



## AAC Publications

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### **Titanic: A First Free Ascent on Torre Egger**

Argentina, Southern Patagonia, Chaltén Massif

**In mid-September, I arrived in El Chaltén to meet up with my friend Marc-André Andre Leclerc. Our goal was twofold: to climb Torre Egger and to film Marc-Andre as he re-enacted the mind-blowing solo of the peak that he'd accomplished just a week before.** We were more than three months earlier than most of the crowds that flock to this alpine-climbing paradise every austral summer. The town was quiet and beautiful.

On the east side of Torre Egger an enormous buttress of perfect granite juts out into the valley, taller than Yosemite's El Capitan. High on the route, a particularly striking pillar of stone stands out like a ship's prow, giving the route Titanic its name. In 1987 a group of three Italians—Giorgio Cominelli, Lorenzo Nadali, and Andrea Sarchi—climbed to the snow slope halfway up the route and fixed 500m of rope to their high point. Thwarted by storms, they left before finishing the route. A month later, two other Italians, Maurizio Giarolli and Elio Orlandi, jumared the fixed lines and then continued to the summit.

In the ensuing decades the upper half of the route has been climbed numerous times via different starts, but amazingly the original thousand feet had never been repeated. Intrigued by Rolando Garibotti's description of the original line—"the six-pitch hanging ice runnel in the lower half is the unrepeated hidden jewel of this climb"—and deterred by significant serac danger on the line Marc-André had just soloed, we decided to attempt the original start.

We first fixed two ropes to the base of an ice runnel 150m above the glacier. After a single rest day back in town, we returned to the route, ascended our fixed lines, and started up the ice runnel before dawn. Deep in the back of a chimney, a thin ribbon of ice and névé, often just a foot or two wide, shot up nearly a thousand feet above our heads. Marc-André cruised up the ice in the lead, shouting enthusiastically about the extremely high quality of the climbing.

Above the ice runnel we emerged into bright sun and climbed a few pitches of steep rock on which Marc-André soloed while I filmed. By 5 p.m. we had reached the mid-route snow slope and dug out a platform for our small tent. I have spent few nights in as picturesque a perch.

The next morning we had packed and set off before sunrise. Pitch after pitch, Marc-André would lead and fix a rope, I would jumar quickly, he would rappel back down as I got myself and my camera into position, and then he would free solo back up to me as I filmed. I was all too aware of the incredible risk Marc-André was taking, all for my camera (or so it felt to me), and at times I wondered if we were being incredibly stupid. But as Marc-André flowed over the rock it was clear that he was completely in control of the situation. Every step was precise, every move executed with confidence. After a couple of pitches my hesitations disappeared.

A couple of hundred meters above the snowfield we reached the crux: a long, leftward undercling traverse that had never been freed. Marc-André set off and moved carefully through the first 10m, underclinging the flake. The wall steepened, and I held my breath as Marc-André pulled around a small bulge. His foot flew off the wall and he screamed loudly, pulling himself back in at the last

second and pawing through to a merciful no-hands kneebar rest. He shook out and looked back at me with a smile, collecting himself before the true crux: a blank downclimb traverse across a steep slab that still separated him from the belay. He stepped out of the crack and moved delicately onto the face, then his foot slipped and he flew off into space. He tried again from the kneebar but came off in the same spot. On his third attempt he kept his foot pasted to the wall with a yell, but slipped again just a couple of moves later.

We still had a long ways to go and I nearly shouted that we should keep moving, but I held my tongue. On his next go Marc-André moved quickly across the slab, pausing for just a moment before stabbing his left foot out and with a yell throwing his left hand to an unseen hold. As he hit the hold his body sagged and I thought he was off, but he pulled himself back in and scampered over to the belay as we both shouted in excitement.

Above the crux we continued quickly on easier terrain. By the time we reached the summit mushroom the sun was low in the sky and the weather had changed considerably. A constant wind blew from the west and thick clouds roiled all around us. Beautiful WI4 hero-sticks up a half-pipe of rime delivered us to an easier slope and finally the summit. I stood on top in disbelief. A small break appeared in the clouds and I looked west over the Southern Ice Cap, washed in the last light of the day. The imposing north face of Cerro Torre broke out of the mist, flying toward us above a sea of clouds like some mythical ice-encrusted battleship. Then it was gone as the clouds engulfed us once again. It was hard to leave such a magical moment and place, but it was clear we didn't belong. With night falling fast, we quickly began our descent.

Eight and half hours later we pulled our ropes for the last time and stumbled to our camp on the glacier. We crawled into our sleeping bags, brewed up a hot drink, and smoked a celebratory cigarette. The jagged silhouettes of the Chaltén massif materialized out of the starry, black sky and we watched our second sunrise of the day. I put down my camera, opened my eyes wide, snapped a mental image, and fell into a deep slumber.

**Summary:** First integral ascent and first free ascent of Titanic (950m, VI 7b M6 90°) on the east buttress of Torre Egger, September 2016, by Marc-André Leclerc, Canada.

## Images



Below the headwall on Torre Egger.



Marc-André Leclerc unroped on Torre Egger.



Marc-André Leclerc at the bivouac on Torre Egger.



Marc-André Leclerc during the second ascent of the original start to Titanic on Torre Egger.



Marc-André Leclerc unroped on Torre Egger.



Marc-André Leclerc unroped on Torre Egger, with the Fitz Roy group behind.



Marc-André Leclerc just before the crux moves during the first free ascent of Titanic on Torre Egger.

## Article Details

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