

WHITE AND WINDY

The Southern Patagonian Icecap, 2006.

by Grant Dixon



We plodded into the whiteness, dragging heavily-laden orange plastic sleds behind, buffeted by the wind and often losing sight of each other, despite being only metres apart, as stronger gusts filled the surrounding air with windblown snow. As the wind was blowing straight into our faces, we were further blinded by our goggles becoming encrusted with snow within seconds of wiping them clear. Eventually accepting the silliness of proceeding, given the possibility of unseen crevasses lurking nearby, we camped. Getting the tents erected securely, without losing anything to the wind, required a systematic approach and then we collapsed inside. However, blowing snow repeatedly filled the depression between tent and our hastily-built snow block wall, partially burying the tent within a few hours. This required a "volunteer" to get fully dressed whilst inside the tent and having ensured that all orifices were sealed then to make a rapid exit when the tent door was briefly unzipped, in order to shovel snow outside.

British explorer Eric Shipton undertook several pioneering explorations of the Patagonian Andes 45 to 50 years ago, naming the region "Land of Tempest". How apt! We had no illusions about the likelihood of poor weather during our planned foray across the Southern Patagonian Icecap. But here we were pinned

down on the Marconi Glacier, our access route, yet to even set foot on the icecap. We had left the shelter of Southern Beech forest, where skeletal trees were not yet greened by spring, only two days before and would inhabit a realm of ice and rock for the next three weeks.

The climate of the Patagonian Andes, shared by Argentina and Chile, is dominated by their proximity to the sea and the prevailing moist westerly winds. Forced upward by the transverse mountains, these sometimes ferocious winds dump snow that ultimately feeds vast glaciers and encrusts the spire-like



peaks in rime. Southern Patagonia contains the most extensive area of glaciers outside the polar regions, including the 16,800 square kilometre Heilo Continental Sur. This "continental ice" is often called the Southern Patagonian Icecap, but in glaciological terms it is an "ice field", more a series of plateaux and large glaciers interrupted by various ranges than a Greenland-style icecap.

Less than two days after hauling our gear up the Marconi Glacier's steep headwall, and now well out on the icecap, we were again pinned down by a storm, wind and blowing snow roaring over our somewhat better-pitched tents below the bulk of 3393 metre Cerro Francisco Perito Moreno. Five days here had exhausted much of our reading material and thoughts of attempted ascents had faded when the need to move on was clinched. During a particularly wild night, one of the tents was completely buried and two of its poles broken as a result.

Even during the approach trek we were buffeted by the wind, the plastic sleds and skis strapped to our packs acting like big sails, and soaked by rain and sleet. The prospect of gliding across the gleaming white expanse of the icecap, blue sky above and laden sleds following obediently behind, was at that time an attractive vision. It was mostly a dream of course, but we did have a couple of days like this.

On the first such evening after our protracted storm, with the tent still under repair, I elected to sleep out. It was clear, cold and still. My compacted snow bench provided an extensive view westwards across Paso de los Cinco Glaciares (Pass of the Five Glaciers) and from the warmth of my sleeping bag I watched the salmon tones of dusk fade and stars progressively appear.

If Patagonia has a signature peak, Cerro Torre is it. This 3102 metre granite spire is the ultimate inaccessible pinnacle in form and has a climbing history featuring controversy, tragedy and no shortage of epics. Approaching the Circo de los Altares (Cirque of the Altars), Cerro Torre remained hidden until I rounded the final bluff and entered this west-facing valley. The peak towered against a deep blue sky, its 2000 metre west face rising directly from the glacier. Furthermore, Cerro Torre is only one of the spires and glacier-smoothed bluffs surrounding the cirque, an incredible place. The evening was completely clear, still and relatively warm. We stretched out, removing damp socks and boots to dry, and cooked dinner atop a large flat boulder beside which we'd camped. Above, Cerro Torre gradually changed colour until only its summit ice mushroom glowed pink.



The icecap is drained by large glaciers flowing westward to the sea and, to the east, calving into huge turquoise lakes that extend from the mountains well out into the dry Patagonian steppe. The largest of these glaciers is the 1000 square kilometre, east-flowing Veidma Glacier. We spent a couple of days traversing its upper reaches, snow cover gradually decreasing as we descended towards 1000 metres elevation and crossed its medial moraine. The moraine, manifest as prominent dark bands visible even on photographs from satellites, comprises ridges of boulders and gravely ice flanked by shallow melt water pools. We successfully negotiated the latter (plunging into water on skis is not to be recommended, although my companions managed that unpleasant feat several days later, where a small pool was covered by snow) and found a snowy corridor through the bouldery ridges.

The 3000 metre Cordon Mariano Moreno is one of several north-south ranges protruding from the icecap and forms something of a barrier to the worst of the westerly weather. As we skied parallel to its southern ramparts, climbing gradually towards the head of the Upsala Glacier, clouds capped the peaks and poured over the range. Having progressed from sky-filling cirrus clouds earlier, we suspected a change was imminent and by evening we were again shrouded in a snow storm. Three more days passed while we grappled with boredom and awaited an opportunity to tackle some ascents, but the mountains never reappeared.

The Upsala Glacier was our route off the icecap to Lago (lake) Argentino and boat transport back to civilisation. Despite its size (almost as large as the Viedma) the Upsala Glacier has displayed dramatic wasting and retreat, especially during the last forty years. Consequently its lower reaches have become very broken. After the snow cover ran out we continued on skis for a while but the glacier surface progressively became more hummocky, riven with small crevasses, and the ice very abrasive from frozen grit. Changing to crampons, we plodded on, still towing the sleds. Smaller chasms could usually be crossed by jumping, then continuing to run forward and jerking the sled across the gap. However, this didn't always work. Paul's sled slid into a narrow crevasse at one point, hanging free below and pinning him at the lip of the void until we assisted in extracting the sled.



We camped amongst ice ridges and deep blue crevasses, finally accepting that the sledding terrain had ended. Next morning it took some time to pack, cramming rucksacks to overflowing, then tying sleds, skis and anything else remaining to the outside. The resulting loads were bulky and extremely heavy. Consequently, we had to help each other on with our loads, before staggering off

towards the edge of the glacier, two kilometres away. It was a calm day, fortunately, as the loads had plenty of windage and a gust while traversing the narrow ice arêtes could have readily precipitated a plunge into the adjacent deep chasms.

Once off the glacier a series of bare ridges, only recently released from the ice themselves, barred the way. It was two more days of toil to cross these ridges and descend to Lago Argentino. Our mammoth loads sometimes made it difficult to fully appreciate the country we traversed, but it was certainly dramatic, and a fitting finale. Initially we traversed above the brilliantly blue Lago Azul, itself sandwiched between the orange rock and glacial ice. Later, above the aptly-named Cañòn de los Fosiles (fossil canyon), an in-your-face geology lesson, with the convoluted folding of rock beds of differing colours - yellow, brown, grey and black - spectacularly exposed, and in the canyon itself, pale belemnite fossils (cylindrical organisms of Jurassic age) dot the dark limestone pavement.

An extended foray onto the Southern Patagonian Icecap had been a dream since my first visit to the region, now more than twenty years ago. Satisfying as it was to finally undertake such a journey, it also underlined the vast scope for further exploration. Perhaps I'll be back again one day.

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