



Far to the South,
below the Strait of Magellan,
in Tierra del Fuego,
stands a mountain
obscured by clouds
and battered by storms.

Inexplorado

Ralf Gantzhorn

It rarely allows even a glimpse.
But the few who have seen cannot forget,
and they always return
to Monte Sarmiento,
the White Mountain
of the Land of Fire.



So it was with Padre Alberto María de Agostini, the Italian explorer of the Patagonian Andes, who discovered the peak for himself in 1913, and who came, inexorably, back in 1956, when he was seventy-three years old. And so it is with me. In the middle of the 1990s, I saw a picture of Monte Sarmiento for the first time: a giant ice pyramid lost amid the fantastical shapes of a fjord-riven land and a cloud-swayed sky. Was *it* here, at the end of the world, the perfect mountain? Not even 2500 meters tall?

I began my research and found little. Naturally, the photographer was Padre de Agostini. The stories told of horrific storms and impenetrable rainforest—with cloudbursts of rain that rose to some of the highest levels on earth. Even today, there were no reasonable maps. The few that I got from Santiago, Chile, had the magical word *Inexplorado* written across the region. A dream I had in kindergarten came over me. Here was a place where you could still be an explorer; in every corner, you could find the unknown, perhaps even the unseen. And to journey there by ship! Sarmiento stands completely alone like a lighthouse on a peninsula, 150 kilometers away from any human settlement and only reachable by water.

To cross the channel of Tierra del Fuego, the “Land of Fire,” in a sailboat and then to climb the most beautiful peak in the world: Wasn’t that my dream? The perfect combination of mountain and ocean? At least for me, a child of Hamburg, the city between the North and the Baltic seas?

With Rubber Boots and Crampons

“WATCH OUT that your crampons and axes don’t puncture the dinghy!” says Micki Fischer, the skipper on my fourth expedition to Monte Sarmiento in April 2010. He looks anxious, not just, I think, because of the rucksacks full of sharp equipment. Soon gray clouds thicken the sky. Under soft rain (of all things!) we search for a better approach, for the fourth time this trip, although it doesn’t really seem like a good idea at the moment. The south winds let us hope for our much-longed-for weather window. *With a little faith, a little intuition.* Squeezed full with all our mountain gear, the small dinghy floats over the ice-cold water and scrunches onto the shingle beach of Caleta Escandallo.

And thus it is: “Take care of yourselves and return safely.” We hug Micki good-bye. His eyes darken as if he has already passed judgment on us and determined that he is seeing us for the last time. Now Robert Jasper, Jörn Heller and I are left to ourselves. Marooned on a beach east of my dream mountain, we’re surrounded by nothing, except a thousand years of undisturbed wilderness. In this solitude, *the wild* is not just a word—it is a force. I feel the possible consequences of our acts pass through my flesh and through my bones. Language shifts into new and tangible meanings. Here, for example, a tiny mistake, a broken leg, signifies *the end*. There is no rescue—anywhere—probably no one would ever know what happened to us. But wasn’t this precisely what I wished for? A departure into the unknown, into an undiscovered land? A mountain adventure outside of all civilization?

I am underway with good, reliable friends, I remember. Both Robert and Jörn have endured their Patagonian expeditions well. Calm flows through me.

[Opening Spread] “The twin summits of Monte Sarmiento rise like a *fata morgana*,” writes Ralf Gantzhorn. | [This Page] Jörn Heller in 2010 on the ridge to the west summit (2145m, according to his team’s GPS measurement). In 1956 Carlo Mauri and Clemente Maffei made the first ascent of the east summit (ca. 2195m). Ralf Gantzhorn (all photos)

A Japanese Garden in the Rainforest

LIKE A WALL OF EVERGREENS, it rises up before us: the cold rainforest of the Land of Fire, with its tangled undergrowth and thorns, its dead-fall lying every which way, its bottomless marshes. We beat a narrow path with machetes through rampant, growing things—a necessary but violent course. It almost hurts. Because this forest is beyond belief: its delicate filigree seems the opposite of such a harsh climate. As I gaze at each small detail, fine patterns of lichen, moss, tiny flowers, knobby trees, stone and water appear like a carefully arranged Japanese garden, composed of raw and untouched wilderness. I haven’t heard of any poisonous plants or animals in this part of the world. And for that reason, I begin to have a nearly tender feeling for this wood.

It goes on: we climb over fallen tree trunks, leap from moss patch to moss patch to avoid the depthless pools. With each step, the ground compresses, releasing smacking and gurgling noises as it re-forms. Inside this place, all dreams of ascent disappear. Mountaineering boots run full of water. Later, farther up and farther in, they will freeze into shapeless lumps.

At the end of the wood, the land steepens, but the swamp continues. “The Moss Ramp,” as we’ve christened the approach to the glacier, becomes its name. We rate the difficulty “Moss III”; rock-climbing grades have no significance here. Ropeless, we move hand by hand over all kinds of dripping wet plants and oily slabs. Our rare, green hand-holds and footholds would make a botanist cry. But we’re happy just to get through this passage without falling.

At last we reach the glacier, and a small hole in the cloud cover gives us confidence. Five minutes later, it begins to snow. The wind still blows from the south that tiny shred of hope. *Monte Sarmiento is indeed, I think, the mountain with the worst weather in the world.* We climb across crevasse-torn icefields—onward. *Hope dies last.*

Whiteout

JÖRN NAVIGATES in the whiteout with his GPS; Robert by feel; and I by the memories of earlier attempts. Together we locate the Collado Este, a col in the east ridge, and a good departure point for attempts on that side of the mountain. Next, on a steep slope, we find a spot protected from avalanches and dig in. The snow proves soft, and like a marmot, I disappear quickly underground. As I begin to sweat, Jörn and Robert transform slowly into icicles. Then Jörn goes in, and Robert becomes an ice mummy. Soon the hole is big enough for him to shovel, too. After two hours, we all fit inside. We block the entrance with a pack and burrow in our sleeping bags. Finally, we can cook something. While a blizzard whirls outside, we settle down to dine under a shimmering blue snow ceiling.

“Delicious,” Robert says. “Food in a bag.” And we all know that back in civilization we wouldn’t touch the contents. But here, amid the blustering sounds of the wind, everything seems enchanted. Experience

[This Page, Top] “The nature of Tierra del Fuego is sensitive to even the lightest footsteps,” Gantzhorn says of the rainforest between the shore and Monte Sarmiento. | [This Page, Middle] A curious fox, unused to humans, examines Gantzhorn’s 2005 camp. | [This Page, Bottom] Moss grows on a wind-bent birch. Gantzhorn calls this image an example of “nature’s exquisite art despite the world’s worst weather.” | [Facing Page] “Iceberg ahead!” Micki Fischer navigates the *Tari II* through the Pia Fjord in 2010.





says: *Set the alarm clock for every two hours, so you can excavate the opening. Sleep too long, run out of oxygen, and you'll never wake up!* I sink into a sleep as faint as twilight, with no memory of pain. As the images of my last three expeditions to Monte Sarmiento are reborn, I let them flow.

A Secret World

THREE TIMES I'VE organized trips to this peak, and now I sit for the fourth time, infatuated, at its foot. I know all its rocks well enough to greet them by name: But do they peer back at me, gloating over their knowledge of indecipherable secrets? I'm not sure, really, whether I'll ever have a chance of getting closer to my dream.

Even planning my first expedition to the mountain in 1999 left frost-white strands in my hair. It took me nearly two years to find a willing skipper and enough fellow expedition members to split the cost of skipper+boat x four weeks. Tierra del Fuego has never been cheap. Then three weeks before our departure, with eight teammates signed on, I tore my Achilles tendon. I lay howling in my hospital bed. An invisible world shattered in my mind. But after a while, the doctor gave me back a piece of hope. Although climbing was naturally out of the question, the skipper Henk Boersma found a sea kayak for me, so I could still explore the fjords from an elevation of zero meters, with a giant cast on my foot and crutches under my arms.

It was thus that the realm of the photo became a real place and

cast me entirely under its spell. A Chilean climber once said, "These mountains were truly born in the 'Land of Fire.' They are wild, volatile, unpredictable." In 1999 the skies were unusually clear and many of these peaks revealed themselves, true to the adjectives he'd used to describe them. I meandered up the Pia, the Brooks, the Martinez and countless other fjords. Everywhere rose hundreds of ice-encrusted dream mountains, most of them unknown, unclimbed, unmeasured. It was as if I were wandering along the edge of a magic country, without being able to climb into it. But the most beautiful of all was Monte Sarmiento.

One day, near the end of our journey, during the 500-kilometer return to Puerto Williams, a powerful storm lashed us with the gale-force downdraft of the *williwaw* wind that falls fast, cold and heavy through the Strait of Magellan. We were forced to flee to Puerto King, the small natural harbor where Charles Darwin and *The Beagle* had anchored in the 1830s, while he collected plants and fossils and began to interpret the evolution of a world in ceaseless change. By now I'd become proficient enough with my crutches that I could undertake short hikes. So, during our brief shore time, I hobbled up a 500-meter hill. When I reached the top, a little gap in the clouds opened and through that port-hole, a fragment of Monte Sarmiento appeared. Then, despite the storm (or perhaps because of it), the mist parted again to allow a glimpse—for a very short moment—of the west summit.

Now, the reader should understand that on the west summit of Monte Sarmiento is an ice formation that looks like the face of an

ancient and ill-tempered man. And in the way that this visage materialized for a few seconds out of the gray sky, it seemed clear to me that the mountain was saying good-bye.

Even Little Accomplishments Can Bring Happiness

IN THE AUTUMN OF 2002, I had, once more, both men and money enough to sail to Tierra del Fuego for four weeks. The daylight shrank to the hours between 8 a.m. and 4 p.m. Many mornings we had to clear the boat of new-fallen snow. Thus we journeyed through the Beagle Canal and the Ballenero, and the much-feared Brecknock Passage—a sliver of open Pacific that the Chilean novelist Francisco Coloane depicted in *Cape Horn*: "As raw as the strings of its own hard consonants, [it] is not so long, but the waves sharpen like the edges of a crater, break on the dark, bleak cliffs and fall back with an explosion of foam into the sea...a nightmare for all sailors."

I don't know of any place on earth as "dark" and "bleak" as this

southwest corner of the Land of Fire. Yet whether you believe in chance or not, on the next morning in the good harbor of Puerto King, we woke to a lustrous dawn. And there it stood again, the most beautiful mountain in the world, with its old and disagreeable face. Monte Sarmiento greeted me—or at least I imagined it so—to another round of the game *Climb me or not!*

This time, drunken with blue skies, we forgot what we knew of the mountain's geography and approached from the north. The line looked so easy and ended under vertical seracs. *A game of Russian roulette with five bullets in the cylinder.* So we retreated in perfect weather. Had we remembered, instead, to read our Agostini, we could have avoided that experience, as the Padre had made the same mistake in 1913.

The old man of Sarmiento seemed to derive so much joy from our failure that he promptly wrapped himself in clouds. In the end, we made the first ascent of two 1500-meter peaks in the nearby Cordon Navarro. "Better to return home with two small successes than none at all"—that was our motto for the rest of the expedition.

[Facing Page, Top Left] **The *Tari II* in the Brecknock Passage, a "much-feared" portion of the journey to Tierra del Fuego. Charles Darwin described this region in *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839).** | [Facing Page, Top Right] **Heller and Robert Jasper try to keep their lunches in their stomachs as "Matrose" Michel steers.** | [Facing Page, Bottom Left] **Jasper, Fischer and Heller plan the voyage. "The chart is worth as much as the paper it is printed on," Gantzhorn says.** | [Facing Page, Bottom Right] **Jasper and Heller make**

their way over moss and tree trunks. "There are no easy paths in this fairytale forest," Gantzhorn says. According to legend, early Western explorers named this remote part of Chile "Tierra del Fuego" (aka "The Land of Fire") after glimpsing the numerous campfires of the indigenous people. In the nineteenth century, European settlement spread disease and conflict that eventually resulted in the deaths of many of the area's original inhabitants. | [This Page] **The *Tari II* in the Pia Fjord. Jasper climbs the mast.**



My 2005 trip could be summed up in one compound word: *continual-rain-frustration*. For four weeks we sat on the shingles of Caleta Escandallo in a steady downpour, four weeks without sun. A fox became a regular visitor, marking our gear with his scent. Nine times we ran all together up the Moss Ramp to the start of the glacier, only to find that the clouds had been even quicker from the west. On the tenth time, we could actually see the mountain for six hours, but by then we were too worn out and too *rain-frustrated* to make a wholehearted attempt. As we sailed back, not once did the mountain show itself again. I thought it was the end of all things.

You Never Really Reach the End

It's 2:00 A.M. I peel myself from the warm sleeping bag and shovel out the entrance. As if in a trance I look outside and I can't believe it: there's no wind, no snow. A star blinks through the clouds. "Boys, wake up! The weather, it actually got better!" In an instant, Robert and Jörn are wide-awake. Muesli, tea, a little bit of chocolate and we're off by 4 a.m., marching into the dark, down from the east col to the north, where the face begins to rise toward the west summit.

Through our headlamp beams, dark lines of crevasses multiply, each one immense and fathomless, until we're forced to turn around and seek out other weaknesses. We end up on a narrow, steep and winding ridge. The high fog, which had made the night so black and murky, dissolves in the faint light of dawn. The apex of the mountain surfaces from behind a subpeak. Is today our day? My gaze wavers along the snow-enameled, storm-furrowed ice face of Monte Sarmiento. What gap will form a passage through all these crevasses, cornices and ice bridges?

We move higher beside a vertical step of unstable snow, covered with twisted feathers of hoar and rime. It must be at least -20°C. By luck, the wind sleeps. *How long will this weather window last?* There's no answer to that question. To try to retreat from here, in bad weather or in poor visibility, would be like landing a plane blind, with no knowledge of the airstrip. I don't know how much time we have left.

Shortly before dawn, we reach the summit plateau. For the first time, we can look out to the west: the heavens are blue. Within this land of sea and storms, we seem to have caught *the* day. But have we really? We climb as fast as we can, and our small hope swells into something vast: a vision of standing on the highest point.

And then, just 100 meters from the top, we reach a dead end. Giant overhanging mushrooms of loose snow-ice bar the way. Below us, an abrupt chasm opens. What now? *Good advice is not cheap*. If I remember correctly, 500 meters to the left, we'd spotted an exit to the summit. How could we get there? *We must rappel*. But from where? In this anchorless, unconsolidated snow?

Robert—the strongest and the most experienced among us—stands on one side of a small snow ridge and locks the rope off tight on his harness. He begins to lower Jörn—the lightest—to the other side. Slowly, Jörn disappears. "I hope this rope actually reaches the bottom of the

[Facing Page] Jasper traverses on the northern flank of the mountain. To Gantzhorn, this landscape seemed like "the icy land of the Snow Queen" in the Hans Christian Andersen tale. | [This Page, Top] "You have no chance so take it." Jasper and Heller at a col in the east ridge, 2010. In whiteout conditions, Gantzhorn writes, the team relied on GPS, intuition and memory. | [This Page, Middle] Jasper waiting for the weather to improve in the Collado Este, "under a shimmering blue snow ceiling." | [This Page, Bottom] A temporary dead end at 4 a.m. in the crevasse labyrinth below the west summit.

[Photo] Jasper climbing toward the west summit of Monte Sarmiento. The higher east summit sticks out from behind the ridgeline. Mt. Buckland (1800m) stands in the distance under a fiery sun. What other adventures await him or others here in the future?

bergschrund,” Robert says. After a little while, a quiet, relieved voice calls up, “Off belay.”

“OK, now you,” Robert says to me.

I swing my weight onto the rope. Robert’s eyes widen at the heavy tug on his harness, but he maintains his stance and in a short while, I’m standing next to Jörn. Next, Jörn and I crouch on the other side of the bergschrund and belay Robert as he down climbs. A phantasmagoric realm of ice and snow shapes, like nothing we’ve ever seen before, unfolds before us. It’s as if we’ve landed within the spellbound frozen world of the Snow Queen in the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale. Icicles hang like crystal chandeliers from a turquoise vault. Beneath them, we traverse knee-deep slopes, parallel to the lip of the abyss, until we arrive at a colossal free-hanging ice bridge. If it breaks, so much is clear, no one will survive.

Yet just five meters away from this strange structure, a possible escape route appears. We clamber over a forest of leaf-shaped rime and around an ice roof reinforced by icicles. After four pitches, we reach the ridge between the east and the west summit. Here, our only protection consists of leaping: if a climber falls on one side, the belayer must jump off the other—into the gleaming blue mouth of the void.

The terrain has grown far too delicate: it calls for concentration to the tips of my hair. Above the col, toward the west summit, inordinately large cornices obstruct the summit once more.

“Not again!” Robert says. “Let’s hope it’s the last detour,” I reply. Belayed by Jörn, Robert climbs down for a second time, and this time we try from the south side. At last we find our longed-for passage to the west summit. We climb the last few meters as if through a dream. The view spreads in all directions. Beneath us lies, for one short moment, a landscape of fjords, completely free of all men: white mountains, green forests and deep-blue sea.

I am actually standing on the head of the ill-tempered old man. Far below, in miniature, I can pick out the bay of Puerto King, like a narrow finger, where I first glimpsed him. Am I happy now? Is this the end? Across from us, the east summit protrudes into the cerulean sky—another ice pyramid, a few meters higher than our perch. According to the stories, Carlo Mauri and Clemente Maffei first climbed that point as part of the 1956 expedition led by Padre de Agostini, then an old man himself.

There is no trace of their passage. Even by today’s standards, with modern ice tools, their route looks impossible. *But if you really wanted to know if they’d been there, you’d have to climb to the east summit yourself.* And all at once, I don’t want to bring these thoughts to an end. *The few who have seen Monte Sarmiento, I remember, never forget, and they always return to the White Mountain of the Land of Fire.* ■

—Translated from the German by Keese Lane

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS: La Odissea de Magallanes (WI4+), north face, west summit of Monte Sarmiento (ca. 2145m as per 2010 GPS calculation), April 1–2, 2010, Ralf Gantzhorn, Jörn Heller and Robert Jasper, either a first ascent of a new route or a significant variation of an existing line. At the time, Gantzhorn was unaware of previous ascents on that aspect. Salvatore Panzeri later reported that his expedition climbed a north face direttissima to the west summit in 1986, with a crux that overlaps with La Odissea.

More photographs from the Sarmiento expedition at alpinist.com/sarmiento

