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ZIGGY STARDUST IN PATAGONIA

Early on the Christmas morning of 2016, instead of family celebrations, we were on our way to the austral summer and the famous granite spires of Patagonia. First stop - Buenos Aires. The city, unfortunately, was deserted, so we wasted no time there and, having eaten a good steak, boarded a plane to El Calafate. Quite unexpectedly we were welcomed by the wild side of Patagonian weather – snow and harsh wind. But our enthusiasm did not subside – the weather had to get better in five weeks! From El Calafate, another few hours by shuttle bus finally brought us to El Chalten. El Chalten was established in the 1980s to increase Argentina's presence in the area and to secure the disputed border with Chile. It has since served as a perfect basecamp for climbers, where one has the luxury of sleeping in a comfortable bed, eating amazing Argentinian food, enjoying internet access, and cragging on the nearby walls.

After several days the winds eased off and the weather forecast (which we kept checking every six hours) showed a good weather window coming up – our first chance! Unfortunately, halfway a long and tedious approach to the Torre valley, Saule sprained her ankle. After having rested for a day in a tent, we had to return to El Chalten before having a chance to set foot on the yellow granite walls.

After a few days in town, another weather window was on the horizon and Gediminas set off on his own back to the Torre valley. There, he found some people to team up with and climbed a few classics of the Fitz Roy range. Together with a couple from California he climbed the North Ridge on the "de l'S" from the

Col de los Austriacos and later on, with a newly met friend from Australia, cruised up "Chiarro de Luna" on Saint-Exupéry via the Los Angelitos variation.

Luckily, Saulé's ankle was healing well, and for a recovery trip we hiked in again to the Torre valley and climbed the "Rubio y Azul" route on the Aguja de la Medialuna. After successfully hiking and passing the "foot-in-a-climbing-shoe" test, we could more confidently plan our next tour.

Our time was slowly coming to the end, but the main goal was still to be accomplished – to climb a route on the less visited western walls of the Cerro Torre group. With a long good weather window coming up, we prepared for a five-day trip and left El Chalten on a sunny summer day. The approach to the Torre valley was familiar by now, so it went smoothly and fast. We pitched a tent on the rocky glacier at Niponino and enjoyed beautiful formations of the Fitz Roy and Cerro Torre groups from both sides of the valley. Next morning, we started very early with the goal to ascend the Col Standhardt, descend to the western side and set up camp in Circo de los Altares. Due to high temperatures over the past few weeks, the conditions of the glacier to Col Standhardt were unfavourable – numerous crevasses made it difficult to navigate, while a challenging bergschrund and a very thin snow cover on the last part before the col were mentally demanding. At the col, we appreciated the proximity of the Aguja Standhardt, daydreamed about climbing, and started rappelling to the other side. After several rappels and walking in deep, wet snow, we reached Circo de los

Approaching the Torre valley (photo Gediminas Simutis)



Long way home via the Patagonian ice cap (photo Gediminas Simutis)

Altares. From there the west faces could be seen best and, having considered several possibilities, we chose the most obvious line up the Aguja Pachamama. On the following day, we scrambled up to the base of the face and started climbing the continuous inner corner and crack system. Excellent cracks led us almost all the way to the ridge where we traversed to the left and – as is common on many climbs in the area – faced a few steep parts just before reaching the summit. Abseiling down went smoothly and easily since we had already set up the majority of the abseil points on the way up. We named the route “Ziggy Stardust” (~300m, 6a).

Next morning, instead of coming back the same way, we chose to hike out through the Circo de los Altares and the massive glacier on the western side of the Cerro Torre group. It took us another two (easy) days, and it was a wonderful experience to appreciate the scale of the glacier and to get a glimpse of the mountains from a less familiar perspective.

Back in El Chalten we had just enough time to sell our gear (which was in great demand among the locals), indulge in breakfast facturitas (sweet pastries) and dinner asados (all sorts of grilled meat), and, after five weeks, head back to the northern winter.

Gediminas Simutis and Saulė Simutė

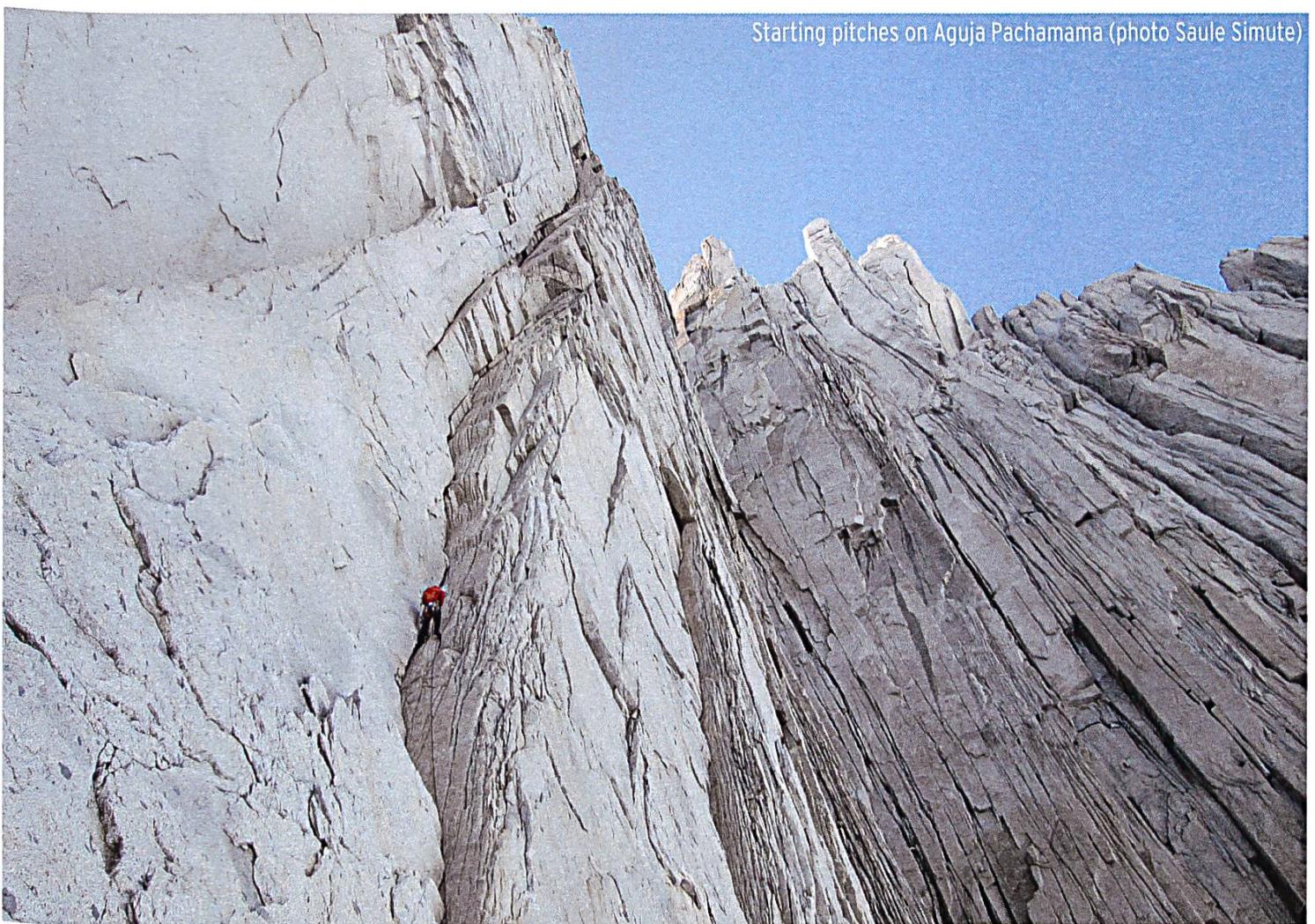
Saulė on the summit with Cerro Chalten in the background (photo Gediminas Simutis)



Never-ending cracks of Ziggy Stardust
(photo Gediminas Simutis)



Starting pitches on Aguja Pachamama (photo Saule Simute)



Midway the route with Aguja Quatro Dedos
in the background (photo Saule Simute)



Aguja Pachamama with the line of Ziggy Stardust (photo Gediminas Simutis)

