

CONQUISTADORS OF THE USEFUL



By {ROLANDO GARIBOTTI}
Photos {BETH WALD}

They came from all
across the globe.
others came simply
seeking South America's answer
to the Alps.
Regardless, and standards they set in
a relatively unknown corner of Argentina
shape modern alpinism as we know it.

In February of 1943, Pablo Fisher and Gustavo Kammerer stood at the base of a blank slab only 30 feet below the summit of the highest spire of Cerro Catedral. They carried a rope, a few pitons and a heavy iron hook, which they attempted to toss over the summit.

Fisher threw and retrieved for an hour and a half without success, until the moment the hook flew down, tore through his clothes and lodged in his shoulder.

The two climbers were Germans who had been driven to Argentina by the pressures of war, and drawn south to San Carlos de Bariloche, an oasis of mountains and lakes often described as South America's answer to the Swiss Alps.

While a few of the easier summits around Bariloche had been climbed, Torre Principal, the most technical, was the big prize. A year before, two other Germans had tried to climb it, but retreated at the slab as well. Fisher and Kammerer had also been turned back on their first attempt. The two pulled the hook out, luckily from only a minor wound in

Fisher's shoulder, and retreated again. A few days later they were back. This time they carried the closest thing to a bolt kit that existed at the time, and in seven hours of arduous work Fisher drilled seven one-inch thick metal rods, which allowed them, finally, to reach the summit. So began the storied climbing history of the incredible Frey.

Today, climbers from the rest of Argentina, South and North America, and Europe journey to Frey. Some stop here as part of a larger Patagonian tour, heading to or returning from the Fitzroy region, but many make it their main destination. From late December to late February the camping area is crammed with multi-colored tents, and climbers speaking many different languages.

The spires and other climbing in the Cerro Catedral area are generally referred to as Frey after Emilio Frey, an early pioneer and climbing club founder who backed construction of a stone climbing hut on the shore of Laguna Toncek, at the base of the main group of spires. The hut still stands.

OUR homemade hangers were far from adequate, with my own being the very worst.



The

first time I hiked to the Frey hut, I was 8, complained the whole way, and hoped never to return.

Little did I know that I would repeat that hike, up a beautiful forested valley from the base of the neighboring ski area into the Cerro Catedral Spires, hundreds of times, and spend many months living at the Frey hut.

My family had moved to Bariloche a year before, also evading a kind of war. In 1976, on my fifth birthday, when we lived in Rosario, central Argentina, the military overthrew the existing government in a tumultuous coup d'état. Being so young, I did not understand what had happened and simply wondered why none of my friends had shown up to my birthday party.

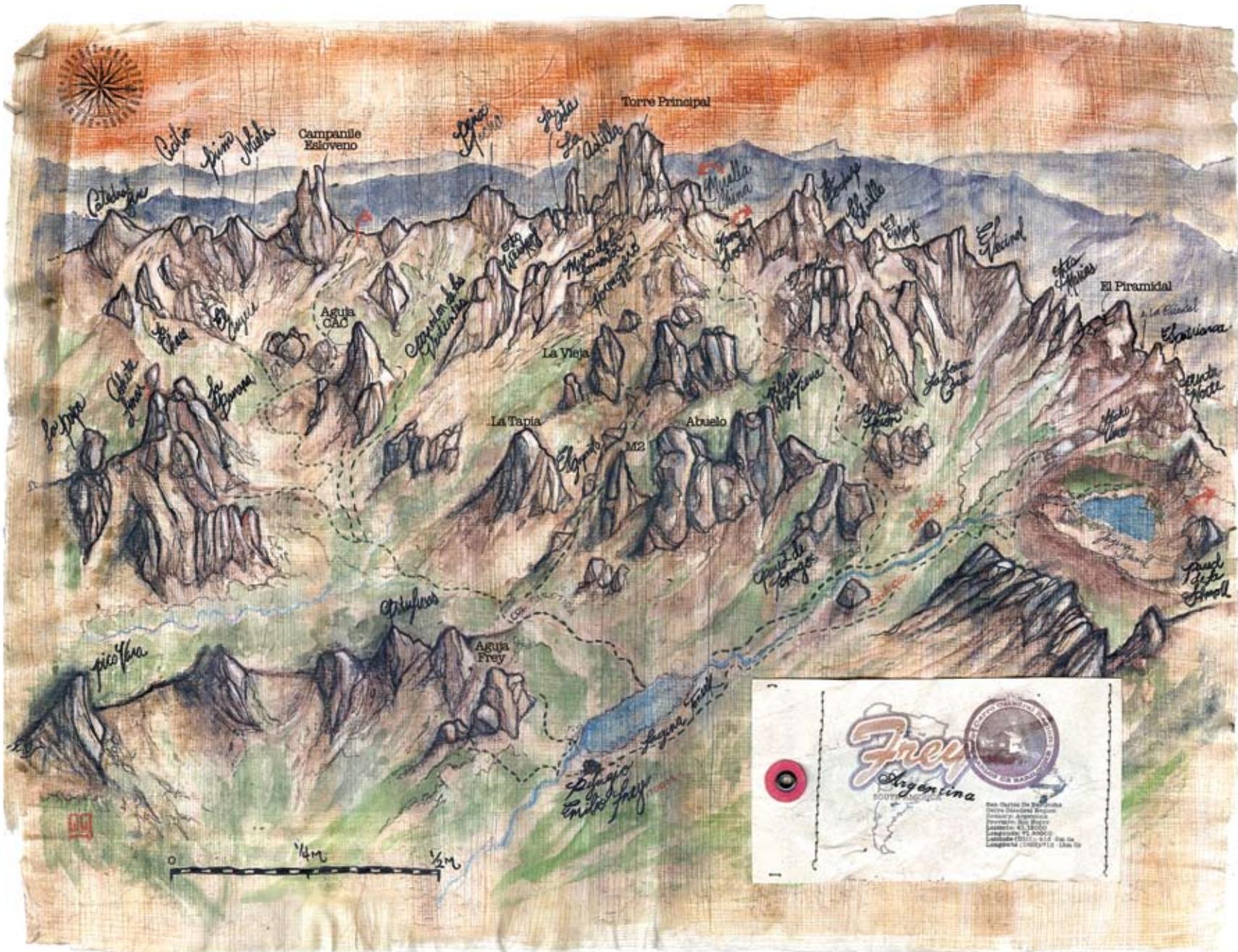
During the next seven years, almost 30,000 people disappeared at the hands of the military. My father was a university

professor, and the chaos destroyed his work environment. We moved to Brazil, and two years later moved to Bariloche, which had one of the most remote and apolitical universities in Argentina. I still remember my parents telling me that we would go live somewhere in the mountains. Having never seen one, I could not imagine what mountains might look like, nor how they would shape my life.

Over the years, the three-hour hike would come to feel like returning home as I crested the last rise to the hut, looking directly into Laguna Toncke and its surrounding spires. Some are small and close enough to be a beginner's dream: My first climb in the area was the 30-foot Perfil de Mujer, and 20 years later I still recall my elation at the summit. Others such as Torre Principal and Campanile offer four- to 10-pitch routes, with one- to two-hour approaches from the hut. The rock, yellow granite reminiscent of Idaho's Sawtooths, is almost always perfect.

Campanile's steep and featured granite is perhaps the best; La Tapia offers the best slab climbing; Piramidal has the best cracks; Principal has the longest routes and most scenic summit. Every crag and every spire is particular in its own way, offering a pleasant variety. During summer—December to March—the weather can be very mild, with much sun and little wind, but the rest of the year it can sometimes pose challenges not unlike those found in the Fitzroy massif 800 miles to the south.

In the early 1900s, rumors of the beauty of the mountains and lakes attracted immigrants from other areas of Argentina, neighboring Chile, and several European countries. Some of the Europeans came before World War I, others, like Fisher and Kammerer, soon after it in search of work and better living conditions. In 1931 two European immigrants, Otto Meiling and Reynaldo Knapp, and two



Argentines, Emilio Frey and Juan J. Neumeyer, founded Club Andino Bariloche, a mountaineering and ski club that would become quite renowned.

Climbing activity around Bariloche and in Catedral surged when a large contingent of Europeans, having supported the losing side, arrived after World War II. Among them was a group from Slovenia, which included Dinko Bertonecij, who in 1952, with Francisco Jerman, did the first ascent of Campanile, the second-most important spire in the area. Dinko remained Cerro Catedral's driving force well into the late 1960s.

Many locals followed suit. The three most gifted climbers Argentina ever produced, Jose Luis Fonrouge, Sebastian de la Cruz and Teo Plaza, all cut their teeth here. Fonrouge, best known for the second ascent and first alpine-style of Cerro Fitzroy via his Supercanaleta in 1964, became Dinko's protégée, and in the early 1960s they established a number of new routes. Some of them, such as Fonrouge-Bertonecij on Campanile, remain classics to this day.

The generation of Bariloche climbers immediately before me was a one-man show. "Seba" de la Cruz was talented beyond reason and, after climbing in the Cerro Catedral spires for a few years, went on to climb Fitzroy in 1984 at age 16. A year later he did the mountain's first winter ascent. By age 25, he had climbed the North Ridge of K2, skied to the South Pole, traversed the entire Patagonian icecap, climbed the North Face of the Eiger, the Salathé in a day and Cerro Torre. Then, suddenly, tired by a few too many back-to-back trips, he called it quits. These days Seba, a father of two, lives a quiet life running a small hotel at the base of Cerro Tronador, the glaciated peak that dominates the landscape west of Bariloche.

I looked up to Seba and imagined myself one day doing things in the mountains, too. His example made going to the peaks in southern Patagonia seem like a natural next step. Despite growing up in the same town, sharing the same birthday and being only two years apart, we only climbed together a dozen times. I still recall vividly two consecutive days we spent together in early 1988, when we climbed two bolt-less first ascents, Peor es Casarse on Aguja Frey and Califia Fosil on Campanile. Today, despite retro-bolting, the routes remain serious undertakings.

I progressed through Club Andino's ranks, first on skis, then hiking and climbing, dreaming of mountains like Fitzroy. Soon our little climbing group became quite independent. There were seven or eight of us, with four of us attending the same high school, so it was easy to find partners for after-school cragging or weekend outings. Friday evenings we would often take the last bus to the trailhead and then spend the weekend climbing or hanging out, depending on the weather.

When I was 15, several of us put up a short new route on a blank slab that required bolts. None of us had ever placed a bolt, but we were lucky enough to have the son of a hardware store owner among us to talk us through it. Our projected route was all of 45 feet long. We had seen bolts in magazines and in films, and, with a Eurocentric influence in our culture, thought they seemed like a very good idea. We lacked the foresight to understand any consequences to our actions.

Back in 1943 Fisher and Kammerer had unknowingly thrown the first stone in any future ethical debate. They climbed at a time when few others visited these areas, and couldn't have envisioned the symbolic implications of their seven one-inch metal rods. In the 40 years since, very few bolts had been drilled

at Frey, and all were placed exclusively as aid bolts in order to reach summits. The first bolts for free climbing were six unfortunate retro bolts that a visiting climber added in the early 1980s to El Frente, a multi-pitch climb on La Vieja with a terrifying reputation.

Like other youngsters, we were eager to do something different to separate us from the past. We placed three bolts on our little climb, and without even knowing it, created the first sport climb in thousands of miles. A few months before, a friend had brought a bag of pharmacy-bought magnesium carbonate-chalk—and between the white marvel and our proud three bolts, we felt ready to storm the world.

Around that time, in the mid 1980s and less than two years into my climbing career, I was lucky enough to run into the Swiss expatriate Peter Luthi, who became my hero and the most important influence I ever had. Among other things, he taught me how to place gear properly, saving me from many potential bad falls. “Pedro” still today spends much time in and around Refugio Frey. He had climbed extensively in Patagonia and the Alps, including an early ascent of Fitzroy with Reinhard Karl. Pedro has always been a loner, and often climbed and still climbs solo. His solos inspired me to follow suit. At first they involved little more than high bouldering, but building upon these low-level risk ventures and small successes, I began to gain self-confidence.

“Fear makes the wolf bigger than he is,” says an old German proverb, but learning to handle it is crucial. My opinion is that committing climbs and soloing can be great teachers, requiring knowing one’s limits and learning to judge terrain intelligently. Pedro’s lessons represented the climbing philosophy that reigned at the time, one that accepted risk and personal responsibility.

For a teenager, the internal rewards of commitment and responsibility were an unexpected blessing. They made me stronger and more able to shrug off the pressure that others, particularly in school, exerted. I no longer found it a stigma to be the one kid in the class that had never, and would never, set foot in any of Bariloche’s renowned discos.

In the late 1980s, the well-known Swiss climber Michel Piola visited Frey. Michel is likely the most prolific new router in the world, having established thousands

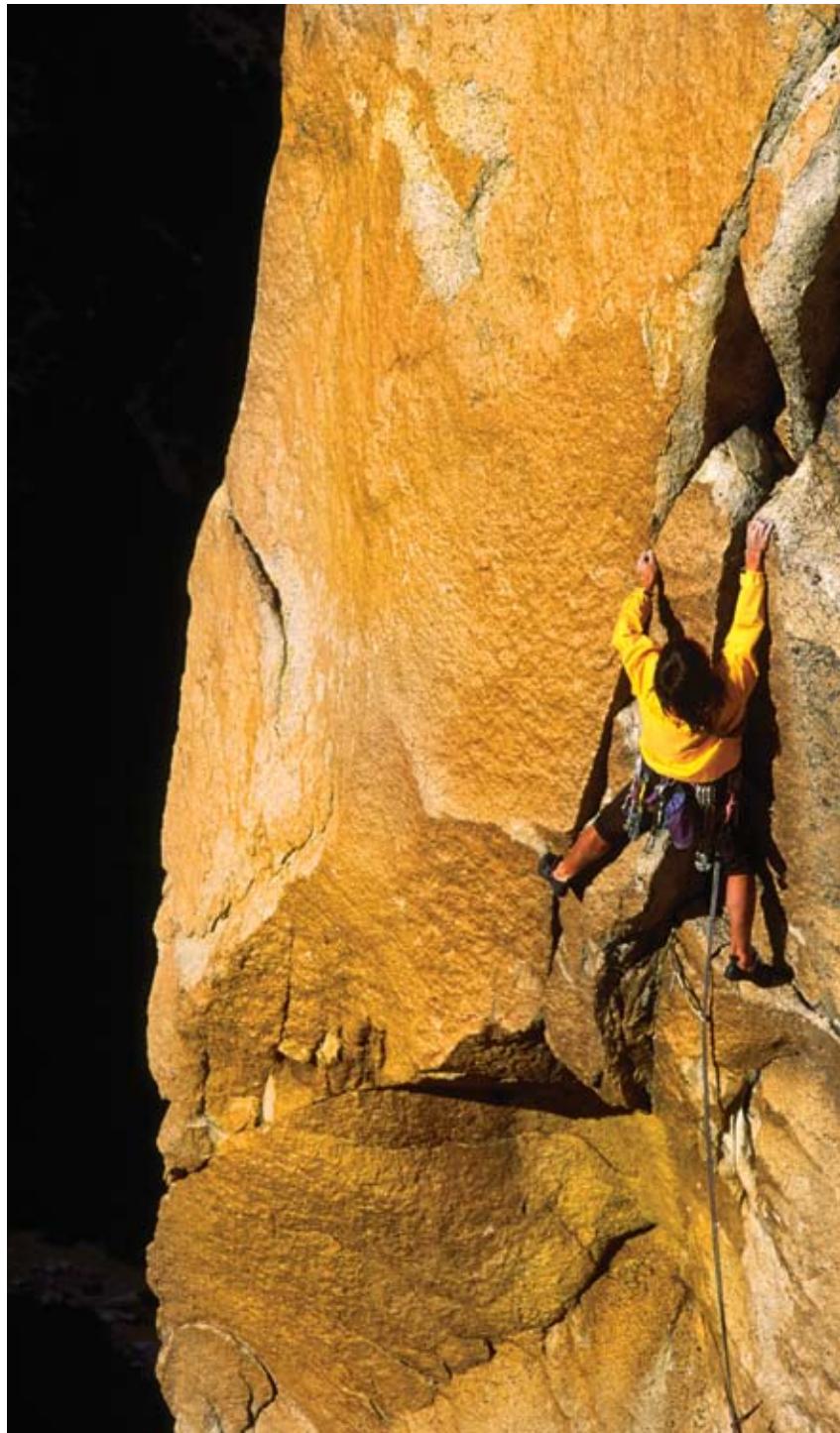
of new routes in the Alps, Madagascar, Trango, Morocco and Patagonia. His first new routes were on the Alps’ most difficult faces, routes like the Ghilini-Piola on the north face of the Eiger and the Piola-Steiner on the north face of the Matterhorn. He later became one of the first to use bolts in the Alps. At first, his approach was minimalist; the nine bolts on Voyage selon Gulliver on the Grand Capucin are perhaps the best example, but soon he took a more aggressive course. His Anouk on the Petite Jorasses was allegedly the first route in the Alps to sport more than 100 bolts.

During his first visit he spent only five days at Frey, but he established what at the time were four of the most difficult and committing routes in the area, including the four-pitch Deriva de los Incontinentes in La Tapia. Climbing ground-up, and hand-placing widely spaced bolts, he set a high benchmark for what we came to consider good style. Repeating those routes, we saw that Michel’s intention was to maximize the rewards of every meter covered.

For a couple of years we attempted to imitate Michel, running it out between bolts as far as we could. It was not only the adventure that attracted us, but practicality. We had no access to bolt



at crucial moments on alpine climbs, Inevitably reach back into my old Frey toolbox



hangers, and since making them at home was difficult and time-consuming, we used as few as possible. Our homemade hangers were far from adequate, with my own being the very worst. I made them with 1mm-thick stainless steel—they resembled cutout soda cans—and had such small holes that only certain carabineers would fit.

Michel returned two years later with a power drill and a safer, more mainstream vision of climbing, to establish another half-dozen routes. These climbs are extremely aesthetic and enjoyable, with Objetivo Luna and Imaginate perhaps the best examples, but they lack the commitment and adventure of his original routes. This second visit had a powerful long-term effect: it made first ascensionists feel responsible for creating enjoyable, safe routes, and turned new-routing from an esoteric personal pursuit into community service. This very European vision, often referred to as “escalade plaisir” (“pleasure climbing”), justifies bolts for comfort, accepts bolted belays—whether needed or not—and considers run-outs an unreasonable risk. It differs greatly from the adventurous approach that English and North American climbers, in particular, tend to apply in backcountry areas. Still, I owe Michel a lot. Without him we would never have gone anywhere.

One of the sole visitors to espouse an adventurous approach was the English climber Paul Pritchard, who traveled extensively in South America in the early 1990s. Climbing on natural gear, Paul added three new routes on Piramidal and one in La Vieja, but, more important, he

developed a close friendship with Teo Plaza, Argentina’s most inspired climber. Teo was of the generation of climbers immediately following mine. He grew up in the flatlands and moved to Bariloche under the pretense of going to college, which he soon abandoned. He was extraordinarily driven and had a short-lived but very fruitful alpine-climbing career. At age 20, between 1992 and 1993, he climbed Fitzroy, Cerro Torre, a new route on Aguja Standhardt’s east face, a difficult new route on the east face of Paine’s Central Tower, and a new route on Paine’s North Tower, the latter two with his fellow “Barilochenses” Diego Luro and Ramiro Calvo, who were then 17 and 18. Teo’s “beautiful life,” as the Patagonia maestro Ermanno Salvaterra described it, came to an end when all nine participants of a mountain guide’s course, including the instructors, were caught in an avalanche that killed him and two others. The route No-Teo-olvidaremos, a play on words for “We will not forget you, Teo” climbs the south face of Torre Principal’s secondary summit and, providing five pitches of sustained, improbable climbing up a granite monolith, is undoubtedly the best climb in the whole area.

Despite the widely respected climbs of Pritchard and Plaza, the search for safer climbs, often dubbed “well-crafted,” continued after Piola’s second visit. Unfortunately, hand in hand with “escalade plaisir,” came retro-bolting, then bolt-chopping. Friction arose between some of the “older” climbers, myself included, and the more recent activists who promoted retro-bolting to



VISITING FREY

» FREY IS LOCATED WITHIN NAHUEL HUAPI NATIONAL PARK, THE FIRST NATIONAL PARK IN ARGENTINA, ESTABLISHED IN 1934. PLEASE BE THOUGHTFUL AND EXERCISE A "LEAVE NO TRACE" ETHIC.

{SEASON}

December to March. In January Frey is bustling with hikers and climbers February is calmer.

{GETTING THERE}

From Buenos Aires to San Carlos de Bariloche, by bus (20 hours, approximately \$100) or by plane (two hours, approximately \$300). From downtown Bariloche take public transportation (leaves every hour), to Villa Catedral, located 15 miles away, at the base of the ski area. A well-marked trail starts at the far end of the parking lot where the bus drops you off, and a three-hour hike takes you to the Frey hut. For general info about hiking and climbing in Frey and the surrounding area, visit Club Andino Bariloche, located downtown (20 de Febrero 30) or visit www.clubandino.com.ar.

{WHERE TO STAY IN BARILLOCHE}

There are countless hostels and hotels with a wide range of prices, but Pension Arko (Guemes 691, Tel: 54-2944-423109) is a favorite among visiting climbers.

{GUIDEBOOKS}

The only guidebook available is a cheap climbers' guide that can be bought at Club Andino. It includes topos to 90 percent of the climbs, and basic information about how to get to each of the formations, but leaves room for a bit of good-hearted adventure and exploration.

{REFUGIO FREY}

The hut can be a bit crowded, especially in January, but the ambiance is very relaxed and welcoming. The hut keepers serve dinner and breakfast and some evenings make pizza (www.refugiofrey.com.ar). If you need route recommendations they will be your best source. There is a climbers/hikers kitchen in the hut, but if you intend to cook your own meals you will be better off bringing your own stove. Take any multi-fuel gas stove and for fuel buy paint thinner (solvente), the local equivalent of white gas, at a local hardware store (ferreteria) or paint shop (pintureria).

{CAMPING}

Free camping is available around Laguna Toncek. Please be sure to use the restrooms located by the hut. You can get drinking water from the creek that feeds into the lake.

{THE CLIMBING}

Routes range from single to nine-pitch climbs (250 meters max). The best are in the four-pitch range (120 meters). Grades go from 5.6 to 5.13. Some of the best climbs are in the mid 5.11 range, although many moderate climbs are superb. There is also some very good bouldering.

{EQUIPMENT}

Take a set of nuts, a double set of cams and two ropes. Bring a rain jacket and pants, a light fleece, a light insulated jacket, hat and gloves as well as shorts and T-shirts.

{GUIDE SERVICES}

Argentina was recently accepted into the UIAGM (international guides association). Several of the fully certified Argentine guides live in Bariloche. A list of these guides, including contact information, can be found at www.aagm.com.ar/guias.htm. Look for those that are UIAGM certified (next to the name is written: GAM UIAGM 2005).

{OTHER THINGS TO DO}

Visit the temperate rain forest at Puerto Blest, on the far end of Lago Nahuel Huapi. Hike to some of the other huts in the surrounding mountains. Go sport-climbing to a dozen areas located around Bariloche (a guidebook by Pablo Pontoriero can be found at Club Andino). Go dancing in any of the many high-tech discos. Head west, to Chile, and climb in Cochamo, South America's answer to Yosemite (www.stonedance.com). Gorge at one of the many local "chocolaterias."

make the formerly committing climbs accessible to everyone.

The question of what is appropriate in terms of safety remains elusive. Different individuals have different needs and expect different paybacks from their outdoor adventures. I personally wrestle with certain primal instincts that make me welcome risk for its soothing properties, an outlook in which I am certainly not alone. New-routing is a creative act, one that exemplifies diversity, while retro-bolting turns a blind, arrogant eye on history and creativity.

Much has changed in Frey since I first climbed there more than 20 years ago. Although bolts are now found on almost every spire, the biggest change has been philosophical. The concepts of risk and personal responsibility have mutated.

I often wonder how the advent of a more cautious approach influences those new to climbing. Since Teo's passing, Frey has failed to produce any climbers that even remotely come close to displaying the kind of vision and fantasy that he or De la Cruz had.

Maybe it doesn't matter, and maybe few people care about such things today. But from the mountains I have climbed I have drawn lessons I wouldn't trade for anything and haven't found anyplace else. At crucial moments on those alpine climbs, I inevitably reach back into my old Frey toolbox and fiddle through free-solos and committing ascents to find the right mindset to see me through.

In early 2005 I returned to Frey, because, while one can find any number of arguments against the use of bolts, no argument justifies bad bolts. Not only were the many homemade bolt hangers placed in the mid- to late 80s less than adequate, but the self-drive bolts that are still often used have very low holding power and age badly. Since my own "soda can" hangers were so very bad, and since I'd personally placed hundreds of self-drive bolts, I have always felt guilty and responsible. On many of my early routes, bolts are far enough apart that a broken hanger could result in serious injury or death.

Over a three-week period I replaced, with no new additions, 270 old self-drive bolts with 12mm stainless steel bolts

and hangers. Many of them were on my own routes, but more than half were on those of Piola and other climbers. I also replaced a couple of Fonrouge's hand-made ring-bolts from his 1961 Fonrouge-Bertoncelj route on Campanile, a great milestone at the time. As I worked, and looked westward into a darkened sky and a fast-approaching storm, I was relieved to think that in spite of all the changes over the years, I still found intensity in the very same scenery, and the very same holds.

The previous day I had revisited the three-pitch Ultimo Recurso to replace its 20-some bolts. Its name—The Last Alternative—summarized the relationship that my high-school friends and I had had with Frey. We had named it thinking that if at any point in life the thought of suicide seriously crossed our minds, we could always return here.

Since then, though life has naturally grown more complex than any of us could have imagined, every time I return to Frey my heart jumps. Here I found refuge when I needed it most, during my teenage years. In the climbs I found a much-needed sense of self-worth, in the hut keepers I found sympathetic surrogate parents when my own could not understand my choices, and in a tent by the lake I found the joy of the first kiss. Certainly no place has given me more. High on Campanile, weaving from huecos to little edges on a sharp arête, looking west and south into endless mountains and lakes, with glaciated volcanoes floating on the horizon and condors circling overhead, I often wonder, what else could anyone need?

Rolando Garibotti's many major climbs include Cerro Torre, Fitzroy, Cerro Standhardt and Cerro Murallón, and solo ascents of Saint Exupery, Guillaumet, Mermoz and Mariano Moreno in Patagonia, and a 24 hour ascent of the Infinite Spur on Mount Foraker, Alaska.

He was born in Italy and raised in Bariloche, and has lived in Boulder for the past 13 years. In spite of contradictory passports, he considers himself a citizen of Bariloche, where, one day, he hopes to enjoy his old age.

