



AAC Publications

Monte San Valentín, North Spur

Chile, Northern Patagonia, Aysén Region

The view across Lago General Carrera to Monte San Valentín, prominent in left center, with the north spur, in profile on the right, climbing about 3,000 meters to the northeast summit. The climbers traversed two kilometers to tag the highest point. Photo: Jim Donini Collection.

PROLOGUE

The Pyrenees and classic routes of the Alps, where Oriol and I live and work, are experiencing a massive rise in popularity, a reflection of our society's apparent need for immediate success, results over experiences, and "likes" over emotions, feelings, or acceptance of any kind of failure. Unfortunately, alpinism has been impregnated with this societal rot, and ideas or values like exploration, the unknown, doubt, risk, and the thrill of uncertainty before an ascent have been lost to a pseudo-alpinism full of beautiful photos on peaks where the weather is always good and the climbers have bright, super-clean outfits and smiles that look like they've come straight from the dentist.

Our mountains are becoming targets for commercial and consumerist exploitation, and, regrettably, we're allowing it. For this reason, our ascent of Monte San Valentín may have a certain value within the absurdity of the alpine, because it embodies the values of alpinism that are important to us: friendship, exploration, aesthetics, difficulty, and also, to some extent, a bit of failure, as you'll discover in the paragraphs that follow. — Martín Elías

THE ALLURE OF THE UNKNOWN

The first time I laid eyes on one of the Patagonian Icefields, an unusual sensation gripped me—I was standing at one of Earth's boundaries! From the summit of Aguja Standhardt, a cold desert stretched to the west, extending all the way to the Chilean fjords.

This striking image, coupled with the immediate sense that I felt of being at home the first time I set foot on Patagonian soil, fueled my annual escape from the Pyrenees to go and drink some maté in the southern reaches of the world. As I got to know the land's history, customs, and people, my friends transformed into an authentic family. I also began to grasp the huge scale of Patagonia. Just as I have mentally mapped the Pyrenees from east to west over two decades, I've spent 20 years attempting to navigate the north-south expanse of Patagonia. Exploring its summits, routes, and trails during the sporadic clear days, I've envisioned retracing the trails of the Tehuelche along the Andean mountains.

For many years, our discussions of Patagonian mountains have included the north face of Monte San Valentín, the highest summit in Patagonia, at the north end of the Northern Patagonian Icefield.

[Elevations given for San Valentín on maps and other sources range from 3,876m to 4,070m. It was measured with GPS at 4,032m in 2008; the most frequently cited elevation is 4,058m.] Thanks to photos and the invaluable tool called Google Earth, I gained insight into the complex terrain of this mountain. In recent seasons, I've organized my annual pilgrimage to the southern Andes with the aim of attempting the prominent north spur, which separates the Grosse Glacier from the Exploradores Glacier, providing direct access to the mountain's northern summit.

BLAME IT ON PERE

My initial journeys to Chilean Patagonia were fueled by the stories shared by my friend Pere Vilarasau, who was originally from Catalunya but now is one of Chile's leading climbers and guides. His efforts in establishing new routes and exploring the vast Patagonian terrain are undeniable. Over the last 15 years, he has transformed Villa Cerro Castillo in Aysén into a place where boredom is nonexistent, offering sport climbing and multi-pitch routes near town, along with new access routes and climbs in the Castillo and Avellano massifs.

During my first season in the Aysén region, in 2022, I climbed Cerro Castillo with my friends Ferran and Juanjo, and waking up at the summit gave us an incredible view of the north side of San Valentín. After sipping many matés, driving many kilometers of gravel roads, and navigating the Valdivian jungle, we believed we had discovered the best way to access the massive wall. However, an eagerly anticipated weather window never arrived.

In mid-October 2023, I found myself back in Aysén, where a massive amount of snow left over from winter prevented us from spotting any signs of spring, let alone good weather. A couple of sunny but cold days in early November provided Lucía Guichot and me with an opportunity to follow in Pere's footsteps. We opened a beautiful ice route with two friends on Punta Miller ([see report here](#)).

The following week saw the arrival of Martín Elías and Nieves Gil, followed by our friends Romi and Jonathan, completing the Iberian clan in Castillo. We enjoyed numerous sport climbs, asados, and parties while waiting for the good weather that just wasn't coming.

Finally, motivation prevailed over unfavorable conditions, and despite mechanical issues with our truck, Nieves, Lucía, and I set out to explore the approach to the Grosse Glacier. We left the road at 47 meters above sea level and spent five days hiking, getting soaked, and marveling at the dimensions of the place. We eventually set up a tent on the easternmost arm of the Grosse Glacier, a place we called Las Tripas del Infierno ("The Bowels of Hell"). The northeast summit of San Valentín was still more than 3,000 meters above us.

Nieves, Lucía, and I reassured ourselves that the loud avalanches falling day and night wouldn't reach our small tent in the middle of the glacier. We seized a clear day to ascend a little peak of almost 2,000 meters that provided a perfect lookout. From there we could observe the conditions on the north spur of San Valentín, choose the best line to take, and plan the timetable we would need to follow for an ascent.

As we returned to civilization, Martín and our friend Romi met us a couple of hours before we reached the car and treated us to beers and empanadas. What a pair!

THE WINDOW ARRIVES

Initially, we doubted the usefulness of our exploration, as it seemed we might run out of time for an attempt on San Valentín. However, on our way back to Villa Cerro Castillo, Martín was already considering changing his plane ticket, delaying his return home by a week to take advantage of a long-awaited window of excellent weather that seemed be arriving.

Our rope party would be Martín, Nico Tapia, and me. We started on December 4, accompanied on the first day of the approach by Richi Mansilla and Felipe Romero, who wanted to get to know the

Grosse Glacier and offered to help carry some of the weight. Our hike started in the rain, which persisted into the night and the next morning. (After all, this is one of the rainiest places on Earth.) By the evening

of the second day, the three of us found ourselves back on Las Tripas del Infierno, where we pitched our tent at 800 meters. That night was clear, and we could see the line ahead. However, we woke to light rain that didn't stop until we had surpassed the first 500 meters of the climb.

Above the bergschrund, on the west side of the spur, we climbed three mixed pitches up to M5/6a, followed by slopes up to 70° leading to a shoulder on the ridge, above 2,000 meters, that we called Collado del Mezzogiorno. (We named this simply because we arrived there at noon.) From here, we crossed over a hanging glacier to the steepest part of the ridge without any difficulties and bivouacked at around 2,500 meters.

The next day, five good mixed pitches of around M5 took us to ice slopes of 70° to 80° degrees and eventually an impressive 50-meter ice waterfall (WI5), the icing on the cake. We exited the face by an aesthetic 70° goulotte/ramp with an M5 shoulder.

Martín was eager to reach the main summit, so we had no choice but to walk two kilometers across the plateau to San Valentín's highest point. It was all joy at the top, with hugs and views of the Northern Patagonian Icefield, although a cold wind didn't allow us to enjoy the show for long.

The walk back to the northern summit and rappels down the ridge proceeded with minimal delays, and soon we were back at the big shoulder of Collado del Mezzogiorno. The decision to keep going down from there, despite the afternoon heat, wasn't the best. Soon after we left the collado, a small wet snow avalanche dragged me down for more than 150 meters. I was a bit bruised up, but with the help of my friends, we continued down for a little while until we decided to bivouac again.

The more dangerous part of the descent was still to come in the morning: more than 800 meters of downclimbing and five rappels that would take us back to the Grosse Glacier. Painkillers and the tension that this place imposed pushed my pain into the background until we reached the middle of Las Tripas and felt safe at last.

Relieved, happy, and now more aware of my injuries—which included a moderately severe sprain in my left ankle and a cracked vertebra—we contacted Philippe Reuter from Puerto Guadal, about 55km away, and he promised to come and pick me up at 7 p.m. in his little helicopter.

With this arrangement in place, Martín and Nico left their gear with me and set out toward the road at a brisk pace. The helicopter flight that followed was exhilarating! Before 10 p.m., we all were enjoying our first beers together.

SUMMARY: First ascent of the Arista Norte (north spur) of Monte San Valentín (ca 4,058m), by Oriol Baró (Catalunya), Martín Elías (Spain), and Nicolás Tapia (Chile), December 4–8, 2023. After a two-day approach from just above sea level, their route (WI5 M5) gained 3,000 meters from the bergschrund to the summit. The trio descended by the same route.

HISTORICAL NOTES: Although several parties have tried to reach the north spur of San Valentín, none had attempted the actual climb before now. In 2008, Jim Donini and Thom Engelbach explored the jungle approach from the Exploradores Glacier, to the northeast of the spur, reaching what Donini called Sound of Music Meadows, above the forest, and continuing to a glacier beyond. Donini returned the following year with Kelly Cordes and got a little farther. In 2016, Tad McCrea received an AAC grant for a plan to attempt this approach, climb the north ridge of San Valentín, descend the far side, and packraft out. Donini said this team got farther up the mountain than he had, but they were driven back by poor weather, again before starting the actual route.

The only other team known to have attempted San Valentín from the Grosse Glacier was a Chilean party in 1981. They climbed a long ridge to gain the head of the Reichert Glacier, which descends to the west from San Valentín, then reportedly climbed the steep west side of the peak to the top. One of the climbers died in a storm during the descent, and their climb has been disputed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Born in Catalunya in 1979 and based in the Pyrenees, Oriol Baró is an IFMGA guide and prolific exploratory climber, with many new routes in South America and Asia. His story was

translated from Spanish by Omar Gaytán.

Images



The upper ridge and headwall on San Valentín were reached in a long day of climbing from the cirque to the right. The bivouac is at approximately 2,500 meters, still about 1,500 meters below the top. The main summit lies two kilometers across a plateau beyond the northeast summit seen here.



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