



AAC Publications

Cerro San Lorenzo, South Pillar (El Faro)

Chile – Argentina, Central Patagonia

Martin Elias, Francois Poncet (a.k.a. Ponpon), and I approached the east face of Cerro San Lorenzo (3,706m) for the second time in early October. (Martin and I made a previous attempt in 2017, with Sebastien Corret.) The three of us, longtime friends of many worldly adventures, were accompanied by a spiritual fourth: In Martin's pocket, a card given to him by his mother, depicted the Virgen de Lomos de Orios. None of us are believers, yet many mountaineers seem to cling to superstition and sentimental tokens—a pair of lucky ice axes, an amulet given by a friend—are often brought on a trip to the mountains. So, warmly nestled in Martin's coat pocket, we had our protector.

The path to Cerro San Lorenzo begins at Las Horquetas, a lonely hotel where Quentin Tarentino's *From Dusk Till Dawn* could have been shot. From there, the asphalt turns west and changes into a dusty estancia road. Here, for a fist full of dollars, the estancieros have bought huge parcels of land for their cattle and wildly endangered the local ecosystems in numerous ways. In the distance, Cerro San Lorenzo stands, as Doug Tompkins said, like an Argentine Everest, because of its shape and gigantic proportions. Thanks to Tompkins Conservation, entering Perito Moreno National Park means leaving this other Argentina behind and joining the thousands of guanaco, rabbit, puma, niandu, cachaña, pichu and other wildlife who live in this desert sanctuary.

Dense lenticulars stretch across the horizon in undulating waves, giving depth and immensity to the liquid-blue sky. Inky stains of blue and green dot the landscape, receptacles of water flowing from the rapidly receding glaciers. Upstream from Lago Belgrano, the flat-bedded glacial valley of Rio Lacteo is carved through colorful volcanic rock. The Puesto San Lorenzo, which will be our home for the next weeks, sits at the bend of the valley. Old wooden cart wheels and a cow skull nailed to the door are a window to the past.

In 2017, conditions were lacking for the unnamed wall between Cumbre Buscaini and Cumbre Central, and our attempt on Cumbre Central, in the middle of the east face, was thwarted by the usual bad weather, leaving us only a 12-hour window. A year later, as a high-pressure system approached, we gave more thought to those cornices and seracs atop the face and ruled it out, agreeing that mountains are many and life is short. Pilar Sur seemed like an attractive option, yet its rock is dangerous (see AAJ 2016 for previous attempts). We drifted toward the south. Hidden from us until then, a logical line appeared up the cold south face of Pilar Sur, which we had begun calling El Faro. Sweet virgin, Lomo de Orios, we finally had a plan! The majestic throne of San Lorenzo's huge east face begins on the north end with the striking South African Ridge. To the south, the wall extends like a barrier for 7.4km, 1,800m high at its apex. Absurd drips and curls appear, sculpted by the raging winds or maybe Dalí himself. Immense overhanging cornices and seracs serve as a crown, threatening what would otherwise be a mixed climbing paradise. At the southern terminus lies the huge and attractive 1,200m needle, Pilar Sur.

On October 18, we set out in a fresh blanket of snow brought by a raging four-day depression. Crossing Rio Lacteo proved vivifying in the early hours, and we soon reached the big glacial lake barring access to the east face. We decided to cross the semi-frozen "Laguna de los Tempanos." Icebergs floating on the lake had all been pushed together by wind allowing us to hazardously jump

from one to the other. Martin remarked, "Guys, we're doing a real shitty move here." Eventually, he broke through a plate of ice and went waist-deep into the water before crawling out. The virgin was looking after us.

We placed a camp a couple of hours after the lake at the foot of the tremendous east face, and we slept there that night. The next morning, after a lot of falling in waist-deep holes in the moraine, we reached the south slopes below Pilar Sur. It was 10 a.m. when we started climbing. The forecast had proposed a 48-hour window of southern high pressure, security until the next evening.

After some technical mixed climbing on good rock, we accessed a snow and ice ramp that we had spotted on our scouting trip. We unroped and quickly climbed the 500–600m ramp, which gave access to the steeper part of the face. At the end of the ramp, we roped up again and found poor snow conditions, bad rock, and a lack of ice. Night found us as I climbed the first meters of what turned out to be the crux of the route: 80m of vertical, snow-covered blocks of rock. Fixing rope on the first 30m of difficult drytooling, we rappelled down and chopped out some small ledges on an icy slope. At midnight, we were in our sleeping bags.

Cracking my eyelids the next morning, the scenery was stunning: Fitz Roy stood at the distant gates of the southern ice cap. After a quick game of rock, paper, scissors, Martin got lucky and geared up for the worst pitch of the route—possibly the worst in his life! The rock in this section involved a balanced blend of crumbling sand and oven-size blocks that seemed to fracture at the touch. "Un asco," as the locals say! The three-hour lead brought a constant shower of rocks. At one point, a rock hit our stove which promptly joined all the other distant, fallen rocks. Without a chance of water, we decided to trust in the Virgin.

More mixed terrain led to the col between the impossible-looking spire called Torrecilla and Pilar Sur. From here, we transitioned to the north side. Three pitches of rime-covered rock led us to the summit as night fell and clouds engulfed the mountains. The setting sun reflected in my companions' eyes and set alight a flame of folly.

The 12-hour descent lasted all night. Low on the face, Martin noticed something red in the snow. "Milagro!" he shouted. The stove, intact after a 400m fall, was restored to us! Dehydrated and hungry, we reached the foot of the wall at dawn on October 20.

We call our route La Milagrosa (1,200m, 6a M7 A3) and propose the name El Faro ("The Lighthouse") for the tower. It was not an especially nice route to climb with its bad, poorly protected rock; however, its unique setting in the heart of the giant San Lorenzo and my exceptional companions made this adventure excellent.

– Jérôme Sullivan, France

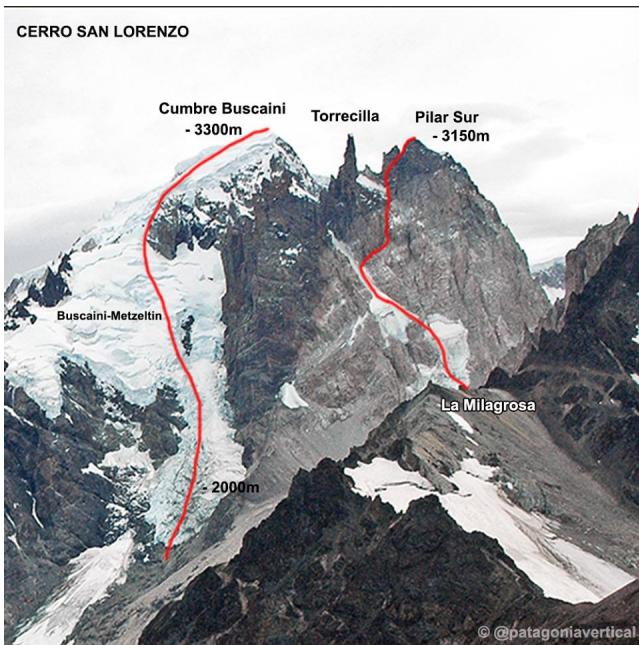
Images



From AAJ 2016: The south end of Cerro San Lorenzo (3,706m), showing (A) Aguja Antipasto and (1) Romance Explosion and previous attempts on (B) Pilar Sur: (2) 2013 Argentine attempt. (3) 2016 Ecuadorian attempt. (4) 2015 Slovenian route to the col. (C) Cumbre Buscaini. The left side of the unnamed wall is visible, with Cumbre Central out of view to the right.



From left to right: Aguja Antipasto, Pilar Sur, Cumbre Buscaini, and an unnamed wall between Cumbre Buscaini and Cumbre Central.



From Pataclimb.com: Pilar Sur from the south, showing the majority of the 2018 line La Milagrosa (1,200m, 6a M7 A3) on the south face; the final three pitches to the summit climbed the opposite north side.



The “throne” of Cerro San Lorenzo’s east face, with the South African Ridge on the far right and Pilar Sur on the far left.



Cerro San Lorenzo and the South African Ridge looking, as Doug Tompkins said, like an Argentine Everest.



Ephemeral drips on the unnamed wall between Cumbre Buscaini and Cumbre Central.



The east face of Cerro San Lorenzo with the prominent unnamed wall between Cumbre Buscaini (far left) and Cumbre Central (right).



In the shelter of Puesto San Lorenzo.



Approaching the south side of Pilar Sur with the spire Torrecilla also visible.



The hidden passage up the south side of Pilar Sur.



Martin Elias and Francois Poncet at the bivouac on the second morning.



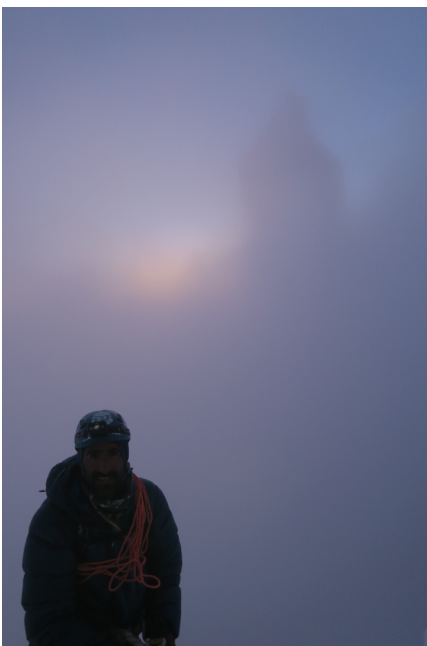
Jerome Sullivan at the bivy on the second morning, with the crux passage above.



Jerome Sullivan writes, "After a quick game of rock, paper, scissors, Martin got lucky and geared up for the worst pitch of the route—possibly the worst in his life! The rock in this section involved a balanced blend of crumbling sand and oven-size blocks that seemed to fracture at the touch."



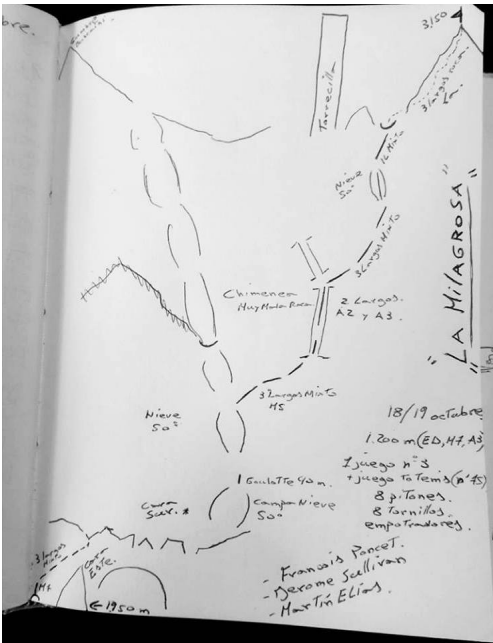
From left to right: Francois Poncet, Martin Elias and Jerome Sullivan. Unclimbed Torrecilla is in the background.



Martin Elias, ready to descend from Pilar Sur. Torrecilla is in the background.



Francois Poncet on the summit of Pilar Sur with the summit of Cerro San Lorenzo in the background. Jerome Sullivan writes, "You can read the madness in Ponpon's eyes."



Topo for the route La Milagrosa (1,200m, 6a M7 A3).

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