not stop for long before heading down the standard route to a point where we could put on skis at 4750m. From here we made a swift return to camp in less than an hour.

We were looking forward to a quick descent to VBC but our difficulties were not over. We had not appreciated how hard it would be to lower the sleds down the fixed ropes from High Camp to Low Camp. Abseiling with the conjoined sleds was a tough challenge and it took three hours to get from 3500m to 2800m. Low Camp was enjoying the evening sun but the route to VBC was shrouded in low-lying mist. We had been anticipating a smooth ski down gentle slopes to VBC. Instead we endured a tense descent



74. Patrick Bird (left) and David Hamilton on the summit of Mt Shinn. *(David Hamilton)*

through fog with visibility of no more than a few metres. Only the faint marks left by the ski poles of a previous party and an occasional marker wand indicated the correct path. After a 13½ hour day we staggered into VBC to be welcomed by the ALE camp staff with a bottle of champagne and a hot dinner.

The trip had lasted 14 days. We had covered 90km, much of it above 4000m, and summited three of the highest peaks in Antarctica. Patrick added up the figures and concluded that we had climbed a total of 8125m and descended 6625m on skis. I reminded him of our conversation six months earlier. When I had invited Patrick to ski with me in the Vinson Massif he had said that it sounded like a lot of money to climb one mountain. I had replied 'you get yourself down there and I will make sure you get a chance to climb more than one mountain'. I had kept my side of the bargain and we both agreed that it had been a great trip.

**Summary:** An account of a ski mountaineering expedition in the Sentinel Range of Antarctica's Ellsworth Mountains by David Hamilton and Patrick Bird in January 2010, including ski ascents of Mt Vinson (4892m), Mt Shinn (4660m) and Mt Rutford (4477m).

DEREK BUCKLE

# Chile Relish

## The 2010 Alpine Club expedition to Chile

It was hot when we arrived in Santiago at the end of January, in marked contrast to the cold prevailing in the UK at the time. It was here that we met up with Carlos Bascou, our Chilean member who had worked hard on planning our itinerary. He and Mike Soldner had conceived this expedition some years previously and had eventually decided on exploration of the mountains surrounding Tupungato from a base in the upper reaches of the Rio Colorado. Both had visited this area once earlier as part of their preparation for the first Chilean expedition to Nanga Parbat in 2007. At

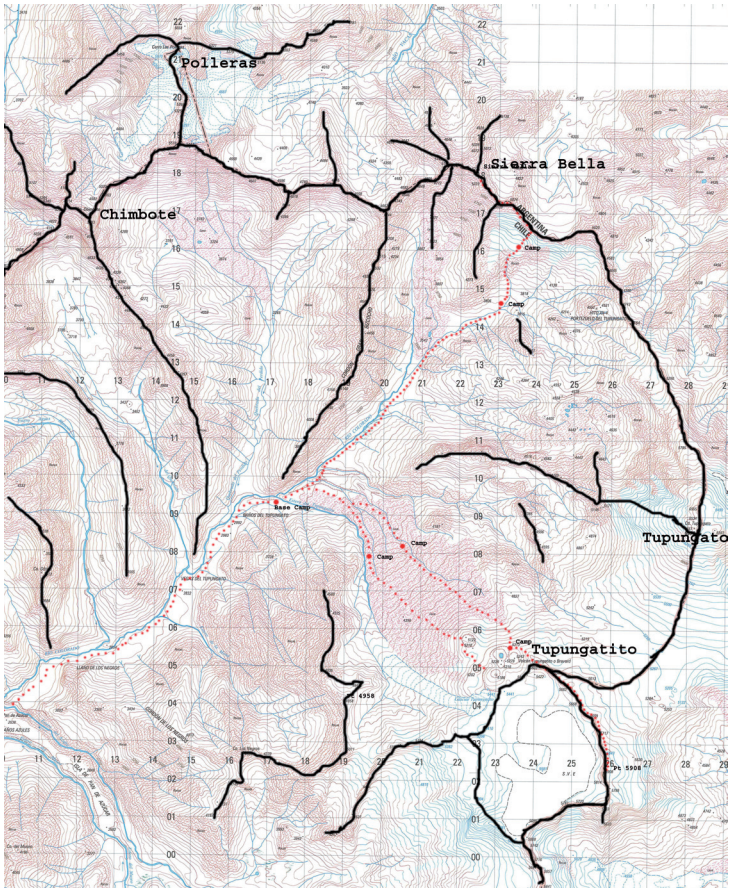


75. Alpenglow on Tupungato (6570m), one of the highest peaks of the Chilean Andes. (*Derek Buckle*)

6570m, Tupungato is one of the highest of the Andean peaks, yet it does not attract the hoards regularly seen on Aconcagua, its close neighbour and the highest mountain in South America, despite being only 70 km from Santiago. The relative remoteness of Tupungato compared with many other Chilean mountains undoubtedly accounts for some of its reduced popularity, but the need for access permits to the upper Colorado valley is a second factor. Permits are required from both the Chilean border control agency and the Alfalfel power plant harnessing the waters of the Rio Colorado. As Carlos had arranged these prior to our arrival in Chile our access to the valley was a remarkably smooth affair.

Suitably equipped with detailed maps and a vast quantity of food, we left

Santiago for the mountains on 2 February. A short drive of only two hours took us east from the city to the vast opencast mine at the road-head hamlet of Chacayal where we met with the *arrieros* and mules that were to take our loads over two days to a base camp at 3160m. Neither day was particularly arduous but a flood-damaged bridge over the Rio Azufre, a significant




76. Tupungato region with routes followed by various members of the Alpine Club expedition indicated.

tributary of the Colorado, necessitated an early horse-assisted river crossing that limited the distance travelled on the first day. By necessity therefore we made our first camp on a grassy plateau watered by a mineral spring. The scenery became typically volcanic and would become progressively more so as we gained height. Crossing the Azufre before noon the following day was an exciting affair, particularly for those unused to horse riding. My own very limited experience had already demonstrated that I had little control of horse behaviour and it was fortunate that the horses were roped





77. Kai Green negotiating densely packed *penitentes* on the descent from Sierra Bella. (*Derek Buckle*)

for the crossing, especially when even they stumbled in the fast-flowing muddy waters.

Safely transported across the Azufre, we generally followed the Colorado for a further six hours until a rightwards branch led to Baños del Tupungato where we sited base camp. Despite the dust, this camp afforded stupendous views of Rabicano (5334m), Chimbote (5493m) and Polleras (6024m) to the north-west in addition to Sierra Bella (5275m) and Tupungato (6570m) to the north-east and east respectively. Chimbote, the only major unclimbed peak in this panorama, was one that we had hoped to attempt until we learned that a number of competent Chilean parties had been defeated within 100m of the summit by steep, unconsolidated rock. We were later to experience some of this loose rock and it more than vindicated our decision to leave Chimbote well alone. Previously climbed Polleras on the other hand looked an attractive mountain, but earlier ascents had been made from the west and it was unclear how we could access this side of the mountain from where we were, bounded to the south as it was by a seemingly impregnable wall. Rabicano was too far away to



78. Derek Buckle and Kai Green approaching the south summit of Sierra Bella (5223m, Alpine D) (*Carlos Bascou*)



79. Sierra Bella (5275m), an early objective of the AC expedition. (*Derek Buckle*)



even be considered. Faced with this scenario we focused on Sierra Bella and one of the satellites of Tupungato called Tupungatito.

Having decided to attempt Sierra Bella first, Carlos, Kai, Dave and I continued up the main valley on 4 February following the well defined northerly *voie normale* to Tupungato until a side valley led leftwards at ~3700m. Here we left a stash before returning to BC. Unfortunately Dave was by now unwell so the following day only three of us returned to establish a camp on a level gravel patch immediately across the river from the stash. From here Kai and Carlos still had the energy to prospect a route up the steep, boulder-strewn northerly couloir as far as the glacier snout before turning in. The next day full loads were carried up the couloir from where we traversed rightwards over progressively larger *penitentes* until five hours later we reached a rounded boss a little below a major rock band at 4461m. The effort required to traverse closely-packed, 0.5 to 1.5m high *penitentes* while hampered by heavy packs necessitated that we camp here. Some two hours later, after collapsing the upper *penitentes* onto those lower down, we had a level platform on which to pitch the tent surrounded by a magnificent panorama comprising literally billions of *penitentes*. It seemed that the whole face on the Chilean side of the range comprised these intriguing ice pinnacles that are formed at higher altitudes in the Andes as a result of differential ablation.

We left camp at 4.15 the next morning, clambering over frozen *penitentes* in the dark until we crossed the bergshrund. From here the slope steepened to approximately 40 degrees for some 300m before we joined the frontier ridge. Fortunately this slope was free from significant *penitentes*, but they reasserted themselves with a vengeance on the ridge. After cresting a prominent snow dome, however, it was possible to cross a shallow col to a scree-lined outcrop that led in about 1km to the rocky south summit of Sierra Bella (5223m, Alpine D) that we reached after more than seven and a half hours. The final 10m involved delicate climbing on highly unstable, poorly protected ground, a phenomenon which appeared to be typical of most of the exposed rock in this area. The main summit, around 50m higher and a further 1km on, lay to our right over a narrow rocky arête that we estimated might take a further two hours to reach. Needless to say we did not attempt it.

On account of the *penitentes*, the return to top camp took almost as long as the ascent, exacerbated somewhat by our tired state. Scrambling down over unstable ice pinnacles more than a metre tall was a salutary experience that none of us was anxious to repeat. It was with some relief that we eventually stumbled back into camp too tired even to prepare a cooked meal. Sleep was not long in coming that night.

We returned all the way to BC the following day, pausing only to collect surplus gear from the lower camp. On arrival we learned that most parties had opted to climb Tupungatito, although by a variety of routes. Tim and Cherrie had climbed to the first caldera in a heroic two-day stint taking a route just left of the prominent north-west flowing glacier while others had



80. Chimbote (5493m), at the time of writing the only major unclimbed peak above the expedition's base camp at Baños del Tupungato. Steep, unconsolidated rock near the summit has proved a barrier. (*Derek Buckle*)

opted for a more northerly route that gave access to the col between Tupungatito and its more elevated parent. They were still in the process of establishing their high camp when we arrived back. Rather disappointed by the poor quality rock, John T made the decision to descend with Carlos that same evening and Tim and Cherrie left for the same reason the following day. Unfortunately, after making an ascent of the 4958m peak just south of the Tupungatito glacier, a slip resulted in Les losing his passport which meant that he and Paul also had to descend in order to arrange a replacement. Somewhat like the 'ten green bottles sitting on a wall,' the remaining group was now reduced to 10.

On 10 February Kai moved up to join Henry, Gemma, John R and Mike at the left hand camp on Tupungatito while Annabelle, Margaret, Pru, Dave and I made tracks for that nearer the glacier where Tim and Cherrie had stayed earlier. A prominent dead cow constituted an obvious way mark where the two tracks diverged. After consolidating these upper camps located at around 4200m, various parties climbed the miscellany of summits on Tupungatito. The complex topography of these active caldera made it difficult to ascertain the dominant summit of the volcano and it appeared that all parties reached different points. Because of their more northerly location, Gemma, Henry, Mike, Kai and John R followed the



northern crater rim past a prominent crater lake from where Kai and John R established a further camp on the ridge itself. Unhampered by *penitentes*, they then traversed the frontier ridge in a southerly direction to make the first ascent of a prominent 5908m peak (Alpine AD) that is as yet unnamed. The higher 5933m peak nearby unfortunately eluded them. We subsequently learned from a scientific team from the University of Maine that joined us later at BC that the uncharted region marked on the Chilean maps was in fact an icecap filling yet another crater from which the glacier emanated.

Dave and I meanwhile traversed the right-hand rim of the first sulphurous crater to a high point of 5388m (GPS reading) beside an even greater caldera. This crater gushed steam with the loudness of a jet engine while at the same time supporting numerous *penitentes*. Due to a later start, Annabelle, Margaret and Pru just failed to reach the crater rim, stopping a little short of 5000m, but it was a fine effort nonetheless.

Both camps returned to BC on Saturday the 13 February where the final drama was enacted by Pru. After a fall on large, unstable boulders she unfortunately tore a lateral knee ligament that reduced her progress to a painful plod. Thankfully, *arrieros* attached to the scientific team came to our assistance by transporting her back to BC on horseback. After one more day at BC, during which our own *arrieros* returned with mules, we returned to the road-head where Carlos was ready to ferry us back to Santiago, naturally stopping en route for beer and a meal at a traditional Chilean restaurant.

Thanks are due to Carlos Bascou and Mike Soldner for organising this unique expedition to a part of Chile rarely visited despite its closeness to the capital, Santiago.

**Participants:**
AC members: Carlos Bascou, Annabelle Barker, Derek Buckle, Margaret Clennett, Henry Day, Kai Green, Gemma Hagen, Paul Hudson, John Rushby, John Temple, Tim Whiteley, Dave Wynne-Jones.
Guests: Pru Cartwright, Mike Hale, Leslie Holbert, Cherrie Whiteley.

**Maps**
Chilean 1:50,000 maps; IGM 5-84-05-0061-00 Tupungato and IGM 5-04-05-0060-00 Rio Olivares.

**Summary**
In February 2010 sixteen AC members and their guests visited the Tupungato area of the Chilean Andes where various team members climbed Tupungatito and the south summit of Sierra Bella. In addition, probable first ascents were made of two peaks on the frontier ridge with Argentina, one of 4958m and the other of 5908m, both unnamed.

**Acknowledgements**
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