

The East Ridge of San Lorenzo, Patagonia

Paul Fatti

Plates 21–22

Situated on the Argentina-Chile frontier, some 200km to the north of Mt Fitzroy, Cerro San Lorenzo at 3706m is the second highest peak in Patagonia. (Cerro San Valentin (4050m) is the highest.) First climbed from the Chilean side in 1941 by that redoubtable Patagonian explorer, Fr. de Agostini, it had until 1985 had only one further ascent, also from the west. The mountain is big, and an ascent from any side is a major challenge, but for me the unconquered E ridge was the real attraction. Curving to the summit in an elegant sweep from the glacier below, it is the only break in the mountain's sheer eastern defences and, being nearly 2½km in vertical height, it must be one of the highest ridges in Patagonia.

Together with three companions, I had attempted to climb this ridge in 1980, but we were driven back by a storm from our high point about 700m below the summit. (An account of this attempt appears in the 1981 edition of the *Journal of the Mountain Club of South Africa*.) The main reason for our failure was our inability to sit out bad weather on the ridge—hard ice prevented us from digging a snow cave, and the angle was too steep for pitching conventional tents.

This factor occupied our thoughts while planning a second attempt five years later, and eventually we came up with a design for a box-tent, which we hoped to be able to anchor in the snow overlaying the steep ice just below the ridge. None of my companions from our previous attempt were able to join me, and the three who accompanied me on this occasion, Erwin Muller, Russell Dodding and Hans-Peter Bakker (H-P), were all newcomers to Patagonia.

Our expedition was dogged by problems right from the start. My original thoughts had been for a six-man party, and then, having been reduced to four, Russell, a British passport holder, found himself caught up in the aftermath of the Falklands war with his visa application in jeopardy. Fortunately, a month before our departure date, I made a chance acquaintance with an Argentinian professional colleague, who was able to bring pressure to bear in the right quarter, and so Russell got his visa. Our next major problem occurred just after we arrived in Buenos Aires, late at night on 16 December 1985, and discovered that some of our bags had gone missing between the airport and the hotel. The resolution of this problem was very much more expensive than the previous one, but eventually we were reunited with our ice gear after having had a king's ransom extracted from us by a mafioso gang of taxi drivers.

Our good friend Willy Cook, resident of that wind-swept E coast town, Comodora Rivadaria, met us at the airport and took us to a local supermarket to stock up for our planned six-and-a-half week stay in the mountains. The drive

across the wind-swept Patagonian steppe in the back of Willy's eight-ton truck was the usual dusty affair, but by nightfall we were breathing in the bracing air of the Andes.

Sen. Cofre, manager of Estancia El Rincon to the south-east of San Lorenzo, remembered me from our previous visit, and as before was happy to assist us with horses for the carry to Base Camp. The following morning we set off from the estancia, heavily loaded, with two equally heavily loaded horses in tow. The five-hour walk up the Rio Lacteo valley to Base Camp was filled with memories. The pretty beech-groves, clear ponds and boggy marshes, with their dramatic backdrop of snow-capped peaks, were sufficient to explain to my companions why I have kept returning to Patagonia.

The weather was magnificent, and we had splendid views of Cerro Penitentes (2943m), second highest peak in the area, the first ascent of which we had made five years earlier. As we approached the grove of beech trees in the sheltered lee of the moraine, where we planned to site our Base Camp, the impressive face of San Lorenzo came into view, flanked on its northern end by the elegant curve of the E ridge. The summit soared high above the surrounding peaks, its final 100m defended by a vertical rock-band forming the top of the E ridge. Much of our planning for this expedition was concerned with how to climb this 50m rock feature at the top of 2100m of snow and ice.

After two days of load-carrying we were pretty well ensconced in Base Camp, with only a few more loads remaining. Sen. Cofre promised to bring these up on horseback. Russell takes up the story as we set off, in indifferent weather, up the moraine-covered glacier to establish a snow-cave on the col at the foot of the E ridge.

'The trudge over the lunar moraine was seemingly endless; each harsh step sent shock-waves reverberating through my entire being. Inspiration came in the form of a fresh breeze, a sight of the ridge and excitement because the assault was starting in earnest.

'Having chosen a spot out of rock-fall danger, Erwin set to digging our snow-cave. Working arduously in relays for four hours, we completed an entrance tunnel and the basis of two sleeping chambers. The incessant Patagonian wind, our constant companion, relented slightly, allowing light rain to accompany us for a while. Hans-Peter, unable to dig because of an injured wrist, kept a good flow of sweet tea going. We stocked the cave with food, fuel and hope and returned to Base Camp for Christmas revelry.

'Eager to utilize fully the good weather which was now starting to return, the snow-cave completed and the box-tent tested, we roped up and ascended into the night. We planned a two-day climb to establish the box-tent, but took one day's food along to save weight. Climbing the glacier adjacent to the ridge was straightforward albeit slow, with the two "rookies" of the party, H-P and myself, trying to get used to the sore feet and aching calves which accompany snow-plodding. Small detours were necessary to locate the appropriate snow-bridges, and a subsidiary rock-ridge, once crossed, led us to the traverse to the N face.

'North face, 600m high, 50-55° snow and ice. Moonrise. Both tools in, kick, kick. Repeat—*ad nauseam*. Hand-torches bobbing in this ethereal environ-



Photo: Paul Fatti

21 *San Lorenzo, viewed from NE, showing the route taken by the South African expedition.*



Photo: Paul Fatti

22 *A camp near the summit of San Lorenzo, on a mushroom cornice.*

ment. Stone-chutes. Chocolate. Dawn, accompanied by exposure. 16 pitches to the ridge seem like 30. What an introduction to ice-climbing for H-P!

As we rose higher and higher up the N face it started dawning on me that there was far less snow about than when we climbed it five years ago. Indeed, apart from the first few pitches, we were climbing entirely on ice. When we arrived at the site of our previous bivouac spot at the top of the face, where there had then been a metre-thick overlay of snow in which to dig out a sleeping ledge, we found only hard ice. This was disastrous, as all our planning had been based on the assumption that we would have this layer of snow on which to perch our box-tent. Russell continues the story:

'24 hours of body motion: we are dehydrated, hungry, tired and desperate. Sitting *à cheval* on the knife-like ridge we realize that the mountain isn't going to offer the hope of a level area for our box. Weary minds clinging to reason and logic, hands clasping the vital brew, our crampons infinitely aware of the 1500m drop below them. Labiosan and glacier cream have earned their keep today. Down or onward? Ice-windows in the hanging glacier above hint at the possibility of a bergschrund. Democratic decision is made to continue: my soul fills with optimistic hope.

'Paul leads four more pitches on the left of the ridge, and calves scream for relief from front-pointing. Erect and dominating the skyline, Fitzroy is espied 200km to the south, bastion of Patagonia. A triangular void was approached and: "Eureka!", a cavernous haven of blue ice and powder snow. This wonderland of jumbled blocks and silence is a sanctuary from the incessant gradient of the ridge. Animatedly we level a platform, erect the box-tent, sip brews and collapse into deep sleep, after 32 hours on the go.

'Morale and sanity restored, we leave the box and a little gear behind, and head out into the orange glow of evening. Destination: Base Camp. Erwin and Paul share the down-climbing on the N face, whilst the others abseil into the night. Will the screws hold? In a melting world the following morning we scurry across the traverse, moving together. The N face explodes as the temperatures soar, causing Erwin to call a halt on a crenellated rock-ridge. Reluctantly we stop and take our seats for "The Greatest Show on Earth", as Mother Nature orchestrates this display of avalanche, rock-fall and sérac-tumble. Hot, no food, no fuel, sipping iced coffee—waiting. Shade and freezing reach us at last, and we ski, slip and swim back to the snow-cave: *en route* a crevasse tries to make close acquaintance with my body. Ravage of the food bags precedes sweet porridge and welcoming sleep.'

The weather had been superb during most of our four-day stint on the mountain, and it continued so for a further two days before the inevitable storm broke. Initially this did not concern us much, as we needed a good rest to recover and fatten up before returning to the ridge, but, as the days rolled on, we started getting restless. Our plan was to return to our box-tent in the bergschrund as soon as the weather improved, with eight days' fuel and food, equipment for the remainder of the climb, including the rock-band on top. Our experience during the descent, sitting on the rock-ridge while the avalanches roared around us, had emphasized the importance of avoiding the N face during daytime. Furthermore, in order to reduce the 32-hour continuous

climbing time, we planned to establish a temporary camp at a safe spot near the top of the easier-angled, but highly crevassed, lower section of the ridge. There we could rest until the sun left the N face at about 6pm before setting off upwards.

The less said about our climb back up to our bergschrund camp, the better. The weather was still poor, and the wind kept showering us with freezing spindrift as we made our way upwards in the light of our head-torches. By morning we were in the teeth of another storm, but, spurred on by the thought of our bergschrund, we continued front-pointing up the steep ice-slopes. We arrived, frozen and exhausted, late in the afternoon to find our box-tent half buried under a cone of fresh snow, which had blown in during our ten-day absence. Fortunately it was not damaged, and soon the four of us were squeezed up with mugs of hot tea.

Next morning the weather was terrible. Fortunately, apart from the rapidly growing pile in the entrance of the bergschrund and the occasional gust of spindrift which swirled deeper inside, covering our tent and equipment, we were well protected from the storm. It was 10 January 1986, and we had seven food bags left. Our situation was clear: being at 3000m and with 700m to go to the top, we had seven days for the weather to clear and for us to climb to the summit and back. If the storm did not abate in that time—not unlikely for Patagonia—we would simply have to descend, bad weather and all.

The next day was just as bad, and despite our frequent tapping of the altimeter there were no signs of an increase in pressure to herald the approach of better weather. Erwin takes up the story from the following day:

'I already felt as if I was in an icy cage. It was the third day we had to spend cooking, reading and playing cards. Our only diversion consisted in climbing out of our sleeping bags to answer nature's calls. Paul and I forced ourselves through deep snow and mist to the ridge to observe the snow, ice and weather conditions. The situation was still hopeless. Nevertheless we set our wrist alarms for four o'clock the next morning.

'Restless, I woke up at about 3.30am. Through the gap of our icy cage, I could see the stars twinkling in the night sky. Excitedly I woke up my friends and prepared breakfast. Hoping for a fast ascent, we packed our rucksacks with the minimum of equipment and food. The weather, snow and ice conditions were excellent. As long as the terrain was not too difficult we climbed in two parties for speed. After about six rope-lengths along the exposed ridge, the terrain became steeper and more icy. Light-headedly I continued climbing without any running belays. Suddenly I slipped. With a reflex action I was able to stop myself. Fear flashed through my mind. Shaken, I realized that it was now time to change our climbing technique. During our stay in the bergschrund we had decided that Paul and I should lead alternately, with H-P and Russell following on prusikers.

'Two rope-lengths further on we arrived at a narrow strip of ice stuck to a steep rock-face. Bravely Paul managed to traverse diagonally up to safer ground. Rope-length after rope-length we climbed, Paul and I leading alternately. Russell had taken over the function of preparing safe abseil points at every possible belay. Via two very steep ice-couloirs to the left of the ridge we

reached a small rock-band below a steep ice-field leading up to another couloir below the final rock-buttress. Meanwhile the weather had changed considerably. An unpleasant wind, spindrift, flying ice and snow as well as the nightfall depressed our spirits. It was now 11pm, we were cold and we had been climbing continuously for 15 hours.

'Our expedition had reached another of its critical decision points. Should we abseil? We withstood the temptation, but as we could not find any place to stop and rest, we had no choice but to continue by torchlight through the night in the hope of good weather conditions the next day.

'That night we climbed three freezing cold pitches looking for another bergschrund, which, we thought, was diagonally to the left and which promised to be a suitable safe bivouac spot. It was about 2.30am and we were in thick mist when Paul decided to stop, because he could neither find the bergschrund nor see where to continue. To cheer us up he started cooking on the steep ice-wall, balancing the stove delicately, half on a rock-flake and half on his rucksack. For more than three hours we hung there, secured to ice-screws, waiting for the sun and clouds to rise to gain a better view. It must have been during that night that we all contracted frostbite on our fingertips and toes. As the grey dawn appeared, we considered traversing to the left on to the escarpment, but H-P persuaded us to continue straight up to the rock-buttress at the top of the ridge. Paul and I continued leading rope-length after rope-length. The clouds rolled away and a wonderful day dawned.

'After a strenuous steep pitch on snow overlying hard ice, we got back on to the ridge, and another short pitch led to the bottom of the rock-buttress where we decided to have a meal and a good rest. Since leaving our bergschrund camp, we had been on the go for 31 hours. Russell took over the lead, but unfortunately the line he chose turned blank, and we lowered him back down from a piton. Paul then took back the lead and climbed diagonally up to the left over steep, snow-covered loose rock. Two-and-a-half hours of crampon-scrapping climbing, pulling up indiscriminately on nuts and Friends, brought him to the top of the rock-buttress. Excited shouts revealed that he could see the summit.

'H-P, who climbed this pitch last, first had to cope with a jammed rope and then with a hold which came away in his hand. He fell a short distance on to my belay, and the falling rock smashed into his leg. For a few seconds he hung there, thinking that his leg was broken. Fortunately, after several anxious calls from above, he came to and continued up to the stance. Paul then traversed a short distance to the left and yelled through the light snow-storm that he saw the way to the summit, just before the snowfall and darkness made the top invisible again. After two further rope-lengths I arrived on the summit ridge in mist and complete darkness. It was already midnight and a comparatively flat-looking spot invited us to start digging a level site for our two small tents. We eventually crawled into our sleeping bags 46 hours after crawling out of them in the bergschrund.

'After a deep sleep I woke up at about midday. The sun was shining. We found ourselves approximately 30m below the summit. One rope-length away from our bivouac site behind an iced-up rock tower on the ridge we could see

the top. Hungrily we ate a rationed but nevertheless strengthening meal, and then set off in the late afternoon to conquer the last obstacle. The mist had descended over the summit, but now and then I was able to look back through it and see our bivouac tents. It was then that I discovered that we had positioned them on top of a huge overhanging cornice!

'Without any major difficulties I reached the summit of San Lorenzo in thick mist, followed by Paul, Russell and H-P. At 6.15 on the evening of 15 January, our eighth day, and more than 60 roped pitches since leaving Base Camp, we joyously shook hands and congratulated ourselves on our success and good team spirit.

'After taking the usual summit pictures, we returned to our exposed bivouac site to experience a wonderfully colourful sunset before turning in for our second night on top of the world.'

Miraculously, the weather turned out perfect the next day. It was our fourth day since leaving the bergschrund with only one four-man-day pack of food, and now all that remained to eat was a small bar of chocolate each. Down we went, abseil after abseil. I went down first, searching out the rock outcrops for spikes, nut or piton cracks. Where none could be found we abseiled off ice-screws. Erwin, our other family man, took up the rear, and it was his decision whether or not to remove the backup protection for the abseil points.

Darkness was closing in when we reached the easier terrain just above the bergschrund, and at 11.30pm we crawled back into the safety of our box-tent. We spent another day resting there before setting off on our final descent. The good weather spell had come to an end, but despite the swirling winds and snow we were able to descend rapidly down the now familiar terrain. By midnight we were down the N face, and in the early hours of morning we pitched our tents at the site of our intermediate camp for a few hours of sleep before negotiating the crevasses of the lower part of the E ridge. There was a lot for us to carry down from the snow-cave, and as a result of our heavy packs and weary state the final descent down the moraine was made in record slow time.

We collapsed back into Base Camp on the evening of 19 January, 12 days after setting off from it with eight days' food. Then the eating began . . .