



AAC Publications

El Valor del Miedo

The First Ascent of the East Face of Cerro Murallón in Patagonia

THE IDEA of attempting Cerro Murallón came to us way back in 2010, even before my first trip to Patagonia. Matteo “Berna” Bernasconi and I both were looking for a big adventure. We were not afraid of failing, just wanting to live the full Patagonian experience.

Berna and I are part of the “new” generation of Ragni di Lecco, an invitation-only alpine club based out of Lecco, Italy. The history of Ragni climbers’ accomplishments in Patagonia is long. Wearing the “red sweater,” the symbol of the Ragni group, is a source of endless motivation; we try to follow in the footsteps of the great alpinists who preceded us.

At one point, Berna and I sat down with two old heroes from this storied group: Mario Conti, who made the first ascent of Cerro Torre in 1974, and Carlo Aldè, who climbed the first technical route up Cerro Murallón in 1984. They enlightened us with a few ideas for these mythical mountains. When they finished talking, I couldn’t wait to see Patagonia with my own eyes.

Two mountains caught our attention: Torre Egger, with its still unclimbed west face, and Cerro Murallón, which to us offered an ideal combination of isolation and beautiful unclimbed walls. Murallón sounded too complicated for two guys with little expedition experience. We opted first for Torre Egger and spent about 160 days in Patagonia over three years to climb this mountain. Torre Egger was a very hard school that allowed no mistakes, but we learned a lot of things: about expeditions, big-wall climbing, organization, and mental strength.

After completing this huge adventure, in 2013, Berna and I took different paths for a few years. I looked for new challenges in alpinism, in Patagonia, Greenland, and other places around the world, while he dedicated himself to his job as a mountain guide.

In January 2016, also after a three-year saga, I made the first repeat, and first ever ascent in alpine style, of the East Pillar of Fitz Roy, a route opened in 1976 by Ragni members Casimiro Ferrari and Vittorio Meles. On this climb, I relied on an exceptional partner, David Bacci, also from the Ragni group. Later that season, David and I managed a short reconnaissance trip to see Cerro Murallón firsthand. Despite being only 100km from Cerro Torre, the difficult approach and isolation made Murallón radically different from the mountains of the Chaltén massif. For such an expedition, three climbers seemed ideal. So, the circle closed: I asked Berna if he still was interested, and he answered enthusiastically.

David, Berna, and I met in El Calafate on January 10, 2017. The weather this season was dramatic, with continuous low pressure for a month and a half. But our morale was high. With a month’s food, we set off by boat to Estancia Cristina, at the northern end of Lago Argentino. From there we moved all of our food and equipment by Jeep to Refugio Upsala, and then started shuttling loads on foot to Refugio Pascale. This small box of iron and wood was our home for four weeks.

By January 15 we had everything we needed at Refugio Pascale and started waiting for a window—at least one good enough to hike to the base of the wall and choose our line. The waiting game went on

for several days...and then weeks. Luckily there were a few boulders around, so we could have fun and keep fit. Every two days we would call a friend in Italy for the forecast and he would tell us, "For the next five days: bad weather with strong winds and precipitation." I had learned from past experience, especially on Torre Egger, that climbing these mountains is a matter of patience. Toward the end of January, things started to look different: a possible window in the first week of February.

On February 1, we hiked toward the north side of Cerro Murallón with a week of food and all our gear. We had only been able to see the mountains for one day in the previous three weeks, so we had no idea of the conditions. We were open to many options. Trying to free the northeast ridge, opened by Ragni climbers in 1984, was really appealing. For difficulty, the northwest face, a sheer 900m rock wall, had only one existing route, climbed by Stefan Glowacz and Robert Jasper in 2005, and might offer other options. On the other hand, the unclimbed east face had all the ingredients for a great adventure.

We set up advanced base camp one and a half hours from the foot of Cerro Murallón, in what we thought was a sheltered spot; nevertheless, while we were putting up our tent, strong wind broke a pole and ripped the fabric. After waiting here for a day and a half, we decided to head up to the wall at about 3 p.m. on February 3. We had received a positive but not very reliable forecast for the following two days. Since we had barely seen Cerro Murallón during our whole expedition, we made a blind choice about what line to attempt. I love rock climbing, but the conditions suggested this was not the time. The mixed climbing on the east face was a more appealing option. We knew Bruno Sourzac and Laurence Monnoyeur had attempted the center of the face in 1999, climbing approximately two-thirds way up the wall, with difficulties to M5 A2 90°, before retreating in a storm. However, we were unsure of their exact line. [Editor's note: Another attempt on the east face occurred in 1984, when, before attempting the northeast ridge, Ragni climbers Carlo Aldè, Fabio Lenti, and Paolo Vitali climbed about halfway up the east wall, reaching the central snowfield below the steeper headwall. Casimiro Ferrari then insisted they abandon the east face to focus on their original objective, and the trio used up their last sunny day for two months to retrieve their gear and move it to the northeast ridge.]

There were many question marks concerning the approach, the line, and what would happen if good weather focused the warmth of the sun onto the ice. We would need to be fast, bringing only the essentials for climbing a 1,000-meter face, including food for a day and a half and ultra-light sleeping bags and half-mattresses. That night we bivied on the glacier below Cerro Murallón amid an eerie atmosphere. There was no wind, but the mountain remained hidden by dense fog. When the alarm rang at 3:30 a.m., the fog lingered. Disappointed, we stayed in our sleeping bags. But at 5 a.m. the fog suddenly disappeared: Our long-awaited window had come!

We hurried to start hiking toward the east face. Eventually, with first light, we had the chance to quickly study the wall and choose a possible line. We aimed for what looked like a couloir with good ice, eventually leading to a snowy shoulder where we could assess the upper wall.

At 7:30 a.m., David starting leading the first of six pitches in a long block, following an ice runnel, while Berna and I followed with the backpacks. His final two pitches, leading to the snowy shoulder, proved to be steep and sustained, with a few overhanging sections. The ice was good, since the goulotte was still in the shade. However, at noon, when we arrived at the shoulder, we were greeted by powerful sunshine, and looking up we could see many of the ice runnels melting, with snow and rock debris falling down the wall. David and Berna proposed to wait for the shade of afternoon, but I knew that losing four hours might be crucial, especially given the nature of the season so far. So, despite less than ideal conditions, I proposed to lead straight up, the section of the wall that looked to be most sheltered from falling rock and ice.

Prior to this, I had not led an ice pitch in three years, and I had never done a true mixed climb. No time like the present! Little by little, I found my way up through soft snow, rock, and a little ice. Sometimes I climbed with ice tools, other times I preferred to just grab the holds with my hands—and I had to admit I was having a lot of fun! After three 60-meter pitches, the sun had left the wall. I could see the

next pitch was going to be a perfectly vertical ice runnel, so I turned over the lead to Berna, who is more confident on this kind of terrain. We were making steady progress.

Berna led the next 300 meters until we arrived under the final headwall, approximately 200 meters tall. The route-finding had been a bit tricky and it was getting late. After a 60-meter traverse left, we sighted a line through the upper wall and prepared a snowy bivy ledge. Unfortunately, after dinner, an unexpected avalanche hit the ledge, leaving us under 20cm of fresh snow. Berna's inflatable mattress was flattened. Thankfully, most of the slide rushed past our exposed position.

We woke on February 5 at first light. Clouds thickening on the horizon blocked the sun. We could feel the first gusts of Patagonian wind. David took the first pitch above the bivy. The headwall looked more difficult than anything in the 800 meters below us. The weather continued to worsen, but we soon reached the base of the final 40-meter pitch. David gave it his all, fighting his way up through delicate dry tooling and aid moves. Berna and I shouted and cheered as the wind blew stronger and stronger. At 1 p.m. we all reached the top of the wall. The air was filled with blowing snow.

A hard decision awaited: How to get down? We could either rappel 1,000 meters down the wall we had just climbed, with little gear, or attempt to descend the unfamiliar southwest side of Murallón. Rolando Garibotti, who followed this route with Silvo Karo to make the only known ascent of Cerro Murallón's western and highest peak, in 2003, had told us this would be mostly walking, so we chose this option. After about 300 meters of easy hiking, we reached the east summit of Cerro Murallón and then headed across the plateau, looking for the way down. We soon found ourselves wandering around giant seracs. Although Rolo had written of this route that "a cow could do it," three men couldn't find the way! We weren't the first to experience this situation. In 1984, after climbing the northeast buttress to the east summit (which they believed to be the highest point), Carlo Aldè, Casimiro Ferrari, and Paolo Vitali also attempted this descent; however, after a day of wandering through a labyrinth of seracs and a fall into a crevasse, they felt there was no way out and decided to rappel their route.

As evening arrived, we consider a shivering bivy in a snow hole, but then a quick opening in the clouds allowed us to see the Cono Glacier, far below us to the left. We decided to rappel to the south, down a big serac, to reach the glacier. What we thought would be three or four rappels turned into ten. Once on the glacier, we found a terrible maze of crevasses. At 10:30 p.m., exhausted, wet, and with almost no food, we stumbled across two huge rocks in the middle of the glacier, offering some respite from the storm. It was the best gift we could imagine.

On February 6, we split our last energy bar for breakfast and started a long day of hiking. Our tent was still 25 kilometers away on the far side of the mountain. The Cono Glacier's poor condition forced us up and down mountains of ice, and then, once in the moraine, through huge piles of unstable blocks. Our situation improved once we reached the Upsala Glacier, and we finally reached our advanced camp again after a 13-hour day, three days after leaving.

In seven years of trips to Patagonia, Cerro Murallón was my wildest adventure by far. The world felt far away, and I felt small and exposed to the power of nature. I'm looking forward to more expeditions like this, where the climbing, though most important, is still only one of many aspects forming a complete adventure.

Summary: First ascent of the east face of Cerro Murallón, to the east summit (ca 2,770m), by El Valor del Miedo (1,000m, M6 A2 90°+), by David Bacci, Matteo Bernasconi, and Matteo Della Bordella, February 4–6, 2017.

About the Author: Born in 1984, Matteo Della Bordella lives in Varese, Italy, and has been a member of the Ragni di Lecco since 2006. Since 2010 he has made annual visits to Patagonia, where his climbs include a "fair means" ascent of Cerro Torre's southeast ridge.

Images

THE RAGNI IN PATAGONIA

The Ragno or Lecco group was founded in 1965, in Lecco, Italy. The name Ragno, or "spiders", refers to a time when Tita Plaz saw Gigi Vitali climbing in Gfigna, in the early years of the group, and his movements were so elegant that Plaz said, "he climbs like a spider!" To join the Ragno, you need to be nominated by three members, your resume has to be approved by a technical committee, and two-thirds of the members at a special meeting have to vote in your favor. There were about 100 members at the end of 2015.

The Ragno began sponsoring international expeditions in the mid-1960s. Among the first was Walter Bonatti and Carlo Mauri's trip to Patagonia in 1968, during which they made the first attempt on Cerro Torre's west side and traversed the Adela group. Along with Felco Doro Altan and René Eggman, they also did first ascent of Cerro Mariano Moreno. Over the six decades since then, the Ragno have been responsible for some of Patagonia's most significant climbs.

1966: First ascent of Monte Sarmiento, Tierra del Fuego

1968: Bonatti-Mauri climbs in El Chaltén massif

1966: Monte Buckland, Tierra del Fuego

1970: New high point on west face of Cerro Torre, 250 meters below top

1974: First ascent of Cerro Torre, by west face (the Ragno Route)

1976: First ascent of east pillar of Fitz Roy

1984: Northeast arête of Cerro Murallón

1986: New routes on Aguja Poincenot's west face, the south face of the Central Tower of Paine, and Monte Sarmiento (celebrating the Ragno group's 20th anniversary).

1988: First ascent of Cerro Iso Patón and first winter traverse of Hielo Patagónico Sur

1989: First winter ascent of Monte San Valentín, by a new route

1992: New route on north tower of Paine

2000: North face of San Lorenzo

2008: Northwest face of Piergiorgio

2013: West face of Torre Egger

Thanks to Matteo Della Bardella, Rolando Garibotti, and Patascimb.com



A thin runnel on the east face of Murallón.



The east face of Cerro Murallón, showing the line of El Valor del Miedo (2017) and the team's bivy site on the route. Blue circle marks the Ragni (Italian) climbers' high point in 1984. The northeast arête, climbed by the Ragni team in 1984, is in the center.



David Bacci leads a delicate mixed pitch just above the bivouac during the first ascent of the east face of Cerro Murallón.



Cerro Murallón (left) from the Upsala Glacier. The east face is in the sun. The 2017 route up the east face and the 1984 ascent of the northeast arête both topped out on the east summit (farthest right). The 2017 team rappelled the wall at far left, under the seracs. At right, the highest peak is Cerro Don Bosco.



The upper south side of Murallón, showing the high point reached by the Italians in 2017.



Unable to find the easy walk down, the climbers rappelled the south face under huge seracs. They estimated they would need three or four rappels but instead made ten.

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