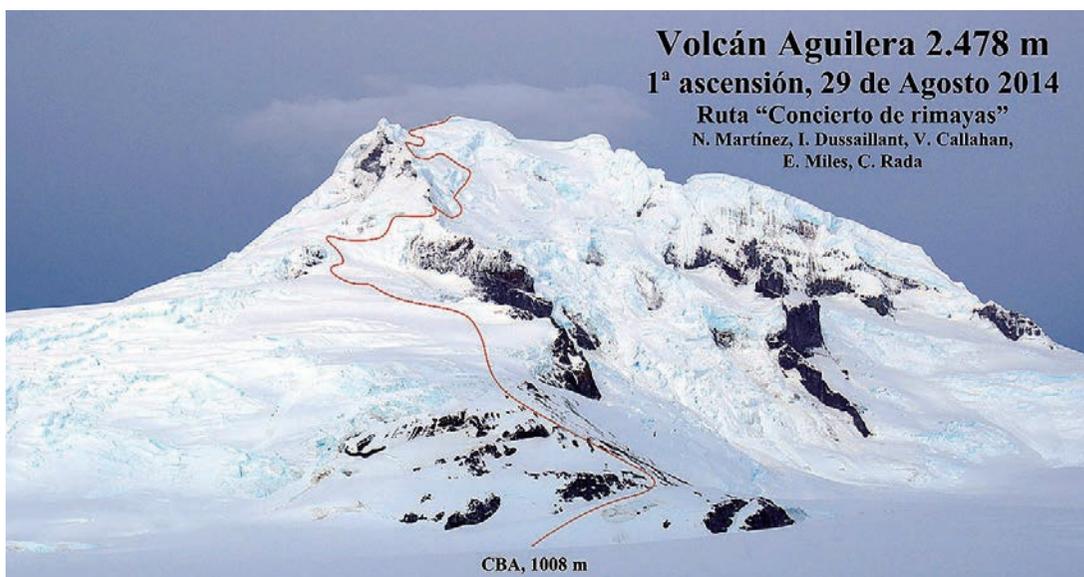
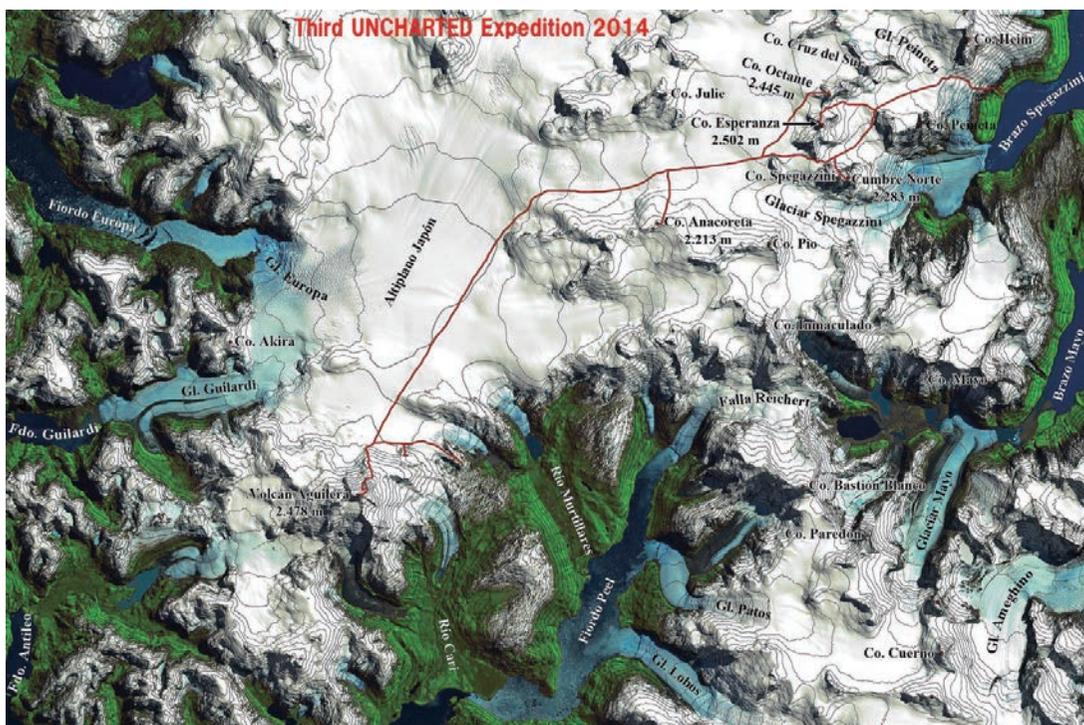


CAMILO RADA

# Volcan Aguilera first ascent and four other virgin summits on South Patagonian Icefield



## History and Explorers

In one piece of history, in 1922 Ramon left behind the city of Punta Arenas and his beloved Anita. There, another of Anita's suitors pays the mailman to neither deliver Ramon's letters nor send him the ones she wrote. During two years of agonizing wait, Monsignor Aguilera, who was like a father to Ramon gives strength to Anita to wait, despite not receiving any news from her beloved.

In another piece, the indefatigable explorer and Salesian priest Alberto M. De Agostini in 1933 reached the summit of Mount Mayo, an imposing set of needles that rise above Lake Argentino. For him, more than a mountaineering achievement, it was an observatory from which he identified new landmarks to fill the blank map. One of the pieces discovered by De Agostini was an imposing mountain rising afar, in the stormy region of fjords between the ice and the sea: Monte Aguilera named in honor of Monsignor Abraham Aguilera, the first Chilean bishop of the Magallanes province.

The first to set foot on that remote kingdom observed by De Agostini was the legendary explorer Bill Tilman, whose tales of *Mischief* motivated young explorers to follow his footsteps. One such was the British Matthew Hickman, who organized the expedition "Patagonia 85" behind the mysterious Mount Aguilera, mixing science and mountaineering in one grand expedition. After a hard approach they managed to reach the base of the mountain and explore its South, East and North slopes, but all the lines they saw were discarded, considering them either unclimbable or too dangerous. Further plans of exploring the NW face or doing a traverse on the icecap were dramatically frustrated by a two week storm that kept them tent bound in a small hill at the southern end of the Altiplano Japon (named by a Japanese team that had attempted to cross the ice cap in the early '70s), in great contrast with the beautiful weather they enjoyed during the approach through the forest. Despite the unfortunate timing of the weather, they conducted a great deal of exploration and confirmed the suspicion – due to its great prominence - that Cerro Aguilera was in fact a stratovolcano, thus to be renamed Volcán Aguilera.

Scattered pieces of this story were the attempts by the Japanese led by Eiho Otani in 1989, and the British attempt led by James "skip" Novak in 1993 together with Julian Freeman-Attwood and Frank MacDermott, aboard the now legendary *Pelagic*.

In 2003, another Briton: Dr. David Hillebrandt, made his first attempt to reach Aguilera, along with Nick Banks, Allan Richards and Chris Smith. After being frustrated by brutal and unforgiving weather, Hillebrandt returned in 2004, when he was able to solve the difficult approach through the Cari river basin and achieved the highest point to-date, reaching 1,300 meters of elevation. From this high point, Hillebrandt could see a feasible route to the summit, but was forced to turn back due to time and supplies. A third attempt in 2005 was again confounded by poor weather, not even reaching his previous high point, still a long way from the summit at 2.478 m.

In 2013, a Chilean team led by Abdo Fernandez, after a tough month-long fight, confirmed the immense difficulties of access from the sea. Although the mountain is just 8 km from the coast, it is guarded by swamps, dense forests and thickets, which being combined with harsh weather had thwarted all previous attempts via this "logical" access.

## **UNCHARTED Mount Aguilera Expedition 2014**

Along with Natalia Martinez (Argentina), in 2014 I decided to make real our dream to be part of the story of this untamed volcano. We added three friends to the team: The Chileans Inés Dussailant and Viviana Callahan, together with the American Evan Miles.



First view of Volcan Aguilera 2,478m seeking a climbing route © Evan Miles



South face of Volcan Aguilera © Natali Martinez



Beautiful dawn of Lake Argentino, Punta Bander © Evan Miles



Barrier of floating ice in the entrance of Brazo Spegazzini © Evan Miles



Navigating in full speed © Camilo Rada



Disembarking in the coast of Brazo Spegazzini of Lake Argentino © Natali Martinez

After considering all options for access to the mountain, we decided to learn from our predecessors and exchange the attractive but treacherous 8 km access from the sea shore for 50 kilometres across the ice cap. While much longer, it would lead us through interesting untrodden terrain. What could be better? We would have to cross valleys and passes that had not yet seen the human footprint. In addition eliminating the long sea approach rendered it much cheaper and despite everything we felt like the ice was a more natural and manageable terrain for us, not at all sea creatures.

On 16 August 2014 the dream turned into reality. In the wake of our boat we left behind the months of preparations. It is a very special moment when you finally are “abandoned” in a remote corner, with no phones, money or help. It’s only your team and mountains. Paradoxically when you finally face complete uncertainty, things appear clearer than ever. We faced a complex and yet delightfully simple problem ... going from “A” to “B”.

The photogrammetric flights of US Air Force in 1945 revealed most of the hidden mysteries of the Patagonian ice, wonderful! But at the same time they eliminated forever the possibility of reviving the emotion De Agostini felt on Cerro Mayo, gaining with every step a broader view on unknown terrain, a revelation to human knowledge. The XXI century maps and satellite images anticipated that we have four key milestones to overcome: Forest, the crevasse fields of Peineta Norte glacier, Spegazzini pass and Aguililera volcano climb. Without any means to move around the lake, to try other approaches to the ice was not an option, it was from here or nothing, so each milestone was “make or break”, a Russian roulette of obstacles and hazards.

## The Forest and Crevasses

It has always disturbed me that in Chile we have access to many mountain through-roads carved by the mining industry that destroys those same mountains. In the American west coast the logging roads plays a similar role, providing access to a fantastic landscape while destroying it. Even at Lago Argentino, there are bagual cows, untamed animals that inhabit these less-accessible remote forests by thousands, displacing native species such as the Huemul, a native Patagonian deer.

Ethical or not, we did not hesitate to follow its trails, just hoping against encounters, as they are famous for their aggressiveness, almost like a cattle equivalent of William Wallace avenging his fellows condemned to slaughter. With joy we found easy access to the icefield..



Accessing to snow bridge over crevasses  
© Natalia Martinez



Cerro Peineta west face © Natalia Martinez

The plateau where we expected to start pulling sleds (and forget about the tedious portages) was 1,300 meters above our base camp, and above the forest we faced the Peineta Norte glacier which received us with a murky crevasse field. It was crossed once by an Argentinean expedition almost ten years before, but without that piece of information we might have labelled it as insurmountable when considering access options on the satellite images. But it was still unknown to us, and the retreat of the glacier played against us. We hoped the winter and its snow were in our favour.

Under the skis the crevasses passed one after another, we watched the ground trying to guess where the colossal cracks were hiding under the uniform surface, which were readily visible in the satellite images. Probing here and there, we were gradually moving forward as the slope died out to finally reach the plateau, where we left a very well-flagged deposit, with our loads and a transmitting avalanche beacon in the case of a heavy snow storm arrives before our return.

## The pass

From the deposit on, each step opened virgin territory, each sight was a gift we treasure in our memory, and each photo was a unique document, the first record of an unknown corner of our planet. Extensive snow hills stretched for several kilometres until a range of virgin peaks and vertical walls, that offered two weak points only, which we called Esperanza and Spegazzini passes, homonyms of the hills over them.

We faced again the Russian roulette on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, the revolver drum turned again as we shortened the distance to the Spegazzini pass, mist covering everything and enhancing the suspense. We didn't know if we would be able to cross the pass on foot, on skis or with a tricky rappel. We struggled up the last metres as towing the sleds took us to the limits of our strength, with our noses almost touching the snow we claimed the inches one by one. Suddenly "click", the firing pin strikes again an empty chamber. The fog is behind and in front of us a gentle snow slope leading to the horizon is revealed.



Japan Plateau (Altiplano Japon) © Natalia Martinez

30 km of plains and gentle descents followed, with clouds that formed over, under and between us, two days travelling through a parallel world where time is elongated and the mind flies while your feet move forward on their own.

The heart, trying to keep up with the legs sends torrents of blood to the brain, keeping us alert and far from the torpor that one can quickly fall into in daily life during a similar period of peace and absence of stimuli. This kind of traverse gives the mind a blank canvas to express itself, create thoughts and show us what is inside, those ideas that are truly ours, a window into ourselves. Ideas and memories present themselves as dreams flashing before your eyes, and only the icy wind on your face and fingers, the tug of the sledge, and the ache alternating between stomach and muscles keep you tied to this world.

After descending an unnamed glacier and going around an unnamed mountain, the expansive Altiplano Japón revealed to us, and in the background, afar, an amalgam of rock and ice truncated by thick grey clouds. That was our mountain! Aguilera! We were finally there, it was just in front of our eyes but still hidden, shrouded by the mystery that surrounds it.

It took 10 days of effort just to get us to the peak's base, but the relief, joy and smiles were framed in the same routine we got used to over the last week.

All that rain in winter was an unexpected event on the plains of the Patagonian Ice, at 1,000 meters of elevation, and the devastating effect on our wall mirrored what was happening to the glaciers all around us, a very disturbing reflection in the context of a marked decline observed in the vast majority of the Patagonian glaciers. Looking back, I wonder if there was a connection with the fact that 2014 was the warmest year of the last 130 on record. It is surprising to think that even in the most remote corners of the planet echoes the sound of its industrial centres.

## The Volcano



Fine day, checking gears © Evan Miles



Camp at the foot of Aguilera © Natalia Martinez

We decided to launch an attempt to summit on August 29<sup>th</sup>. We left at 4:30 am, wading crevasses and any other obstacles that became part of our square-meter universe, as big as the beam of our headlights. Surrounded by clouds, we wondered if this attempt would be useless or if it had even a small chance of success.

We gain meters quickly as clouds gradually disperse and the clarity of pre-dawn light expanded our tiny world. When the golden rays of the sun finally broke the horizon, the uncertainty and darkness transmuted into a magical space, full of hope and joy. Immensely happy and somehow proud for the unexpected beauty of “our” volcano.

With an infusion of energy, we face the first technical climbing steps, a 50-60° slope of compact rime.

Among whimsical ice mushrooms we reached the North ridge, featuring sheer drops to the west, we climbed up looking desperately for a pass in that direction, and finally, just before the ridge transforms into wall. A nice and easy pass let us continue towards the summit.



Fortunately finding easy route to the northwest face © Natalia



Northwest face, seracs, crevasses and glacier  
© Natalia Martinez



Finding route to north ridge  
© Evan Miles

This good news further enhanced our joy and optimism explosion. In five hours we had passed 1,000 meters of altitude, it was 10am and there were only 500 meters left to the summit. The terrain to be covered on the North wall looked pretty good, the weather seemed to be improving and we even dared to think we could get back to camp before dark. How naive! Ultimately 'challenge' is not

something intrinsic to mountains, and has more to do with the difference between our expectations and reality. And unwittingly, our disproportionate optimism was brutally increasing the challenge of what was coming ahead.

A narrow but very promising couloir surprises us with a humongous and unbridgeable bergschrund of overhanging walls. We started to realize that the terrain which looked quite promising was in fact a labyrinth, and as in any labyrinth, retracing our steps to try again became the only way to progress.

So we did, and tried to the right, passing two huge seracs covered in icicles.

The terrain was not very technical but extremely intricate and tangled, scattered in crevasses and bergschrunds, therefore forcing us to move roped, but at the same time the slope was such that we had to place protection, altogether severely slowing us down.

Soon we found ourselves in yet another dead end, having to backtrack again as the clouds gradually lowered, blurring the vision of the infinite landscapes we had enjoyed before.

Another gigantic bergschrund blocked us, contouring along it we lose elevation and after traversing 200 meters on a steep slope it gave no signs of abating. As we regrouped to assess the situation, the fog thinned momentarily showing a pass about 50 meters away. A small bridge allowed us to cross the bergschrund and again we felt one step away from the summit, but a hundred meters above, the slope was concealing another bergschrund of impressive proportions, invisible until we probed it. The early illusion of success eludes us again.

We contoured back once again looking for a pass, and climbed a rime mushroom to find yet another bergschrund. Normally a mountain face has only one bergschrund, but Aguilera didn't seem interested to fall into the normal category. We circled back to the left, until a delicate snow and ice clump allows us to cross, and, more crawling than climbing, we finally reached the summit ridge. We were again permeated by the feeling of having the summit within easy reach, but once again the excitement transmuted into disappointment. The summit was 50 meters away according to maps and GPS, but we just saw one false summit following another, and in the dense mist the walk felt endless. After walking half a kilometre on the summit ridge, in shades of white against white, a large icy mushroom started to delineate, with overhanging walls and a large crack across its base. We circled in search of a weak line, crawling cross it to the next slope and just 20 meters above we were blocked again by cornice, like a never ending game. We traversed it to the right hoping it would be the last obstacle, and it was. We climbed back to level ground, walking around scrutinizing the shades in the fog hoping to find no signs of another higher peak. After exploring in all possible directions, we began to embrace the idea that a seemingly endless ascent had come to an end. We were on the top of Volcán Aguilera, where we for so long had dreamed to be. It was a single meaningless piece of ice in this long adventure, but one that closes a cycle, the artist's stroke completing a work that would otherwise have been just a sketch.

We shared hugs with deep emotion and celebrate: the wind was blowing hard, it was cold, the fog was dense, we were covered in frost and it was starting to get dark, but nothing eclipsed the immense joy we felt, not even the prospect of a long night down by that labyrinthine ice maze. Our footprints were almost erased by the blowing snow.

## **The party continues**

Having achieved our main objective sooner than expected, we set out to explore the base of the volcano, glancing possible accesses from the sea and looking for the source sulfur smelling gusts that we felt. Then we started our return without rushing, climbing what we liked the most as we went.

A lone ice summit would offer us a brief and entertaining climb and a fantastic ski descent, and we agreed to call it Cerro Anacoreta (2,213 m, 1st ascent, September 3rd).

After moving our camp one step forward, we launch an attempt to the charming and beautiful south summit of the Cruz del Sur range. Climbing was pleasant, the views spectacular, and the ski descent formidable. Like the constellation south of the Southern Cross in the sky, we call it Cerro Octante (2,445m, 1st ascent, September 4th).



View from Spegazzini 2,283m (from right) Cerro Cruz del Sur, Mosco, Cerro Octante © Natalia Martinez



(From left) Cerro Octante 2,445m, Esperanza 2,502m, Espranza Sur © Natalia Martinez



Cerro Esperanza, reflecting evening sunshine © Natalia Martinez



On the summit of Esperanza © Natalia Martinez



To the top of Esperanza © Natalia Martinez



View to north seen on descending from Octante  
© Natalia Martinez



Peak seen from Octante en route to Esperanza  
© Natalia Martinez

During whole trip we had looked from all the angles at the attractive cerro Spegazzini, unable to determine which of its four summits is the highest. Finally we decided to try the East summit through a beautiful itinerary on ice and rock slopes. The view from the top took our breath away, eastward it featured a sheer drop to the Spegazzini glacier, which snaked from the heights to the blue waters of Lake Argentino. Unfortunately, the next summit westward proved to be a few meters higher. (East summit, 2,283 m, 1st ascent, September 5th).



Stunning Cerro Spegazzini 2,283m and Bolas Glacier seen from Cerro Esperanza  
© Natalia Martinez

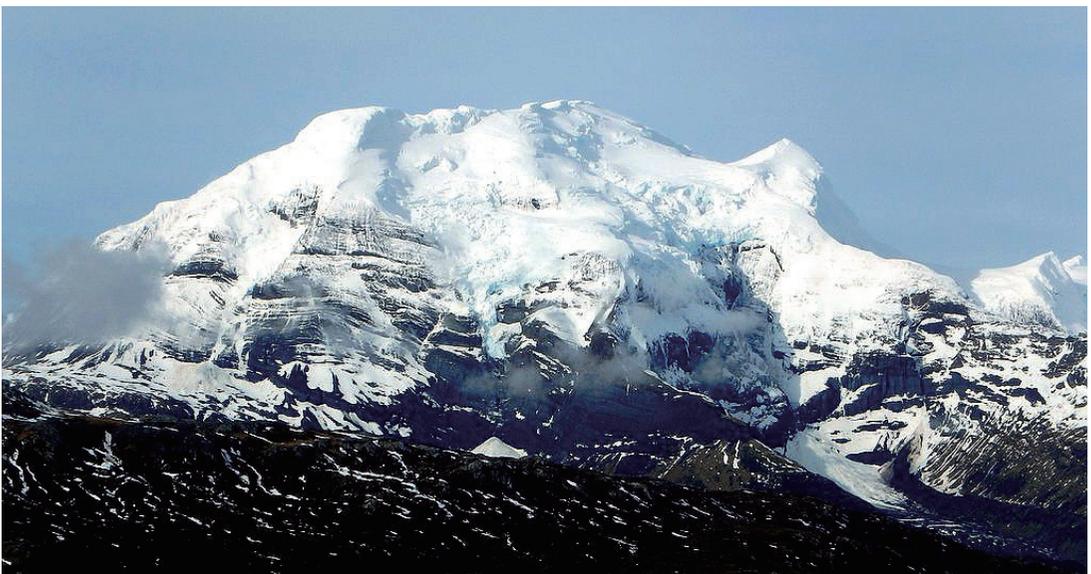
Finally, before returning to the shelter of the forest we climbed the beautiful Cerro Esperanza, following an aesthetic ridge that ends in lush ice mushroom climb seasoned by the spectacular view we enjoyed from the top. (2,502 m, 1st ascent, September 6th) It's nice to think that our footprints there are like a mandala that the wind erases. We left nothing, and so much at the same time. A part of us now belongs to those mysterious mountains, to which we are linked forever by that bond that is forged when someone entrusts you with his deepest secrets.



Overwhelming Cerro Mayo © Evan Miles



Impressive view from Spegazzini © Natalia Martinez



Cerro Bastion Blanco, overwhelming mountain view © Natalia Martinez