



THE CALL OF THE VOID

Trek to imposing ridge of Argentina’s Mt. Fitz Roy rattles nerves of Patagonian climber

GERRY FEEHAN

On a windswept ledge high above Laguna de los Tres, looking up at the formidable summit of Mt. Fitz Roy, I asked our guide if anyone had climbed that intimidating granite spire.

“Oh yes,” Victoria said, “many have made the ascent. But also, some fail.”

She smiled, looked down at the turquoise lake far below and murmured something to herself. “Now, let’s get out of this crazy wind.” She led us back down the trail to the lee of a lichen-covered rock where we ate lunch.

The 22-km return hike from the town of El Chalten to Mt. Fitz Roy’s base is Argentina’s most famous trek. November is springtime in Patagonia, and despite the harsh blowing “viento de la Patagonia,” the trail was busy with backpackers and day-hikers from around the world all converging on the same viewpoint. With room for only one set of boots in many of the narrow, steep, treacherous spots along the final ascent to the alpine lake and view of the iconic peak, courtesy was in order. And it was observed. Invariably people politely gave others room to pass in the more tenuous places. Such civility is a rare, reassuring relic.

The return trail to town was more gradual, winding casually around two more lakes before descending and flowing gently beside the Chorrillo del Salto. When we arrived at the hotel, I asked Vicky what she had said up on that inhospitable ridge: “Besitos ... ciao, ciao.” Then she touched her lips with two fingers and blew them to the wind. “It’s a small kiss ... then goodbye.”

Two of her friends had died up there the previous winter. Bad weather. When someone makes an ill-advised climb in the Andes, Argentines smile softly and whisper solemnly, “So long, see you on the other side.”

The staff at Hotel Don Los Cerros were hospitable. I mistook the scruffy-looking fellow wandering the lobby for a fellow backpacker until he said, “Buenas tardes, please, may I show you your room?”

Laid back and polite, Antonio meticulously demonstrated the operation of the thermostat, lights, mini-bar — even the bathroom faucets (“C” means hot.) Then, in halting Spanglish, he pointed simultaneously to the hallway door and the outside window and sternly advised that under no circumstances were they to be left open at the same time.

“El viento es peligroso!” he warned. Apparently, a crosswind could easily tear a sheet of glass from its frame and send shards crashing down upon the patrons of room 217 (us, that is).

El Chalten was founded in 1985 when some enterprising locals realized the potential to draw visitors to Parque Nacional Los Glaciares in this beautiful but remote part of Argentine Patagonia. Until then, Torres del Paine, just across the Andes in Chile, got all the hiking attention. Roads were built and visitors came. But El Chalten is still a small, quaint village. In high season there are more tourists than residents. A 10-minute saunter gets you from one end of town to the other.

It was only a four-minute walk to the restaurant and we were



The granite spires of Mt Fitz Roy, visible from Argentina’s most famous Patagonian trek, reach up to the sky. PHOTOS: GERRY FEEHAN



Vicky, left, was a lovely taskmaster. The view from room 217 at Hotel Don Los Cerros — with the window shut!



famished after our long day in the mountains. “Perhaps you wait 20 minutes for the table,” promised the owner of La Tapera. “Please have seat on portico.”

We waited over an hour. Patrons exited. New customers walked in and were seated — many of whom had arrived after us. Somehow it was never our turn.

But for sixty-odd entertaining minutes we shared travel memories, old tales and corny jokes with folk from all over the world on that lively porch. We practised our French, Spanish — even a smattering of German — laughing all the while with new-found acquaintances. When Francesco finally invited us in to dine, we were enjoying ourselves so much we nearly declined.

On the third morning Vicky met us in the lobby, unfolded a map and pointed to Laguna Torre, a remote mountain lake where the ice had just come off — and “bergs were

What few trees there were were all windblown, sparse green crowns toppled over in a permanent arboreal comb-over.

still floating — in the sunny Austral spring. She doled out lunch bags, held open the door and off we marched, out of town and up into the Andes. We trooped along obediently while the path steepened and the pace increased. Huffing and puffing, I caught up to her after an hour or so and inquired: “How far?” “Six hours, más o menos.” “Each way?” I asked.

“More or less.” Vicky was a woman of few words. Lovely, but a taskmaster.

For reasons unknown, a new term has invaded mountaineering lexicon. “L’appel du vide.” It means “the call of the void.” It’s the odd sensation one can apparently experience when overlooking a precipice; an illogical, insane but overwhelming desire to jump.

Of course one doesn’t. Instead, you calm down, back away and just relish the not having taken the plunge. Perhaps an appreciation for a life almost forfeited? Gives me vertigo just considering it. I spent a lot of time in high, precarious places in Patagonia and never felt the desire to hurl myself off any of them. I just wanted to crawl the hell back from the ledge.

The next morning, exhausted — but happily invigorated from our Fitz Roy stay — we loaded our gear into the airporter van and hugged goodbye. We were bound

for Ushuaia at the very tip of the continent. I turned to blow Vicky a departing “Besitos ... ciao, ciao” but she was already walking purposefully away at a brisk pace.

The two-hour drive to the El Calafate airport was unremarkable. What few trees there were were all windblown, sparse green crowns toppled over in a permanent arboreal comb-over.

This part of Patagonia is remote and desolate, the type of isolated place where a couple of norteamericano bandits might lie low for a while after robbing a few trains north of the Rio Grande. Like Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. They spent a year here ‘round about 1905 ... at least that’s the way they tell it at La Leona, a quaint little café and museum just down the road from El Chalten. I saw the faded pictures on the wall — and visited the souvenir shop — so it must be true. Más o menos.

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