



Climbing Potential on the North Patagonian Icefield

Chile, Northern Patagonia, Aysén Region

The North Patagonian Icefield has enormous potential for exploration and mountaineering. The area can be divided in three zones: The northern section is mostly within the basin of the San Rafael Glacier and is dominated by Monte San Valentín (4,032m), the highest peak in Patagonia. (The official elevation of San Valentín is 3,910m; however, a research team doing ice coring near the summit about a decade ago measured the elevation with a geodetic GPS and obtained a result of 4,032m, as reported in a paper published in 2008.) The natural longing for the highest summits has drawn most mountaineers to this area, and most of the summits have been climbed, but only San Valentín has more than one route.

The southern section of the icefield, corresponding mainly to the basin of the Steffen Glacier, has the highest unclimbed peaks, which have been defended by difficult access.

The central section, visited by several expeditions in 2017–2018, including ours, is comprised of the basins of the San Quintín, Colonia, and Nef glaciers, and offers the largest concentration of unclimbed summits and a range of difficulties and terrain types, from big peaks that could be climbed on skis to sheer granite walls. On the west side, all of the Cordón Aysén peaks offer about 1,000m of elevation gain from the plateau. Cerro De Geer and the mountains in the southern extreme of this group present beautiful climbs without much technical difficulty aside from crevasse fields and an eventual bergschrund. But the ones in the center, such as Cerro Aguila and Cerro Alfil, have no straightforward routes.

On the east side, the horizon is dominated by the peaks Largo, Cachet, Nora East, and Nora West, all of them flanked by vertical granite and ice walls. They were first surveyed and named by Juan Waag around 1898, as part of surveys made for the British arbitration that defined the border between Chile and Argentina in this area. Waag worked for the Argentine government, which supported a boundary that followed the highest summits, forcing the surveyors to explore deep into uncharted sections of the maps. Chilean surveyors worked far to the east, tracing the limits of the basins that eventually drain into the Pacific Ocean (the criteria supported by the Chilean government to trace the border). So, paradoxically, each survey commission was exploring the land that would end up in the territory of the other.

A hundred and twenty years later, Nora East and West remain unclimbed. The first, while not extremely difficult, could offer an epic ski descent. Nora West is defended by 1,000m faces on its north and south aspects, and steep and narrow arêtes on the east and west. Cerro Cachet was climbed in 1971 by the only route that bypasses the sheer granite walls that surround most of the mountain. Largo was climbed in 2007; however it offers many other routes and is surrounded by other summits that rise abruptly from the ice, with sheer granite walls up to 900m tall. Cerro Gargantua was climbed in 1971, but has a striking unclimbed wall, and Punta Pantagruel was just climbed last season, along with a couple of smaller summits. Many other peaks are yet to be named or climbed.

– Camilo Rada, Chile

For additional photos from this area, see the report from the Natalia Martínez and Camilo Rada expedition in 2017.

Images



The imposing west face of Cerro Largo.



Cerro Largo from the south.



Unnamed peaks and walls near Cerro Largo in the warm, soft light of sunset.



Cerro García.



The peak called "Alfil" by the 2017 Martinez-Rada expedition.



"Cerro Aguila."



Cerro Gargantua (left) and Punta Pantagruel.



Cerro Arenales.



Unnamed virgin summit dubbed A1 by the Martinez-Rada team.



Unnamed and unclimbed peaks to the southwest of Cerro Largo.



Unnamed nunatak.



North face of Cerro Nora.



The Northern Patagonian Icefield, showing approach from Puerto Bertrand to the Cordón Aysén used by Natalia Martínez and Camilo Rada in July/August 2017. (Yellow line: boat travel; blue: foot travel aided by horses; red: foot travel and climbing.) Martínez and Rada made the first ascent of Cerro Enroque. Other peaks climbed in early 2018: (1) Cerro Fantasma. (2) Punta Pantagruel. This is a simplified version of a map under development by the Uncharted project. Peak names and locations differ from other sources, including official maps, but the mapmakers have strong historical evidence to support the naming. Maps and more information can be requested from natalia@unchart.org.



Unclimbed Aysén

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