

Patagonia 2005 The North Pillar

By Jacob Schmitz

After a month and a half working on Aconcagua I found myself in Buenos Aires drinking my fourth, or maybe eighth, beer, looking at two of my good friends from the states. They were itching to fly down to El Calafate, the gateway to Argentine Patagonia, as I was already a week late meeting them.

A month ago I had been at Plaza Argentina, the base camp for climbers attempting the Polish Glacier or the Polish Traverse routes on Aconcagua, the highest peak in Argentina and the tallest mountain outside of the Himalayas. (22,890ft) Two days before a client and I had climbed the Polish Glacier direct, a difficult 3,500 foot ice climb to the summit. It was the only successful guided trip up the glacier that year. I was tired and looking forward to a week of rest in Mendoza, the third largest city in Argentina known for great wine, some of the best steaks and women that make guys want to move to South America permanently. But instead of basking in the warm glow of once again having summited a great peak I was on the satellite phone with my boss back in Alaska. No surprise, he had another trip lined up for me, forgetting that I had friends flying into Buenos Aires in two weeks. Three clients from the States were paying big money to climb Aconcagua with me as their guide and they were already packing their bags for their journey south. As a mountain guide, work can sometimes be hard to find, you don't say no. My mind immediately started making checklists and planning food menus for my next expedition that would begin in less than a week.

Leading an Aconcagua expedition is not an easy endeavor. Not only must I do everything possible to get them to the summit, I also take care of all of the logistics This includes shopping for food, picking them up at the airport, checking them into their hotel, checking their gear, etc. If they are missing a bag then the bag becomes my bag and I go back to the airport to get it. Their problems become my problems and small tasks become nightmares instantaneously. Being in a foreign country also offers its own special challenges. Most of the time I butcher the Spanish language and make countless phone calls, trying to find out important information. In searching for lost baggage its no surprise to find out the bags are in Europe or worse in Africa, where they are happy to send it to you in Argentina only after they help themselves to some items that will cost you a arm and leg in Mendoza. Lost or forgotten items must be located or rented in town from one of the many stores that survive on people who lost their bags or came ill prepared.

My clients this time were Sean Schwamer the founder of Cancer Climber, a photographer to document the trip, and another peak bagger from Alaska. Due to arrive in just a few days after my return to Mendoza, I skipped resting and began planning, buying, and bagging all of the food for each camp. By now it had become second nature for me, as this was my 8th big trip as the guide –cook – porter - expedition leader and at times therapist, but it doesn't make the job any less tedious and time consuming. Being fully prepared is crucial on any big mountain. As a guide it is my job to make one of the hardest human endeavors possible for just about anybody. That sometimes even means therapy to those who forget where they are and what they are doing on a big mountain. Too many times the altitude gets to them, they know that they are hurting and if they turn around they could hide from the elements that crush peoples willpower over 20,000 feet.

In the back of their mind they know that they could hike to base camp in six hours or less and enjoy a beer at 14,000 feet. Yet somehow, I love my job.

Through all of the planning, trekking in, days spent shuttling loads from one camp to another, and eventually summiting Aconcagua for the second time in a month my mind was lost in the dreams of where my next trip would take me. Patagonia was calling and though my interim duty was to make sure these three clients had a safe and rewarding trip in the Andes, in my head I was already climbing routes on the smooth granite faces that lay much further south.

Now in a smoky bar with a childhood friend from California and one of my favorite climbing partners and good friends from Yosemite I could already feel the thrill of a new adventure coming over me. Hatching plans and discussing routes it was all I could do to spend one more night in Buenos Aires instead of jumping on the next plane out of town. The next day we flew down to Calafate, a tourist town in the southern province of Santa Cruz, then took a four hour bus ride, mostly on a dusty dirt road, across the rolling hills of Parque Nacional Los Glaciares. Our destination was the globally famous Fitzroy and Cerro Torre rising tall above the small town of El Chalten they stand like castle walls. Upon our arrival it was obvious that it was peak climbing season, top climbers from all over the world were staying in town and at the backcountry base camps nearby. Just as famous as the rock spires themselves is the storms that slam into them. Many tourists who only spend a short time backpacking in the park barely get a glimpse of the mountains and many climbers that arrive with big dreams never get a chance to climb. Storms move in fast from the Pacific and travel uninhibited till they reach the Patagonia ice cap. Most climbers stay for months but only get a day or two of clear weather to climb the 3,000 foot walls. Even then they are often stop because of icy cracks or unstable snow on the summit.

My climbing partner Aaron Martin and I had talked about climbing the North Pillar of Fitz Roy. My old Californian buddy Brent was just along to see the sights and hike to base camp. After getting all of our supplies in town and separating the bags into reasonable loads we dropped them off at a ranch house to be packed into base camp at Rio Blanco. With good weather over Patagonia we were in a hurry to start climbing and did not want to waste time hiking our gear and supplies in, instead we had horses do our grunt work. This was especially nice for me because I just gotten off Aconcagua four days earlier and my legs really needed a rest.

For Aaron and I the hike to Rio Blanco was a walk in the park. For Brent who had spent more time in the city working and chasing the American dream, it was a slow up hill battle. After finding ourselves a nice spot in the climbing camp we relaxed and visited our neighbors. Two Canadians, who dubbed us the Happy Hour Crew because of our willingness to hike in boxed wine and beer, joined us for a couple of brews and laughs but retired early in preparation for climbing the next day. The weather was supposed to stay stable so as Brent packed for a few days hiking in the mountains Aaron and I packed for an attempt on the North Pillar and quickly went to sleep.

We picked the North pillar also called the Gretta Pillar. Named after the wife of Casarato, a famous climber from Europe who was the first to climb the pillar. Because of its beautiful cracks going up the golden wall. But before you climb on the wall you have to climb over the berugshrund (a gap between the glacier and the peak) then up 800 feet of mix rock and snow. At times the mix pitches at the start of the climb are harder than the

climb. Then once you get to the wall you have 22 pitches of climbing, with difficulties up to 5.11 A1. For most people it would take four to five days. We hoped to do it in one to two days, base camp to base camp. The North Pillar seemed to be the perfect route for us.

That night was short for me. I sat up with a start in our dark tent, thinking that I was late for something of the utmost importance, just to realize that it was only 11:00pm and it was our wake up call for our first Patagonia adventure. Many people who set out to climb Fitz Roy will move to a higher camp then spend three to five days climbing. This method meant they would spend long days in the vertical world and cold nights wishing that they were back at base camp. We decided to climb it in one push. No bivi (sleeping) gear only a liter of water and little food. With a small rack of gear Aaron and I hoped to do the hike and climb in one long day. After having some coffee and oatmeal we attacked the hill leading to a high alpine lake and soon after made it onto the glacier. Reaching Paso Superior in just a few hours, we crossed the main Glacier leading to 800 feet of mixed climbing and finally the great rock face of the North Pillar. Aaron skillfully found a way through the bergshroud and on to the broken rock gully with only shallow ice holding it together.

After only the first 100 feet of climbing I could no longer see Aaron. Weather was coming in and the clouds were just above the glacier now. Knowing that it would be deadly to get caught in a storm we decided to leave our gear at the base of the pillar and start the long hike back to camp.

Later that afternoon we stumbled back into base camp. On our way by the climbing hut we saw that Kevin Thaw and Leo Holding were at camp, two of England's best climbers. After a brief conversation we realized that they also wanted to climb the same route we had just been on. Leo, having met Aaron and I before in Yosemite, said we should start first. Because we had our gear on the route, knowing that Aaron was a fast climber, and knowing we both had spent lots of time on walls they believed that we would be the faster party. A plan was made that we would start an hour before them.

The next day Aaron and I hiked with Brent back to town. He was going to take a bus back and catch his flight home. It was a good chance to eat a good meal before our second attempt on the north pillar. Knowing now that it could be one of the biggest adventures of our lives and the most testing we ate like kings and then reluctantly said our good byes.

Once again at 11:00pm the alarm went off, but this time I had not even been asleep. Knowing that we would be climbing for the next 36 hours straight, maybe with out any sleep at all, I begged Aaron to reset the alarm for midnight. Before I knew it he was waking me up again and cooking breakfast. I could hear the stove whistle from inside the tent. To our surprise Kevin and Leo were not up yet. We quickly grabbed our packs and started the approach.

Six hours later we found our self at our previous high point and watched the sunrise. Aaron climbed the first 100 feet and then I climbed past easy rock and ice to the top of the next pitch. Aaron led next taking us to the true base of the pillar, its grand rock face stretching up before us. I was surprised to see how good the rock quality was and happy to lead the first pitch. After arriving on a small ledge to find some old gear and a tent that was shredded, I could not see a easy way off so I brought Aaron up to let him have a look. He was eager to get back on the sharp end of the rope and set off climbing up and to the right for 50 feet before he was able get any protective gear in. The next pitch found us

on easier ground and we moved fast knowing that Kevin and Leo were probably not far behind us. Aaron would climb as fast as he could which at times meant he would not stop at the top of a pitch. Instead he would quickly make an anchor, pull up the remaining rope, and then tie it off so I could ascend the fixed rope while he climbed tied into what rope was left. With this method Aaron would still place protective gear that would shorten his fall but if he made a mistake, with no belayer, he was looking at taking a very big fall. A few hours later with Aaron sufficiently tired it was my turn to lead. The climbing was moderate and fun on perfect rock. After fourteen hours on the move we both needed a rest and decided to sit on a small ledge and see how Kevin and Leo were doing. Exhausted, our rest turned into an extended stay and after Kevin and Leo arrived on the ledge we all decided to spend the night right there.

With almost 1500 feet between us and the base of the wall and another 800 feet to the base of the glacier we had an amazing view. Looking north we had had an unobstructed view of rock spires, glaciers to the right and left and green hills in the distance. All too quickly though the sun set and before we knew it we were cursing the cold and our decision to rest there. Then it got really cold.

The ledge was only three feet wide at its widest point and about eight feet long. Kevin had a backpack that had a sleeve sewn to the top and could be used as a bivi sack while Leo had a very warm jacket and a hat. Aaron and I, however, only had light jackets and our rain gear. We spent most of the night rubbing each other's backs and pounding our feet on the wall. It got to twenty-two degrees on the wall that night. No one slept. It was a nightmare! In the dark, early hours of the morning, we talked about rappelling off the ledge then ascending back up the fixed rope just to get warm but it was too cold to motivate moving at all. When the sun finally did hit us, it took us over an hour to warm up enough so that we felt we could climb.

The first pitch of the day was a great crack that went around the corner. As we left Kevin said there is nothing better than a 5.11 breakfast pitch to wake you up. With Aaron leading it took only a few hours before I joined Aaron on the top of the North Pillar. From there I took the sharp end looking for a way into the notch that separated the pillar from the main Fitz Roy tower. I crawled up the snow slope to look over the other side and found myself perched dangerously on top of a cornice (overhanging snow) looking down the other side of the 3,000-foot wall. After carefully down climbing and cursing at myself for not thinking about cornices I found the anchor. But I could not equalize it! I was beyond exhaustion, fried, and making stupid mistakes.

After talking to Aaron we made the difficult decision to go down. Shortly afterward clouds came in and I was so happy then not to still be high on the rock face in the weather. To spend another night on the wall would have been hard but spending that night in a storm would have been fatal. As I smiled, knowing that I had dodged a bullet and was not going to spend another night on the wall, I was also disappointed that we did not summit.

Forty-eight hours later we were back at camp at Rio Blanco. Dropping our backpacks on the ground outside the tent we immediately went to bed. Completely drained from the two days of climbing. Fitzroy had won the second round, keeping us off the summit but the climb up the pillar will be remembered as my true introduction to Patagonia and alpine speed climbing. At the next break in the weather we would be ready, taking what

we learned from this epic outing in the mountains, and using all of our combined skills for our next push to the summit.

Authors Note: Aaron Martin and I continued climbing in the Fitzroy region that summer climbing several routes including finally summiting the main Fitzroy Tower via the Canadian Direct route. This new route was put up by two of our friends from British Columbia and was established while we were climbing on the other side Fitzroy.