



AAC Publications

Central Tower of Paine, Riders on the Storm, First Free Ascent

Chile, Southern Patagonia, Torres del Paine

In 1991, Germans Kurt Albert, Bernd Arnold, Norbert Ba tz, Peter Dittrich, and Wolfgang Gu llich made the first ascent of Riders on the Storm (1,300m, 7c A3). The 38-pitch rock line, which tracks up the center of the east face of Torre Central, was primarily climbed free, with only five aid pitches, including a long pendulum traverse (AAJ 1992).

In the three decades since, a completely free ascent of the line has been attempted by a number of teams, including Nicolas and Olivier Favresse, Mike Lecomte, and Seán Villanueva O'Driscoll (Belgium), who freed all but four pitches in 2006 and noted a possible free variation to avoid the pendulum. In 2016, Ines Papert (Germany), Mayan Smith-Gobat (New Zealand), and Thomas Senf (Switzerland) freed two of the original aid pitches and unlocked the potential five-pitch free variation after pitch 13; they summited, but rockfall and poor conditions prevented them from completing the free ascent (AAJ 2020). Smith-Gobat returned the following year with Brette Harrington (USA), documented by photographer Drew Smith (USA), but did not make any progress. Harrington, Jacopo Larcher (Italy), and Siebe Vanhee (Belgium) were similarly stymied in 2023.

Over three weeks in January- February 2024, the team of Vanhee, Nicolas Favresse, and Villanueva O'Driscoll, along with photographer Smith, finally made the route's complete free ascent, encountering difficulties up to 7c+ on the free variation, as well as no shortage of snow, ice, and wind upwards of 80 mph.

The 2024 team reached the summit in 18 days, swapping leads, with each team member (except Smith) following all pitches free. The free variation entails a downclimb followed by two pitches at 7b+ leading into the 7c+ crux—two side-by-side cracks running up to a roof—which was led by Vanhee. Another 7c crux is found before rejoining the original route. They reached pitch 26, the enormous Rosendach roof, by their sixth day, but cold and ice then paralyzed them below the roof for a week. When the weather cleared, they pushed ahead and—after another pause for two days due to heavy spindrift— summited on February 9.

The team said conditions, not technical difficulty, were the primary hurdle on this route, both in this effort and in previous ones. Their success, they said, came as a result of patience, luck, and the drive to take advantage of every possible weather window, no matter how small.

In 2017, the same trio freed the 1,200m El Regalo de Mwono, at 8a, on the east face of the Central Tower. Favresse, Villanueva O'Driscoll, and Ben Ditto freed the South African Route on the same formation in 2009.

— Owen Clarke, AAJ, with information from the climbing team

Images



Nico Favresse on pitch 16, part of the new free variation to Riders on the Storm (1,300m 7c+) on the east face of Torre Paine Central.



Siebe Vanhee leading pitch 17 during the first free ascent of Riders on the Storm (1,300m, 7c+) on the east face of the Central Tower of Paine. This pitch was the crux of a five-pitch variation to the original route.



Seán Villanueva-O'Driscoll stemming up the dihedral on pitch 18 of Riders on the Storm, where the free variation rejoins the original route.



Riders on the Storm (1,300m, 7c+) on the east face of Torre Paine Central.

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