



AAC Publications

Chaltén Massif 2021–2022 Season Summary

Argentina, Southern Patagonia

The climate continues changing. Weather patterns in Patagonia are strongly influenced by the north-south location of the low-pressure belt surrounding Antarctica. From 1980 on, this belt has trended southward—more pronounced during the summer—which is leading to drier, warmer weather (see “Sunny Patagonia?” in AAJ 2018). Some of the changes—long stable weather windows—are welcome; others—regular rock and ice fall and serac collapses—are less desirable.

In the Chaltén Massif, some of the affected places were the southwest face of Poincenot, from which large blocks reached the Polacos camp, the glacial approach to the east side of Cerro Torre, swept several times by a serac, and the couloir below La Brecha on Cerro Chaltén. In Torres del Paine, the affected areas were the east face of Cerro Catedral, the southeast face of Torre Norte, and the north face of Cuerno Central.

Due to glacier recession, the approach to Niponino camp, below the Torres group, has become increasingly problematic. The original crossing on the northeast side is a lottery of sorts, involving more danger than most climbs. Several groups have turned around, others have taken falls, and some have had to rappel after getting stuck on the steep, hard mud. In February, Luka Krajnc and Luka Lindic explored the south side and found a safe, albeit longer way. Where the trail used to drop down to the glacier, they went up and right, then traversed horizontally before dropping straight down to the grassy meadow before the glacier. A month later, a group of volunteers marked the route, making it easy to follow.

What other lessons will the climbing community draw from this new climate landscape, and how will we adapt? In the Alps, climbers have been forced to shift objectives drastically. Climbs that previously were done in summer are now only done in winter or spring.

On Cerro Torre, Vitto Messini, Gabriel Tschurtschenthaler, and Matthias Wurzer climbed the Ragni Route on the west face of Cerro Torre in late December 2021. Theirs was the first ascent of the peak since February 2020. Notable about their climb is that Gabriel is legally blind. If light conditions are optimal, he can see the shapes of the peaks, but he can see no details. Harder than the climb itself was the approach, especially contouring around Lago Eléctrico. Earlier, the three climbed the Cochrane-Whillans Route on Aguja Poincenot. These are the first ascents by a blind person of both peaks. In late January 2022, Mario Heller, Pablo Pontoriero, and Roger Schaeli, climbed the Ragni on Cerro Torre and paraglided off. Fabian Buhl was the first person to climb and fly off the Torre, in 2020.

Over four days in late January 2022, Jeff and Pritti Wright climbed Aguja Standhardt, Punta Herron, and Torre Egger. Pritti's ascents are the first female ascent of Herron, the third of Torre Egger, and possibly the third of Standhardt. In addition, four all-female rope teams climbed the Northwest Ridge (Afanassieff Route) of Cerro Fitz Roy (in chronological order): Ramona Volken and Anne Flechsig (CH), Laura Tiefenthaler and Babsi Vigl (AT), Fanny Schmutz, Lise Billon and Camille Marot (FR), and Rocio Voumard and Delfi Fainguersch (AR). Prior to this, there had been only five all-female ascents ever. The first all-female ascent of the route was done by Milena Gomez and Dörte Pietron in 2010, followed by Cintia Percivati and Luciana Tessio (2012), Nastja Davidova and Tina Di Batista (2013), Laure Batoz and Caro North (2013), and Sol Giradorou, Camila Roldan, and Lilen Sosa (2016).

Ondrej Húserka and Jozef Kristoffy (Slovakia) opened a new route on the east face of Aguja

Desmochada, to the right of Circus Pets. They approached via the Poincenot couloir (700m, 3), a climb in its own right, which took them seven hours. Their 14-pitch route, Pain and Gain (500m, 7a+ C1), climbs a line on the right side of the face. A pitch below the summit, they improvised an open bivy, reaching the top on day two. The climbing is sustained, and pitch 11 required aid, but with dry conditions it might go free. They rappelled Circus Pets.

On the far left side of Aguja Saint-Exúpery's south face, Esteban Degregori, Horacio Gratton, and Pedro Odell (Argentina) climbed El Zorro y la Rosa (450m, 6c+ C1). They joined the Austrian route on the south spur and continued to the summit of Punta Cristina (700m in all). Around the corner, to the west, Kiff Alcocer and Jordon Griffier climbed four new pitches (5.11b C1), connecting Last Gringo Standing to the Brooks-Crouch, finishing on the Austrian route[8] .

In early January 2022, Boris Egorov (RU) and Lucas Moraes (BR) repeated the BASE jump off the GMHM exit on Mojon Rojo's west face. Lucas used a wingsuit, Boris did not. A few days later Egorov did the first BASE jump off Aguja Guillaumet, exiting from the summit block down the west face. [9]

In late February 2022, Jenny Abegg established the FKT for "La Vuelta al Hielo," the circumnavigation of the Chaltén Massif via the Southern Patagonia Icefield, which covers 55 miles with 10,000' of vertical gain. Twenty of those miles are on glaciated terrain, on the eastern edge of the "Ice Cap," following the approach commonly used to reach the base of the west side of Cerro Torre. Beyond the danger of solo-glacier travel, the biggest difficulty is navigating sections of very unstable moraine. Abegg completed the "closed, trails loop," counterclockwise, solo, and unsupported, in a blazing 15:29:58, beating the previous FKT by more than four hours. Twenty days earlier, Kaytlyn Gerbin and Fernanda Maciel, did a partial version of this traverse, the "U variation" (47 miles, 8,600'), supported by two porters, in an incredibly fast 13:15:11.

In late 2021, to the north of Río Eléctrico, Julián Casanova and Joaquín Paul skied several new lines, some with Pablo Torres Mash: the east faces of Cerros Milodón Norte (500m, 45°) and Central (400m, 50°), the east face of Cerro Neumeyer (500m, 50°) with one 30m rappel on the lower part, and the south face of Cerro 30 Aniversario (600m, 45°) with a 15m rappel.

There were three fatalities in the Chaltén Massif this season. One involved an avalanche, another massive falling debris, the third a lone falling rock. Two of the climbers were conscious after the accident and died alone; this is the kind of nightmarish situation that no one would wish for. These are the fourth and fifth such deaths in this massif in the last ten years. These brutal details are included here to underscore how serious it is to climb in a remote wilderness area where there is no professional rescue team with helicopter support. There were other close calls, some of which involved a lack of planning and strategy that was staggering. Some takeaways:

- Risk management protocols commonly used for ski-mountaineering are often ignored in summer alpinism. While one might not need to carry beacons and other avalanche equipment, after big snowfalls it's essential to assess the stability of a slope before getting on it, move one at the time from land anchor to land anchor, and consider turning around.
- Peaks that are crowned by huge, overhanging rime mushrooms should be considered off-limits when the freezing line is well above the summit.
- Plan your climbs based on the forecast, set a turnaround time, and respect it. If the weather is supposed to deteriorate on Thursday, at what time on Wednesday do you need to start descending? In 2019, three climbers died of exposure for pushing their luck against a serious forecast. This season five people came mighty close to suffering the same fate. Don't be fooled by the scarcity bias—the mountains are not going anywhere, and there will be another window.
- A communication device (inReach or VHF radio) can be crucial for speedy and affective response

during an emergency. (The frequencies and phone numbers to program on your device are on pataclimb.com. Share your contact info with other climbers in the vicinity of our route.) If possible, do not push the SOS button on your inReach; it results in cumbersome, delayed communication. Instead, contact the local authorities or friends directly.

- When an accident happens, give notice, but then do everything you can to carry out a self-rescue. Do not sit around and wait.

Before your trip, create an online folder with your personal information, including medical history and medications, rescue insurance card, insurance policy, emergency contacts, and contacts for your climbing partners, and share this folder with close friends or family. Pay for rescue insurance, and make sure it includes body recoveries. Although rescues here are done on a free, volunteer basis, insurance may pay for additional resources that could make a difference in your survival. Body recoveries are not done for free, and cost a minimum of \$10,000. Before climbing, register with the national park (free; link at pataclimb.com).

The local volunteer rescue team, the Comisión de Auxilio Fabio Stedile, continues to do a superb job, mobilizing people and resources to help those in need. This season two of their interventions were life-saving.

— **Rolando Garibotti**

Images



The new south-side traverse around Laguna Torre, an easier and safer route following glacier recession.



Pain and Gain on the east face of Aguja Desmochada. The route finishes along Puerta Blanca, which comes up from the icy saddle at right.



The south face of Aguja Saint-Exupéry, showing (1) Austriaca (1987) and (2) El Zorro y la Rosa (2022).

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