
WILL SIM

Avellano Tower



The climber, the gauchos, their horse and its luggage. (*John McCune*)

A few years ago, on a grey autumn's day in Llanberis, my friend John Crook came round. With no surprise to anyone who knows John, he came armed not only with enthusiasm to find any dry rock available in the penetrating drizzle but with a stock of fresh stories from far-flung adventures that had come to pass since we'd last seen each other. That evening, sat in my little house on Snowdon Street, John showed me hundreds of photos of exploratory climbing in the Andes and Patagonia that had me squirming on the sofa with jealousy and excitement.

Here he was hacking through jungle to remote, unclimbed crags, or else exploring huge dolerite columns, like a photo-shopped Giant's Causeway, climbing big Andean ice faces, and best of all, a vast, conical tower, more a big wall, in a remote, almost untouched range of Chilean Patagonia. The legendary Jim Donini had introduced John to this spectacular wilderness. John had been kicking his heels in El Chaltén waiting for a weather window with Dave Brown, who had been in contact with Jim. Did they fancy 'something a little different?' That was back in February 2014, and they made some brilliant first ascents, with and without Jim, including a 300m first ascent on the Tooth. It was what they saw across from them that made their jaws drop: a pristine wall of vast proportions, the east face of South Avellano Tower, which to their knowledge had never before been attempted.

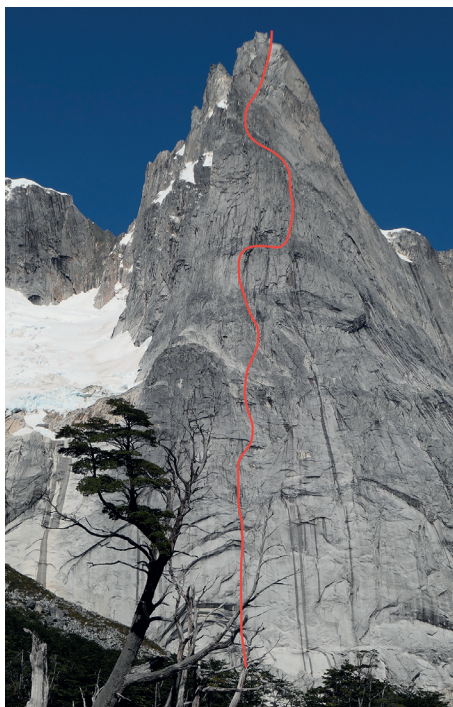


John McCune, John Crook, Paul Swail and Will Sim on the first ascent of the east face of South Avellano Tower (900m, E5 6a). (*Ruth Bevan*)

John and Dave set off in the middle of the night with food and water for two days, having scoped out a line of continuous-looking grooves leading to halfway ledges and felt optimistic. But the granite was like that on El Capitan, glacially polished and smoother than expected. Before long they were lowering to the ground. At dawn, they were already trying another groove, but were met with the same fate. A third attempt got them established on the face but it was a circuitous route and they made little vertical headway. Back on the ground, thwarted once again, they spent an afternoon starting up at the monolith that had beaten them back, contemplating their failure: they were going to need reinforcements.

John and Dave were back in December, just ten months later, with Andy Reeve and Will Harris, to try a direct line up the centre of the face. This more substantial effort required a new approach to Avellano, across the huge, rough Lago General Carrera in a small, overloaded boat. The gauchos took their gear 30km up the beautiful Avellano valley from the south-east and the team then made multiple load carries through glacial rivers, marsh, forest and moraine to the base of the wall.

Things started well, and they made good progress up this central line, but their attempt was thwarted by a cold storm that blanketed the wall in snow that took too long to clear. Returning to collect their gear, they found their



Line of the first ascent from base camp.
(John McCune)



Will Sim following high on the wall.
(John McCune)

first 80m of fixed rope gone. A car-sized flake had peeled off from high on the wall, slicing through the rope and leaving blocks of granite strewn over ledges below. Dave made a heroic lead to reach the lines above and so allow the recovery of the team's gear. After that, Avellano was laid to rest for a while, although an American team did make an attempt in January 2015.

Three years later, in January 2018, John was returning for his third attempt and I was going with him, along with John McCune, Paul Swail and Ruth Bevan. Jim Donini and his wife Angela offered wonderful hospitality and although the weather in December had been poor, conditions slowly improved the closer we got to the wall. It took us ten days from arriving in Chile to reach our base camp and during the rough boat ride across Lago General Carrera we became separated, with John McCune, Paul and myself on one side of South America's second-largest lake and John Crook and Ruth on the other with the gear, unable to cross back due to high winds and tall waves. Thankfully a local gaucho gave us shelter until next morning.

Having regrouped on the north shore of the lake, we trekked up to the mountain over the next four or five days with our new friend Luis the gaucho and his horses. For the last two or three days we needed to help relay loads on stretches that were too rough for the animals. The weather was sill cloudy and we didn't get a chance to see the wall until we were nearly at base camp.



Paul Swail low on the face of South Avellano Tower (900m, E5 6a) during the first-ascent push. The summit of the tower can be seen far above. (*John McCune*)

This proved to be an idyllic spot, with running water and plenty of wood. John McCune and I built a handy lean-to for extra comfort and sheltered cooking. And while we were making ourselves comfortable, the wall was finally drying off sufficiently for us to climb. We made quick progress on John's original line, setting ropes to the halfway ledges over the course of two days. Poor weather threatened to arrive by the end of the following day, so we made the decision to go for it. We reached the top of the fixed lines by daybreak and attacked the headwall in two pairs.

The rock became more varied, with some loose flakes and areas of exfoliating rock. There was some high-quality climbing and amazing positions, particularly where we had to avoid a big wet corner for a couple of pitches. John followed steep and strenuous cracks up the left wall of this to a ledge, before looking up in dismay at what appeared to be a dead-end. Paul Swail then set off up a wild-looking groove, overcoming increasingly unlikely terrain. But after managing to place a peg in a very awkward position, he made steep moves through a roof on chicken heads to an outrageously exposed traverse that brought us back to the top of the corner. From here I made a long, bold traverse back right over compact black rock to reach a viable-looking groove. An intricate pitch led to some burly lay-backing around a roof, and before long we were pulling onto the north face, where easy ground led to a final ramp. This provided a great finale, with 200m of high-quality but straightforward climbing. Almost to our disbelief we had found a way up the wall and topped out that afternoon at around 5pm, as the famous Patagonia wind swept in. The rain started as we were halfway down. Ruth traced our progress from base camp with radio contact throughout and had made us pumpkin curry and cheesecake for our return.



Paul Swail pulling through the roof on the crux pitch. (*John McCune*)

Our route was a thousand metres and every pitch had gone free: E5 seems about right, give or take a grade or two. We were all nicely shocked that our main objective had been achieved after only three days' effort: we had half-expected it to take us 10, taking into account the bad weather, and had come equipped with portaledge to give us options. I think the fact that we knocked off the South Tower so fast was partly due to the luck of the weather changing for the better just when we were ready to launch. But it was also due to the groundwork that John, Will Harris, Dave Brown and Andy Reeve had made in the previous attempts. Thanks boys.

With two weeks of food left in base camp and spirits high, it was nice to know that anything else we climbed was a bonus, yet there were plenty of plums for the picking. Once our bodies had recovered from the South Tower, myself, John and Paul made the first ascent of a beautiful route on an attractive mountain we came to know as Cerro Square Face. The climax of this fantastic route was a dreamy, splitter crack that felt about E5 6b and seemed too good to be true. We strolled around on the windless summit for a few minutes in Patagonian heaven before beginning the descent.

A few days after that John, Paul and myself made another first ascent, a classic alpine spur sporting a worrying final tower, which we had heard rumours of being attempted previously by an American team. Sure enough, after several hundred metres of what felt like serious ridge traversing, the final tower reared above us. I was dealt the sharp end and after some scary steep fist jamming through more death-blocks than I care to admit, I rolled on to the summit after completing yet another fantastic, virgin line. We called it the Mestizo ridge.

Our last climbing of the trip was spent trying to repeat our own route up the South Tower's east face, but going more direct in a section where we'd spotted a crack through binoculars. Unfortunately it wasn't to be as the



After finishing the expedition at the Avellano Towers, the team moved on to the dolerite towers of Cerro Colorado just south-east of Lago General Carrera. (John McCune)



Ruth Bevan climbing at Cerro Colorado. (John McCune)

heavens opened on us halfway up the wall. It was the only day of the trip that the forecast was wrong, but we couldn't complain given the trip we had had. We reversed the load carrying of the approach and met up with Luis and his horses for the walk out to the lake. Hunger had well and truly set in now that we had exhausted nearly all of our provisions, but we didn't care, we'd just had three weeks of dream climbing in a barely explored Patagonian paradise.

Summary

First ascent of east face of South Avellano Tower (900m, E5 6a), *Last Gaucho* (E5 6b) on Cerro Square Face, north-east of main towers, and the high-quality *Chicken Run* (600m, E2) on an unnamed formation adjacent to Square Face.