



Cerro Esquinero, Northeast and Northwest Faces

Argentina, Northern Patagonia, Nahuel Huapi National Park

On January 29, 2018, Szu-ting Yi and I met Juan Carlos Martinez, a fisherman in Villa La Angostura, Argentina. He warily eyed the two out-of-place foreigners with bulging packs filled with climbing equipment, camping gear, packrafts, and food for 20 days. Eventually, he shook his head and motioned us toward his skiff. Without fluency in a common language, we let the small outboard motor fill the silence as the bow of the boat cleaved Lago Nahuel Huapi in two perfect halves. The immensity of the enormous lake was matched in size and color by the cloudless sky above. The sole interruption in this blue world was our destination, the dark green beech forests guarding the foothills of Nahuel Huapi National Park.

Looking for a climbing objective in Patagonia, I had searched “patagonia, cliff” on Google and filtered through the resulting images. Eventually, I saw an image of unique-looking cliff by a lake. The lake was Lago Huahuahue, and I discovered the cliff to be Cerro Esquinero (1,920m). More online sleuthing led to the coordinates of the lake, about 40 km northwest of Bariloche. I discovered many trekkers had ascended the low-angled south side to the summit of Cerro Esquinero, but what about the 800m granite walls on the north? I emailed legendary Argentine climber Rolo Garibotti. He replied, “Some friends of mine went there 30 years ago, when we were still kids. They did not have bolts, so what they could do was limited and [they] did not complete a route. I have not heard of anyone else returning.”

Once on shore, we followed a horse trail for 4.5km and camped next to the Refugio José Diem, a small hut below Cerro Colorado (1,850m). The next morning we started the 20km off-trail journey to Cerro Esquinero. In 2011, the nearby Cordon Caulle volcano had erupted, spewing more than 100 million tons of ash into the sky and literally burying the surrounding area. Since then the ash has drifted and settled, making the hiking with our monstrous packs an exercise in patience. We spent the next three days following and losing the tracks of the South American cougar and huemul deer, while Andean condors monitored our progress overhead. The final day of the approach found us thrashing through and then clinging to dense beech shrubs as we descended a near vertical slope to the Huahuahue Valley. The impassable vegetation on the valley floor forced us to slosh through a thigh-deep bog and then wade down a chest-high, slow-moving river. By nightfall we were able to set up our base camp on the pristine western edge of Lago Huahuahue.

The northeast wall of Cerro Esquinero rises 800m above the lake. Paddling across the translucent water on February 4, I heard the crack before I saw it on the face. Well, not the crack itself, but the sound of a small stream trickling down the continuous fissure from the summit snowfields. At daybreak my wife and I moored our packrafts to a chockstone and started climbing. We followed the slabby, sometimes-vegetated crack and quickly climbed seven pitches. Then the wall steepened and the full strength of the Patagonian summer sun hit us. The temperature neared 80 degrees and our pace withered. Above me, meltwater dribbled over a ledge like an overflowing sink. At least we had a drinking source, I thought as I stemmed my hands and feet out on the nearly frictionless granite to avoid the central water runnel.

Reaching a ledge, I plunged my hand into a small depression filled with water. Fishing around for a hand jam, I felt something wriggle between my fingers. I yanked my hand back to reveal half a dozen tadpoles. They were happily squirming around in a pool the size of a milk jug 300m above the lake.

Sun, no wind, almost too hot to climb, now tadpoles on the route—was I really climbing a first ascent in Patagonia? The reminder came in the form of a buzzing cloud of vicious tábanos. These biting horseflies, the size of quarters, were our constant companions, looking for any bare skin to exploit. Despite the heat, I pulled my hood over my helmet in an attempt to maintain my sanity against these winged devils.

After tadpoles, tábanos, and pitch after pitch of polished granite, an unstable chockstone the size of a dump truck, oozing with moss and other vegetation, blocked our way a mere 10m from the top of the wall. Not willing to give up, we rapped down 50m to a flat ledge and bivied with nothing but our rain gear to ward off the cold. In the darkness my headlamp caught the reflection of two tiny eyes as a Las Bayas frog hopped away from my beam.

“Well, Szu-ting, if cold-blooded amphibians are moving around at night,” I said while placing a chalk bag under my head for a pillow, “I think we will do fine.”

The morning light brought warmth but no obvious route-finding solution to the top. After climbing a few dead ends, we began rappelling back to our rafts at the base of the wall.

Less than a week later, we were again bivying on a ledge 400m off the ground, this time on the northwest face of Cerro Esquinero, and this time we'd brought our down quilt. The route up to this point had been a mix of steep corners and smooth, low-angle slabs that gained a large ledge halfway up the face. My biggest achievement for the day had been convincing Szu-ting to link a licheny fist crack and a hard, mossy 5.10+ offwidth flare, so I didn't have to lead either one.

Directly above our bivy, a series of spectacular dihedrals split by perfect-looking cracks stretched toward the summit. Some looked like they would require bolts, and all would require some cleaning. With little food and a questionable weather window, time was something we did not have.

The next day we traversed 150m to the east and found an easier series of cracks. Szu-ting led up the crux and best pitch of the route, a laser-cut 5.11 C1 finger crack that stretched for almost a full rope length. Above, I suffered through a run-out, loose, and wet layback that brought us to a long corner system and the top of the wall. The sun was setting as we scrambled another 500m to the true summit of Cerro Esquinero. We quickly descended several hundred meters down a low-angled couloir that split the northeast and northwest buttresses. The remainder of the descent looked complicated in the dark, and we were out of food and trashed from the last two days of effort, so we decided to bivy again.

After finishing the descent and resting for a day, we packed up our base camp and paddled 1.5km across Lago Huahuaehue on February 14. We had decided to return by descending into the Milliquo River drainage to the east. We were unable to find the horse trail, and our descent ended up taking two full days of bushwhacking, river navigating, and slippery slab traversing.

As we arrived on the shore of Lago Nahuel Huapi, the wind picked up and sent whitecaps out across the lake as cirrus clouds overhead predicted the end to our amazing stretch of good weather. Tomorrow a boat would shuttle us back to Bariloche. As we cooked dinner on the beach, we both relaxed in the evening glow of our last day in the wilderness of Northern Patagonia.

– Dave Anderson

Club Patagonia from David E. Anderson on Vimeo.

Images



Cerro Esquinero above Lago Huahuahue in Argentina's Nahuel Huapi National Park, showing the two new routes completed by Dave Anderson and Szu-ting Yi in February 2018. The left line is Ice Cream Tempura (490m, 5.10 R C1) and on the right is Rising from the Ashes (880m, 5.11 C1).



Szu-ting Yi soaking up the sun after an unplanned shiver bivy during the first ascent of Ice Cream Tempura (490m, 5.10 R C1) on Cerro Esquinero. Yi and her husband, Dave Anderson, began climbing the route straight out of their packrafts and were stopped a mere 10 meters from the top of the wall by an impassable chockstone.



Szu-ting Yi on the second day of the approach to Cerro Esquinero, near the summit of Cerro Colorado, with Lago Nahuel Huapi in the background.



Szu-ting Yi descending toward Cerro Esquinero in the Huahuahue Valley of Nahuel Huapi National Park. It took Yi and Dave Anderson four days to establish themselves in the valley, where they climbed two new routes on Cerro Esquinero.



Szu-ting Yi paddling across Lago Huahuahue before making the first ascent of Ice Cream Tempura (490m, 5.10 R C1) on Cerro Esquinero, in Argentina's Nahuel Huapi National Park.



Szu-ting Yi leading the initial section of Ice Cream Tempura (490m, 5.10 R C1) on Cerro Esquinero, in Argentina's Nahuel Huapi National Park.



Dave Anderson following the splitter finger-crack crux on Rising From the Ashes (880m, 5.11 C1) on Cerro Esquinero. This was one of two new routes Anderson and his wife, Szu-ting Yi, put up in February 2018.



Szu-ting Yi doing some big-wall gardening at the start of the crux pitch of Rising from the Ashes (880m, 5.11 C1) on Cerro Esquinero, in Argentina's Nahuel Huapi National Park.

Article Details

Author	Dave Anderson
Publication	AAJ
Volume	61
Issue	93
Page	0
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions