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# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

## Madidi

Bolivia's Spectacular New National Park

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In the dead of winter at the bottom  
of the world, four climbers race  
storms up an unforgiving mountain.

# Stone Cold Ascent

Swiss alpinist Stefan Siegrist labors near the base of Argentina's Cerro Torre. No one has climbed its west face in winter.



“S  
UPERMOUSE, SOON YOU WILL BE A DEAD MOUSE!” sings David Fasel at the top of his lungs, in the style of the heavy-metal bands he so admires. A winter storm continues to rage outside our crude hut. Three nights ago the mouse in question ravaged David’s last pouch of tobacco, and he declared war. Last night he finally killed the mouse, and still in the flush of victory

he roars his tuneless battle song again. From a detached perspective it sounds moronic, but out here on the edge of the Southern Patagonian Ice Field every time I hear the refrain I collapse with laughter.

To me, laughter is as important as food to the success of an expedition, but among us it can take ten minutes to bring off a simple piece of adolescent humor. We have a language problem. David, Thomas Ulrich, and Stefan Siegrist come from Switzerland and speak Swiss-German and simple English. I'm from California and have only a few stock phrases of Swiss-German. We're in the depths of the Patagonian Andes, trying to pull off the first winter ascent of the treacherous west face of Cerro Torre, and at times communication is a real muddle.

A week ago during our first attempt, on



**On a nine-day haul to the base of Cerro Torre, one of the packhorses falls through a frozen river. It is pulled onto the ice only minutes from death. The team saves the animal with frantic body massaging.**

what I interpreted as David's explicit, face-to-face instructions, I unfixed a rope and clipped it to my harness in order to drag the rope to the next higher anchor. Moments later I was yelling, "Stop! Stop!" as I felt David begin to commit his weight to the newly unfixed (and unsafe) rope. Disaster was averted, but I dread

GREGORY CROUCH says climbing Cerro Torre made U.S. Army Ranger School, a 58-day endurance test, look easy. Adventure photographer THOMAS ULRICH, who lives in Interlaken, Switzerland, has been obsessed with Cerro Torre for more than a decade.

any situation where we have to reach a complicated and serious decision by yelling through a storm from opposite ends of a 200-foot rope.

Fortunately the Swiss and I do have a common basis for communication: the love of high and wild places. Forty-eight hours after the storm that penned David and me in the hut abated, we find ourselves in just such a place, 700 feet below the summit of Cerro Torre. Yesterday we climbed the bottom two-thirds of the west face—the easy part. This morning we launched ourselves at the upper tower. Right now it's late afternoon, and we're up against a hundred-foot headwall of vertical ice that separates us from the upper west shoulder of Cerro Torre. Flat ground lies a mile of gravity-defying terrain below.

A needle lancing into the southern sky, Cerro Torre might be the world's perfect mountain. Its west face occupies a place in modern climbing circles similar to that of the north face of Switzerland's Eiger in the 1950s. But to Thomi and Stefan, who live in the shadow of the Eiger, its north face is a training climb. Cerro Torre is not only much more technically difficult than the Eiger, but the Patagonian weather—lashing wind, churning clouds, stinging snow—is much nastier. The conditions more than make up for the fact that Cerro Torre, at 10,177 feet, doesn't count extreme altitude as a weapon.

Just over my left shoulder is a savage winter landscape of ice, snow, mountain, and sky. But I don't dare look. The weather is obviously deteriorating, and I can't handle another eyeful of the lenticular clouds over the peaks to the west and the graying horizon beyond. To calm myself, I inspect the slings, carabiners, and ice screws anchoring me to the vertiginous ice, scan the rope for tangles, and examine the belay device through which my gloved hands feed the rope to my partner above. Still, waves of fear surge through me. I feel like an egg balanced atop a flagpole.

Thomi Ulrich clings by the metal points of his two ice axes and his crampons to the ice

above. Two hundred feet below, David and Stefan prepare to climb to my small platform chopped out of the ice. Thomi bangs one ax into the bulletproof surface, and a dinner plate of ice shatters loose and whacks the top of my helmet. He hacks again, securely imbeds his ax into the ice, and tests the placement with a tug. He kicks the front points of his crampons into the ice, and steps up while a fresh flurry of ice fragments ricochets off my lid—*thunk, chunk-chunk*. I hunch my shoulders and shrink my neck in an effort to hide my whole body beneath my helmet.

We're trying to shoehorn our blitzkrieg into a lull between storms, and I'm afraid that we might have committed to one of the dreaded "almost good enough" windows of fair weather

that Patagonia frequently serves up—one that will catch us high up the walls of the peak when the inevitable comes. Storms slam into Cerro Torre with the pounding fury of a cavalry charge. This is because the Patagonian Andes plunge deep into the heart of the great Southern Ocean. Here, athwart what sailors refer to as the roaring forties and furious fifties, storms spawned over the ocean encounter only one obstacle as they tear around the bottom of the globe—Patagonia.

**W**E HAVE NO CHANCE of reaching the top today. I shiver, thinking about the deteriorating weather and another long night on an icy ledge with the temperature well below zero Fahrenheit. We have no

## A needle of stone and ice



What draws climbers to Cerro Torre? At 10,177 feet it's not the height, and other ascents may be as technically demanding. The mountain's frosted west face (right) hints at its greatest challenge: Cerro Torre rises between windswept oceans like a skyscraper in a tempest. The first barrier that storms hit when they roll in from the Pacific is the Andes. Moisture-laden winds cap Cerro Torre with lumpy ice formations that thwarted climbers until two controversial ascents in 1959 and 1970—the first unconfirmed, the second aided by a machine for driving bolts into rock. Since then many teams have scaled the east side, but only seven have climbed the west, and never in winter. The route taken by Thomas Ulrich, Greg Crouch, Stefan Siegrist, and David Fasel is shown in red.

radio, no emergency beacon, and no hope of rescue if anything goes wrong. We left no umbilical cord of rope strung out behind us to secure our descent. That much rope would be too heavy and slow to install, a laborious tactic that would expose us to the dangers of weather and icefall for much, much longer. Safety depends on a quick and efficient climb up and down. The winter cold and the few winter hours of daylight complicate everything. We need more clothing, heavier sleeping bags,

threaded hollow tube that will arrest any fall. I'm just below the upper left-hand corner of a massive dihedral, where the ice-covered walls of granite come together like the pages of an open book. Because the west side of the Torre faces squarely into the winds that blast in from the Pacific, it is festooned with monstrous white blobs of rime ice, ice like the crunchy ice in a freezer condensed directly from the humid atmosphere. These rime mushrooms grow into wild, twisted shapes; the biggest are the size of

peak. Fasel, Ulrich, and Siegrist have paid their dues in the Swiss Alps. David, who is 27, realized last April that he didn't want to spend his adult life in the cubicle world of the software industry, so he quit his job to come on this expedition. He plans to devote his life to the mountains. He's a warhorse. His pack always seems heavy, and I've never heard him complain.

Of all the people I know, Thomas Ulrich might be the best at making things happen.

normal circumstances he's strong enough to drag all of us to the summit, but here he is caught in a stew of emotions: his commitment to Ulrich and our climb on the one hand and on the other his desire to be back in Switzerland with his girlfriend, Karin, who is seriously ill with cancer. Karin had insisted that he join the expedition. Wrestling with his own doubts and worries, he has to struggle to push himself on.

I'm the old man at age 33. I come from the

## Patagonia is gonna make us pay.



"Our only hope is to wedge a fast climb between storms," says Crouch. The sun emerges the morning after their arrival, and they charge up the mountain to the base of a massive ice mound called the Helmet (right). Then a wind starts to blow, and clouds fill the sky as they bivouac for the night. Conditions deteriorate the next day (above). "There's only one place to go," Ulrich says. "Down."

more headlamp batteries, more fuel, and more calories than we would in the summer. It's a double bind, because every additional ounce means we climb more slowly.

The rain of ice on my helmet stops, and I chance a look around. The line of clouds to the west seems a little darker, the wind a little stronger. Thomi, suspended 30 feet above by a cord from his harness to his right ice ax, uses both hands to twist in an ice screw, an eight-inch-long, one-and-a-quarter-inch-diameter

houses. They are almost impossible, and always terrifying, to climb—often the rime can't support your weight. Our route weaves up between the mushrooms and links solid stretches of blue, gray, or translucent ice. Far above, the biggest, most twisted rime formations on the entire peak shine a ghoulish white in the sunlight. They guard access to the summit, and they look utterly impregnable.

Only years of dedication to the alpine trade earns a climber the right to stand on such a



This entire undertaking is his brainchild, and in fine Swiss tradition he is an incredible organizer. "It's a mythic mountain," says Thomi. "It gets in your blood, and the dream keeps you going." Married and the father of two, Thomi also has a child's sense of humor coupled with relentless drive. He wanted to make this climb in winter because only then would we have the Patagonian Andes to ourselves.

Of the four of us Stefan Siegrist has the most experience on extreme rock and ice. Under

non-alpine terrain of Santa Barbara, California, and have been hopelessly in love with the mountains of Patagonia since I first saw them in 1994. This is my seventh expedition into the Patagonian crucible of fear, agony, and hope.

**A**S I EYEBALL the rime mushrooms, below and to the right Stefan labors toward my anchor using his ascenders, metal clamps that help him climb the rope. "Greg," Thomi calls from above in his Swiss lilt, "this

## Brief days and interminable nights



The climbers retreat to a primitive hut built for glacier researchers (left) and wait for the weather to break. Boredom becomes the enemy. Three long, idle nights drain battery and food reserves. The team skis to a cache near the hut (facing page), but they need more supplies, so Ulrich and Siegrist head for the nearest village, 15 miles away, to resupply. Crouch and Fasel hang on for five more days.

is the best. This is sooo radical." I'm glad he's having such a good time; I'm so afraid, I might vomit.

Beneath Stefan, David waits his turn sheltered below a gargoye of rime. I can just make him out as he ducks his head inside his yellow jacket—and calmly lights a cigarette. Forty minutes later Thomi disappears over the top of the headwall. I muster enough courage to fumble with my ascenders and follow him up. I'm panting when I reach him, and beneath my two union suits, fleece sweater, insulated jacket, and storm shell I'm bathed in greasy sweat. The sun shines weakly on us for the first time today, 15 minutes before it drops behind the mountains to the west. The low-angle light makes the rime formations shine a brilliant yellow. We're in another world.

Inspired by Thomi's performance, I claim the next lead. I head 20 feet left, then up into a groove. I'm knackered from our two full days on this hill. Steeper and steeper ice forces me to use only the front points of the crampons under the toes of my boots. I focus on making smooth, controlled swings with my axes and refuse to give in to my quivering calves.

The sun has vanished. It's 6 p.m. It'll be 10 a.m. before we see it again. Meanwhile I'm still leading, and any fall would almost certainly result in serious injury. In gathering darkness I pick and kick my way to the end of the pitch and rig the rope to two ice screws. Then

I descend and join my teammates, who are digging out a sleeping spot under a rime mushroom that rears up like a band shell. I scrape up a mound of rime along the edge to make me feel safe for the long winter night. I don't want to roll off in my sleep and take the death dive. As I work, my hands ache, the wind chills my sweat-damp clothing, and I think about tomorrow. More pain. I smile, remembering the scene in *Rocky III* when a journalist asks Clubber Lang, the champion, for his prediction for the fight. His answer: "Pain!" I explain it to the team. We laugh.

Our last 20 days have passed in a blur of physical effort. We carried and sledged more than 400 pounds of gear to the base of Cerro Torre. We slogged monster loads through forests, across a frozen lake, four times up a 3,000-foot pass, across rock moraines, and then ten miles up the huge Viedma glacier under the cold light of a full moon. Even with help from three Argentine friends—Alejandro Caparrós, Max Odell, and Gerardo Javier Spisso—and the use of Don Guerra's packhorses for two days, that labor took nine days.

On our previous attempt we got two-thirds of the way up the mountain before being rejected by a storm. Then David and I endured eight foul-weather days in Supermouse Hut, 12 miles south of Cerro Torre, while Thomi and Stefan skied and hiked back to civilization to get more headlamp batteries. Those are the big sufferings. Our little sufferings include blisters, ankles swollen by uncomfortable ice boots, always being cold, freeze-dried food, no showers, smelly clothes, and instant coffee.

**W**HEN THOMI sprang this idea on me during a transatlantic telephone conversation seven months ago, I grabbed my spot as fast as I could blurt out "Hell yes!" The opportunity to score a first on such a peak



hooked me instantly. Cerro Torre is the scene of one of the mountaineering world's greatest controversies, and no other mountain exerts such pull on me.

I'm not alone. In the late 1950s Cerro Torre stood unclimbed, but its savage beauty captured the imagination of many top climbers. Rival factions raced to make the first ascent. Italians Walter Bonatti and Carlo Mauri led an attempt on the unknown west face in 1958, while another expedition explored

have climbed it in the warmer seasons.)

Meanwhile on the opposite side of the mountain the expedition leader, Bruno Detassis, lost heart soon after the mountain emerged from a storm to show its perfect form. He declared Cerro Torre impossible. But two members of the expedition, Cesare Maestri and Cesarino Fava, were not so easily deterred. Maestri and Fava, along with Toni Egger, an Austrian, returned the following season. In a desperate all-out six-day push Maestri and

Maestri and Egger as the greatest climb of all time, and so it would stand if such a storm of controversy hadn't sprung up since 1959. Year after year top alpinists have attempted to duplicate Maestri's feat—and in 40 years no one has succeeded. Indeed, those who have come closest report significant differences between the terrain they encountered and what Maestri reported.

In 1970 Maestri, intending to silence the growing band of critics, returned to Cerro

titled "Cerro Torre: A Mountain Desecrated!"

In fairness to Maestri the majority of his "compressor route" consists of hard, high-quality climbing on natural features. I climbed it, and so did Thomi and Stefan, in 1996; it was an experience that gave me the confidence to push out onto the cutting edge—to Cerro Torre's west face in winter.

We're not feeling much confidence as we arrange our sleeping perches just above the headwall. Thomi faces the blackness to the



the more accessible east side. Bonatti and Mauri reached a platform more than halfway up beneath a wicked rime mushroom they named the Helmet, but they were unable to get past it. As they descended through the southwest col, the high pass that separates Cerro Torre from Cerro Adela, they christened it the Col of Hope. (Their vision of a route up the west face was finally realized in the summer of 1974 by an Italian team led by Casimiro Ferrari. Since then six other teams

Egger, supported by Fava, claimed to have done it, climbing up the east and north faces. The stormy descent cost Egger his life—he was swept away by falling ice.

In a clear hack at Bonatti and Mauri, Maestri named the north col, through which he and Egger had climbed, the Col of Conquest. He wrote that "in the mountains there is no such thing as hope, only the will to conquer. Hope is the weapon of the poor."

Contemporaries trumpeted the climb by

Wake up boys. Today we climb.



A lucky break: The day after Ulrich and Siegrist return to the hut, the storm passes, and the team begins its second attempt. The climbers ascend quickly above the Col of Hope where the ice is firm (left). They inchworm up the mountain at a top speed of 200 feet—one rope length—every half hour, held by ice axes and the steel front points of their crampons (above). Siegrist takes the lead here.

Torre and forged a route up the southeast ridge, which soars 4,500 feet like a flying buttress on a Gothic cathedral. But rather than pulling off a tour de force of courage, commitment, and skill, like the purported 1959 climb, he used a 150-pound air compressor to drill 350 bolts into steep sections of stone, then strung up thousands of feet of rope to link his team to safety. This drew loud protest from climbers worldwide, most famously in an article in the British magazine *Mountain*

west, then turns. "Boys," he says in English, "I'm not religious, but tonight we are in the hands of God."

He's right. If the storm holds off, we go up and finish this thing. If not, down we go.

At six o'clock in the morning, pulses from a wristwatch alarm shatter my sleep. I stir and fight the Velcro tabs, draw cords, and zippers that close my sleeping bag and bivvy sack from the freezing air. Ice crystals, frozen onto the inside of the sack, rain onto my face and

These rime mushrooms grow into wild, twisted shapes. . . .



Cerro Torre is capped with rime, brittle ice filled with air pockets—a creation of humid oceanic winds. The heights look like they're covered with blown insulation. "Bad rime is unclimbable," says Crouch. "You can push your arm in up to the shoulder." The climbers look for gray patches—good ice where they can insert screws to secure their ropes.

melt. A dream of lying on a beach under a hot sun with my beautiful wife, DeAnne, hangs in my mind. Outside the sleeping bag, reality is a world of ice. Automatically I check the dark sky for an approaching storm. The brightest stars shine fuzzy through a layer of high clouds. A breeze tickles my nostrils with moisture and hints of pain to come. "Wake up boys. Today we climb."

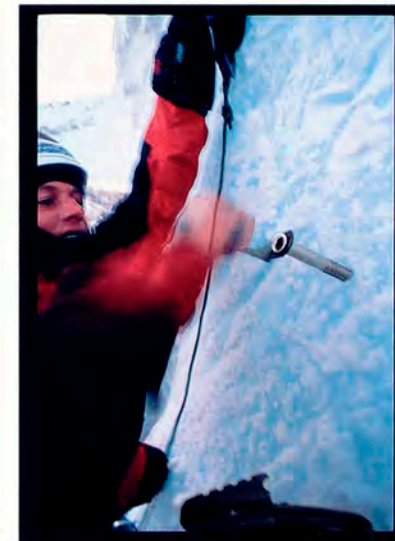
I fish my headlamp up from the depths of the sleeping bag, turn it on, and fumble to fire up the stove. The midwinter sun is hours away, but with the stove hissing and roaring, I won't drop back to sleep. Beside me the Swiss are now also in a preparation frenzy. We pull on clothes, devour muesli, adjust ice boots, harnesses, and crampons, load rime and snow into the pot to fill water bottles, stuff sleeping bags and backpacks—all on the brink of what seems to be the drop off the edge of the world. We're hopeful for the top, so we leave our sleeping and cooking gear behind and pack just clothing, hardware, water, snack food, and cameras. It takes three full hours to get ready.

I serve up my best sportscaster imitation, "Clubber, what's your prediction for the fight?"

And in unison my three Swiss friends howl, "Pain!"

In two hours we climb 500 feet above our bivouac and—boom—we're face-to-face with the summit mushrooms we saw from below. They overhang the north and west faces like the prows of half a dozen *Titanics*. If we can't find a groove through these barriers or a traverse around them, our ascent stops right here.

Stefan takes the lead and finds a possible route down and then up around to the left. He attacks a groove while David belays and Thomi takes photos. I scan the range. The view over the rock towers and glaciers of Patagonia is sublime; the weather isn't. The lines of lenticular clouds along the mountain range to



the west are thicker and blacker, and beyond is a murky torrent of approaching cloud. On all the mountains around us strong wind blows snow through cols and tears it from ridges, but for some odd reason that defies logic, here, 200 feet below the summit of Cerro Torre, I could light a match.

David looks over and asks, "What do you think, Greg?"

"I think we're gonna make it," I reply, "but I'm sure Patagonia is gonna make us pay."

Stefan fights his way up 70 feet of shoddy, rotten rime in the groove he's found, then finds a patch of ice solid enough to hold a screw. He clips the rope through and has David lower him back down to the belay. He's exhausted.

Thomi takes the lead and disappears up the rime groove. David feeds the rope out. Twenty minutes later a steady shower of ice chunks comes flying down from above. Thomi is hacking open the top end of a 20-foot-long closed tube of ice that goes up through the heart of the steepest rime mushroom. We each follow Thomi in succession. The vertical culvert is the wildest ice feature I've ever encountered. I'm quiet with awe as I climb through it.

The culvert is the key to the climb. Thirty feet above it I join my friends on the summit of Cerro Torre. Or, better said, almost on the summit. We cavort on a plateau beside a





Siegrist wedges himself into a niche of rime, with Monte Fitz Roy beyond. The summit is only 200



feet or so overhead, but the team is stymied until Ulrich hacks into a vertical shaft within the rime.



Once on top, Ulrich, Fasel, Siegrist, and Crouch take time for a quick portrait; then comes preparation

for the descent—and for a Patagonian send-off: Another storm is bearing down.

30-foot mushroom that leans like a frozen breaking wave, but we can't find enough solid ice to climb to the very top. Thomi pulls his camera aside from in front of his face and uncovers a Cheshire cat grin.

I won't relax and celebrate until we're safe in a bar sipping whiskey, but I soak up the view. The ice field and a sea of mountains stretch away north, south, and west. The sun glints off Laguna del Desierto to the left of the enormous wedge of Monte Fitz Roy. The rocky teeth of the range stand close at hand. Everywhere other than here, it seems, is being scrubbed by fierce wind. "OK boys, that's enough fun. We're out of here."

Stefan buries a three-foot-long aluminum stake sideways in the summit snows, ties a sling to its middle, and anchors two ropes knotted together to the sling with a snaplink.

I go down first and try not to think about the three-foot stake that supports my future. The first rappels go easily, and back on the bivvy ledge we retrieve our stashed gear. Suddenly the wind makes war. David and I work together atop the headwall. I catch his eye as I prepare to rappel past the edge. "Now we pay!" I yell over the wind. "Pain!" he shouts back, grinning. I continue to rappel first but can't dangle straight down the headwall; the building gale tosses me back and forth. At the end of the rope I reach for the anchor, but an invisible hand pushes me away. Finally, a lull; I lunge with the point of my ice ax, catch the anchor, and pull myself over.

To the west the sun is perched on a wall of clouds, and the wind rages like a mob of demons. Below the headwall I must go down and to the right, but the wind tangles the rope

around lumps of rime. I yank on the rope as hard as I can to snap off the snags. Some won't break, so I swing over like a pendulum, tiptoeing on my crampons, and smash them with my ax.

We come to the small saddle that crosses over to the Helmet. Wind screams up the ice slope from below. I belay David, and he staggers across the saddle to disappear behind a rime monolith. The wind draws the rope between us into a 130-foot ballistic arc. The sun is gone, the sky is blood-red; we're fighting for our lives. Too scared to walk on the flat section, I crawl and feed rope through my rappel.

Two hours later we're descending by headlamp through the Col of Hope, a gigantic funnel for wind off the ice field. It's a maelstrom. Golf-ball-size chunks of ice blast up the

45-to-60-degree slope. The updrafts blow my clothes full of frigid air. Well after midnight we suffer down the final glacier in blackness broken only by our headlamps. Streaks of snow blur sideways through the pools of light. My face is stung by snow; a gust knocks us to our knees. Then the slope runs out into flatness, and it's over.

In my sleeping bag at last, I can't locate a part of my body that doesn't ache or throb, but before I lose consciousness, my memory stumbles across the words that have carried me through many ordeals before—words from the Bible that were the motto of my high school cross-country team. "We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us." □