



Volcán Palpana, South Face

Chile, Atacama Desert

A few years ago, I took a picture of the south face of Volcán Palpana (6,023m). It was a distant photo in which no details were distinguished other than its verticality. This is something unusual in the Atacama Desert of northern Chile, where the high peaks are characterized by slopes of sand and stones rather than vertical rock or ice walls. I showed the photo to my friend Alejandro “Jimmy” Mora, and in March 2019 we decide to check it out.

We fly to Calama and acclimatize near San Pedro de Atacama. A couple of days later, we drive to the Ascotán salt flat, north of Calama, and then toward the northern slope of Palpana. To reach the elusive south face, we continue by truck along a precarious road to the northwest ridge and set up our first camp at 4,400m, where we leave the truck. The next day is a long walk along the west slope of the Volcáno. After several hours with a magnificent view of the desert, we finally have before us the objective, the south face, and we set up a second camp below at 4,900m.

The cold sunset illuminates our climbing options. The 1,000m face is divided into two sections: the first part of snow and ice couloirs, 40–60°, and approximately 700m tall, and, the second part, a vertical headwall, 300m tall, which crowns the south face of the Volcáno. The headwall is complex and crossed by ice cascades cut by overhangs, all at an elevation above 5,700m.

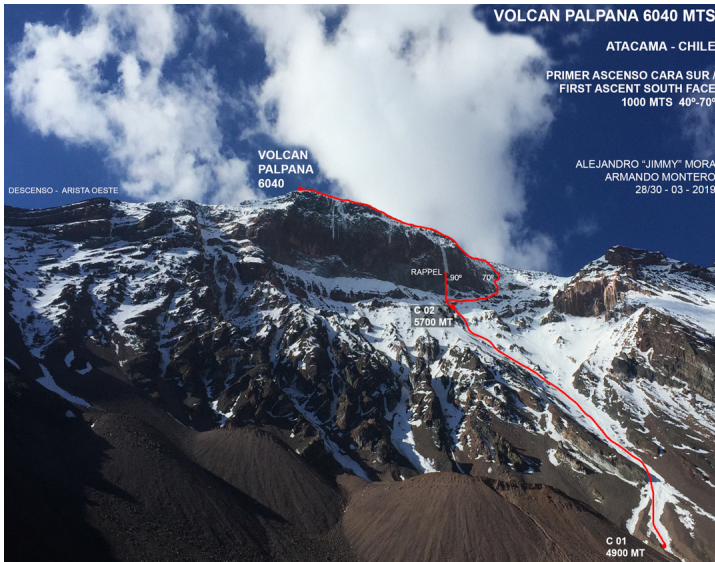
On March 28, we start climbing the couloir on the right side of the south face. As we gain height, the slope increases. Our plan is to sleep just below the headwall and a long ice waterfall. The day passes at a continuous pace, step by step, the mind wanders, memories drifting, the flow of consciousness begins. The sun hides as the altimeter reads 5,700m. We look for a terrace to put up our small tent. Ice ramps and vertical rock ridges surround us. Finally, we carve a terrace in the broken rock. It's cold. This desert freezes more deeply than my home mountains in Patagonia.

March 29 is summit day. At last, the sun rises. The rock on the headwall is compact and decomposed and does not offer many possibilities. The waterfall looks more vertical than it had from below. We go for the ice. With many overhanging sections, the progress is slow and difficult. The ice is fragile. Overhead, the huge stalactites and ice roofs remain in the air, levitating. The route is very difficult. Great stones suddenly fall from above. The hill helps us make the decision: We decide to rappel, get off the waterfall, and continue climbing another way.

We still have hours of light and climb unroped by 60–70° ice and snow ramps to the right of the headwall. The afternoon progresses, clouds form, and it starts to snow. Approaching the summit crater, the slope declines but the ridge plateau is covered with penitentes that slow our advance. The wind and cold increase as we cross the crater. At sunset, with the last light, we reach the summit. Happiness is short. To get down, we have to re-cross the crater, more than a kilometer in diameter, and descend slopes to the west. Several hours later, we arrive back at the truck, having made the first ascent of the south face of Palpana.

— Armando Montero, Chile

Images



A photo topo of the first ascent of the south face of Volcán Palpana (6,023m), showing the significant waterfall attempted by the climbers and their line of retreat to easier slopes on the right side.



The south face of Volcán Palpana (6,023m), in northern Chile's Atacama Desert.



Armando Montero (left) and Alejandro “Jimmy” Mora (right) below the upper headwall of the south face of Volcán Palpana (6,023m).



Alejandro “Jimmy” Mora attempting the waterfall ice on the upper headwall of the south face of Volcán Palpana (6,023m). The climbers retreated soon after this and climbed more moderate slopes to the right.

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