



AAC Publications

Double Traverse: Unsupported Crossing of the Patagonia Icefields

Chile, Northern and Southern Patagonia Icefields

Over 45 days between late October and mid-December 2022, Thomas Auvaro, Léo Billon, Didier Jourdain, Christophe Malangé, and Jordi Noguere—all members of the French Groupe Militaire de Haute Montagne (GMHM)—completed an unprecedented traverse, linking large portions of the Northern Patagonian Icefield (Campo de Hielo Norte) and Southern Patagonian Icefield (Campo de Hielo Sur), covering 600km of glaciated and, at times, jagged cordillera and paddling. The team spent two years planning and training for the trip, including a one-month reconnaissance in October 2021.

Jourdain, a captain of the GMHM, thought of trying this project a few years ago when he was flying north from Antarctica. The original idea dates to 1993 when Franco Dellatorre, Arturo Giovanoli, and Romolo Nottaris (all from Switzerland) crossed the northern icefield, starting from Laguna San Rafael and taking 14 days; Franco and Arturo then transferred by boat to Glaciar Jorge Montt (at the north end of the southern icefield). They reached Falla Reichert (a gap in the icefield), where they stopped due to an accident and then exited via Estancia Cristina.

There have been several crossings of the southern icefield. Over 98 days in late 1998 and early 1999, Pablo Besser, Rodrigo Fica, José Montt, and Mauricio Rojas (all from Chile) started via Glaciar Jorge Montt, reached Falla Reichert, and then continued south to exit via Glaciar Balmaceda, reaching the Seno de la Última Esperanza. They used one cache at Falla Reichert (AAJ 2000). Additionally, over 54 days between the end of August and the beginning of October 2003, Bo rge Ousland (Norway) and Thomas Ulrich (Switzerland) kayaked from Caleta Tortel to reach Glaciar Jorge Montt, traversed to Falla Reichert, and continued south, exiting via Glaciar Tyndall and reaching Puerto Natales by kayak (AAJ 2004).

The 2022 expedition started from Lago Leones, reaching the plateau of the northern icefield via the Cristal-Mocho col. In committing to do the traverse without resupply, they initially carried 100kg–105kg each. Thus, in the first few days, before they could pull sleds, they had to porter 25kg loads at a time. Their journey began with six days of good weather, which meant they were unable to kite-ski to Paso Colonial and the Cordón Aysén.

They exited the northern icefield via Glaciar Steffen, initially via the center, then past a couple of kilometers of sharp ice ridges to reach the left bank. This section took five days, requiring the team to carry three loads through the moraines and ice ridges. On day 14 of the expedition, they packrafted 20km down the Río Huemules to Fiordo Steffen and Canal Baker. Continuing with the packrafts, they then spent four days covering 100km of open water to the start of Glaciar Jorge Montt. They wore dry suits and flotation vests. On the coast near Glaciar Jorge Montt, they cached their water gear, which was later picked up by boat.

The route up Glaciar Jorge Montt was crucial to the success of the trip. This section is notorious for having taken as long as two weeks for other teams. Instead of ascending the left (west) bank, they ascended the right bank, taking a side valley to the east leading to a pass. In two days, they reached the first glacier and in another half day the glacial plateau. They were then able to kite-ski much of the northern part of the southern icefield.

Permit constraints forced the group to avoid the border area disputed with Argentina. This meant that after passing Volcán Lautaro, they headed west to Paso de los Cuatro Glaciares and Altiplano

Caupolicán, west of the Cordón Mariano Moreno. This was a far more complex route than if they had been able to stay on the east side. Due to high winds, after 27 days of moving, they took their first rest day, just before Paso Rokko (ca 2,100m).

They arrived at Falla Reichert after 32 days, on November 30. They managed to descend it in a single day, choosing the safest possible line (which is nonetheless exposed to massive seracs). For this, they set up several Tyrolean traverses for their sleds, which now weighed around 60kg. On the opposite side, not far from the summit of Cerro Bastion, they were caught by a fierce storm and decided to wait for better weather, since the descent from Bastion is technical and dangerous. For five days, they holed up in a snow cave while it raged outside.

On day 38, they started the ascent up Cerro Bastion, following a glacier with a steep ice section. Unfortunately, Malangé slipped 5m while traversing a sharp ice ridge, breaking his hip. The next morning, thanks to a four-hour weather window, a helicopter from the Chilean company DAP was able to pick him up. They estimated that a rescue by foot to the west, down to the sea, carrying Christophe in a makeshift stretcher, would have taken seven to ten days.

Though shaken, the team decided to continue, climbing to the summit of Cerro Bastion that very day. The next day, they waited for improved weather. On day 41, they realized they could not wait any longer. The descent was epic: There was no visibility to stay clear of dangerous seracs, their clothing was covered by two centimeters of rime, and they had to do some 120m rappels, overhanging at times, all while carrying 60kg sleds hanging from their harnesses.

The next day, they started late but made good progress toward Glaciar Grey, which they reached after a very long effort on day 43. By now, they had six days of food left. They were at 1,400m with 80km/h winds and a poor forecast ahead to reach Glaciar Tyndall and Glaciar Balmaceda. They decided to head out. On December 13, day 44, they worked their way along the left (east) bank of Glaciar Grey, negotiating a long section of sharp ice ridges. After 16 hours, they reached the hut below Garner Pass in Parque Nacional Torres del Paine, having traveled 365km across the southern icefield.

The next morning, they walked down to Lago de Grey, where they were picked up by boat. Within three or four days they were on their way home.

– Rolando Garibotti, with information from the participants

Gear and Food Notes

- The team used carbon fiber ski touring race boots, made by Pierre Gignoux, a small outfit in France, combined with Intuition liners and specially made gaiters.
- They used light racing skis from Ski Trab: Gara World Cup in 162cm length, with Plum Race R170 bindings.
- They used single-wall tents, with thicker poles than usual, that were designed specially for the trip but will be commercialized by the manufacturer, Samaya.
- The sleeping bags were Barbat 500 from the French brand Triple Zero, with an extra 100 grams of down (600 grams of 800-fill-power down in all). On top they added a Primaloft cover from the brand Carinthia.
- They took two 60m Petzl Rad Lines (6mm) and one 120m 5mm rope.

- They used MSR XGK stoves, taking 170ml of fuel per person per day (10.2 liters per person when they started, planning for 60 days), but because they were able to find quite a bit of water, they used less fuel than expected. This allowed them to often use warm bottles to dry their clothing or sleeping bags.
- They had two sleds each: a full size one and a front half piece. Initially, this allowed them to divide the load into two sleds; later they combined both pieces, side by side, into one sled, in such a way so they could not roll over while the skiers were kiting.
- They carried 60 days of food: 45 of them were 900 grams per day and offered 4,000 calories, while the remaining 15 were 500 grams per day and had only 2,000 calories. All of the skiers lost a lot of weight, some as many as eight kilos.

Images



Traversing the Campo de Hielo Norte (Northern Patagonian Icefield), with Cerro Gargantua prominent in the left background and Punta Pantagruel in right center.



Taking advantage of good weather for kite-skiing on the Southern Patagonian Icefield.



Paddling through the fjords en route to Glaciar Jorge Montt and the Campo de Hielo Sur.



Paddling through the fjords en route to Glaciar Jorge Montt and the Campo de Hielo Sur.



On the Southern Patagonian Icefield.



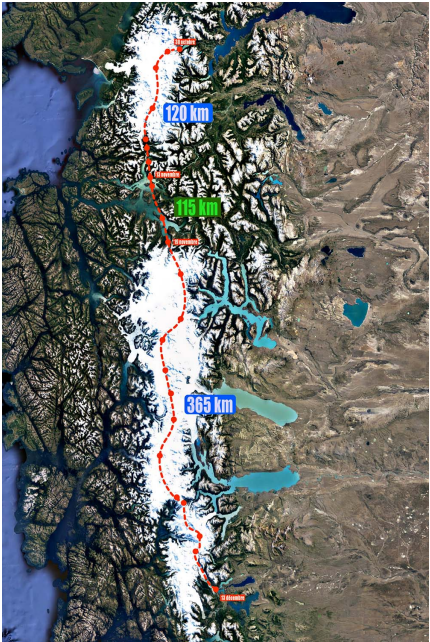
Descending from Cerro Bastion in a storm with 60-kilogram loads. Some of the rappels were up to 120 meters.



Descending Falla Reichert, a difficult gap in the icefield, in rough weather.



Camp after a storm.



Overview of the approximately 600km traverse of the Northern Patagonian Icefield (Campo de Hielo Norte) and Southern Patagonian Icefield (Campo de Hielo Sur).

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