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VOYAGES EN PATAGONIE

We had been dreaming about it for quite some time: one day, we would go to Patagonia. And so we did. Our four-week long trip in December 2017/January 2018 was divided into three main locations: Tierra del Fuego, Torres del Paine, and El Chalten. It was meant to be a trekking trip. Not that the climbing was not attractive to us, but taking on these legendary summits seemed beyond our reach.

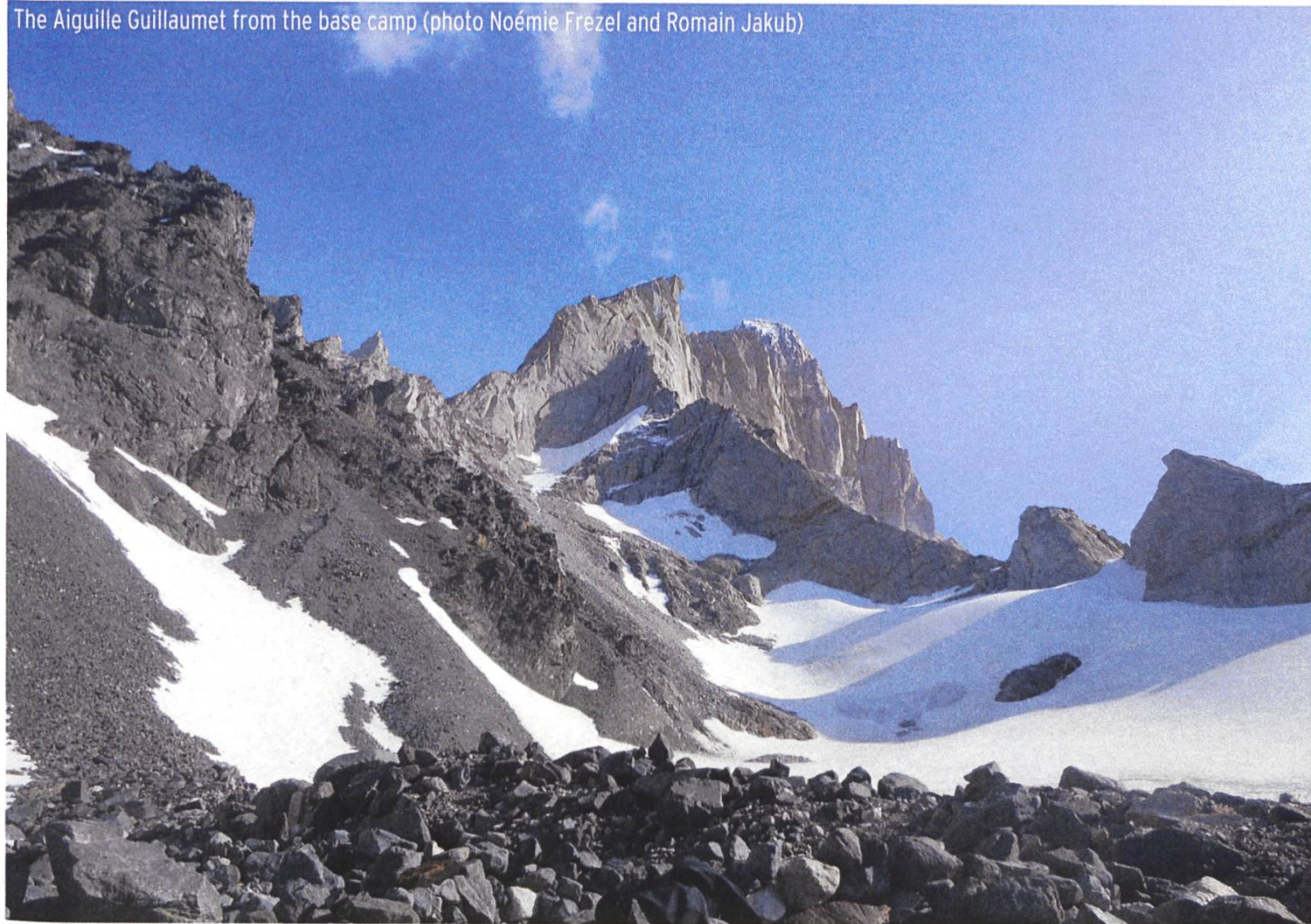
So off we went to the most meridional city in Argentina, Ushuaïa. The contrast between the main street full of shiny restaurants and shops (including the unavoidable Hard Rock Café) and the poor and dirty appearances of the rest of the city was striking. Many people come to Ushuaïa for the cruises to Antarctica, but that was not part of our plans. We spent our first afternoon on the Beagle Channel with sea lion and penguin colonies, before heading to the Parque National Tierra del Fuego. One is allowed only three days in the park, but this was ample time to explore the most worthwhile paths. The southern shore line under a ray of sunshine is a true wonder. We used up the couple of days before our next flight with a short trip to Lago Esmeralda. The intense turquoise water of the lake was quite magical, sparkling in the fickle Patagonian sunshine. The locals, apparently quite fond of the place, seemed amused to see us setting up our tent by the lake, but they let us enjoy the peace and quiet.

Next step: Torres del Paine. To reach this mystical place from Argentina, one must fly to El Calafate before crossing the Chilean

border by bus. We only forgot one thing: bus departures on December 31 and January 1 are few. So we made the best of the two days we had to spend in El Calafate. On the first day, we made a day trip to the Perito Moreno Glacier. Even for those who are used to the Alps, the sight of this huge glacier front plunging into the lake is unique and worth seeing. On the second day we treated ourselves to an organized tour to an “estancia”, a traditional Patagonian farm, which could be reached only by boat. The cruise among the icebergs was an experience. Eventually, we were able to travel to Puerto Natales and from there to the Parque National Torres del Paine. Since several years, due to the increased popularity of the park, all camping sites must be booked in advance. Our alternative was to ask for a climbing permit, which allowed us access to the climbers' campsites located more remotely in the valleys.

We first hiked up the Valle Frances until the end of the official path, where all regular tourists must turn around. From there, we continued into the forest and beyond, up to the flanks of the extraordinary towers of granite. We set our tent behind what we thought was a big enough boulder; it wasn't. There is a reason why all campsites are sheltered deep in the forest: When the wind blows, it is serious stuff. At the end of the night spent holding onto the roof of our tent, one of the tubes eventually bent and broke, ripping open a fair bit of the tent fabric. What followed was emergency packing under freezing rain and a rush back down to the closest rangers' station. The fabric could

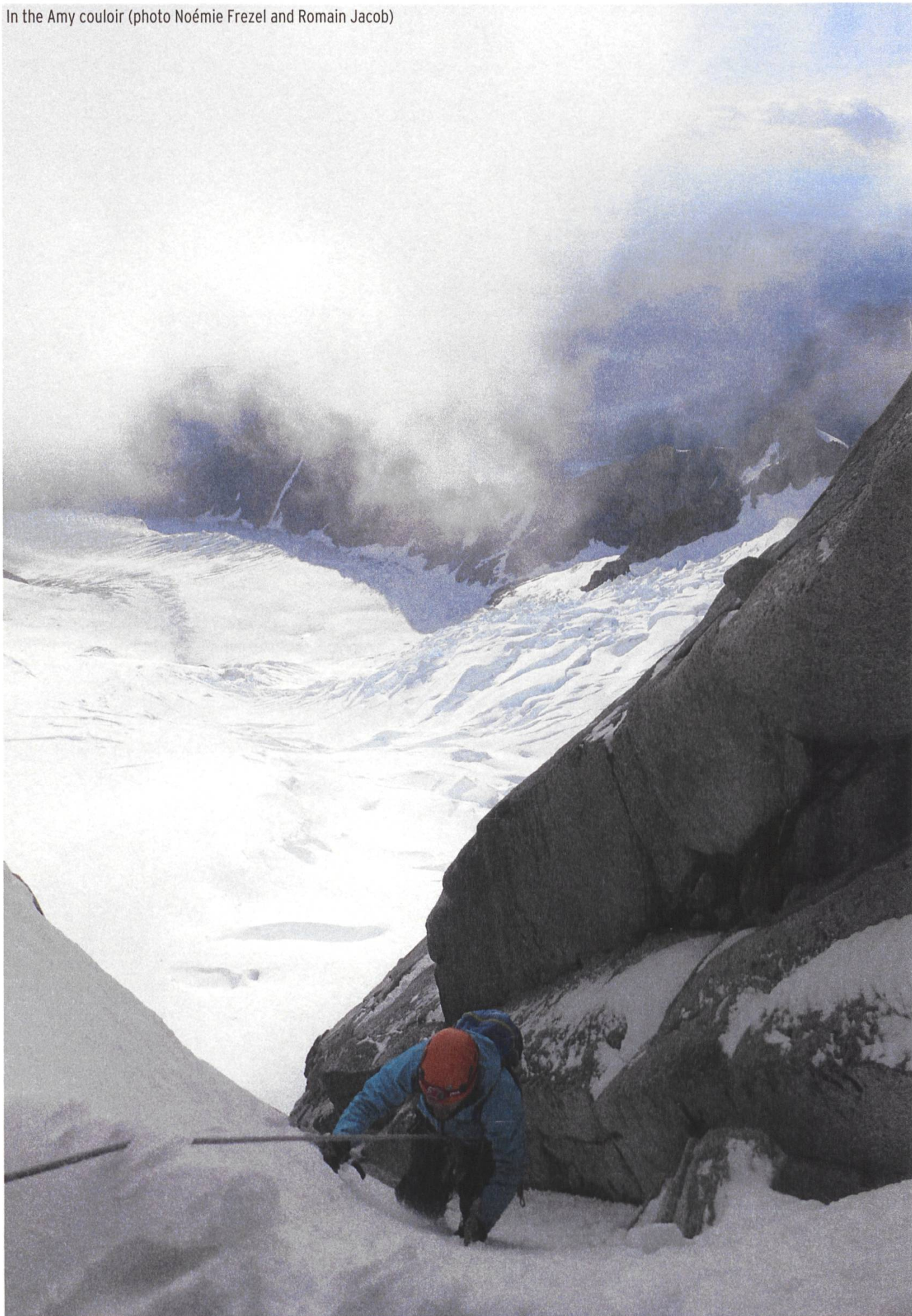
The Aiguille Guillaumet from the base camp (photo Noémie Frezel and Romain Jakub)



Campsite on the shore of Lago Esmeralda (photo Noemie Frezel)



In the Amy couloir (photo Noémie Frezel and Romain Jacob)



be fixed, but the broken tube was more problematic. While we were pondering our options, one of the rangers went into his cabin and came back with a surprising gift: a set of tubes for our exact tent model. "People forget so many things," he said with a smile. Whew! Owning a popular MSR tent model turned out quite useful! We then headed towards the Valle del Silencio, on the eastern side of the park. At the entrance of the valley, the climbers' base was a rustic cabin made of wood and plastic tarps. Judging by the amount of carved wood in the inside, there must have been quite some hours of waiting for suitable weather conditions. We spent a couple of days there in the company of two Czech climbers who were waiting for their chance to climb one of the famous Torres. On the last two days, some Chileans arrived at the camp, more interested in chilling and getting high than anything else. We spent our days hiking in the area, getting wet from heavy rain and then drying in the warm sunshine several times per day. The true Patagonian experience! We closed this chapter of our trip with a hike to the Mirador Torres, one of the three Torres del Paine, before taking the long way back to the park entrance. On the way, we crossed with the thousands of tourists who attempt to reach the Mirador every day. The park is clearly suffering from its popularity.

We finally headed for our last destination, El Chalten. On the way we had a pleasant surprise: the forecast indicated steady sunshine for the next three days! If you have ever been to Patagonia, you know that is a rare opportunity. We had to climb something! Straight off the bus, we ran through the city to find a guides' office that might still be open and eventually found one. "There

is a good window coming up, what can we climb?" was my first sentence. An hour later we were sitting with our guide, discussing route options for the northernmost peak of the Fitz Roy range, the Aiguille Guillaumet. Our preference route was the Montrouge, a rock route on the northwest side. But the summer had been quite bad and the cracks were still filled with ice. Instead, we decided to go through the Amy, the normal snow and mixed route on the west side. Except for some sketchy traverse moves (made somehow harder by our amateur gear: rented strap-on crampons on hiking boots), the route was really fun. "Cumbre!" as the guide said. Summit, sunshine, and the vertiginous view over the north face of Fitz Roy. A pure moment of joy and wonder. This was, without doubt, the highlight of our trip. We spent our final days in Chalten doing some of the classical trails, with beautiful views of the surroundings. And, last but not least, we became dedicated customers of the "Chocoladeria", the perfect place to chill between two hikes, and serving one of the best hot chocolates we have ever had!

Overall, this was a great trip. But whoever decides to visit Patagonia must accept the unpredictability of the weather. You will most probably be cold. You will get wet for sure. But the strong wind will help you to dry off quickly! If we were to redo this trip, we would probably not go to Torres del Paine. Traveling back and forth to Chile took a lot of time and energy. Plus, in the high season, the park is overcrowded and visitors are strictly controlled, which is not exactly the way we enjoy the mountains. So, what next? We shall see. Haila!

Noémie Frezel and Romain Jacob

