

TASTE THE PAINE

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Sitting upstairs at Café Andino in the Peruvian town of Huaraz, sipping Americanos and browsing climbing mags, I came across an article about Cerro Escudo. In 1994/5 three Americans had climbed a route up the east face of this colossal peak in the Torres del Paine; two other lines nearly reached the summit ridge but no one had climbed the steep eastern and northern aspects all the way to the summit. Seeing the pictures of the Americans in Gore-Tex suits and plastic boots, battling up this wall amid legendary Patagonian storms, I was hooked.

January 2007 saw me at the foot of Cerro Escudo on a reconnaissance trip. I scoped out a potential line to the left of the American route; steep, beautiful grey and golden granite, and more than 1200m high. Ten months later I was back.

From the beginning I was against the idea of hiring horses or porters, finding it more rewarding to bring in everything alone. The approach was a 24-mile round trip from where the minibus drops you off. I covered this 11 times, carrying gear, food, and fuel, for a total of more than 260 miles. But soon I was established at the base of the route, with a nice camp out on the middle of the glacier.

The climb started with a 150m slab that went pretty easily, mostly 5.6 and A2+, which brought me to a large, sloping snow ledge. Above that, the next 1000-plus metres would prove steep and very difficult. Most days, I would be lucky to climb a single long pitch, clean it, and prepare the rack and ropes for next day. On average the 65-70m leads took five to eight hours and often wind and snow forced me back to the portaledge. I had chosen to make this ascent starting in December, a bit earlier than most big climbs in the park, so I would experience snow rather than rain. I would stay dryer, but it also was a lot colder. The trade-off seemed good as the vast majority of the climb was on direct aid and it doesn't make such a big difference if it is cold.

I usually moved my portaledge camp every two pitches rather than fix long strings of rope to the ground, or between widely spaced portaledge camps. Camp-moving was the most nerve-racking part of the ascent. I had so much equipment and weight, it would take me the better part of a day. I used a Cliff Cabana ledge with a custom double-wall, triple-pole system and anchored this to three different points at all times. The updrafts on the wall were so severe they would lift even the haulbags, and I tied those down too. About half of my anchors used no bolts.

Four pitches of difficult and increasingly steep climbing brought me to the only natural ledge above the big snow ramp. The weather was quite unstable. At about 5pm I decided to move everything up to the three-foot by eight-foot ledge. All went well while I hauled the bags, but by the time I started to break down the portaledge below, the storm was building at an uncomfortable pace. I sat in the portaledge for five minutes, debating



68. The 1200m east face of Cerro Escudo showing routes and significant ascents: **1.** South-east couloir attempt (Banbolini-Jover 1996) halted 200m below ridge. **2.** *Taste The Paine* (VII 5.9 A4+ Turner 2008) continued to summit. **3.** *The Dream* (VII 5.10 A4+ Breemer-Jarrett-Santelices 1995) descending from ridge. **4.** *Via de los Invalidos* (6c A3 German Alpine Club 1994). **5.** *Et Si Le Soleil Ne Revenait Pas* (VI 5.10 A4 Nicolet-Zeiacker 1997). **6.** North Ridge (5.10 A2 Gore-Perkins 1992) 12 pitches of mixed climbing followed by 12 pitches on the north ridge, with a high point near the top of *The Dream*. (Dave Turner)

whether to move it. I had only two hours before nightfall, which at that season and latitude is 11.30pm. I went for it - and paid a price.

Almost as soon as I lowered out the kit on the haul line, it started to snow and the wind picked up. Even jumaring was difficult. At the ledge I fought to set up the Cabana; it's the biggest portaledge made and like a giant sail. Then came the crux - putting on the double rainflys. An expedition fly doesn't simply pull over the ledge like a tent fly. You have to open the fly and insert the ledge through the open door. If you don't get it just right, it won't fit together. Halfway through this stage, I heard an approaching gust that sounded to be ripping open the fabric of time. I had one second to grab the corner of the ledge and then I was airborne. The updraft picked up the portaledge and pulled me up with it until my feet were an honest two metres above the rock ledge. My daisies snapped up tight against the anchor, and the portaledge and I rode the wild wind for more than five seconds.



69. Cerro Escudo, showing Turner's east face and ridge route to the summit. (*Dave Turner*)

During the next two and a half days, 3m of snow fell as Patagonia tried its best to remove me from the wall. Having made it through this I was content that my bivvi system was sufficient for even the worst storms.

Pitch after pitch of long, thin cracks and seams presented themselves at just the right times. As one started to blank out, another was usually not far away. Mostly I would pendulum across just before I would have to drill. But, of course, sometimes rivets were needed; a time-consuming and mentally draining task, the dirty deed of big-wall climbing. Since most of the steep established routes I'd done on El Cap and other walls had 100 to 200 holes, I carried more than 200 rivets. But in the end I drilled only 80 lead holes on the climb. In 25 pitches, I averaged only three to four holes per pitch. Nothing really blank stood in my way – a miracle, actually.

Day eight on the wall underlined the loneliness of a long distance solo:

Wiping ice from my goggles, I could barely make out the glacier far below. I stepped higher in my aider, gaining a few inches onto the poor hook placement. 'Don't blow it now,' I thought. Just a little higher and ... pop! The hook went and I went with it. Gold and grey rock accelerated in front of my eyes as I involuntarily headed back toward the belay. I heard the reassuring but somewhat scary sound of nylon ripping apart as a screamer clipped to a beak ripped open. The beak popped and I kept falling, now swinging wildly. Another screamer activated on the next beak placement, and then I rattled to a halt.

My belay anchor was just below. I debated ducking into the portaledge

for a minute or two, to let a snow flurry pass and collect myself. Obviously it was going to be a long day. Instead I reached to the back of my harness for a jumar to go back up and finish the pitch. As I clipped the jumar to the rope, I noticed a squishy feeling inside my left glove. When I took it off, blood poured out. Apparently the hook had ripped open my knuckles when it sheared from the edge above. But the bleeding soon stopped, and I knew I could take care of it later; inside the portaledge I had pain meds and stitching materials, and later that night I could play doctor.

I started back up to finish the pitch, but after one move with the jumar the beak that had held my fall decided it had had enough, and I crashed down against the portaledge. Shocked, I glanced over to the belay anchor, half expecting to find a partner to whom I could yell, 'Did you see that?' But I was alone.

Once I had two pitches fixed above my highest hanging camp, I considered my summit strategy. I loaded my alpine pack with ice tools, crampons, butane stove, bivvi sack and other gear. On day 33, I made my way up the two fixed ropes, intending to fix one last hard aid pitch, which would get me to an easier ramp leading to the long summit ridge. Reaching the ramp at 11am, I reckoned enough time remained to climb its two pitches and get a peek at the ridge. Soon I was sitting astride a notch, one leg draped over the east side of the massif, and the other over the west. A huge vertical tower blocked my view ahead. It was still early, around 1pm, and I thought, 'Why not just go for it?' I had not brought food, or water but I was excited and the weather seemed to be holding. I tied a 70m lead line onto my back, clipped some pro to my harness, and started free soloing.

On the ridge, the rock turned from beautiful, solid granite to loose, fractured metamorphic rock. Occasionally I self-belayed short sections with a loop of rope clipped to protection. I climbed up or around a seemingly endless series of towers and gendarmes, until eventually there was nothing higher, and my dream had come true. No, I made it come true.

I found a small trickle of water in the back of a crack to sip from. Almost as quickly as I had fallen into the magical summit mindspace, I returned to the reality of getting down. By 11pm I was back in the ledge, stuffing my face with chocolate and hot drinks, with the iPod on full blast. The party didn't last long, but I remember waking up the next day with chocolate all over my face.

Remarkably the weather was still holding and with 1000m vertical metres to descend with 250lbs of gear, I started moving early. Eighteen hours later I was headed down the last rope on the last set of rappels. By this time the ropes were in bad condition, with numerous core shots and severe abrasions. About 60m above the glacier, one of the damaged sections passed through my specialized rappel system (a Gri-Gri feeding a double-karabinered ATC extended from the harness), and suddenly the rope seemed to break.

The damaged rope hit the overheated ATC, the sheath either broke or burned, and I plunged the scariest two metres of my life. As the sheath

stripped its way down the core, I started to smell burning nylon; the hot ATC was now beginning to burn through the core strands. I desperately reached to the back of my harness for my knife to cut away the heavy bags, but couldn't find it. So I just watched as the ATC burned its way into the core, until finally the device cooled sufficiently and stopped melting nylon. But now I was stuck. So much of the sheath had bunched below the ATC that I couldn't budge it. Eventually I found my knife and cut my belay loop from my harness, freeing myself from the ATC. I dropped a bit onto the Grigri, which was now clipped to my two tie-in points, and I pulled the handle as fast as I could and slid down the slab until my feet hit the glacier. I let out the biggest monkey call ever, and it echoed through the Valle del Silencio. Soon a few other climbers who had been watching me for weeks started to flash their headlamps and holler from their high camp above the other side of the glacier. What a moment!



70. Alone on the wall. (Dave Turner)

Unfortunately, that rope's core was so damaged it would have been stupid to go back up to retrieve my ropes; other climbers and park guards talked me out of trying. I have been beating myself up over leaving this junk on the mountain; it was the one flaw in an otherwise perfect ascent. Many people believe the weather will remove the ropes, but I have

a few rounds of drinks waiting for the next team (or soloist) who, when making the second ascent, cuts these ropes from the wall and piles them at the base for me to carry out.

Summary: An account of a first ascent to the summit of Cerro Escudo, Torres del Paine, southern Patagonia, Chile, solo by Dave Turner, December 2007-January 2008. *Taste The Paine*, VII 5.9 A4+. Turner spent 34 days on the 1200m wall, climbing it in 25 pitches, followed by the summit ridge with difficulties to 5.9.

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