with the grandeur of Nature, compared with the 'paper-war' waged by government officials. However we finally reached Bariloche on January 28.