

# MONTE SARMIENTO

AFTER 57 YEARS, TIERRA DEL FUEGO'S  
SPELLBINDING PEAK GETS A SECOND ASCENT

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**CAMILO RADA**

**D**ancing with the gusts of winter wind, Natalia Martinez and I inched onto the summit that had long been the focus of our dreams. It was 10:45 p.m. and pitch dark. More than simply the high point of a mountain, this peak was the validation of years of friendship, struggle, passion, and chance. No one had stood at this point in 57 years. Who knows how long it will be before climbers return?

In 1580, while chasing the notorious privateer Francis Drake through Patagonian fjords, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa spotted a “Volcán Nevado” (snowy volcano). Later cosmographers

pictured a mysterious smoking volcano in the unexplored interior of Tierra del Fuego, inhabited by sea monsters, giants, and tailed natives.

The mountain’s twin peaks were a centerpiece of the writings of Robert Fitz Roy, who unveiled the geographical secrets of the southernmost end of America together with Phillip Parker King, during epic expeditions from 1826 to 1836 aboard the H.M.S. Beagle and Adventure. Among countless discoveries, they realized Sarmiento’s Volcán Nevado was not a volcano, and they renamed it after its discoverer, even though that right should be given to the native people, the Yaghan and Kawésqar, who had arrived here 10,000 years earlier.





**[This page]** The north face of Monte Sarmiento. The first winter ascent climbed the ice face directly to the main summit (left). *Marcelo Arevalo* **[Previous page]** Monte Sarmiento rises more than 2,200 meters, directly above the sea. *Guy Wenborne*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when steam-powered vessels made the Magellan Strait a popular oceanic passage—a golden age that lasted until the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914—thousands of travelers knew of this magnificent mountain, and the few who had the luck to see it spread the word about its surpassing beauty and colossal size. At the time it was perhaps the only place on Earth where a tourist could contemplate an ice wall rising vertically more than 2,000 meters just a few kilometers from the seashore. Many travelers enthusiastically lauded the sight, and even Jules Verne drew upon it in his novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. In 1882, John Ball wrote, “I know of no other peak that impresses the mind so deeply with the sense of wonder and awe.”

The climbing history of Mt. Sarmiento is one of the longest in the Americas, starting at a time when only a handful of major peaks had been climbed in the U.S. and Ecuador. The geologist Domenico Lovisato was first to attempt Sarmiento, in 1882. Later, at the twilight of the 19th century, after the first ascent of Illimani in Bolivia, the renowned British mountaineer Sir Martin Conway reached a point at 1,000 meters on the glacier that now bears his name.

With the 20<sup>th</sup> century came the indefatigable explorer Alberto De Agostini, who was spellbound by Mt. Sarmiento and attempted it twice between 1913 and 1914. Agostini’s youthful dream became an obsession, and at the age of 73 he was back as the leader of a team of Italy’s best alpinists, who, after nearly two months of attempts, launched a bold alpine push.

Carlo Mauri and Clemente Maffei, fighting with fog and wind, finally crowned Agostini's mythical "Esfinge de hielo" (Ice Sphinx) on March 7, 1956.

Since then many have attempted to follow their steps with no success, including the Italian Giuseppe Agnolotti. Lured by Sarmiento's spell, he organized expeditions in 1969, 1971, and 1972, and was deprived of the west summit by just a few meters. He would title his book *Sarmiento: White Hell*.

In 1986, thirty years after the first ascent, Maffei returned to score another victory with the Ragni di Lecco, making the first ascent of the west summit via its northeast face. [*Sarmiento's climbing accounts tend to be confusing due to its two independent summits, and the fact that some expeditions have had the secondary western summit as their main objective. The main summit is the east one, about 60 meters higher. Furthering the confusion is the fact that Mt. Sarmiento is not located in the Cordillera de Sarmiento, the mountain range that lies 200 miles to the northwest, and is covered in the Recon section on page 78.*] A star-filled expedition comprised of Charlie Porter, John Roskelley, Tim Macartney-Snape, Stephen Venables, and Jim Wickwire aimed to crown both summits in 1995. The team couldn't fulfill all their ambitions but achieved the second ascent of the west summit by a new route up the beautiful southeast face.

In 1999, another "spellbound" climber appeared, the German Ralf Gantzhorn, who, without giving up, returned in 2002, 2005, and 2010, in the last case alongside the prestigious climbers Robert Jasper and Jörn Heller. After aborting an attempt on the north ridge at a

similar point to Agnolotti's 1972 expedition, the Germans made a bold traverse of the west peak's north face to join the 1986 Ragni route and complete the third ascent of the west summit.

More than ten other attempts were unsuccessful. [*See the online version of this story for a complete history of attempts.*] It was only in the austral winter of 2013 that the 57-year spell of mountaineering mischance on the main summit of Mt. Sarmiento would be at last broken, by a multidisciplinary expedition with a similar spirit to the historic 1956 one.

Our expedition, led by Gonzalo Campos and Gino Casassa, reached Mt. Sarmiento on board the sailboat Arco Iris, with mixed

[**This page**] A newspaper celebrates the "Italian victory in Tierra del Fuego" in 1956.





**[This page]** Monte Sarmiento or its west peak have been climbed only five times in 57 years. (1) First ascent of main summit (2,207m GPS), Mauri and Maffei, 1956. (2) First ascent of west summit (2,145m GPS), Ragni di Lecco, 1986. (3) Southwest face of west peak (Macartney-Snape–Roskelley–Venables, 1995). (4) North ridge to north face of west peak (Grantzhorn-Heller-Jasper, 2010). (5) North face of main peak, Martínez-Rada, 2013. *Uncharted Project*

objectives: dendrochronological studies, GPS and automatic weather station installation, photography and filmmaking, sea kayaking, and mountaineering.

The climbing team was divided in two. The reconnaissance team of Cristian Donoso, Mario Sepúlveda, and Uber Quirilao made an attempt on the west summit between July 21 and August 9, providing valuable reconnaissance. Natalia Martínez (Argentina), Inés Dussillant, and I (Chile) targeted the main summit.

Our team set up base camp on August 19 on Bardonecchia Beach. We had received a forecast for a good weather window to arrive just four days later, and our logistics for a 30-day effort were quickly re-engineered in order to take advantage of that window, if it actually opened.

We followed a well-established trail through the forest, a legacy of Agnolotti's 1972 expedition, with its five tons of gear and the wooden "cube" hut that was used as high camp. We began using skis once well above the forest at about 300 meters. In the alpine we had to battle against bad visibility and constant winds, sometime gusting up to 140 kph (87 mph), forcing us to dig into an ice cave at Vittore Col. We were not able to set a high camp at the Col Norte (1,200 meters) until August 22.

The weather window did in fact start on August 23, and luckily it lasted to the 24th, when we were ready to tackle the climb, after ferrying all the necessary gear to high camp. Inés would wait at camp. Natalia and I left at 3:45 a.m. under dream conditions—



'schrund, the route unfolded elegantly to the summit, through a straight gully surrounded by lush rime cauliflowers, very sustained but rarely exceeding 75°. The ice conditions were excellent, although it was demanding to place protection. The rope quickly began to flow



the wind nonexistent and the stars sharply defined in all directions, silhouetting the bold mountains around us. We skinned up Conway Glacier under strong moonlight to reach the bergschrund shortly before sunrise.

Four hundred meters directly below the summit, the bergschrund presented a five-meter overhang covered by more than 80 centimeters (two feet) of rime. After a brief attempt to free climb, I began to aid over the bergschrund, using a shovel to dig a trench diagonally upward.

Once we were above the rhythm of the axes and the tinkling beat of ice screws. By the sixth pitch, twilight was already descending on this short winter day, and bitter cold brutally brought us back to reality, reminding us of the urgency. We knew these superb conditions would not last much longer—and might not be repeated for months. The wind began to blow and our infinite horizon was reduced to the square meter lit by our headlamps.

We had chosen our route on a bold bet, as the gully ended in a terrifying cirque of massive, overhanging ice mushrooms. A shadow we had seen in aerial

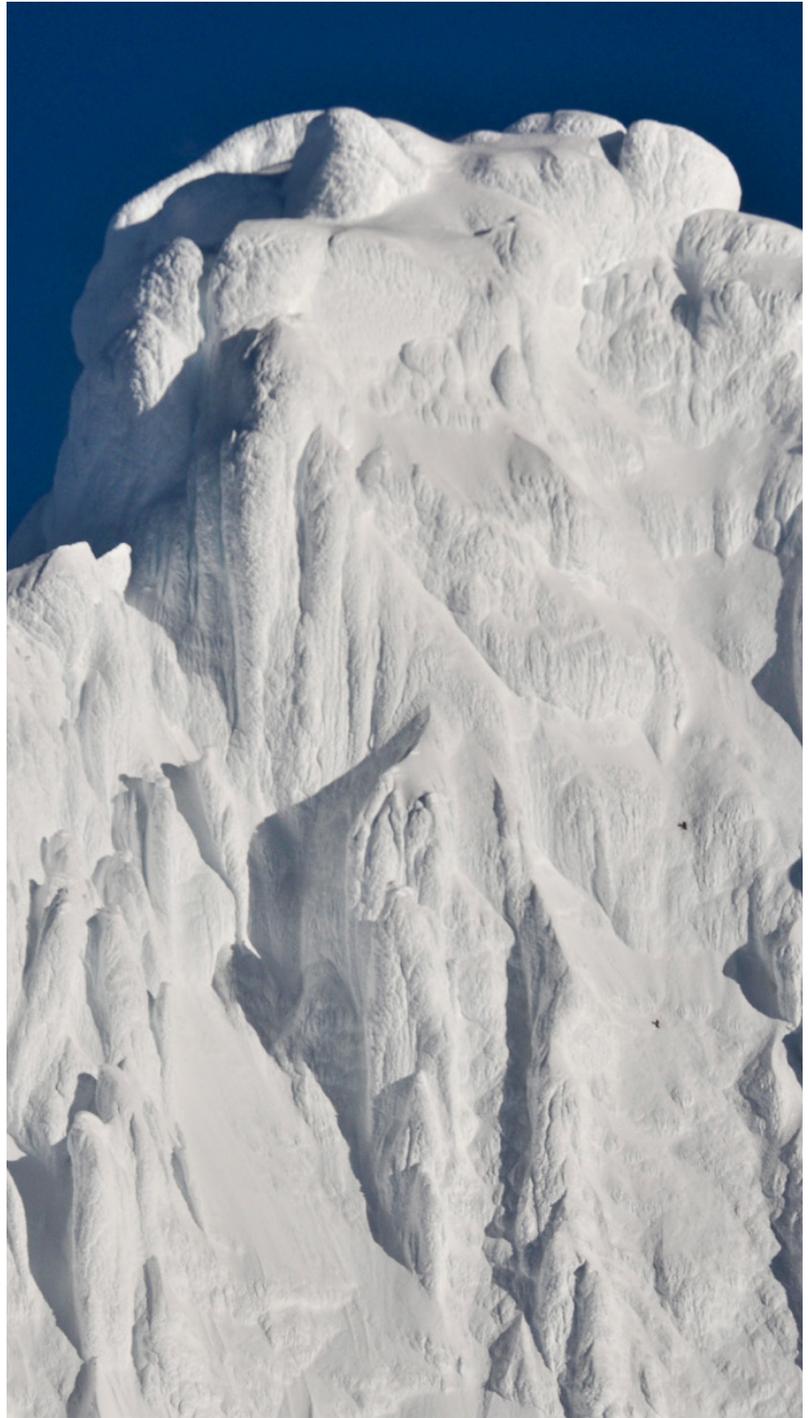
**[This page, top]** Approaching through a lenga forest. *Inés Dussailant* **[This page, bottom]** The author deploys a shovel and a few aid moves to clear the bergschrund. *Natalia Martinez* **[Next page]** The climbers can be seen midway up the north face during the first ascent. *Inés Dussailant*

photos led us to believe that one of the mushrooms on the left was disconnected from the main wall, opening a channel that might allow us to escape onto the gentle slopes leading to the summit.

As we neared the top of the face, my headlamp jumped nervously to the left with each step, probing for the exit. We began to fear this passageway had only been a figment of our imagination. Suddenly the beam penetrated deep between two colossal ice mushrooms. Powder snow lay waist-deep on the upper slopes, but we didn't care because the summit was at our fingertips.

During the long descent, small pieces of ice swept the face and rapped against our helmets to keep us awake. Once we were at the bergschrund, impenetrable fog swept in on the wind—everything was back to normal for Mt. Sarmiento. With one eye on the tips of our skis and the other on the GPS, we slowly made our way back to camp. At 10 a.m. we finally arrived, exhausted but with a deep feeling of fulfillment, after more than 30 hours on the move.

They say dreaming is necessary to digest one's experiences and set them to memory. If so, we still had a lot of work ahead.



#### SUMMARY:

First ascent of the north face of Monte Sarmiento's main summit (2,207m GPS) at the west end of Cordillera de Darwin, Tierra del Fuego, Chile, by Natalia Martinez and Camilo Rada, August 24–25, 2013. The new route, only the second summit route on Sarmiento in 57 years, was called Suerte de Sarmiento (400m, D+). [See page 89 for information about the author.]