



AAC Publications

First Ascents in the Exploradores Valley: Cerro Cheuco, Cerro Pinuer, Cerro Caballo

Chile, Aysén Region

After four years of working in the Exploradores Valley, west of Puerto Río Tranquilo (toward the west end of Lago General Carrera), and always looking at these incredible and barely explored mountains, it seemed time to invest some effort to climb some of these peaks. I was sure that the views from up high would be amazing.

In May 2018, I met a traveling Scottish fellow, Ross Balharry. He was super-motivated and seemed to be related to the Terminator—like a machine! We first climbed together in the Cordillera Castillo, and I immediately proposed to him that we go to Cerro Chueco (ca 1,900m, 46°29'06"S, 73°00'14"W) in the Exploradores Valley during the next good weather window.

Good conditions arrived in late May. Our initial idea was to climb a gully called El Dedo (“the finger”) to gain access to Cerro Chueco. To get there we had to cross Río Norte, and at first the river was too swollen to cross. Looking at the map, we saw an avalanche path on the mountain’s east shoulder that would connect us to the summit, and below this the river was wider and the water was only hip deep. We climbed via the avalanche path—there wasn’t enough snow to pose a danger—and made a bivy at its exit. The panorama was incredible, with the north face of San Valentín in all its glory.

At 3 a.m. we left for the summit under a full moon and perfect snow conditions. We navigated the glacier without trouble until we encountered a giant 10m crevasse that cut horizontally across an 80° slope on the mountain’s eastern slope; luckily, it was covered by a solid snow bridge. After the crevasse, the slope eased to 60° with steps to 70°, so we decided to continue unroped to the summit, which we reached at full sunrise at 7:30 a.m. In perfect weather, all that remained was to contemplate the 360° view of the mountains. The icefields to the north commanded most of our attention, and we could see many future projects.

In January 2019, with the Exploradores Valley still very much on my mind, and a weather window that could not be missed, I spoke with my friend Luis Torres, who is from Puerto Río Tranquilo, about another climb. We decided on what appears to be the highest peak in the valley at 2,300m (46°36'54"S, 72°56'10"W). We called the unnamed peak Cerro Pinuer, in respect to don Iram Pinuer, who has resided below the peak for the majority of his life.

We ascended from Iram Pinuer’s home, 20km into the Exploradores Valley. Upon leaving the forest, we set off in the direction of the north ridge. We made a bivy before the ridge—the plan was to leave at night because of expected warm daytime temperatures, and we wanted to be on the summit at sunrise.

We set off at 3:30 a.m. The first obstacle was an arête of third- and fourth-class rock. Above, the snow was in perfect condition. We followed the slope of the ridge, which was about 60° with steps up to 75°. We arrived at the summit at 7:15 a.m. on another epic windless and cloudless day.

We downclimbed quickly under the warming temperatures, and by 9:30 a.m. we were in a safe area, just in time for the peak to begin sloughing off ice, snow, and rock. We got to our bivouac, threw everything in the packs, and continued on in the direction of the road, happy about a new summit,

while the horseflies and the heat followed us all the way.

In the first days of February 2019, another good weather window arrived, our motivation was still intact, the hills were dry—all ideal for an attempt on Cerro Caballo (ca 1,900m, 46°33'32"S, 72°59'02"W), another unclimbed peak with a few previous attempts. I spoke with Francisco Croxatto, an explorer of the valley, and he told us about a route that would get us closest to the summit. I invited my friends Nicolas Valderrama and Jenifer Reyes (Colombia) on this project.

We began the hike on a cloudy day, ideal for walking, but the forest was brutal, comprised of prickly *taique* and *chaura* shrubs. After five hours we bivouacked just past the boundary of the undergrowth.

The following morning, we set off at 5 a.m. for the summit. We first had to ascend a stream-fed gully by some rock steps. Above this, a band of snow and 30m of fourth-class rock brought us closer to the north ridge. The main needle stood approximately 120m above. Jenifer led the first fifth-class pitch. We unroped for a section of fourth-class, and then I led another fifth-class pitch. Finally, an easy climb led us to the summit of Cerro Caballo by about 10:30 a.m. We stayed a good while on the summit, as it was another gift-like day, with a 360° view of nothing but mountains.

We downclimbed and made two rappels to get to our bivouac, then continued on to the road, but not without another hard battle in the forest, which made us question why we even like to journey in the mountains. Yet, the following day saw us happily drinking beers and planning our next peak.

– Javier Galleani Calderón, Chile, translated by Pam Ranger Roberts

Historical Notes on the Exploradores Valley: Until recently this area was extremely remote. The road connecting Puerto Río Tranquilo west to Bahía Exploradores was not finished until around 2010. Before this, any of the climbs described above would have required two to four days of approach. The teams that managed to access this area were good explorers but lacked the technical skills to tackle difficult climbs.

In 1938, when existing access to the Chilean settlements around Lago General Carrera was still extremely difficult, the explorer Augusto Grosse hypothesized that the Erasmo Icefield, north of the valley, was not connected to the main plateau to the south. The Exploradores Valley, he reasoned, might offer an ice-free opportunity to connect the Aysén province to the sea. It took Grosse three attempts and several months in the field to complete the crossing and show the feasibility of the route, a feat finally achieved in 1943, just a year before aerial surveys finally revealed the intricate geography of the Patagonian icefields.

After this, the valley wasn't visited by many mountaineers, perhaps because the high peak of San Valentín captured all their attention, and the best routes to reach this summit were via Laguna San Rafael and Río Leones, to the west and south. The only attempt to access San Valentín via the Exploradores was by the Chilean team of W. Millar, Sergio Saldivia, Juan Vargas, and Daniel Vidal in 1981. Their expedition ended in tragedy when Vidal died of hypothermia, and their purported ascent from the north is still doubted.

The most notable exploration in the area was done by Bill Stephenson (New Zealand) in 1979 and the Gino Buscaini and Silvia Metzeltin (Italy) in 2000. However, both of these expeditions reaching summits with only moderate technical difficulties.

The new road through Exploradores Valley gives easy access to some of the most amazing

Patagonian landscapes, and this has sparked a boom in tourism in the area. Mountaineers like Javier Galleani, working as guides for ice walks over the Exploradores Glacier, have brought more attention to the amazing unclimbed peaks of this area.

– Camilo Rada, Chile

Images



Ross Balharry traversing a snow slope on the east ridge of Cerro Chueco, with a view to the northeast. Cerro Redondo is the peak in the right foreground.



Jenifer Reyes leading on the north ridge of Cerro Caballo.



Nicolas Valderrama beneath the the north ridge of the needle-like Cerro Caballo.



Ross Balharry and Javier Galleani Calderón on the summit of Cerro Chueco at sunrise, with a view southwest to the northeast face of San Valentín.



Cerro Chueco with the first-ascent route up the east side shown.



An overview of the Exploradores Valley.



Cerro Pinuer with the route up its north side.



Map of the route followed to climb Cerro Chueco.

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