



Belgians' Banquet: Two New Routes and a First Free Ascent

Argentina, Southern Patagonia, Chaltén Massif

Nico Favresse and I came to El Chaltén this past season without a plan. Other climbers, seemingly discontent with this explanation, would ask, "Are you keeping it a secret?" It seems to be in vogue to have a big project and focus all of your energy on it. Nevertheless, it is natural to let your feeling guide you in the mountains. Very often, for Nico and myself, our best moments in the mountains arise from having no objective and no expectations. We go up to enjoy the moment, to make the next step, the next move—the top far from thought, without importance, and maybe beyond possibility.

On our first trip into the mountains, we left Rolo Garibotti's home with five potential climbs in mind. In the end, we did something else.

While walking the glacier, Nico spotted a nice, clean, and dry line on the east side of Aguja Standhardt. "We might as well try that!" As is often the case, we didn't analyze it too much. We had borrowed two single, inflatable G7 portaledges from our friend Roger Schali. With a weight under 4kg for two people, fly included, this gave us huge flexibility. We were relatively light but could set up camp pretty much anywhere. No need to find a ledge before nightfall.

Rock, paper, scissors. I set off on the first pitch. Harder than expected, an overhanging bulge followed by a difficult-to-protect traverse on a slab gained the crack system we were aiming for. With the weight of the full rack, my camera, and layers of clothes, I was unprepared for difficult climbing. I put up a good fight but was unable decipher the slab. A few falls later, I gained a ledge, built an anchor, and lowered back down to the ground to redpoint the pitch.

Maybe it doesn't make sense to redpoint the first pitch of an 800m wall without knowing what's above, but we like to play the free climbing game. With our lightweight portaledges and three days of food, our destination was unbound.

On the sixth pitch, Nico fought hard on an overhanging, wet crack. As he let out grunts of despair, I prepared myself to give a dynamic belay. It seemed certain he would fall. All of a sudden, he threw a blind dyno around an arête and, miraculously, reached a jug to hold on! Seconding, I was in total disbelief. How did he find the inspiration to jump out from such a blank position? "I was in total desperation," he answered. Another great pitch followed, with a dyno worthy of a modern, Olympic-style bouldering competition, which brought us to a great camp in the vertical void.

The next day was my birthday. For a present, Nico offered me a beautiful overhanging splitter crack! Unfortunately, halfway up, I found myself unable to commit to the 35m of fists and offwidth climbing with a single number 4. I guess that's what the age of 39 does to you. With apologies to Nico, I retreated and found a variation to bypass this incredible splitter.

We installed our portaledges underneath the classic Exocet chimney. I was ready for a little birthday party with a freeze-dried meal. "Can you pass me your lighter?" Nico asked me. "Where is your lighter?" I barked back at him. "It must be in the bottom of my bag," he answered. Suddenly, he pulled out a gluten-free cake, with candle lit, as he sang "Happy Birthday." I felt like a fool for snapping at him!

To avoid Exocet's daytime waterfall of melting ice, we got up in the middle of the night to climb the chimney to the summit. With only five ice screws, it was important to use them sparingly, and 10m above my last screw, I nearly took a large fall while extracting an ice axe from the ice. As I started to fall backward, I desperately stretched out my right arm. The axe hooked itself right back into the ice! "Did you just almost fall?" Nico asked me.

We were the first of the season to attempt the summit mushroom of Standhardt. Although it is not as big or difficult as the ones on Torre Egger or Cerro Torre, we have little to no experience on this vertical rime stuff. Manteling onto the final blob of slush, I wondered if the whole thing might fall off. "All-you-can-eat ice cream for my birthday!" I yelled.

We named the route El Flechazo ("cupid's arrow," 600m, 7b M3 60°; finishing on Exocet, it's 850m, 7b M3 WI5+). The name is an anti-missile, make love not war kind of thing, in response to the nearby Exocet and Tomahawk. However, some seem to think cupid's arrow has caused more damage than any missile in history.

Torre Egger and Aguja Standhardt from the southeast. (1) Titanic (Giarolli-Orlandi, 1987). (1a) MA's Vision (Harrington-Roberts, 2019, climbed free but not to summit). In 2020, MA's Vision was climbed again with a variation (blue line, Gratton-Harrington-Roberts), and the climbers summited via Titanic. (2) El Flechazo (Favresse-Villanueva, 2020) on the southeast pillar (see p.213). (3) Il Dado e' Tratto (Bernasconi-Bordella-Pasquetto, 2020), finishing on the north face (see p.226). Other routes not shown. Rolando Garibotti

Looking at some pictures, we had envisioned a new line on the south face of Aguja Poincenot. After the long approach, standing at the base on Col Susat, the cracks seemed closed and the line a lot less obvious. "We're not going to go very far with our two Peckers and one piton," Nico pointed out. We continued on to the closest and most obvious line, Historia Interminable, climbed in 1989 by a Spanish team. The route on the southwest face had not been repeated or free climbed.

The wall is steep and offers some large cracks. On one pitch, Nico engaged in a memorable two-hour battle with a 60m offwidth (6c). At the crux of this lead, with only one completely tipped out number 6 for protection, things got really spicy. Often, this peculiar style of climbing is difficult to comprehend. With dubious protection it's difficult to commit. Nico reached the end without a fall but not without his pants stained in blood. In the following weeks, he'd complain about his scabs sticking to his pants or sleeping bag and proudly insist on showing the state of his knees to anybody asking about our climb. I made sure to announce that his knees were proof of bad technique. To be fair, the war on the sharp end is different than seconding.

Without portaledges this time, there was pressure to find a bivouac ledge around nightfall. Luckily, we stumbled upon a beautiful snowy ledge and dug out our nest for the night. The next morning, we climbed a couple of new pitches before joining easier ground to the summit (800m, 6c). There was a small setback when we arrived on the western summit, which is a little lower. So we downclimbed a pitch and a half to scramble back up to the real top!

Generally, the approach from El Chaltén to an advanced base camp is about six to seven hours. At the beginning of our season, we chose Niponino in the Torre Valley for our advanced base. The downside of this strategy is that it's hard to adapt. With a short and windy weather window approaching, we wanted to climb an east face, protected from the wind. However, in the Torre Valley, the east faces were covered in rime. We spotted an obvious line on the east face of Poincenot, but it was not accessible from our base camp, and the only gear we had brought down to town were our climbing shoes and chalk bag.

Beggars Banquet on the east face of Aguja Poincenot, starting on the Whillans-Cochrane ramp.
Rolando Garibotti

The climbing community, though, is extremely generous. We soon managed to gather ropes, gear, harnesses, sleeping bags, stove, and a tent. I remarked, "It's great to know that I can come to El

Chaltén completely naked and find all the gear that I need to climb in the mountains!”

We started up the Whillans-Cochrane ramp on Poincenot and soon reached an evident line just left of Patagónicos Desesperados. We were coldly welcomed by wet and icy chimneys. A number 6 with crampon points welded onto it would have been handy protection! We almost always alternate leads, but it was music to my ears when Nico shared, “If there are any difficult offwidths, I might allow you to take the sharp end. You know, to spare my knees!” “Yes, for your knees!” I laughed. In the end, he managed to avoid some icy elevator shafts by venturing onto the slabs. On two occasions, we used an ice axe to mantel over icy, overhanging cracks.

The report's author, Sean Villanueva, with the Torre Group in the background on the southwest face of Aguja Poincenot.

Nico Favresse

It was windy, and few climbers managed to climb that day. Our decision was prescient: We were well protected from the infamous Patagonian gale. Nico built an anchor 5m below the summit, still protected, from which we prepared our assault to touch the summit. “It was a great climb, but I’m not sure if it will become an instant classic,” Nico declared, referring to all the wide, icy cracks. We rappelled Patagónicos Desesperados, reaching the glacier by nightfall. We called the route Beggars Banquet (400m, 7a), after a Rolling Stones album and to show our appreciation to generous friends, without whom we would never have been able to attempt this line.

– **Sean Villanueva, Belgium**

Images



Nico Favresse ascending a long, clean corner on El Flechazo on the southeast pillar of Aguja Standhardt.



Sean Villanueva ascends an overhanging crack on El Flechazo on the southeast pillar of Aguja Standhardt.



Nico Favresse on lead on El Flechazo on the southeast pillar of Aguja Standhardt.



Nico Favresse enjoys the inflatable portaledge on El Flechazo on the southeast pillar of Aguja Standhardt.



Sean Villanueva leads the Exocet exit on Aguja Standhardt.



Sean Villanueva climbs a steep flake on the southwest face of Aguja Poincenot.



Sean Villanueva with the Torre Group in the background on the southwest face of Aguja Poincenot.



Nico Favresse traversing across a wild flake system on the southwest face of Aguja Poincenot.



Sean Villanueva at a bivouac on the southwest face of Aguja Poincenot.



Sean Villanueva atop Aguja Poincenot after climbing a new free route on the southwest face.



Sean Villanueva approaches the east face of Aguja Poincenot.



Sean Villanueva climbs a steep corner on Beggars Banquet on the east face of Aguja Poincenot.



Nico Favresse leads up an intimidating looking corner system on Beggars Banquet on the east face of Aguja Poincenot.



Sean Villanueva leads a steep face on Beggars Banquet on the east face of Aguja Poincenot.



Beggars Banquet on the east face of Aguja Poincenot, starting on the Whillans-Cochrane ramp.



Torre Egger and Aguja Standhardt from the southeast. (1) Titanic (Giarolli-Orlandi, 1987). (1a) MA's Vision (Harrington-Roberts, 2019, climbed free but not to summit). In 2020, MA's Vision was climbed again with a variation (blue line, Gratton-Harrington-Roberts), and the climbers summited via Titanic. (2) El Flechazo (Favresse-Villanueva, 2020) on the southeast pillar (see p.213). (3) Il Dado e' Tratto (Bernasconi-Bordella-Pasquetto, 2020), finishing on the north face (see p.226). Other routes not shown.

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