



AAC Publications

Pillar of the Rising Sun

An Epic New Route on Cerro Murallón in Southern Patagonia

Chamonix, February 2012. We are four climbers living in a two-room apartment: Lise, Jeremy (a.k.a. Djamel), Pedro, and me. François (a.k.a. Pompon) is always over at our place to play cards or talk about our mountain projects. We spend every free moment climbing together in the Massif du Mont Blanc.

The Cerro Murallón project is born from a conversation with Patagonian veteran Bruno Sourzac, who attempted the east face of the peak in 1999. When I return to the apartment with a photo of the southeast pillar, the team is super motivated. Such an amazing unclimbed line! From then on our daydreams are fed with visions of epic climbing on this sharp-edged pillar, floating in the clouds in a far, far-away land of mineral and ice.

Murallón towers above the Patagonian Ice Cap to the south of the well-traveled peaks of the Chaltén massif. Since 1961, five routes have been climbed on the mountain, and the true summit has been reached only two or three times. [See [Climbs and Expeditions for Cerro Murallón's climbing history.](#)]

At the beginning of November, after a summer of preparations, the team assembles in Calafate, Argentina. To reach the peak, we must ride a boat across Lago Argentina, and then trek from Refugio Upsala across the Upsala Glacier and up the Cono Glacier. Since we've brought about 300 kilograms of food and gear, this is quite complicated. Our budget is too small to hire porters, and we like the idea of autonomy. We have brought skis and sleds, hoping this will make the approach easier and faster, but we are quickly disillusioned. When we reach the glacier we realize that skiable snow is another 30 kilometers to the north, and in front of us is a maze of chaotic ice. We are going to have to adapt quickly. Instead of shuttling all our supplies to the mountain, we decide to leave two weeks of food on the east bank of the glacier, along with the portaledge and some other gear. With limited food, we won't be able to wait out a long storm and make a good attempt, but we decide to try anyway. If it doesn't work out, we'll come back for the rest of our food and equipment.

Ahead of us is a stretch of glacier 20 kilometers wide. The dips and surges of ice are huge and seem endless. Our haul bags weigh 35 kilograms, and they act as sails—not pushing us forward, but rather unbalancing us at precarious moments. Up, down, up again, across, don't fall here, maybe the next bridge to the left, dead-end, turn around. Our progress is very slow. So slow that at some point someone utters the thought that we might not even find a way to the other side. The possibility is quickly discarded as "not an option." We haven't even seen the wall yet!

After 13 hours of "onsight" navigation through this labyrinth of crevasses, Pedro sprains his ankle. We suddenly feel quite far from civilization. If someone gets badly hurt, it will be impossible to carry him back over the knife-edge ridges and

through this maze of ice. We decide to stop our frantic race toward the western shore and send scouts to find the easiest way. Finally there's a distant call of "land ahoy," and we manage to make our way safely to a crumbling moraine.

On November 13, five days after leaving Refugio Upsala, with aching feet and painful backs, we finally set foot in base camp. The blackened snow and chaos of rocks aren't very welcoming, but the view of

the pillar is incredible. A spine of rock 1,000 meters high, steep and compact, surges from the glacier. The photos we've seen do not live up to the reality. The prow progressively steepens so it seems as if the last third must be overhanging! We spend the next few hours looking through the binoculars and imagining lines. Only one possibility is evident: the very edge of the pillar, dividing the south face, bathed in the sun, from the east face, now in the shade. We can see three distinct sections on the route. The first third is not so steep and has lots of obvious cracks. The second part is steeper gray granite lined with thick veins of white quartz. A crack system seems to run straight through a section of overhangs, leading to the headwall. This last part fills us with doubt. We are here to free climb, and we can't seem to see any lines of weakness.

Two days of storm keep us up locked up in the tents. On the third day we wake to blue skies and finally get to put on climbing shoes. The 15th of November being my birthday, the team gracefully decides to let me go first. The cracks range from offwidth to finger size, and are clean-cut and continuous. We are very eager and make some stupid mistakes; someone drops a climbing shoe, and another forgets his helmet. Anticipating our descent, we hammer in a few pitons and bolts. We put up 300 meters of fixed lines (all the rope we have), and head back down.

Jimmy Heredia, our weatherman in El Chaltén, gives us bad news. The upcoming week will be terrible: lots of snow and wind. In any case, an alpine-style ascent seems too risky. We have to go back to get our gear and more food. From our vantage point on the wall, Lise was able to imagine an easier path through the glacier. With little weight, it takes us a single long day of 15 hours to reach the other side again. We retreat to the little Refugio Pascale, where we will rest for the next five days while the storm rages on Cerro Murallón.

We now fully understand the scale of our project: the long and complicated approach, the size and steepness of the wall, and most of all, the terrible weather that afflicts this peak. Murallón's location on the west side of the Southern Patagonian Ice Cap makes it very exposed to Pacific storms. Yet we are now totally engaged in climbing this wall. If we came with doubts, we now have none. During these five rest days, our conversations are mostly about the best strategies to adopt. We imagine every possible situation and debate for hours. Once on the wall, every minute will count! Jimmy finally announces possible good weather coming in another five days.

On November 23 we leave the hut with the portaledges and two more weeks of food. Now that we know the best way through the glacier, we plan on two days to return to base camp. But it's impossible to find the same path again, and it ends up taking three days. When we eventually get there, the snow cave has collapsed. Luckily our gear is buried under the snow and has not been carried away by the wind. We build a wall of snow to protect the tent and put up the portaledges on a big boulder. The coming storm pushes us to be quick, and soon enough the wind and rain come rushing in. The portaledges are slammed up and down, ripping the flies in many places. The tent barely survives.

We are quite doubtful of the forecast for good weather the next day, but at 10 a.m. on November 27 the sun comes out and the wind gradually weakens. By the time we pack up, walk to the wall, and haul our bags to our high point on the pillar, it's 4 a.m. We rest just half an hour and set off again. Good weather is too precious to sleep through! We climb another 150 meters that day. The itinerary is a bit more complicated, as we have to cross a section of overhangs and some black, chossy rock. We finally get to a snowy ledge 350 meters up, where we will set up our last camp under a black protrusion of rock that we call the "Chateau."

Lise, Pedro, and I had rested while Pompon and Djamel led the day before, so now we take over while Pompon and Djamel rest at the Chateau. This is frustrating for them, but they have been climbing 30 hours non-stop and need to recover. The rock is compact and gray, streaked with white veins of quartz and freckled with knobs of diorite. It's like a French pastry! Beautiful cracks lead to a blank slab. On our left a fine vein of quartz seems to traverse toward the south face. What providence, it connects with another crack system. I take a nice fall when a block the size of an oven breaks off,

ripping one of the ropes to the core. Apart from this incident, the next 300 meters are enjoyable, following vertical, clean cracks. We can't believe how well things are going! The climbing is sustained between 5.11b and 5.12b, and always well protected. We fix the 300 meters we have just climbed and head back to the Chateau.

Our satellite phone does not work anymore, so we have no information on the weather, on which the success of our expedition largely depends. We decide to move our camp to the other side of the Chateau, where it is better protected from storms coming from the west.

The next day we awake to calm blue skies. We hurriedly get up and start jumaring. Our arrival at the top of the ropes is synchronized with the arrival of damp snow showers and thick fog. But as long as the wind doesn't pick up, we can climb. This may be our last chance. We are 400 meters from the top.

Until now, we have been in doubt about the headwall, because we are not equipped for hard aid climbing. Our relief is huge as we realize the overhanging prow of orange granite is fractured from top to bottom by a perfect crack system. Stunningly, it runs up through a great dihedral and two overhangs. This line is amazing, without a doubt. Meters are gained, slowly but surely. The cracks are running with water, and the "screaming barfies" are almost constant. The leader free climbs, and the others jumar. Pedro does not understand the logic of climbing this way, but we are too cold to put on our wet climbing shoes, and it is now snowing hard. When night comes we are only three pitches from the top, but we are soaked, freezing, and a few centimeters of snow cover everything. We cannot risk spending the night outside. No need to discuss it, we are going down. So close...

We get back to our ledges at 5 a.m. It's now light again, and for the second time during this climb we eat supper and breakfast at the same time. We try to dry our clothes with the stove, a risky technique that leaves the portage in a flurry of feathers when one of us lets his sleeping bag get a bit too close to the stove.

On December 3, after 40 hours of storm, the sun comes out again and starts melting the snow from our portaledges. In a frenzy of activity, we get ready. We don't have much food left. At 1:30 p.m. we are at the top of the fixed ropes. As usual, the weather quickly changes; clouds come in and snowflakes fly. I joke about the "afternoon breeze" that will chase the clouds away, but we are all quite skeptical. Yet half an hour later, the sun is out again. And it will stay clear until we summit.

The cracks we climbed two days earlier are now drier and much more enjoyable. We free everything except a few icy meters that might go at 5.12d/13a. There's no time to work out the moves. By nightfall we have reached our previous high point. It's time to put on the crampons and take out the ice axes. Pompon leads a beautiful mixed pitch on a steep, run-out, ice-plastered corner. When we join him at the belay we are looking at a slightly overhanging wall, nicely decorated with two free-hanging icicles, 1,000 meters off deck. The ice is regularly showered by blasts of spindrift. It's very impressive and quite scary.

I decide to go have a look. After 15 meters and two good pro placements I'm under the spindrift. I put in a cam and engage the steep mixed wall leading to the ice. In the darkness it's hard to find good hooks. I back down to my last cam to look around and suddenly things accelerate. At the belay, Lise sees a snowball with a headlamp inside silently fly past,

and then she is yanked into the anchor. The rope is tense, and I'm dangling, head down, five meters below her. I've fallen at least 25 meters. A cam failed—maybe the crack was frozen. I'm fine, but after a quick discussion we decide to wait until dawn before giving it another try. We find a rock wedged in the ice and sit on it to wait for the sun. A foot-tapping, hand-clapping dance starts. It's cold, maybe -20 Celsius, and we are not equipped for such temperatures. We share our last food.

After three or four hours, the sun starts to rise and gives birth to stunning colors. We look up at the

ropes hanging from my high point and realize that during my nocturnal fall I cut one of them right to the core. As the sun's rays finally warm up our numb bodies we decide to give it another try. Pompon gears up and starts climbing. The pitch seems so improbable that he doesn't bother to take any ice screws. Little by little, he gains a few meters and discovers a passage that we did not see in the dark. A little tunnel between the ice and the rock allows him to bypass the first overhang. An icy slab gives way to a 20-meter, hanging icicle. The ice is aerated and very steep. He equalizes two bad cams and heads on. This will be his last protection until he reaches the belay 30 meters higher. We heave sighs of relief when we hear him yell that he's off belay.

A last, easy pitch brings us to the top of the pillar, 30 hours after we left the portaledges. We are teary-eyed and incredulous. We don't say much. We just look at each other, each understanding what the others are feeling. After an hour, it's time to go. The summit is perhaps half an hour's walk away, but we don't want to press our luck with the weather, and our goal was always to simply climb the pillar. We start rappelling, laughing and talking about the food we will eat when we get back.

When we are halfway down, my luck changes. As we pull the rope, a microwave-sized rock comes loose and crashes into my shoulder. I am stunned and my vision is blurry. When we reach the portaledges a few hours later, my speech is slurred. But after eating a bit, I seem to recover, to the relief of my friends.

On December 5 we touch ground again. We yell and scream as the tension drops. We still have a long way back, but we are safe and we have realized the project that has been nourishing our dreams for six months. The Pilar del sol Naciente stands proudly behind us.

During the next three days another storm comes in, and when we finally reach the Upsala hut, where we started out 32 days ago, we are soaked, exhausted, and hungry. We have lost about eight kilograms apiece. But tonight we will sleep in a dry place. How luxurious! On the boat back to Calafate, tourists watch wide-eyed as five dirty climbers ravage the pastries offered by the boat company, leaving nothing for them.

Patagonia has changed in the last years. More reliable forecasts and better weather seem to have gotten the better of the "expedition" spirit that still defined the Fitz Roy massif and nearby mountains when Eric Shipton first climbed on Cerro Murallón. But Patagonia still has so many unexplored and uncharted lands, waiting for adventurous souls. From the top of a mountain one sees so many other potential climbs. As one project ends, another hundred take form. And the adventure continues.

Summary

First ascent of the southeast pillar of Cerro Murallón (El Pilar del Sol Naciente, 1,000m, 7b A1 WI6 M6) on the Southern Patagonia Ice Cap, by Lise Billon, Pedro Angel Galan Diaz, François Poncet, Jeremy Stagnetto, and Jerome Sullivan, November 27–December 5, 2012. The route had 32 pitches, of which 30 were climbed all free; the aid sections totaled about 10 meters. The climbers placed 15 bolts, all for belay/rappel anchors, and they rappelled from the top of the pillar without going to the summit.

About the Author

French-American mountain guide Jerome Sullivan, 29, lives in Chamonix but tries to travel and climb as much as possible.

Images



Pedro Angel Galan Diaz pauses on the 22nd pitch (6c) of the southeast pillar, as the rock fades into the fog below. The team experienced a multitude of bad weather, which nearly destroyed their portaledge.



Cerro Murallón (2,656m) rises above the Southern Patagonia Ice Cap, along the Argentina-Chile frontier.



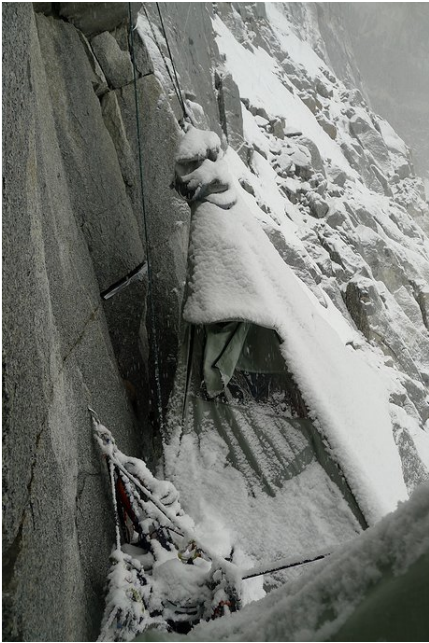
Topo for Pillar of the Rising Sun, southeast pillar of Cerro Murallón, Southern Patagonia.



The team in front of Cerro Murallón. The southeast spur is prominent.



The Upsala Glacier.



Stormy camp.



The amazing headwall corners.



Pitch 28, the third headwall corner pitch.



Looking down the Cono Glacier from Murallón.



Pitch 29 on the headwall.



The crux ice and mixed pitch near the top.

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