
ERMANNNO SALVATERRA

El Arca de los Vientos

A true first ascent of Cerro Torre's north face

Thirteen long years have passed since I first tried to climb Cerro Torre from the north. It was in 1992 with Guido Bonvicini and Adriano Cavallaro. We made our first attempt during October, and managed to reach the base of the so-called 'English Dihedral', climbed in 1981 by Phil Burke and Tom Proctor. We had climbed 550m to that point but turned back because the face was covered in snow. While we waited for better conditions, we climbed the *Franco-Argentina* on Fitz Roy and the *Compressor* on Cerro Torre. In November we made a second attempt and slept at the base of the dihedral inside the English box portaledge, left by Brian Wyvill and Ben Campbell Kelly. The following day the weather was terrible and my partners wanted to descend, but I asked them to give me at least a couple more hours to climb a little higher. I wanted to get to the Col of Conquest, and this we managed to do. I was simply curious to see it. There the storm forced us to retreat.

In 1994 I made another attempt on the same route with the Austrian Tommy Bonapace. He had already tried this line half a dozen times. In the morning we left base camp and by afternoon had reached the base of the triangular snowfield, some 300m above the glacier. We were faced with a series of unfortunate events, and after an awful bivouac Tommy told me, 'Finish, Ermanno, never more.' I knew then that his relationship with this line had come to an end.

The years passed and yet every now and then I was seized by the memory of the face. For a long time I had defended Cesare Maestri, Toni Egger and Cesarino Fava.* I had done so in public debates and bar conversations, and I had argued tooth and nail with Maestri's most persistent doubter, Ken Wilson, then editor of the English climbing magazine, *Mountain*. Nevertheless, little by little my mind was changing. As I re-read and studied everything that had been said and written in defence of Maestri, I started to have some serious doubts. There was no doubt, however, about my desire to climb this supposed route of Maestri's. This dream of mine never died.

In November 2004 I returned home from Patagonia, after completing a new route on the east face of Cerro Torre and two months later celebrated my 50th birthday. For the first time I realized that time was passing, and in

* Maestri claimed that he and Egger made the first ascent of Cerro Torre in 1959 via the north face. Egger fell to his death during the descent, taking with him their only camera, according to Maestri.

January 2005 I decided to return to Cerro Torre to attempt the north face. Towards the end of winter my friend Rolando Garibotti wrote to me proposing a project. He had suggested before that we climb together in Patagonia, but I had always declined, feeling he was much younger and stronger than I was. His proposal intrigued me, but I responded that first I'd like to try the north face of Cerro Torre. Initially 'Rolo' did not seem convinced, but finally accepted enthusiastically. He was on board. Alessandro Beltrami, with whom I climbed the east face in 2004, also accepted.

Throughout the summer, controversy brewed in the Italian press. During an interview I was asked what I thought about Maestri's supposed ascent. I responded honestly that I thought it was 'pure fantasy'. Since I live only about 10km from Maestri, the local press had a field day with my answer and the controversy grew. While I was excited at the idea of looking for signs of Maestri's supposed ascent, my principal motivation was the climb itself. To reach the summit of Cerro Torre without using the bolts on the *Compressor* route (placed by Maestri and partners in 1970) was an ambition that had haunted me for a long time. And not just me. Austrian Toni Ponholzer and his partners had tried the north face more than a dozen times, being stopped on two occasions just 250m from the summit after climbing a direct line up the right side of the north face. Burke and Proctor, after climbing the big dihedral in the east face, traversed into the heart of the north face and stopped just 30m shy of the west ridge. Our original intention was to follow the Austrian's line, but we found it very iced up, so we were forced to look for an alternative. As the great Bruno Detassis once said, 'One must look for the easiest solution through that which is difficult.' In the end that was exactly what we did.

We arrived at El Chaltén at 5pm on 14 October and 10 minutes later we met up with Rolo, who had just arrived from Bariloche. The weather was good and the following afternoon we were standing at the base of Cerro Torre. We were ready to begin the climb, but by dawn the following morning it was snowing and so we returned to El Chaltén. Three more times we returned to the base of the mountain. We climbed the first four pitches and fixed our three climbing ropes. One morning carrying our whole kit, we jumared to the top of the fixed lines, but it began to snow again. We couldn't attempt a climb of this magnitude in such conditions. The fourth time we left early and at 5pm reached a small pillar just above the Col of Conquest, between Torre Egger and Cerro Torre. From there we made a short rappel that allowed us to access the north-west face, where after a few pitches we found a good place to bivouac.

The following day the wall became steeper, but Rolo climbed very quickly, despite having to clear snow in order to find the cracks. By late afternoon we arrived at a small ledge on the very edge of the north ridge. We had a good look at the north face, above and to our left. It looked feasible. We were encouraged. The summit was only about 300m above. Across from

us, and only about 50m higher, was the impressively beautiful summit of Torre Egger, while towards the north we could see Cerro San Lorenzo, more than 200km away. We decided to chop out the ledge so we could sit comfortably through the night. Unfortunately the weather worsened. Black clouds approached from the west and we were buffeted by strong gusts of wind. What should we do? Go down, or continue on? We knew if we turned back we would not return. On these peaks it is common to climb two, three, even four hundred metres and get turned back by bad weather. But after getting this high it is difficult to find the physical and mental strength to return for another attempt.

At eight in the evening, with a lump in our throats, we decided to descend. It was snowing hard and the wind was intense. First we rappelled the north-west face, then did three rappels along the north ridge to get to the small pillar just above the Col of Conquest. In total darkness we continued descending another 200m past the col. At about the same height as the start of the English Dihedral we decided to stop and wait for the dawn. Our headlamps were not working well, hindering the descent. It was 1am and we were quite tired. We dug out a platform with our axes to make the wait more comfortable and to be able to prepare something to eat. Four hours later we set out again on the descent. We were feeling really tired and half asleep. We descended carefully in order to avoid making mistakes, trying to recover all the gear since we had decided against another attempt. At 9am we reached the snow-cave. It seemed like the Grand Hotel! The weather wasn't too bad, but we could hear how hard the wind was blowing up high.

We decided to stay until the following day before descending to El Chaltén. In mid afternoon an incredible buzzing startled us. I yelled as we looked up. An enormous avalanche was thundering down the wall. Ale grabbed the shovels and fled inside the cave. Rolo, barefoot, began to run down the glacier. I thought that he was just going down to get photos, but he fled fearing the worst. Having seen this type of avalanche on the wall before, I managed to stay calm, found my camera and took a few pictures. Probably a huge ice mushroom had detached from the uppermost part of the Torre, sweeping down the east face and covering it entirely. The resulting spectacle was incredible and terrifying. Because of the wind, the enormous white cloud, instead of descending straight down, began to traverse horizontally towards the south and only two small cascades of snow arrived at the base.

At midnight Ale was awake and gave me a piece of cheese and some crackers. I got up and went outside to smoke a cigarette. The sky was blue and I was overcome with a heavy sadness. We had taken everything off the wall and all that remained was to return home. The blue sky hurt so much that I cried. Around 2am I fell back asleep. When we awoke I proposed to my partners that we should make another attempt. There was a moment of silence, but soon enthusiasm took hold and they agreed.



64. Rolando Garibotti on the last pitch of the north face, just shy of the west ridge, where they joined the *Ragni di Lecco* route along which they climbed three pitches to reach the summit. (Ermanno Salvaterra)



65. Ermanno Salvaterra climbing the first of three pitches along the *Ragni di Lecco* west face route. The last of these three pitches was the hardest, involving 60m of vertical and inconsistent frost. (Rolando Garibotti)

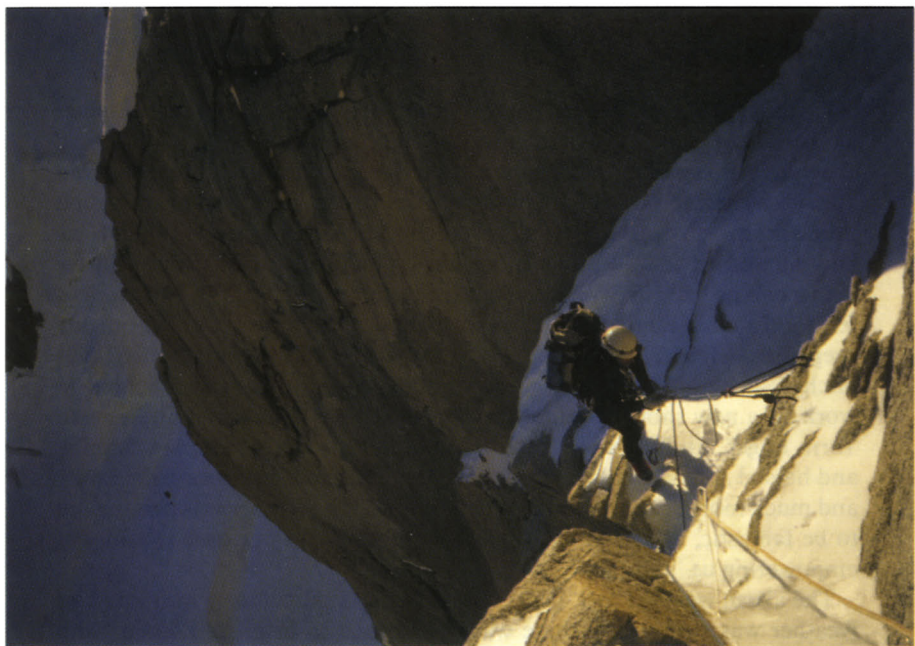
It was snowing as we hiked back to El Chaltén, planning our next attempt as we descended. We would travel as light as possible, leaving behind absolutely everything that seemed superfluous. We were quite tired and knew that we would need a few days' rest. Bad weather the next day left little choice. On the 11th the sky seemed to be clearing, and although we had wanted to rest a couple more days, practically against our will we decided to go back up. We didn't talk much during the walk-in, but our legs felt good and in less than six hours we arrived at the snow-cave. We quickly prepared to climb and Rolo and I started up the wall, climbing the first four pitches, as before fixing our three climbing ropes. Ale stayed behind to work on a new snow-cave that for safety sake we had moved underneath Torre Egger. In little more than two hours Rolo and I returned 'home', and helped Ale with the finishing touches. Our new cave was quite lovely and much more secure than the previous one. The weather was turning out to be fantastic, without even the tiniest breeze, and our enthusiasm was empowering us.

The alarm went off at 3.45am. Breakfast was ridiculously hurried. The weather was perfect and there wasn't a second to lose. At 4.45am, with headlamps on our helmets, we began jumaring the three ropes. We climbed another two pitches and soon arrived at the triangular snowfield. At six the sun began to warm us up.

Retracing our line of just a few days' ago, we moved fast. Rolo used a technique he had learned in Yosemite called 'short-fixing', where at the belay the remaining rope is pulled up, anchored, and then the leader continues up a few more metres. In this way we were able to climb between 10 and 20 metres in each pitch. The slabs above the snowfield are fairly difficult but knowing exactly where to go enabled us to maintain momentum. The snow covering the ramp up to the pillar above the Col of Conquest was in better condition than before, and again we were able to save a lot of time. It was barely noon when we got to the pillar, 50m above the col.

With the cracks on the north-west face still clear of snow from our previous attempt, we were able to get to the small terrace on the edge of the north ridge at around 4.30pm. On our first attempt it had taken us two days to reach this point. We decided it would be a good place to bivouac, but as a few hours of daylight remained we opted to fix a couple of pitches on the north face. After a pause I set out on a short traverse, following a thin crack, and then made a couple of hard moves on a slab, to another traverse. The wall was now in shade and the cold was biting our hands. After this first pitch Rolo and Ale climbed one more, also fairly hard. While we were busy on the north face, the north-west face began to release huge pieces from the frozen mushrooms above, but luckily on the ridge we were safe.

The bivouac spot was phenomenal; in front of us Torre Egger, to the right Fitz Roy, and to the left, the immense Continental Icecap and its mountains. The cold was penetrating and the sky filled with stars. Night passed quickly and we even managed to sleep a bit.



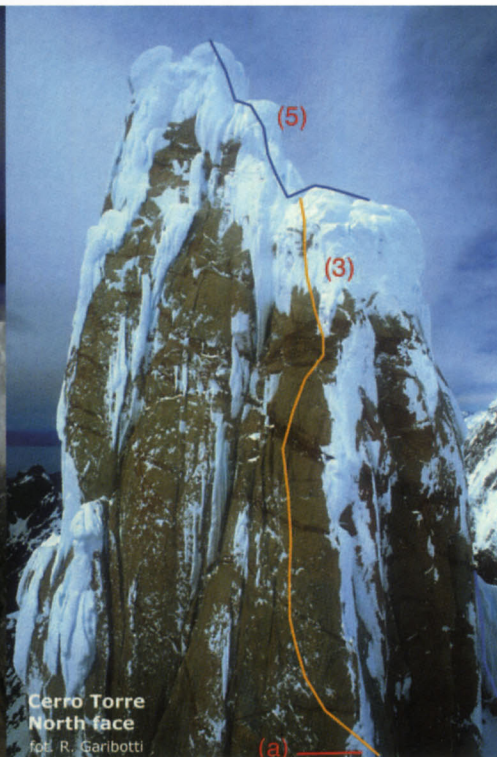
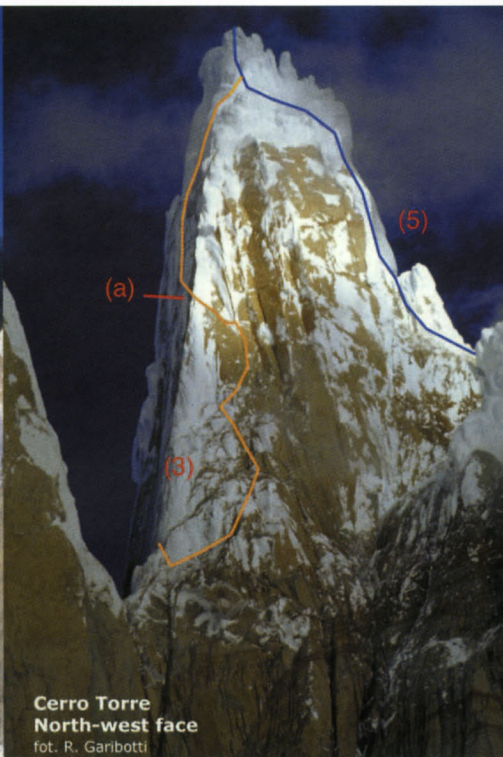
66. Ermanno Salvaterra jumaring on the last pitch of the initial dihedral, just below the triangular snowfield. (*Rolando Garibotti*)



67. Rolando Garibotti and Ermanno Salvaterra on the summit of Cerro Torre. (*Ermanno Salvaterra*)



68. Alessandro Beltrami rappelling along the SE ridge of Cerro Torre after the ascent of *El Arca de los Vientos*. (Rolando Garibotti)



69. Cerro Torre route lines. (*Rolando Garibotti*)

- 1 American route on Torre Egger by John Bragg, Jim Donini and Jay Wilson, 1976. (First ascent of the peak)
- 2 Highest point reached by Toni Egger, Cesarino Fava and Cesare Maestri in 1959.
- 3 *Arca de los Vientos*, Alessandro Beltrami, Rolando Garibotti and Ermanno Salvaterra, 2005 (1200m, ABO). "(a)" marks the first bivouac site. The second bivvi was right under the summit mushroom, before descending via the *Compressor* route the following day.
- 4 *Compressor* route by Jim Bridwell and Steve Brewer in 1979 to the summit. In 1970 Enzo Alimonta, Carlo Claus and Cesare Maestri reached a point 30 metres below the summit.
- 5 *Ragni di Lecco* route, Daniele Chiappa, Mario Conti, Casimiro Ferrari and Pino Negri, 1974. Theirs was, it is now generally believed, the first ascent of the mountain.

Next morning, 13 November, I felt as if I was in a movie or in a dream. Though we started getting ready at 6am, it was two hours later before we began climbing. Luckily, soon after, the sun began to warm our frozen bodies. The wall was nearly vertical and quite difficult. From the top of the ropes we had fixed the day before, Rolo climbed another two pitches, zig-zagging between ice mushrooms to arrive at the top of the north face. When I got up to him at the last belay we hugged each other with emotion. We spoke breathlessly. Now below us, the north face was no longer a problem. With another pitch on perfect ice we joined the *Ragni de Lecco* route, climbed in 1974 by Daniele Chiappa, Mariolino Conti, Casimiro Ferrari and Pino Negri.

It was around 1pm and above us huge unconsolidated ice formations promised to make progress quite difficult. The summit of Torre Egger was now far below us, but we still couldn't see Cerro Torre's summit. The next series of pitches took a lot of effort. The ice wasn't solid or consistent and sometimes we had to dig more than 50cm deep before finding ice or snow solid enough to climb on. We only had two snow pickets and since ice screws were useless, protection was nearly non-existent. But we weren't about to surrender. We were ready to do whatever it took. The sky had clouded over and it began to snow and blow a bit. The last pitch we did in sections, each of us going up a little. Once again the cold became penetrating. Finally, three quarters of an hour before midnight, we reached the highest point on Cerro Torre. Ale reminded me that exactly one year before we had arrived on this same summit after climbing a new route on the east face. It was a profoundly emotional moment. After taking a few pictures we descended the mushroom and sat under a snow overhang to wait for night to pass. Next morning we descended via the *Compressor* route on the south-east ridge.

We named our route, *El Arca de los Vientos* (Ark of the Winds). In all we climbed 37 pitches, 21 of which were new. We dedicated the route to the memory of two dear friends, Spaniard Pepe Chaverri and Argentine Teo Plaza. Back in 1994 these two amazing youngsters made a great alpine-style ascent of the east face of Cerro Standhardt. Unfortunately not long afterwards Teo's beautiful life was cut short by an avalanche. A few years later the mountains also claimed Pepe.

Epilogue

After 46 years of doubt, what of Maestri's claim? Above the gear cache located at the top of the initial dihedral, some 300m above the glacier and 20m below the triangular snowfield, we did not find any trace of the passage of Maestri, Egger and Fava. Between our ascents and descents during our first try and subsequent successful climb, we covered three-quarters of the north ridge, one of three ascent lines that Maestri describes as his. In different publications Maestri describes different lines above the col, one in the newspaper *L'Europeo* (April 1959), one in the magazine *La Montagne* (April 1960), and another in the *Rivista del CAI* (1961). In this 450m section, Maestri says he placed 60 bolts, and yet we found nothing. Between Toni Ponzholzer's attempts and our ascent, three-quarters of these three different supposed lines of ascent have been covered. Neither we nor Toni found any trace of Maestri's passage. Based on these observations and other reasons we are convinced that the first ascent of Cerro Torre was in fact done by the Italians Chiappa, Conti, Ferrari, and Negri in 1974 via the west face. For anyone interested in this history I suggest reading the article, 'A Mountain Unveiled', written by Rolando Garibotti in the 2004 *American Alpine Journal*.

Summary: An account of what is generally accepted as the first ascent of Cerro Torre's north face. The route *El Arca de los Vientos* (1200m) was climbed in 37 pitches over two days by Rolando Garibotti, Ermanno Salvaterra and Alessandro Beltrami in November 2005 with a further day for descent. No evidence has been found beyond a cache some 300m above the glacier to support Cesare Maestri's claim to have made the first ascent of Cerro Torre via the north face in 1959.