Monte Sarmiento

After 57 years, Tierra del Fuego's spellbinding peak gets a second ascent.

Dancing with the gusts of winter wind, Natalia Martinez and I inched onto the summit that had long been the focus of our dreams. It was 10:45 p.m. and pitch dark. More than simply the high point of a mountain, this peak was the validation of years of friendship, struggle, passion, and chance. No one had stood at this point in 57 years. Who knows how long it will be before climbers return?

In 1580, while chasing the notorious privateer Francis Drake through Patagonian fjords, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa spotted a “Volcán Nevado” (snowy volcano). Later cosmographers pictured a mysterious smoking volcano in the unexplored interior of Tierra del Fuego, inhabited by sea monsters, giants, and tailed natives. The mountain’s twin peaks were a centerpiece of the writings of Robert Fitz Roy, who unveiled the geographical secrets of the southernmost end of America together with Phillip Parker King, during epic expeditions from 1826 to 1836 aboard the H.M.S. Beagle and Adventure. Among countless discoveries, they realized Sarmiento’s Volcan Nevado was not a volcano, and they renamed it after its discoverer, even though that right should be given to the native people, the Yaghan and Kawesqar, who had arrived here 10,000 years earlier.

In the 19th century, when steam-powered vessels made the Magellan Strait a popular oceanic passage—a golden age that lasted until the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914— thousands of travelers knew of this magnificent mountain, and the few who had the luck to see it spread the word about its surpassing beauty and colossal size. At the time it was perhaps the only place on Earth where a tourist could contemplate an ice wall rising vertically more than 2,000 meters just a few kilometers from the seashore. Many travelers enthusiastically lauded the sight, and even Jules Vernes drew upon it in his novel Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea. In 1882, John Ball wrote, “I know of no other peak that impresses the mind so deeply with the sense of wonder and awe.”

The climbing history of Mt. Sarmiento is one of the longest in the Americas, starting at a time when only a handful of major peaks had been climbed in the U.S. and Ecuador. The geologist Domenico Lovisato was first to attempt Sarmiento, in 1882. Later, at the twilight of the 19th century, after the first ascent of Illimani in Bolivia, the renowned British mountaineer Sir Martin Conway reached a point at 1,000 meters on the glacier that now bears his name.

With the 20th century came the indefatigable explorer Alberto De Agostini, who was spellbound by Mt. Sarmiento and attempted it twice between 1913 and 1914. Agostini’s youthful dream became an obsession, and at the age of 73 he was back as the leader of a team of Italy’s best alpinists, who, after nearly two months of attempts, launched a bold alpine push. Carlo Mauri and Clemente Maffei, fighting with fog and wind, finally crowned Agostini’s mythical “Esfinge de hielo” (Ice Sphinx) on March 7, 1956.

Since then many have attempted to follow their steps with no success, including the Italian Giuseppe Agnolotti. Lured by Sarmiento’s spell, he organized expeditions in 1969, 1971, and 1972, and was deprived of the west summit by just a few meters. He would title his book Sarmiento: White Hell.

In 1986, thirty years after the first ascent, Maffei returned to score another victory with the Ragni di Lecco, making the first ascent of the west summit via its northeast face. [Sarmiento’s climbing accounts tend to be confusing due to its two independent summits, and the fact that some expeditions

have had the secondary western summit as their main objective. The main summit is the east one, about 60 meters higher. Furthering the confusion is the fact that Mt. Sarmiento is not located in the Cordillera de Sarmiento, the mountain range that lies 200 miles to the northwest.]

In 1976, Cesar Perez de Tudela and Fernando Martinez made an attempt that ended with Martinez as the first and only fatality on the mountain. Later, in 1991 the Argentinean expedition of Jorge González, Pablo Bello, Féliz Memelsdorff, and Guillermo Roque Gonzalez attempted the peak from the Lovisato Valley with no success. And in 1993 the first woman showed up on Sarmiento's slopes, during an attempt by the British expedition of Susan Cooper, Caradoc Jones, Philip Swainson, and Henry Todd.

A star-filled expedition comprised of Charlie Porter, John Roskelley, Tim Macartney-Snape, Stephen Venables, and Jim Wickwire aimed to crown both summits in 1995. The team couldn't fulfill all their ambitions but achieved the second ascent of the west summit by a new route up the beautiful southeast face.

In 1999, bad weather defended the summit from Chileans Sergio Echeverria and Hernán Jofre, accompanied by American explorer Jack Miller. That same year another "spellbound" climber appeared, the German Ralf Gantzhorn, who, without giving up, returned in 2002, 2005, and 2010, in the last case alongside the prestigious climbers Robert Jasper and Jörn Heller. After aborting an attempt on the north ridge at a similar point to Agnolotti's 1972 expedition, the Germans made a bold traverse of the west peak's north face to join the 1986 Ragni route and complete the third ascent of the west summit.

Also in 1999 came the Brazilians Nelson Barretta, Nativo Fransen, and Eduardo Lopez, along with Argentinean Walter Rossini, who without getting discouraged would return again in 2003 with the Chilean Julio Contreras, producing the award-winning documentary Extremo Sul, but without achieving the long-desired peak.

Chileans returned in 2002 with Cristián García Huidobro, Felipe Howard, Diego Vergara, Tito Gana, Pablo Gutierrez, Nico Boetch, Vivi Isso, and Tali Santibañez, in a remarkable expedition that despite their efforts would be rejected by the inclement weather.

Then Andalusian duo Iván Jara and José Antonio Pérez Jorge would attempt it on 2004, and from the same country would come in 2005 a team of the Spanish TV series "Al Filo de lo Imposible," with José Carlos Tamayo, Iñaki San Vicente, and Mikel Zabalza. But, in their words, they "couldn't even fight because of the weather."

In 2008, the Dutch Ronald Naar, Martin Fickweiler, Coen Hofstede, and Edwin Klerkx made the first winter attempt, but poor visibility kept them from the top. And finally, in 2010, the climbers Erhard Loretan and Romolo Nottaris made another attempt in vain.

It was only in the austral winter of 2013 that the 57-year spell of mountaineering mischance on the main summit of Mt. Sarmiento would be at last broken, by a multidisciplinary expedition with a similar spirit to the historic 1956 one.

Our expedition, led by Gonzalo Campos and Gino Casassa, reached Mt. Sarmiento on board the sailboat Arco Iris, with mixed objectives: dendrochronological studies, GPS and automatic weather station installation, photography and filmmaking, sea kayaking, and mountaineering.

The climbing team was divided in two. The reconnaissance team of Cristian Donoso, Mario Sepúlveda, and Uber Quirilao made an attempt on the west summit between July 21 and August 9, providing valuable reconnaissance. Natalia Martínez (Argentina), Inés Dussaillant, and I (Chile)

targeted the main summit.

Our team set up base camp on August 19 on Bardonecchia Beach. We had received a forecast for a good weather window to arrive just four days later, and our logistics for a 30-day effort were quickly re-engineered in order to take advantage of that window, if it actually opened.

We followed a well-established trail through the forest, a legacy of Agnolotti's 1972 expedition, with its five tons of gear and the wooden "cube" hut that was used as high camp. We began using skis once well above the forest at about 300 meters. In the alpine we had to battle against bad visibility and constant winds, sometime gusting up to 140 kph (87 mph), forcing us to dig into an ice cave at Vittore Col. We were not able to set a high camp at the Col Norte (1,200 meters) until August 22.

The weather window did in fact start on August 23, and luckily it lasted to the 24th, when we were ready to tackle the climb, after ferrying all the necessary gear to high camp. Inés would wait at camp. Natalia and I left at 3:45 a.m. under dream conditions—the wind nonexistent and the stars sharply defined in all directions, silhouetting the bold mountains around us. We skinned up Conway Glacier under strong moonlight to reach the bergschrund shortly before sunrise.

Four hundred meters directly below the summit, the bergschrund presented a five- meter overhang covered by more than 80 centimeters (two feet) of rime. After a brief attempt to free climb, I began to aid over the bergschrund, using a shovel to dig a trench diagonally upward.

Once we were above the 'schrund, the route unfolded elegantly to the summit, through a straight gully surrounded by lush rime cauliflowers, very sustained but rarely exceeding 75°. The ice conditions were excellent, although it was demanding to place protection. The rope quickly began to flow to the rhythm of the axes and the tinkling beat of ice screws. By the sixth pitch, twilight was already descending on this short winter day, and bitter cold brutally brought us back to reality, reminding us of the urgency. We knew these superb conditions would not last much longer—and might not be repeated for months. The wind began to blow and our infinite horizon was reduced to the square meter lit by our headlamps.

We had chosen our route on a bold bet, as the gully ended in a terrifying cirque of massive, overhanging ice mushrooms. A shadow we had seen in aerial photos led us to believe that one of the mushrooms on the left was disconnected from the main wall, opening a channel that might allow us to escape onto the gentle slopes leading to the summit.

As we neared the top of the face, my headlamp jumped nervously to the left with each step, probing for the exit. We began to fear this passageway had only been a figment of our imagination. Suddenly the beam penetrated deep between two colossal ice mushrooms. Powder snow lay waist-deep on the upper slopes, but we didn't care because the summit was at our fingertips.

During the long descent, small pieces of ice swept the face and rapped against our helmets to keep us awake. Once we were at the bergschrund, impenetrable fog swept in on the wind—everything was back to normal for Mt. Sarmiento. With one eye on the tips of our skis and the other on the GPS, we slowly made our way back to camp. At 10 a.m. we finally arrived, exhausted but with a deep feeling of fulfillment, after more than 30 hours on the move.

They say dreaming is necessary to digest one's experiences and set them to memory. If so, we still had a lot of work ahead.

Summary

First ascent of the north face of Monte Sarmiento's main summit (2,207m GPS) at the west end of Cordillera de Darwin, Tierra del Fuego, Chile, by Natalia Martinez and Camilo Rada, August 24–25,

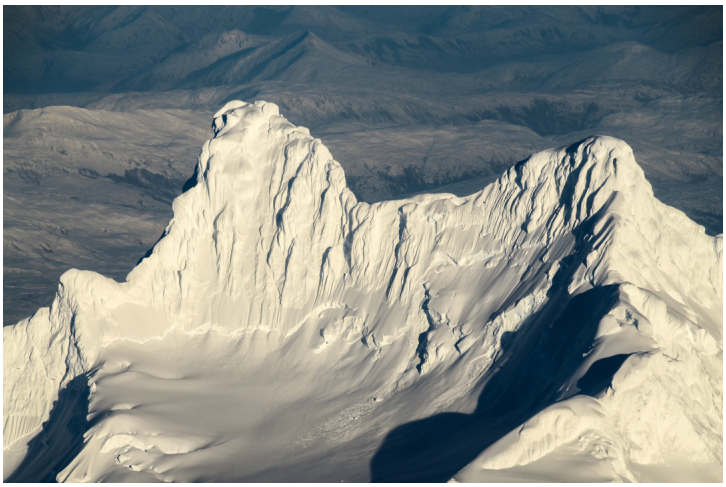
2013. The new route, only the second summit route on Sarmiento in 57 years, was called Suerte de Sarmiento (400m, D+).

About the Author

Camilo Rada, 34, is a Chilean living in Whistler, British Columbia, while earning his Ph.D. in glaciology. He has done numerous first ascents in Patagonia and Antarctica.

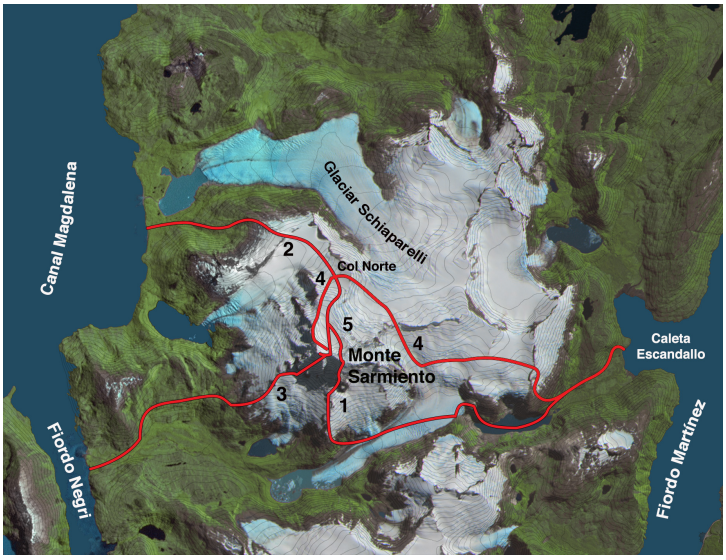
Images

Monte Sarmiento rises more than 2,200 meters, directly above the sea.



The north face of Monte Sarmiento. The first winter ascent climbed the ice face directly to the main summit (left).

A newspaper celebrates the “Italian victory in Tierra del Fuego” in 1956.



Monte Sarmiento or its west peak have been climbed only five times in 57 years. (1) First ascent of main summit (2,207m GPS), Mauri and Maffei, 1956. (2) First ascent of west summit (2,145m GPS), Ragni di Lecco, 1986. (3) Southwest face of west peak (Macartney- Snape–Roskelley–Venables, 1995). (4) North ridge to north face of west peak (Grantzhorn- Heller-Jasper, 2010. (5) North face of main peak, Martínez-Rada, 2013.

Approaching through a lenga forest.

The author deploys a shovel and a few aid moves to clear the bergschrund.

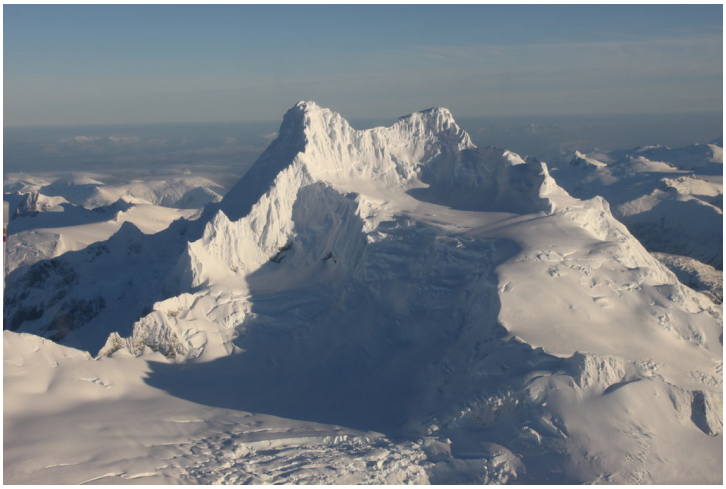
The climbers can be seen midway up the north face during the first ascent.

An 1834 rendering of the HMS Beagle's passage by Monte Sarmiento from England's most prolific landscape artist at the time.

Making way from the base camp at Bardonecchia Beach via the well-made forest trail of the 1972 Agnolotti expedition.

A snowy arrival for landfall at Bardonecchia beach base camp.

The new day breaks at the foot of the sustained bergschrund.



Both summits visible across the wide smile of Sarmiento's north face.

A much more obscured, and typical view of Sarmiento and its neighbors.

Sarmiento returns an indifferent glance.

Still, starlit weather. Is it a dream, or an excellent opportunity for a predawn start from the high camp?

Snacking at camp.

Bardonecchia Beach (base camp) waits patiently at the foot of Sarmiento.

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