



La Norte: A New Line Up the North Face of Cerro Torre, With a Tragic Conclusion

Argentina, Southern Patagonia

In 2013, Nicolas Benedetti and I attempted the north face of Cerro Torre for the first time. We did not have a clear strategy nor much information. We reached the north face via the American Torre Egger route [the 1976 route, which began up the east face of Cerro Torre], and managed to open six new pitches on the left side of the north face. We found a natural and very aesthetic line, which proved to be quite difficult and varied. We retreated due to high temperatures and unpromising weather ahead.

The next year we tried again, and this time Jorge Ackermann joined Nico and me. Conditions were challenging, with a lot of rime, which, combined with high temperatures and wind, forced us to retreat quite early, at the height of the English box. [This “box” is the ruin of a rigid bivouac shelter that was installed at the base of the prominent dihedral on the right side of the east face by English climbers in 1978.]

In the beginning of 2019, we were back at it again. Nico could not join us, so Corrado “Korra” Pesce took his place. With a better strategy, better conditions, and a strong team, Jorge, Korra, and I decided to follow a different line, Un Sogno Interrotto (Giarolli-Orlandi, 1998), in the lower third of the east face, and then managed to open three new pitches beyond our previous high point on the north face. We reached an obvious shoulder on the upper left edge, solving yet another crux. We bivouacked there, and in the early morning, when the wind increased—and since Korra had broken a finger in a fall the day before—we decided to retreat. In early 2020, Jorge, Korra, and I joined forces again, but bad conditions did not allow us to get even close to the peak.

With Jorge busy with life pursuits in the Northern Hemisphere, Korra and I met in Chaltén in mid-January 2022. Within days, a good weather window showed up in the forecast. There was no time to lose. The mountain conditions looked optimal, and the forecasted temperature was promising, being lower than in previous attempts. The weather window spanned January 25 to 28, so on the 24th we hiked to Noruegos, the advanced camp near the base. When we arrived, we were surprised to find the lower wall was snowier than expected, so we decided to wait an extra day to let some of the snow and ice clear off. To gain some time for the next day, we fixed the first three pitches.

On the 26th we woke up at 1:15 a.m., jumared those first pitches, and continued climbing. There was some ice and verglas in this section, so we were slower than expected. Around noon we reached our bivouac site, at the height of the English box but 50m to the right: a ledge with a large granite flake in the back. Leaving our bivouac gear there, we climbed one more pitch to the base of the north face and then fixed the first pitch on the face. This is the crux pitch and has a potential ledge fall, so we wanted to avoid doing it in the early morning.

On the 27th we woke at midnight and started moving at 1 a.m. We decided to leave our bivouac gear on the ledge and climb to the summit non-stop, planning to descend at night. Having led them on our two previous attempts, I took the first seven pitches. Despite the darkness and verglas on some of the cracks and slabs, I managed to move quickly, reaching the Burke-Proctor traverse in only six hours. [This left-to-right traverse was a key part of the 1981 British attempt on a long new route up the east and north faces.] I continued leading two more pitches to the base of an ice gully. Upon reaching that belay, I could see Italian climbers David Bacci, Matteo Della Bordella, and Matteo De Zaiacomo pop

onto the north face from the east end of the Burke-Proctor traverse; they had climbed the big corner on the east face, and after moving onto the north face, they followed our line. (See report [here](#).) Korra took over the lead, his skill set being well suited for the mixed terrain that lay ahead.

At 11 a.m. we reached our previous high point. From here up it was virgin terrain, but having studied the wall, we knew where to go. Korra climbed a crack, then negotiated rime, reaching a comfortable belay ledge. The next pitch looked amazing—parallel cracks splitting immaculate granite—and Korra progressed quickly.

The following pitch was a bit easier, navigating from right to left and passing under an intimidating mushroom to reach another comfortable ledge. From there Korra continued, wearing rock shoes initially and then switching to boots, crampons, and ice axes. The last pitch before joining the Ragni Route (west ridge) was a very nice 90° ice gully that deposited us at the base of the final rime mushroom on the ridge, which Korra dispatched in barely 20 minutes. At 5:20 p.m. we were both standing on the summit of Cerro Torre.

After so many attempts, so much effort, our dream had finally come to pass. We had completed a direct route up the longest portion of the imposing north face. We thought of Jorge and Nico, who had been with us on earlier attempts, and gave a loud cheer, beckoning them from afar.

At around 7 p.m. we started rappelling our route. At the small shoulder partway down, we decided to wait until around 10 p.m. for the temperature to drop and for the wall to stop dripping. Then we continued down to our bivouac, which we reached at 2 a.m. We were tired, so we stopped to hydrate and eat. We discussed continuing down, but changed our minds, deciding to get some rest. We covered our legs with our sleeping bag and dozed off....

— Tomás Aguiló, Argentina

Editor's Note: The conclusion of this story was prepared by Rolando Garibotti, after conversations with Tomás Aguiló.

At around 3:30 a.m., a few minutes after dozing off at their bivy site, 600m above the bottom of the east face, Korra and Tomy heard falling rocks. Within a few seconds, rocks started hitting their surroundings. Soon there was a massive crash. They both were thrown downward, their safety lines cut, but somehow they both stopped on small ledges 2m to 3m below the bivy ledge. They were in extreme pain. Tomy's upper left side was badly injured, and Korra could not move his lower limbs. A 4m-by-1.5m rock flake that had been behind them at the ledge—sheltering them—was gone. Although it might have protected them from a direct hit, it's also possible it was the flake rolling off that caused their injuries.

Their equipment had fallen down the steep wall or was scattered around them. Tomy could not find their inReach communicator. He started making an SOS signal with his headlamp. Several hours passed, and he never saw a reply. Close to daybreak, Tomy, who was able to move with great difficulty, found one crampon and put it on for added safety. Beneath some snow he discovered some food and the inReach. He typed several distress messages, but because of a weak satellite signal on the vertical face, they did not get sent. Nonetheless, Tomy encouraged Korra to maintain hope. Korra in turn encouraged him to go down. Tomy, who eventually was diagnosed with a broken collarbone, five broken ribs, and a punctured lung, thought he would be unable to descend. He could not move one hand and could barely move the other. Korra insisted, and at the same time expressed his intention to jump off; he refused to be secured to the wall.

When daybreak came, around 6:30 a.m., Tomy prepared to rappel with the 50m section of rope that remained. He grabbed as much gear as he was able to find. He held onto Korra's leg, crying one last good-bye; Korra egged him on, passed on his love for his daughter and partner, and they parted.

During Tomy's second rappel, the inReach messages finally got sent. Over the following 10 hours, Tomy made very slow downward progress, taking over an hour for each 20m rappel, and using a jumar and his leg to pull down the rope. At around 5 p.m. he reached one side of the Triangular Snowfield, 300m from the bottom. Exhausted, in pain, and out of gear, he decided to stop.

Fellow climbers had seen Tomy's distress signals around 5 a.m. and replied (Tomy did not see their signal), and they had notified authorities. At the Niponino camp below the Torres, climbers organized and without a clear plan headed toward the face. At the time, Tomy was making steady downward progress, and because of the danger caused by the day's high temperature and because they were unprepared to start climbing such a face, it was decided to wait. Meanwhile, rescuers carried a stretcher and other rescue gear from El Chaltén, and at 1:45 p.m. a helicopter arrived in town and was able to transport five rescuers to Niponino, the highest landing spot considered safe.

At around 6 p.m., with the temperature dropping, and having gathered the necessary equipment and a strong, capable team, four climbers started up the lower east face. They reached Tomy around 9:45 p.m. and helped him rappel back to the ground. In the meantime, ropes were fixed across the very broken, steep glacier. At 1:30 a.m., Tomy was lowered across the glacier to reach Noruegos, where he was switched to a rigid stretcher and lowered down the dangerous moraine toward Niponino. The weather worsened significantly, with wind gusts to 80 km/h. In spite of this, at 9 a.m., Tomy was flown from Niponino and eventually transported by ambulance to El Calafate. After several months he managed to recover from his physical injuries.

At least 70 people participated in the all-volunteer rescue, which was an incredible display of the good Samaritan ethos the local rescue team has cultivated over the last 20 years. A week after the accident, the weather provided a small opening and a drone was flown to establish the location of Korra's remains, but they could not be found. It is presumed he fell and lies in the glacier below.

Summary: The new line linking the lower east face of Cerro Torre with about 550m of new terrain on the north face, and finishing up the west ridge, is called La Norte (1,200m, 7a A2 90°).

Images



Cerro Torre from the northeast. (1) Brothers in Arms, climbed in 2022, follows the 1976 Torre Egger Route and El Arca de los Vientos on the lower east face, then climbs the huge dihedral on the right side of the face before joining La Norte to the top. (2) La Norte, starting with Un Sogno Interotto (1998) and the 1976 Torre Egger route and then climbing about 550 meters of new terrain on the north face.



Aerial photo of Cerro Torre's upper north face. (1) Brothers in Arms (2022), coming up the east face and then following (2) La Norte (2022), which joins the Ragni Route to reach the summit. (3) Burke-Proctor attempt (1981), ending just below the west ridge. (4) Directa de la Mentira (2015). (5) El Arca de los Vientos (2005), joining the Ragni Route to the top.



Korra Pesce climbing on the north face of Cerro Torre during the first ascent of La Norte.



Korra Pesce pauses below the upper pitches of La Norte on Cerro Torre.



Tomás Aguiló (left) and Korra Pesce during the first ascent of La Norte on Cerro Torre.



Corrado Pesce was a mountain guide who lived in Chamonix, France. He was a provocative thinker, full of unusual perspectives, with little tolerance for exaggeration, and was very determined, with endless passion for alpinism. As just one example, he had climbed the north face of the Grandes Jorasses via 15 different routes. Korra is survived by his daughter, Leïa, and his partner, Lucie.

Article Details

Author	Tomás Aguiló
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	219
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions