



Cerro De Geer, First Ascent by Northwest Face

Chile, Aysén Region, Northern Patagonian Icefield

In the austral winter of 2016, I worked as a caretaker on a remote ranch in the Colonia Valley, outside of Cochrane. On bluebird days, I'd walk to the shores of Lago Colonia and look across at the Northern Patagonian Icefield. Cerro Arenales dominated the skyline, but in the distance, I could make out the white summits of the Cordón Aysén (Aysén Range) on the west side of the icefield, impossibly remote and tantalizingly little known.

At camp below Cerro De Geer on the morning of the summit push. Riley Rice
Inspired by those memories and by Camilo Rada's wonderful articles in AAJ 2018 on the icefield's climbing potential, I began lobbying potential climbing partners to come south. Riley Rice and Ciarán Willis, both fellow NOLS instructors, gamely answered the call. They arrived with about 400 pounds of equipment in Puerto Guadal on December 2, 2019, and we made final preparations for a roughly 25-day expedition to the Aysén Range.

Ciarán Willis skis below Cerro Mocho (right) and the south face of Cerro Fiero (left). Riley Rice Ciarán Willis with Cerro Cristal behind him. Riley Rice

On December 4, we traveled by jet boat up the Leones River and ferried loads to the shore of Lago Leones, which we then crossed by motorboat. It took four days of heavy carries to reach the flat "pancake" of the icefield itself, crossing the low pass between Cerro Cristal and Cerro Mocho. We were aided by perfect weather; sadly, this would be the only good weather of the trip.

The south face of Cerro Fiero. Riley Rice

Over the next seven days, we skied in whiteout conditions to reach the base of Cerro De Geer (2,520m), the tallest summit in the Aysén Range and our primary objective. The precipitation was nearly constant, though more bearable when it came as snow rather than rain. Temperatures hovered around freezing. One memorable night included a pounding rainstorm that sounded like thousands of drummers rehearsing on our tent. When it seemed impossible that it could rain any harder, a ferocious lightning storm arrived, and the rain seemed to double in strength. This was the first of three unusual lightning events we witnessed on the icefield.

Skiing up to the northwest face of Cerro De Geer for the first ascent of the peak. Riley Rice

By December 14, we were at the base of De Geer, glad to have completed our ten-day approach. The only glimmer of hope in the bleak weather forecast was a brief pause in precipitation during the predawn hours of December 16. We set alarms for midnight and, after several hours of excavating equipment from snow drifts, began to ski to the broad amphitheater that separates Cerro De Geer and Cerro Margarita. After days of opaque white vistas, it was thrilling to see De Geer and its neighboring peaks for the first time. Howling winds sent wild snow plumes from De Geer's summit ridge.

With conditions deteriorating rapidly, we cached our skis at the base of a rock rib on De Geer's northwest face and began climbing moderate snow slopes, which then steepened into ice. Two pitches of AI3, led by Riley, deposited us on the summit for the peak's first ascent. We could see only each other and the rime we stood on, and we did not linger. On our roped descent through the whiteout, we became acquainted with the interiors of several crevasses.

In stormy conditions below the rocky buttress on the northwest face of Cerro De Geer. Riley Rice
We had plenty of food remaining, not to mention our untouched rock climbing equipment, but the

forecast offered no hope. After two days of hunkering down, we skied eastward and, over the course of five long days, exited the icefield via the “Keyhole,” which uses the Nef Glacier to access the upper Soler Valley. The weather was unrelentingly wet. A notable low point involved getting benighted on a maze of dry glacier while crossing the Nef.

On December 22, we reached El Palomar, a remote outpost where we rendezvoused with the legendary gauchos Don Ramón and Don Luis, who took much of our equipment and horse-packed it to the shore of Lago Plomo. Meanwhile, we descended the swollen Soler River in packrafts. We made it to Puerto Guadal, on the shores of Lago General Carrera, for Christmas dinner. Though we found challenging conditions on the icefield, it is an enchanting place and there was much to be grateful for. I already look forward to going back.

– Ben Wilcox, USA

Images



An outline of the 20-day expedition to climb Cerro De Geer in the Northern Patagonian Icefield, approaching from the Leones Valley to the north and exiting via the Soler Valley to the south.



On the seven-day approach across the icefield to reach Cerro De Geer. The author, Ben Wilcox, writes, "The Northern Patagonian Icefield is, for me, the most enchanting stretch of ice and rock on the planet. I could not have asked for better expedition-mates to fulfill a long-standing dream with."



Ben Wilcox skiing west on the North Patagonian Icefield, with south face Cerro Torre Tobler in the background.



Ciarán Willis skis below Cerro Mocho (right) and the south face of Cerro Fiero (left).



Skiing east with the lower flanks of Cerro De Geer visible behind.



The south face of Cerro Fiero.



Ciarán Willis with Cerro Cristal behind him.



At camp below Cerro De Geer on the morning of the summit push.



Breaking camp below Cerro De Geer as the team prepares to ski across the icefield toward the Keyhole following a heavy snow.



Skiing up to the northwest face of Cerro De Geer for the first ascent of the peak.



In stormy conditions below the rocky butte on the northwest face of Cerro De Geer.



Looking east across the icefield to Cerro Mangiafuoco (far left rock spire), Cerro Largo (distant left peak), Cerro Cachet (center left), Cachet Oeste (center), And Cerro Nora.



The southern aspects of Cerro Torre Tobler (left), Cerro San Valentín (middle), and Cerro Fiero (right).

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