

# Avellano Towers

*Will Harris*

There is a Rucksack Club tradition of assessing the success of a trip by calculating the feet climbed per penny spent. Our expedition to the Avellano Towers wouldn't fare well if assessed in such a manner, and would probably fare worse if miles travelled or distance walked was substituted for expenditure. In fact, an alternative title for this article could be 'Not Big Wall Climbing in Patagonia' due to the small amount of ascent achieved. That said, the trip ranks as one of the best adventures in the mountains I've been fortunate enough to enjoy.

In March 2014 my friend John Crook mentioned in passing that he had stumbled across an unclimbed big wall in a little-explored corner of Northern Patagonia, some five hundred miles north of the fleshpots of El Chalten. I expressed an interest, and then forgot all about it. The next time the wall came up was when I bumped into an old friend underneath Beeston Tor and was introduced to her boyfriend, Dave Brown. Dave greeted me with the line 'Ah, you're the guy coming to Patagonia with us in December'. So began a few months of email conversations and summer evening sessions on the crags ironing out plans.

After an eventful series of flights John and I met our fourth team member Andy Reeve in Santiago, Chile. Andy joined us from the USA where he had recently free-climbed El Capitan, joining a very short list of people to have done so. It was universally agreed that he would be getting the scary pitches. After another short and very windy flight south to Coyhaique we spent a couple of days buying three weeks-worth of food.

We then began to acclimatise ourselves to what became known to us as South American Time. This essentially consists of taking when you think something is going to happen and adding somewhere between an hour and a day. By the end of the trip it came as quite a surprise when we were occasionally crept up on by someone who is on time. Eventually Pascual, our in-country contact, turned up with his newly fixed van and we drove the six hours of gravel roads down to Puerto Guadal, the last town before our objective.

The Avellano Valley lies to the north of Lago General Carrera, and we decided to see if we could access the granite towers at its head by crossing the lake and then travelling its 40km length. Following another day spent waiting, we were met at 5am by an uncharacteristically ontime Pascual, and taken to load onto what I had hoped would be a much larger boat. The lake is the second largest in South America, and the size of the waves combined with the speed of the wind made setting off in a small wooden boat with outboard motor a concerning affair. We arrived three hours later at the head of our valley, fully gripped, soaked to the bone and glad to be back on dry land.

The valley is inhabited by three farmers, a large number of cows, sheep and, most importantly, horses. Pascual had radioed ahead, and we were met by Louis, who had agreed to provide transport for our equipment. Once it



*Horses on the walk-in.*

*Photo Will Harris*

had been established that we were definitely not keen on getting onto some particularly frisky-looking horses, the bags were loaded up and we were on our way. Following a few hours walk we spent our first night in the valley camped at Louis' farm, complete with a freshly-slaughtered and spit-roasted goat supper.

After the inevitably later than expected start the next day we headed up the valley towards the base of our wall. Five hours later Louis stopped at the base of the side valley in which our destination lay, declaring us to be there. Whilst we definitely weren't there yet, we had to agree that we were at the end of the trail suitable for haul-bag laden horses. A brief re-pack later and we set off to carry the first of three loads up to what would become our base camp. Up to this point the scenery had been stunning and the going easy, following cow tracks along a fairly flat valley with only the occasional river crossing to add interest. The last few kilometres to the base of the moraine that became home for the next couple of weeks proved more challenging, involving a good deal of scrambling over fallen trees and wading through rivers. The payback was that we were now in a completely pristine environment, surrounded by alpine rainforests leading to pointy granite peaks, with only condors for company.



*The lower wall. \*Magnified inset below.*

*Photo Will Harris*



*\*Andy jumaring on the lower wall.*

Two days later we were stood below the unclimbed 1,000m-high South Tower in perfect weather. Unable to believe our luck we set about getting haul-bags, portaledges, climbing gear and food in place, and fixed the first 100m of rope up the first three pitches of our intended line. Our plan was to fix all 250m of static ropes and lead lines that we had with us, before setting off big-wall style when given a weather window. John and Andy succeeded in pushing the fixed ropes up another 100m the following day, using a mixture of free and aid climbing to pass a section of rooves. They descended in deteriorating weather, and the next day Dave and I headed back up the fixed lines in worsening conditions to see how far we would get. A particularly wet, windy and gripping few hours were spent climbing a further 30m to a point where obligatory free moves were made impossible by the water now running down the rock, and we decided to retreat.

Unfortunately that proved to be the last of the good weather that we experienced in the Avellano Valley. People often talk of the terrible Patagonian weather, but it wasn't until I heard the roar of the wind from high above base camp that I got what they meant. We were confined to our tents for two days as a raging storm plastered the wall in snow and ice, and warm, stable weather never rematerialised. We split into pairs to attempt



*The Avellano valley from the base of the Tooth.*

*Photo Will Harris*

ascents of alternative smaller towers which would give good alpine rock-climbs, but these were similarly plastered in too much snow and ice for the ski-touring axes that we had to hand.

All that remained was for us to strip our fixed ropes and retrieve our stashed racks from the wall. On the morning that we chose to do this Andy noticed a new orange-coloured streak high on the wall. Despite neither seeing or hearing rockfall during our time underneath the wall a bus-sized flake had broken away from half way up the face, chopping our bottom fixed rope. Luckily we had kept back a smaller rack and half our ropes to re-ascend to our anchors in the event of this happening, allowing John and Dave to strip the wall in some pretty poor weather.

Our walk out proved to be pretty entertaining, with the intermittent rain that had fallen over the previous seven days filling the rivers to the point where a number were waist deep, or higher. Our final crossing to the beach where we hoped to be collected by Pascual proved to be impassable, but luckily Gaucho Louis knew of an alternative route to another possible landing point. Back on the south side of the lake we were very happy to be put up for a couple of nights by American alpinist Jim Donini and his wife Angela. We didn't think that we smelled badly considering we had been wearing the same clothes for three weeks, but a good hot shower proved that this definitely wasn't the case. A days-sport climbing in the nearby desert saw us on our way home.



*Avellano approach.*

*Photo John Crook*

### **Avellano Towers Info**

There is a huge amount of potential for new routes in the towers, with unclimbed walls and peaks of sound granite there for the taking. The only down-sides are that none of the alternative approaches are any easier (although others don't involve crossing the lake), and the weather can be typically Patagonian. The wall we attempted would make a great project for a team looking to take their El Cap-honed skills further afield, and by going a month or two later the weather would perhaps be a little warmer, if no less wet/stormy. Beyond the Avellano Towers the larger area surrounding Lago General Carrera has a huge amount of potential for exploratory alpine climbing. For more info and photo's get in touch.

Top tip: don't fly with LAN/TAM, they consistently lost our bags, cancelled our flight bookings and otherwise caused us unnecessary stress.

A massive thank you to the British Mountaineering Council and the Mount Everest Foundation for their generous grants, to Rab for providing us with clothing and sleeping bags that stood up to some grim weather, and to Lowe Alpine for their excellent rucksacks.