



## AAC Publications

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### **Hasta Las Webas!**

The second ascent of Cerro Riso Patrón in Patagonia

**In El Chaltén's Hostal Del Lago, the wall of the common room is pasted with maps of the vast Southern Patagonian Ice Field, and it is quite normal to observe climbers staring at the wall and daydreaming of windless days on a rime-capped summit, while outside the treetops are bent almost to the ground by gales.** Four years ago, Diego Simari, an Argentine climber and friend, pointed out Cerro Riso Patrón on one of these maps. The contours revealed steep features that seemed to plunge directly into the fjords of western Chile. When I tried to pry more information out of Diego—the size of the faces, the history of climbs, how to get there—he told me it was quite a mystery, that very little was known.

With much help from Rolando Garibotti and Carlos Comensaña, I was able to learn more. Cerro Riso Patrón is an island of rock and rime pinned between the edge of the ice cap and the Chilean fjords. Although it is just 50 kilometers southwest of Cerro Torre, that short distance makes a colossal difference. The arid desert that borders the east side of the ice cap contrasts forcefully with the humid forests and swamplands framing the west side. Pacific storms crash into the bordering mountains, and hellish weather is the norm. Although the combination of complex terrain, poor climate, and isolation makes these mountains terribly complicated to climb, paradoxically it also makes them extremely attractive. When an alpinist sets eyes upon the gravity-defying rime coating these beautiful peaks, an inexplicable chemical transformation occurs in the brain. Against all common sense, and with the collapse of one's natural instinct of self-preservation, there comes an unwavering desire to scale them.

Riso Patrón Central was first climbed by Casimiro Ferrari, Bruno Lombardini, and Egidio Spreafico, all from Italy, in August 1988, via the southeast face. No one had been to the summit since. Riso Patrón South was still unclimbed, and we set our sights on its great west face. The project took three years to materialize. By the end of the summer of 2014, we had a team of four, ready and motivated. We knew our chances of success were minimal, but we all felt that exploring this wild and hostile region would make the experience worthwhile.

### **November 2014 – The First Attempt**

Our team was composed of Lise Billon, my companion on many Patagonian escapades; Martín Elías, a Spanish climber of numerous first ascents and corrosive humor; Antoine Moineville, our filmmaker and a member of the Flying Frenchies high-lining team; and me. Our hope was to hire a boat to take us to the end of Fiordo Falcón, where we would wait for good weather to attempt Riso Patrón South. The logistics proved complicated. Weeks passed in Puerto Natales as the alcoholic sailor who was supposed to manage our trip to Fiordo Falcón bailed time after time. I will skip the details, but it was an emotionally complicated moment.

Eventually we resigned ourselves to taking a ferry, the Navimag, to an isolated island of fishermen called Puerto Edén, in hopes of finding a boat there for the rest of our journey. Halfway between Puerto Natales and Puerto Mont, Puerto Edén is 400 kilometers from any other civilization, almost completely cut off from the rest of the world. This outpost is home to a couple of hundred people who mostly make a living diving for seafood and fishing, living in a very basic way. When we arrived we were pleased to hire Rigoberto, the proud captain of a small motorboat, the Principe, to transport us

to Fiordo Falcón. May Santo Pedro bless our journey!

Three long weeks passed between our landing in Puerto Natales and our arrival at the end of the fiord. At the inlet we called Bahía Fonrouge, we landed on a beautiful beach of fine, white sand, littered with icebergs abandoned by the falling tide. This gave way to a long, deep valley, the Valle Comensaña, which in turn led through dense clouds to unseen Riso Patrón. We felt like the occupants of the Mayflower, arriving in a new land.

We had decided that one of the keys to success would be to stay as dry as possible while we waited and scouted out the approach in the steady rain. If we were to spend three weeks in a tent, unable to dry our clothes, we would be miserable and worn out whenever a weather window finally arrived. So we worked for three days to build a small cabin and install the little homemade woodstove we had bought in Puerto Natales. A meter and a half of humid moss covered the ground, making it complicated to find a place to build, but eventually we had the stove smoking and hot in our little home in the forgotten fjords of Patagonia.

After a week in our shack we still hadn't glimpsed the mountain. On day ten, our weatherman announced (by satellite phone) three to four hours of blue skies in late afternoon of the next day. We immediately set off to stash some gear and inspect the approach. It took us a long day to reach the glacier, walking under pouring rain across marshlands where we'd sink up to the knees, overtopping our plastic wading boots. Eventually we traded the wading boots and fisherman-style foul-weather gear for mountaineering boots and Gore-tex—like Clark Kent transforming into Superman, we hoped. The clouds slowly parted and we finally set foot on the ice.

As the mist ebbed, a gigantic white throne, plastered with rime and smoking white with the wind, slowly emerged. The vision left us in a state of euphoria! And then, literally and emotionally, I went from top floor to bottom in an instant: One second I was ogling one of the most entrancing mountains I had ever seen, and the next I was dangling at the end of the rope with terrible pain in my right shoulder. A snow bridge had fallen away beneath my feet. I immediately understood this meant the end of the expedition.

The rescue was complicated. Inside the crevasse, I had pendulumed beneath a few meters of compact snow, which now separated me from freedom. My shoulder was dislocated, and the wind made it nearly impossible for my friends and me to hear each other. After 40 minutes I was able to dig through the lip and, with the help of my partners, climb out of the dark trench. I was close to hypothermia and my shoulder was impossible to reset. The return to our hut was long and painful, hiking down through dense jungle, and I admit the morphine tablets helped a lot. The icebergs had shifted with the tide and we were in danger of being trapped in the fiord. I was miserable and in pain, but even more I felt shattered by the abrupt ending to our expedition. There was no chance of a helicopter. We called the fishermen on our satellite phone, and eventually they arrived, slowly picking a route through the icebergs clogging the bay. By the time I reached the hospital and got my dislocated arm back into its socket, it had been seven days since the accident.

We had been well aware of the rules of this game. I had only popped a shoulder, nothing fatal, and the worst-case scenario was going to be nerve damage in my shoulder. But it was easy to imagine a worse outcome. The commitment of climbing remote mountains in Patagonia seemed much more real now.

## **September 2015 – The Second Attempt**

My obsession with the mountain only grew. But my friends hesitated, considering the low chances of success. Martin bailed and went to China. It took a bit of convincing, but Antoine decided to give it another go. Lise stayed motivated, as always. Our experience had shown us that a big team would give us a better chance of evacuating someone if anything happened. Diego Simari, who had first pointed to Cerro Riso Patrón on the map in El Chaltén four years earlier, now joined our group. And so

we were four again. This time we decided to go in September, two months earlier, in hope of better ice conditions and because the weather often seems slightly better at the end of the southern winter.

Just as we all arrived in Puerto Natales, the forecast announced a high-pressure system headed our way in only eight days, which left us very little time to get to Fiordo Falcón. With experience on our side, this time the logistics in Natales went quite smoothly. Only five days later we were in Puerto Edén, meeting up with our fishermen friends. We embarked on the Principe and took off for the fiords, our hearts full of hope and desire. But when we reached the entrance to Fiordo Falcón, we discovered the waters were still choked with ice. We had known this was a possibility in late winter, but had refused to acknowledge its consequences.

The fishermen, seeing our despair, tried to force their way through the ice. We cut down two big trees and lashed them to the front of the boat, turning Principe into a fragile icebreaker. Slowly we gained headway. We were close to Bahía Fonrouge, maybe a kilometer away, when a big chunk of ice passed beneath the vessel and crippled the rudder. Could it be that this time we would fail without even disembarking from the boat? Surely this was a bad joke!

The fjord walls, covered with loose rock and dense vegetation, wouldn't let us land, and we were forced to spend the night anchored in a rocky creek. Juan, one of the fishermen, pulled on an ancient wetsuit, a mask, and a breathing tube running from an air compressor and plunged into the ice-filled waters to attempt a provisional repair. As he dropped into the cold darkness, he yelled, "Estamos hasta las webas!" Webas was Chilean slang for huevos, which in turn is slang for "balls"—the phrase is roughly equivalent to "we're in neck-deep." This turned out to be a good motto for the rest of the journey.

In the morning we weighed our options. Our one and possibly unique weather window was hurtling toward us. We decided the only way to make something of it was to give up our original objective, the west face of Riso Patrón South, because we couldn't even start the approach up the Valle Comensaña. The east face of Riso Patrón Central, another unclimbed line, offered our only chance. This approach would be longer, and we weren't even sure how to begin. Twenty-seven years earlier, Ferrari and his team had approached Riso Patrón from Fiordo Falcón, but we didn't know where. A few miles back was another bay where we could reach shore and, we hoped, hike up to the ice cap. As the fishermen dropped us off and we unloaded our gear, we crossed a mental barrier. We had no time to build a cabin, scout out the access, or stash gear. It was to be all or nothing.

The high pressure arrived as forecast, and on September 20 we set off with huge packs, hiking toward the mountains. The weight was terrible, and in poor weather we might have given up. But the view of those giants of rock and snow sucked us in, full of motivation. We crossed a flat marsh where our boots left knee-deep holes in a colorful slush of fungus and algae, then climbed through a nearly vertical forest, using ice axe and crampons to make progress. Eventually we reached an open ridge and put on snowshoes. The ice cap extended in front of us, its flat surface a blessing after the jungle hills we'd climbed. Mountains of enormous proportions surged from the glacier, every rock protrusion capped with outrageous white rime. After two and a half days of struggle, the east face of Riso Patrón Central filled the skies overhead. We happily swapped our snowshoes for crampons. Our backs and legs ached, but our minds were set on the wall in front of us.

Our only photograph of the face had been taken in summer, and what we saw now barely resembled the dry, rocky peak in that photo. The spur we hoped to climb separates the north and east faces. Its lower half was painted in smears of ice, and the upper half plastered in rime. The pillar eventually gave way to a snowy arête and a huge summit mushroom. Our bet on the early season had paid off, as the air was cold and everything on the mountain seemed well glued together. We decided to start climbing immediately, even though we were tired and it was already 4 p.m. Conditions on the wall were great. Three pitches of ice up to 90° brought us to a bivy atop a snowy spur beneath a promising mixed wall. It was only the second day of spring, and the night was chilly, but the air was clear and still, allowing us to see Volcán Lautaro to the north and Cerro Murallón to the south. The immense ice

cap, the Hielo Continental, glowed in the light of a full moon.

The next day we drifted upward over vertical rock and streaks of ice, soaking up the morning sun. The protection was almost nonexistent, but the quality of the ice and the moderate grade (AI 5 M5) left us confident. Rapidly we climbed the first 400 meters of the spur, switching leads, until we reached a large amphitheater. To our left, the line we had planned to follow was plugged with snow over black overhangs, and we quickly dismissed it. A low-angle gully led to our right and into the sea of frost.

We switched the lead again and I headed upward, with no idea exactly where to go. A vague feature called for my attention, but after 30 meters I had to downclimb as the rime beneath my picks turned to froth. I needed to escape to the other side of the spur—this wall was unclimbable. A slight depression to the right seemed to lead to the edge of the pillar. I felt the tension in our team as I started for this option. If it didn't work we would have to rappel and look for another way, but the good weather wasn't eternal and we were losing time!

The rope beneath my feet arced loosely toward my partners below. Occasionally I heard an encouraging *Allez, Jérôme!*, reminding me that a world existed outside the arm's length bubble of rime surrounding me. This pitch was one-way: The pro was purely psychological, and downclimbing would be impossible. Fleeing forward, I plunged my feet deep into the rime and swung my tools furiously. The sun was low. The vague groove allowed me to keep my weight on my feet, but then one of them would unexpectedly drop a few centimeters and send my heart into spasms. *Hasta las webas!* The trick was not to think about it. Little by little I approached the arête, and when I finally hammered a pin into solid rock, I whooped with joy at being alive. My partners had put on their headlamps. The ice cap blushed pink and fiery red as the sun sank beneath the fjords. My friends quickly seconded the pitch—*Are you kidding me?*—with little difficulty.

The east side of the spur looked significantly easier. We rappelled to a vague ledge for what was left of the night. As we melted snow and ate, Diego scalded himself with the stove and, startled, dropped his sleeping bag, which tumbled to the glacier below. He let loose a string of curses I wouldn't dare repeat in a journal like this. We loaned him our big jackets as the temperatures dropped to -20°C, fortunately for only a few hours, as the rising sun soon started to warm his bones.

A beautifully sculpted arête of snow, with crazy cornices and tunnels created by the wind, led us upward until we bumped against the summit mushroom. As we approached this last crux, I really thought we might fail to make the summit. Classic Patagonian rime led to a 10-meter overhang, a boiling ring of inconsistent snow that barred our way. But maybe there was a way around? We rappelled 10 meters and began traversing to the right. Streaks of blue appeared beneath the sparkling white crystals. After a game of rock, paper, and scissors (which I won), I set off for the last pitch. I happily buried screws in ice and climbed through the wild rime. On the backside of the mushroom was easy snow, and we unroped and climbed to the top. We screamed and chanted as the sun dropped below the dark waters of the fjords.

That night we left deadman after deadman, bouncing from one mushroom to the next, as we rappelled the north arête and meandered downward through white meringue, looking for paths of weakness. The wind became stronger and clouds engulfed the mountain. We eventually left the ridge and dropped along the eastern flank, hoping to reach our approach tracks. Seemingly forever we descended, shivering and exhausted, until suddenly we were in the bergschrund. We had made it.

Two days later we returned to the bay where the fishermen had left us. We had been gone for a week, most of which had seen good weather. A mix of luck and audacity and friendship had been the recipe for our success. We had tasted the salty flavor of wild lands. We had seen so many unclimbed, unnamed summits, ridges, and faces hidden behind the swamps, forest, and lakes. These mysteries remain—for those willing to go *hasta las webas*.

**Summary:** First ascent of the east spur of Cerro Riso Patrón Central (ca 2,550 meters), and second

ascent of the peak, by Lise Billon, Antoine Moineville, Diego Simari, and Jérôme Sullivan, September 22–24, 2015. The team descended by the north ridge and eastern slopes and returned to base camp seven days after leaving. Hasta las Webas: 1,000 meters, ED-.

**About the Author:** Jérôme Sullivan is best described as a nomadic climber, as his home is wherever he pitches his tent. He guides in Chamonix for a few months a year. After two accidents in three years, Patagonia has marked his body and mind, yet the magnetic attraction continues.

## Images



Cerro Riso Patrón Central and Hasta las Webas (1,000m, 2015) from the east. The 1988 route is farther left, beyond the rock buttress. Unclimbed Riso Patrón South on the left.



The author searches for safe passage through a "sea of frost" on Riso Patrón.



Approach to Cerro Riso Patrón. Red line: route of the Navimag ferry. Yellow line: route of the Principe from Puerto Edén into Fiordo Falcón. (1) 2014 base camp. (2) 2015 base camp.



The Principe moored in Fiordo Falcón.



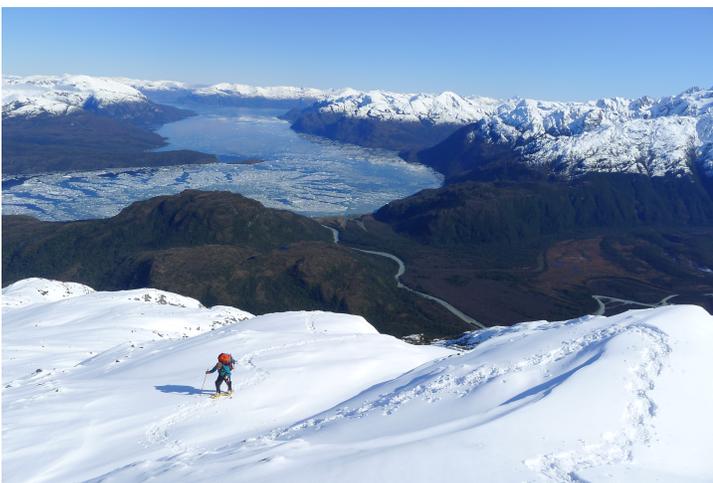
Anticipating weeks of bad weather, the team built a small but well-stocked shack above the fjord.



Approaching Riso Patrón South, moments before the crevasse fall that ended the 2014 attempt.



Hacking a path away from the fjord.



Above the forest and in the clear, en route to Riso Patrón, with ice-choked Fiordo Falcón in the distance.



Scenes from the approach in 2015: A Chilean sailor prepares to get hasta las webas to fix the Principe's rudder.



Brilliant mixed climbing early on day two.



Good but poorly protected ice in the middle of the face.



A stunning sunset view to the northeast, over the icecap to Cerro Buracchio and the Cordón Riso Patrón.

## Article Details

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