



The lack of wind in the trees and the clear skies at 1 a.m. made shaking off the three hours of sleep easy. In the dilapidated hut, we slammed the last sips of grainy coffee and shoved the day's supplies into our packs.

We knew we were breaking all the rules. We had two days to climb on our week-long foray from Punta Arenas. There would be no month-long wait or seemingly endless attempts prior to success. Bumpy bus rides, the wind-scoured border, violent weather and unclimbable conditions: traveling and climbing in Patagonia in a week seemed about as likely as shooting a flying object. From the hip. From a running horse.

Kris's headlamp lit the shanty's carvings as we ducked under the plastic sheeting of the makeshift door. Could the weather get any better? How long would it last? The question hung on the full moon as it set over Fitz Roy's north pillar.

Peaceful forest morphed into scree, scree became glacier as our meditative footsteps and breaths levitated us closer to the base of Aguja Poincenot. A week earlier we had been quelling the angst and anxieties of five international marathoners at the South Pole. The participants of "The South Pole Marathon," clad in their shiny new Gore-tex and spiffy trail runners, were frayed by bad weather and logistical delays. They were ready to go home. We were ready to go climbing.

The crisp air and firm snow bolstered our caffeine buzz, and we made good time to the melted-out snow caves from which most people climb routes. With one day to climb and an anemic rack, the Bonington-Whillans Route was the most likely candidate for success: we knew we could go light.

We moved steadily over the glacial terrain, never stopping, just following the vapor of our breath in the cool alpine air. Fresh sun turned the granite orange, warming our alpine microclimate as we moved in unison over the 400-meter ice ramp that led to the spire's southeast shoulder. Calves burned, but the pain was offset by the knowledge of what we were getting away with.

The sun rose simultaneously with our ascent, beaming us up. The 70 meters of mixed ground at the top of the ice ramp was the day's crux; with my picks placed precariously in an inch of old ice and my crampons on granite edges beneath an awkward bulge, it seemed particularly thin.

From the Hip

Bean Bowers

We pulled up over the bulge of ice-glazed cracks, then traded crampons and ice screws for rock shoes and a few stoppers and cams. Jamming and edging through the granite jungle, we moved fluidly over the wind-sculpted stone, the rime-ice mushrooms on the Torre group to our left constant reminders of the Patagonian fury we were slipping past.

At 11 a.m. my fingers moved from the last shady finger lock to the sunny warmth of the summit ridge. We were on top. The immense ice cap to the west looked soft and benign as it hid the next day's weather system.

A single day of alpine climbing—one day in Patagonia—and only Fitz Roy and Cerro Torre were above us.

Kris took a seat next to me on the summit and scanned the horizon.

"Feels like we're getting away with something here," he smiled.

"Yep," I said. "Kind of like having sex in public."

We dragged our tired bodies into town the next day in time for a celebratory dinner and the mandatory two boxes of good wine. At 3 a.m. we caught the bus south to Punta Arenas. As much as we would have loved to have stayed, we knew we had caught the best of the party. Besides, we had to use the bus ride to plan next year's six-day trip to Patagonia. ■

Bean Bowers on the ice ramp to the Bonington-Whillans Route, Aguja Poincenot. Kristoffer Erickson