



VOLCÁN AGUILERA

THE LAST GREAT VOLCANO
OF THE ANDES IS CLIMBED

NATALIA MARTÍNEZ

Volcanoes and glaciers have shaped the geography throughout Patagonia. Artistic masters in the opposing forces of orogeny and erosion, together they have created the most extraordinary landscapes.

The most pristine, remote, and untouched of the Patagonian volcanoes is Volcán Aguilera, which rises to 2,478 meters in the southern Chilean Andes, north of Fiordo Peel (50°24'01"S, 73°46'02"W). The closest city—El Calafate in Argentina—lies 100 kilometers directly to the east. Aguilera's raging past is revealed by footprints of tephra (volcanic ash) all around Patagonia. A large, explosive eruption about 3,600 years ago left a thick tephra layer still visible on the banks of Lago Argentino. This colossal eruption deeply transformed the upper basin of the Santa Cruz River in southern Argentina.

In 1933 the Salesian priest and tireless Patagonian explorer Alberto María De Agostini made the first ascent of Cerro Mayo, on the far western side of Lago Argentino, and from its summit he was the first human to glimpse vast portions of the Southern Patagonian Icefield. In its western reaches he spotted a prominent massif that he named Cerro Aguilera, after the first Chilean bishop in the Magallanes province of Chile. Bill Tilman was the first explorer to travel deep into the mountainous region observed by De Agostini. He visited the area in 1957, making a west-to-east traverse of the ice cap, wonderfully described in his book *Mischief in Patagonia*.

It wasn't until 1985 that Cerro Aguilera was first attempted. The young and ambitious British climber Matthew Hickman learned about Aguilera from Eduardo García, one of the best Chilean climbers of the time. With heaps of enthusiasm, Hickman's Cerro Aguilera expedition brought together British and Chileans, scientists and mountaineers. After a hard approach they reached the base of the mountain and explored its southern, eastern, and northern slopes, but they dismissed every line they saw, considering them either unclimbable or too dangerous. Plans for exploring the northwest face were dramatically frustrated by a two-week storm that kept them tent-bound at the southern end of the Altiplano Japón. Despite the weather, they conducted a great deal of exploration, among other things confirming the suspicion—due to its great prominence—that Cerro Aguilera was in fact a stratovolcano, thus to be renamed Volcán Aguilera.

Photo Traversing the South Patagonian Icefield. The peak on far right is Cerro Julie (2,284m), climbed by Americans in 1994. The peak on the left is unnamed and unclimbed. *Natalia Martínez*

In 1989 a Japanese-Chilean team, led by Eiho Otani and including Eduardo García, made a second attempt. They were unable even to approach the volcano, hampered by swamps and dense shrub. A 1993 British expedition led by James “Skip” Novak didn’t get any further.

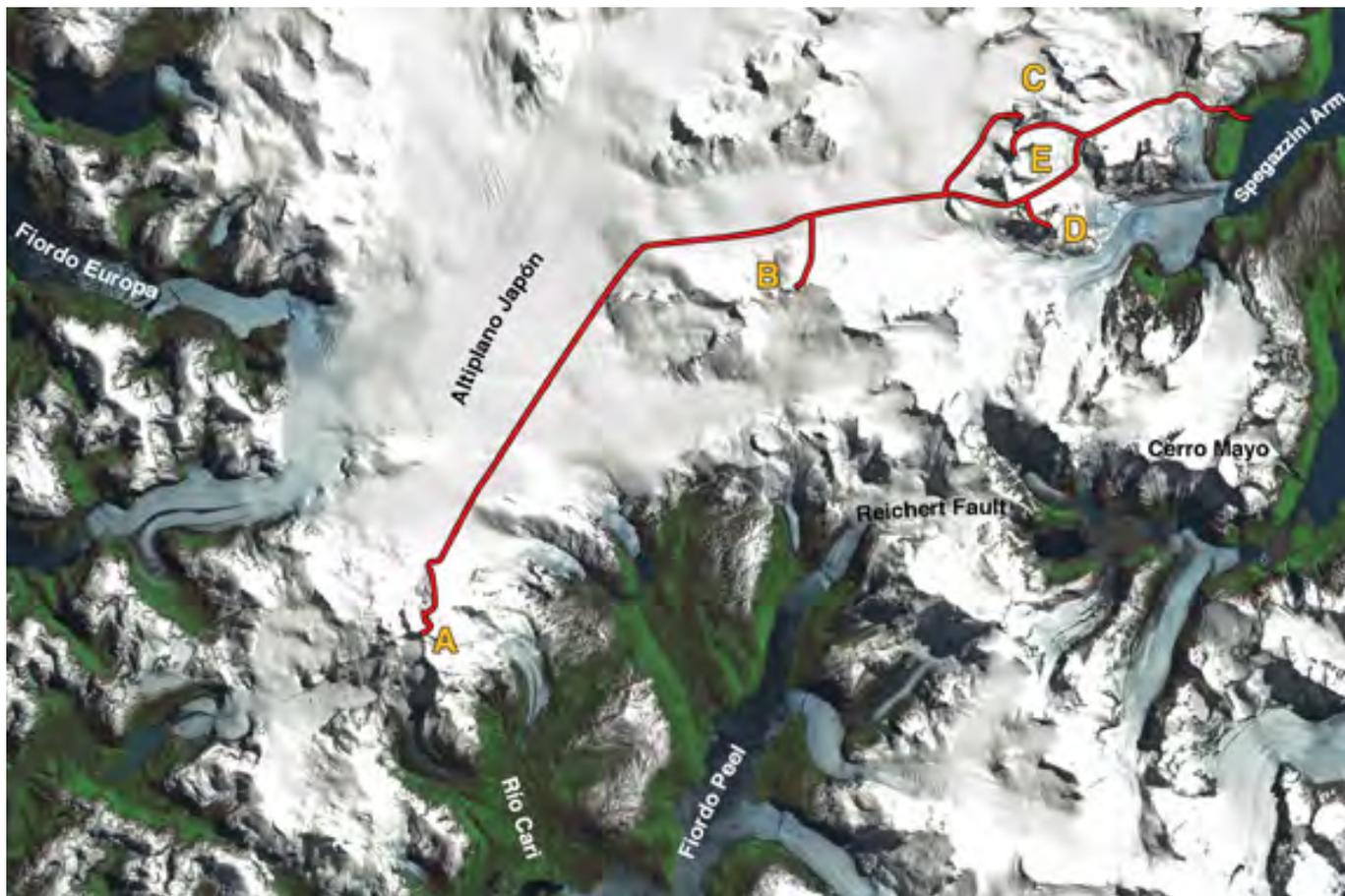
Novak’s expedition aroused the interest of Dr. David Hillebrandt from the United Kingdom, who subsequently made four visits to the mountain, starting in 2003. With Hickman’s advice, he made for the southwest face. Hillebrandt was able to solve the difficult approach through the Río Cari basin and achieved a high point on the peak, in 2004, of 1,300 meters. From this point, Hillebrandt could see a feasible route to the summit, but was forced to turn back due to lack of time and supplies.

In 2013 a Chilean expedition led by Abdo Fernández followed an approach similar to Hillebrandt’s, but once again weather, rivers, and bog suffocated their attempt.

Our expedition in 2014 was part of the project *Uncharted*, initiated in 2011, combining mountain exploration, historical research, and mapping in the remotest regions of Patagonia. Last year we had the opportunity to make the second ascent of the iconic Monte Sarmiento, and we previously did the first ascents of Cerro Trono and Cerro Alas de Ángel in the Cordillera de Sarmiento (*AAJ 2014*).

After studying the logistics and difficulties of past expeditions to Aguilera, we decided to test a new and completely different approach. To this point, all attempts had approached from Fiordo Peel in the summertime. We traded the seemingly simple nine-kilometer approach from this fjord to the base of the volcano for a 47-kilometer traverse from Argentina over the Campo de Hielo Sur (South Patagonian Icefield). This required an untested approach to the ice cap, near the Spegazzini Glacier, that looked feasible based on satellite images and information

[Below] Previous attempts had tried to approach Volcán Aguilera (A) from nearby fjords. The 2014 team traversed the ice cap 47 kilometers to reach the peak. On the way back they climbed (B) Cerro Anacoreta, (C) Cerro Octante, (D) Cerro Spegazzini Este, and (E) Cerro Esperanza. *Uncharted Project*





[Left] Crossing Lago Argentino to Spegazzini Arm.
[Right] The author bushwhacking below snowline. The team carried loads up 1,300 vertical meters to reach the ice cap. *Camilo Rada*



from the local mountaineers Pedro Skvarca, Jose Pera, and Luciano Bernacchi. Despite being much longer, in our opinion this was a bet with greater—but still slim—chance of success. We felt that traversing the ice cap would be more predictable (and less expensive) than sailing to Fiordo Peel, and it would lead us directly to the north side of the mountain, where we were likely to climb. We chose winter in anticipation of better ice conditions.

So it was that we found ourselves sailing the calm waters of Lago Argentino, having departed Bahía Tranquila near El Calafate, and heading to our planned base camp in the Spegazzini Arm of the lake. We landed without difficulty on August 16 and found a beautiful forest of southern beech and canelo (winter's bark). The team comprised three Chileans (Camilo Rada, Ines Dusillant, and Viviana Callahan), the U.S. citizen Evan Miles, and me from Argentina. Brimming with enthusiasm, we started exploring the way to the ice that same afternoon, the first steps in our long approach to Aguilera. We followed paths opened by “bagual” cows, untamed animals that have thrived in this territory that once belonged to the huemul, a native Patagonian deer.

The following four days were intense, as we portaged our 400 kilograms of equipment and supplies up 1,300 vertical meters of virgin forest, rock slabs, and crevasse fields to reach the Peineta Norte Glacier. On the fourth day we moved into our first camp on the ice cap, placed in a heavenly landscape. To the north was unclimbed and beautiful Cerro Heim, to the east and south massive Lago Argentino and the spires of the unclimbed Cerro Peineta, and to the west a range of superb summits, mostly unnamed and, of course, unclimbed.

Skinning through a previously unvisited valley, towing our sleds, we reached our second camp at the foot of Cerro Spegazzini, where we faced another big uncertainty: an 1,820-meter pass that we hoped would give us access to the main plateau of the Southern Icefield. It started easily but gradually steepened until a final 10-meter stretch of 50° snow, which seemed almost endless while pulling a sled loaded with more than 60 kilos. On top we suddenly arrived at the most lonely and pristine place you can imagine, the epitome of nowhere, incarnated in pure, endless, and immaculate white.

On the west side of the pass we descended a long, gentle slope for 15 kilometers, avoiding crevasses here and there, until reaching the Altiplano Japón, an expansive plateau at 1,000



[Above] The mountain on the left is Cerro Esperanza (2,502 meters), which the team climbed during its return from Aguilera. The peak on the right is unclimbed. *Ines Dusallant* **[Below]** Volcán Aguilera (2,478 meters) from the north. The 1,480-meter first-ascent route followed the glacier left of the rock ridge, crossed the ridge just before it steepens sharply, and zigzagged up heavily crevassed slopes to the summit ridge. *Ines Dusallant*



meters of elevation, named by a Japanese team that had attempted to cross the ice cap in the early '70s. This was the realm of the mysterious volcano, which finally made its appearance, towering over the horizon. Previously, all those who had enjoyed this view had been vying for the first longitudinal traverse of the Southern Icefield, a 400-kilometer challenge that left no time for rest, rendering them unable to answer this extraordinary mountain's provocative call.

After 47 kilometers, 10 days, and six camps, we had arrived. Our fabric castles were erected in a peerless landscape—no wonder it so deeply touched the hearts of early explorers. Even though we hadn't yet seen a full view of the mountain, we decided to attempt it the very next day, by the north face, closest to us. In fact, we spent the next two days gazing south, disillusioned and anxious, as heavy rain spattered the tents over our heads. The rain and a warm wind melted away our protective snow walls like a candle over flame. The soul of Patagonia is wild and unpredictable, and we could do little but wait.

August 29 was clear, and we left camp at 4:30 a.m. Crampons biting into snow, we advanced in the quiet darkness, gaining elevation quickly. We began on the east side of Aguilera's north ridge, climbing over a glacier to connect icy platforms and pass a number of serac bands. We topped a final platform and then moved to the right to face the first stretch of technical climbing, a steep slope between icy cauliflowers, funneling us to a narrow aisle between two prominent bergschrunds. The landscape seemed of Cyclopean proportions, and as the sun rose over the icefield Aguilera appeared majestically above us, and now we finally began to comprehend the sheer size and loneliness of our objective.

We continued westward, just below the upper bergschrund, until the north ridge, and then to the base of a prominent rock wall, where we hoped to find a way to the northwest face. Joyfully we discovered an easy pass, almost too good to be true. From this new vantage, however, we realized our planned route was dissected by multiple deep crevasses and broken seracs. We remained at high alert as we wound through this labyrinth. After traversing through several areas of ice and rock fall, we arrived below two humongous, frost-covered seracs, and encircling them we found the first of many massive bergschrunds that were to block our way. As in any labyrinth, retracing our steps became the only way to progress.

Visibility on the mountain had slowly worsened. But despite the adversities, we had everything we needed to continue—in particular, patience, the most valuable asset in Patagonia. One bergschrund seemed endless in either direction, but after a 200-meter traverse



[Above] Crossing the north ridge to the upper northwest face on Aguilera. *Natalia Martínez*

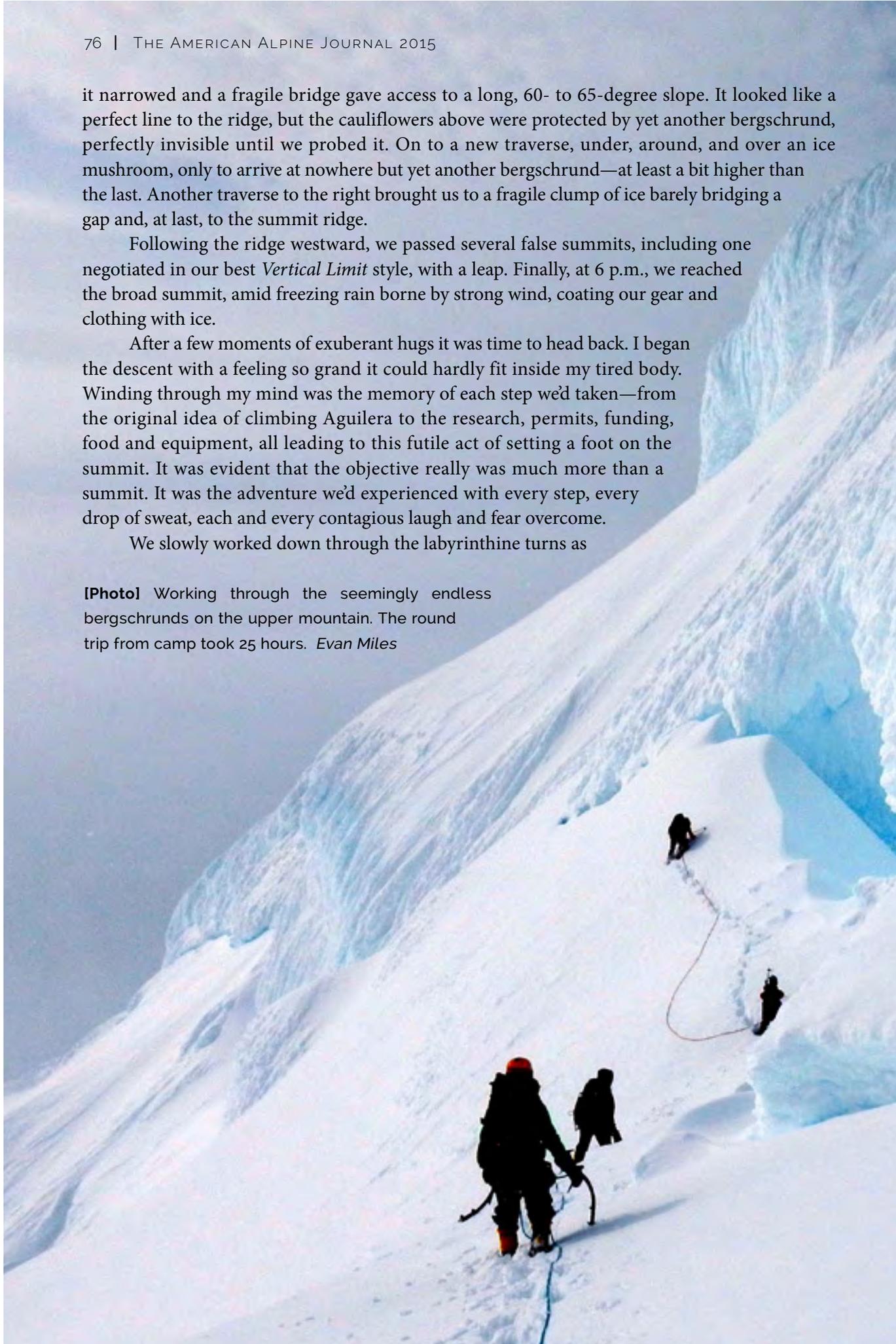
it narrowed and a fragile bridge gave access to a long, 60- to 65-degree slope. It looked like a perfect line to the ridge, but the cauliflowers above were protected by yet another bergschrund, perfectly invisible until we probed it. On to a new traverse, under, around, and over an ice mushroom, only to arrive at nowhere but yet another bergschrund—at least a bit higher than the last. Another traverse to the right brought us to a fragile clump of ice barely bridging a gap and, at last, to the summit ridge.

Following the ridge westward, we passed several false summits, including one negotiated in our best *Vertical Limit* style, with a leap. Finally, at 6 p.m., we reached the broad summit, amid freezing rain borne by strong wind, coating our gear and clothing with ice.

After a few moments of exuberant hugs it was time to head back. I began the descent with a feeling so grand it could hardly fit inside my tired body. Winding through my mind was the memory of each step we'd taken—from the original idea of climbing Aguilera to the research, permits, funding, food and equipment, all leading to this futile act of setting a foot on the summit. It was evident that the objective really was much more than a summit. It was the adventure we'd experienced with every step, every drop of sweat, each and every contagious laugh and fear overcome.

We slowly worked down through the labyrinthine turns as

[Photo] Working through the seemingly endless bergschrunds on the upper mountain. The round trip from camp took 25 hours. *Evan Miles*



snowflakes again turned to rain, creating a spooky atmosphere. Just before dawn we returned to the volcano's base, after 25 hours of effort and uncertainty. With smiles on our faces we sank into a deep, blissful sleep.

After 15 days our main goal had been accomplished. What now? Our fear was that King Wind would reclaim his domain while we were still so far from safety. Instead, Patagonia blessed us with weather as docile, meek, and submissive as you ever see. We took full advantage of the conditions, stopping along the way back to make four more first ascents: the peaks we propose to name Cerro Anacoreta (2,213m) and Cerro Octante (2,446m), as well as the 2,283-meter east peak of Cerro Spegazzini and finally Cerro Esperanza (2,502m).

Other interesting peaks in this immediate area await their first ascents, including Cerro Heim, Cerro Peineta, and the main summit of Spegazzini. South of Reichert Fault are many unclimbed and impressive mountains, especially on the western side of the ice cap. I hope those who read of our journey into the Southern Ice Field may feel the same drive as we did to explore and protect these unique and forgotten places.

SUMMARY: First ascent of Volcán Aguilera (2,478m) by the north face (Concierto de Rimayas, ca 1,480m), by Viviana Callahan, Ines Dusallant, Natalia Martínez, Evan Miles, and Camilo Rada. The team also did the first ascents of Cerro Anacoreta (2,213m, northern slopes, proposed name); Cerro Octante (2,446m, from the west, proposed name); the northwest slopes of the 2,283m east peak of Cerro Spegazzini; and the north ridge of Cerro Esperanza (2,502m). The climbers were dropped off by boat on August 16, 2014, and picked up on September 9. The expedition was supported by a Gore-Tex Shipton/Tilman Grant.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Natalia Martínez, 34, was born in Mendoza, Argentina, and works as a mountain guide and ski instructor, currently living in British Columbia, Canada. She is co-founder of the Uncharted project, which is working on a new map of the Southern Patagonia Ice Field. Like Uncharted's previous maps of Cordillera de Sarmiento and Cordillera de Darwin, this will be available free of charge. For information, write to natalia@unchart.org.