



AAC Publications

Un Mar de Sueños

Three seasons of attempts lead to a new route up the east face of Fitz Roy

It was an idea born from years of climbing in Chaltén, of looking for adventure, of moving fast and light: Michi Lerjen-Demjen and I wanted to climb the east face of Fitz Roy. We started laying plans to attempt the first repeat of the East Pillar (Ferrari-Meles, 1976) in early 2012. But when I told my friend Tincho, a great seaman and adventurer, about this idea, he said that if I wanted to go through the trouble of repeating a route that challenging, why not open a new route? Tincho gave me the nudge I needed.

This was around the time the town of El Chaltén was gripped by the whole debate over the bolts on Cerro Torre. Michi and I wanted to open a new route in a way that would leave these mountains pristine, as we believe they should be. We wanted to climb the east face in alpine style, without leaving ropes or bolts behind, so that some of the adventure we experienced would remain for those who followed us.

The Chaltén massif is like Yosemite for us Argentinians. Many of us started big-wall climbing here, and the level of climbing and creativity among Argentinean climbers is very high. In Argentina, climbers like Luciano Fiorenza have opened ingenious and aesthetic lines by the dozen without seeking much exposure from it, and many climbers that come here for the first time are quite surprised by this. We have our own climbing community, our own mountain magazines, and, somehow, this remains unknown to the rest of the world.

In Bariloche, where I grew up, the mountain culture that came with the European settlers remains strong to this day. Refugio Frey, one of the mountain huts near Bariloche, is a hub for climbers and skiers, surrounded by granite spires and only a few hours' walk from town. I got a job at Refugio Frey when I was 16. Peter Lu?thi worked there at that time; he was a vibrant character and mentor for many Argentine climbers, and he took me under his wing and transmitted his love for adventure. Here I also met Rolando Garibotti, Luciano and Bicho Fiorenza, and Ramiro Calvo, a group of legendary Argentine mountaineers. From them, I learned to move in the mountains. Their stories made me dream of the Chaltén massif.

When I was 18, I headed to Chaltén with hand-me-down climbing gear and a few pesos in my pockets. I was ecstatic to finally be there, surrounded by those mythical mountains. I learned to climb big walls—and to climb ice, for that matter. I returned to Chaltén every year and climbed many peaks, and I guess this gave me the tranquility to try new things. Attempting new routes with uncertain outcomes was possible because I had already reached the summits, so the pressure was off, in a sense. I took a liking to the adventure of route finding, of not knowing what comes after the next pitch, of the dynamic that forms in a team when deciding which way is next.

Michi and I first climbed together on Fitz Roy, on the Supercanaleta, in 2007. Several years later, in December 2011, we guided Fitz Roy together. We worked really well as a team and got our client to the top and back down in 20 hours. It was a blast. Michi went back to Switzerland after guiding, but I called him when I saw that good weather was coming and proposed that we try our new route on Fitz Roy. He came back to Chaltén right away.

Despite all our good intentions and aspirations for greatness, we were naïve about what lay ahead. In the pictures of our proposed route the cracks looked big—lots of offwidths, we thought. Once on the

route, we realized that these offwidths were in fact razor-thin cracks. This was disappointing since we had left most of the small gear behind to leave room for our big cams.

While we were taking our No. 4s for a stroll up Fitz Roy, the sun blazed and rocks flew down the face all around us. Thankfully, the route is so steep that the rocks cleared the whole wall before hitting the glacier. The conditions that season were surreal. Patagonia is renowned for the harshness of its storms, and now it was the good weather making things difficult. Many accidents occurred in the days before our climb, and Michi and I joined the rescue parties. In the aftermath, we both were going through some mind games.

After eight pitches of thin cracks—artificial climbing, plain hard—we decided to retreat. We joked that it would be easier with ice on the route. “We should come back in winter,” we said. What a crazy idea: no one around, no tragedy except for maybe our own, no controversies, no rocks falling—the more we thought about it, the better it seemed.

In July 2012, I picked up Michi in Calafate and we headed to Chaltén across the frozen estepa. I had never been to Chaltén in winter, and I had no idea what to expect. The hills around town were covered with a dusting of snow. It was quiet. Apart from the handful of people who live in Chaltén year-round and a few construction workers from the north, there was no one around. It was great to have the tranquility to focus on the task at hand. We needed peace and quiet to face the challenges ahead.

Despite the serenity we felt in town, the conditions proved difficult. The first time we brought gear up to our base camp at Paso Superior, two meters of loose snow lay on the ground and the going was rough (although the ski down was unreal). The second time we went up, the snow had turned to ice. We spent four days on the wall and made it only five pitches higher than we had in the summer, despite all the extra gear we had and our knowledge of the route. We retreated before some bad weather came in.

This winter attempt was tough, but it was probably the best climbing experience I’ve had in Patagonia. We were all alone, and it felt like what Patagonia must have been like 50 years earlier. In fact, it was such a good trip that we decided to give the route another try, but this time in summer, since the winter conditions didn’t turn out to be all that helpful after all.

I met Michi again in November. One more attempt, and that was it. We had spent a lot of time together in 2012, and we felt very solid. During our first weather window, we reached Paso Superior only to realize the wall was in worse condition than we had seen it in winter, and the ropes we had cached were gone. We felt like it was over. We came back to town, and after a fair amount of sulking we pulled ourselves together and waited for the next good weather window, which came three days later.

In winter, we had figured out that the lower part of the route was sheltered enough that it could be climbed in bad weather, so we took our chance when only a few days of good weather appeared in the forecast. We approached the face under stormy conditions. Once on the wall, it was snowing and the wind was howling, but around us the air was still. What are the chances to be climbing in such conditions in Patagonia? With every pitch we reached higher ground. It felt like cheating. Finally, we were moving.

We spent that night on the Ledge of Hope, a name we’d coined from far below, while scoping the route, when it appeared the ground above the ledge might be easier. Here, we found very little comfort but much hope for the climbing ahead. The chimney we’d been dreading since we first saw it during our winter attempt—a gaping flake that we feared might be unprotectable—turned out to have a fist crack in the back. After 40 meters of relatively easy climbing we emerged back onto the face. Above, a really thin crack, about 20 meters long, disappeared into a blank dihedral. But again we were lucky: An amazing orange dike led over toward more inviting dihedrals to the right. After some free climbing, some hooking, and a big pendulum, we reached the dihedrals with big grins on our faces. We had

studied this part of the wall so intensely in our pictures—I couldn't believe we were finally there.

Now the cracks were deeper, and though the climbing was not actually easier, our minds relaxed knowing we had good gear. At around 10 p.m., we reached the second ledge on the climb. We felt grateful for that small bit of horizontal space, knowing we wouldn't have to sleep hanging in our backpacks. After cleaning the ice off the ledge, making water, and eating our polenta, we finally went to sleep at 1 a.m.

The next morning, when I looked down from our small ledge, I realized I could still see the first pitch of the climb—it's rare in Chaltén to find a climb this steep from the bottom to the top. We started climbing again with the sun on our backs. The wall became less vertical, and the terrain grew easier. When we joined the Ferrari-Meles route, we decided to leave some gear on a ledge so we could reach the summit faster. This was a huge mistake. As we advanced, the wall became very steep again, and we had just left behind our aid gear. But we pulled through. After six pitches on the Ferrari-Meles, we decided to look for better rock and easier terrain further right. The rock got better, but easy climbing remained to be found. After five more pitches of challenging but fun mixed climbing we topped out just 50 meters from the summit. I had never felt so happy on a summit before. I'd been transfixed by this climb for three seasons, and we had succeeded without leaving any bolts or using any fixed ropes. The exhilaration of the summit was short-lived, however; we had to get down. And now we had to descend the East Pillar to retrieve the gear we had left there. It felt sketchy to go down that way, but we were curious about this unrepeated climb. We had heard there was a ton of abandoned gear on the route, and we expected to find fixed anchors all the way down, but in the end we discovered only three rappel stations. We had to build our own rappel anchors the entire way as we continued down through the night. It was vertical, and we prayed at each rappel that our ropes would not get caught. We reached the base of the route at 6 a.m., after 24 hours on the move.

Only as we walked toward Paso Superior in a daze could we look back at the wall and understand that our dream had come true. We had gone up this massive wall, this sea of granite, *un mar de sueños*.

Summary

First ascent of Un Mar de Sueños ("A Sea of Dreams," 1,200m, 7a A3 M4) on the east face of Fitz Roy, by Jorge Ackermann (Argentina) and Michael Lerjen-Demjen (Switzerland), November 14–17, 2012. The two climbed 23 pitches to the left of the East Pillar route (Ferrari-Meles, 1976), then joined that route for six pitches, and then broke right for five more pitches to reach the top. They bivouacked twice en route and then rappelled the East Pillar through the night to descend.

About the Author

Jorge Ackermann, 26, grew up in Bariloche, Argentina, but now resides in Canada for much of the year. "My passion is to climb and discover new climbing spots, but I need to disconnect from the climbing world from time to time," he says. "I work as a carpenter in the off-season, and I really enjoy working with wood and resolving building problems."

Images



Jorge Ackermann en route.



Jorge Ackermann forges up a dihedral toward steeper rock overhead. The lower route was relatively sheltered, so the pair took a chance and approached the face despite a storm. "It was snowing and the wind was howling, but around us the air was still."



Approach- ing the east face in winter 2012. Un Mar de Sueños (1,200m) lies mostly to the left of the Ferrari-Meles East Pillar (1976).



Ackermann making a key traverse high on the route.



Michael Lerjen-Demjen low on the east face.



Traversing toward the ominous chimney above the first bivouac.





Michi Lerjen-Demjen (left) and Jorge Ackermann below the wall.



Route line.

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