



AAC Publications

Riders on the Storm: Free Climbing on the Central Tower of Paine

Chile, Southern Patagonia, Torres del Paine

As if enchanted, the tower appeared to grow bigger the higher we climbed. At 4 a.m. on February 6, 2016, after three weeks of effort, I was jumaring to the final hard pitches on the east face of Torre Central. The monotonous movement allowed me to slip into a dreamlike state. A lone condor circled past, at one with the constant winds that carried him upward. His dark eyes started straight through me as though questioning my clumsiness, my separation from the world of wind and air, from the wild freedom he enjoyed. At once, joy flooded my being and I forgot the pain. I was at peace, dangling off a tiny rope 1,000 meters above the glacier—a guest with the rare privilege to exist in this beautiful and unforgiving place.

Ines, Thomas, and I reached the top of our fixed lines as the first golden rays hit the wall. Huddled on a small snow patch, we absorbed the power of the place, watching the fireball of the sun rise over the darkened plains. Then, without words, we slipped back into our routines. It was my lead, the 31st pitch, and our time was limited. I pulled on my tight rock shoes and peeled off my thick jacket and gloves. Within seconds, my fingers and toes lost all sensation. I simply had to trust that they would hold.

The day before, Ines and I both had come close to freeing this section, so we knew what to expect: a crack barely wide enough for the fingertips. We'd have to climb it quickly before the ice above us thawed. Beneath the tape, my hands were already torn, and as I twisted them into the narrow opening, my skin ripped open in new places. I buried my fingers deeper: I knew that executing these moves required me to block out everything else and to believe in myself entirely.

"Allez, allez, gib alles!" Thomas and Ines shouted, mixing French and German. Their energy merged into mine, and with every remnant of strength left in my exhausted body, I lunged toward a slight widening far above. To my surprise, my numb hand landed perfectly.

I did it! Now, don't blow it.... I tried to calm my breathing, to move with slow control and precision. A wave of elation swelled as I reached around the final lip and felt warm, dry rock. I heaved my body onto a ledge. Finally, I could let go. I gave an ecstatic cry. Twenty-five years had passed since Bernd Arnold and Kurt Albert first aided this crack, and I'd just free climbed it. Was this real? When Ines and Thomas joined me and we embraced, I felt like the happiest person in the universe.

Ahead rose a teetering stack of loose stones of every size, held in place by rapidly melting ice and snow. I admired Ines' experience as she switched between rock and ice without hesitation; she paused only to ponder our crumpled topo. For weeks we'd been confined to one side of the wall, always looking east over Argentina. On the summit, I could see for 360 degrees. Mountains stretched to the vanishing point.

The sun crept closer to the horizon and the air chilled. To save weight, we'd left our boots and warm jackets far below. Slowly, reluctantly, we coiled our ropes and gathered our jumbled gear to begin the long descent. I volunteered to go last, so I could enjoy every remaining second on the summit, with only the luminous blue sky above.

Mayan Smith-Gobat and Ines Papert (Germany) were the first women to climb Riders on the Storm

(1,300m, originally 5.12d A3) on the Central Tower of Paine, Chile, with support and photography from Thomas Senf (probably the fifth ascent overall). The two women freed all but four pitches, including a couple of former aid pitches (up to 7c+), and discovered a variation that might allow the full route's first free ascent. Smith-Gobat returned in 2017 with Brette Harrington (USA), hoping to complete this project, but poor conditions and storms prevented much progress. This story is adapted from an article in *Alpinist* 55, with permission.

Images



Ines Papert traversing a huge roof on Riders on the Storm, Central Tower of Paine.

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