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March 2024 Newsletter



Mike Scott on the summit of the Central Tower of Paine.
Photo Richard Smithers

Doreen and the three Towers.
Photo Mike Scott



50th Anniversary

of the first ascent of the East Face of the **Central Tower of Paine**

2024 marks the 50th Anniversary of one of the most significant first ascents by a South African team and in the history of the MCSA! This Newsletter is dedicated to celebrating this remarkable achievement and has been compiled, in the main by expedition members Paul Fatti and Mike Scott. Enjoy! (Paul Carstensen)



Roger and Paul on the summit ridge in a snow-storm.
Photo Art McGarr

The Torre Centrale del Paine (2460m) was first climbed by British mountaineers Chis Bonington and Don Whillans in 1963, from a high col on the West side (graded VI, A2 600m). (They were followed by an Italian party the next day, using the fixed ropes that Bonington and Whillans had not yet removed, so it is debatable whether their climb can legitimately be considered as a true ascent.)

The massive 1200m East Face of the Central Tower (graded A4/5.10) was first climbed in 1973/74 by a South African team led by Paul Fatti. Paul's team included Merv Prior, Art McGarr, Roger Fuggle, Mike Scott and Richard Smithers. They used siege tactics and fixed ropes over 6 weeks and endured several blizzards lasting many days. They climbed in Double Boots and thick PVC or Gore-Tex anoraks

and some wore Army WW2 battledress wool pants. Equipment included a deadweight of pitons and nuts plus 2 prototype single cams that Roger had brought from the USA. The party were terrified about trying them out, but they turned out to be useful in some of the wide cracks that the party climbed.

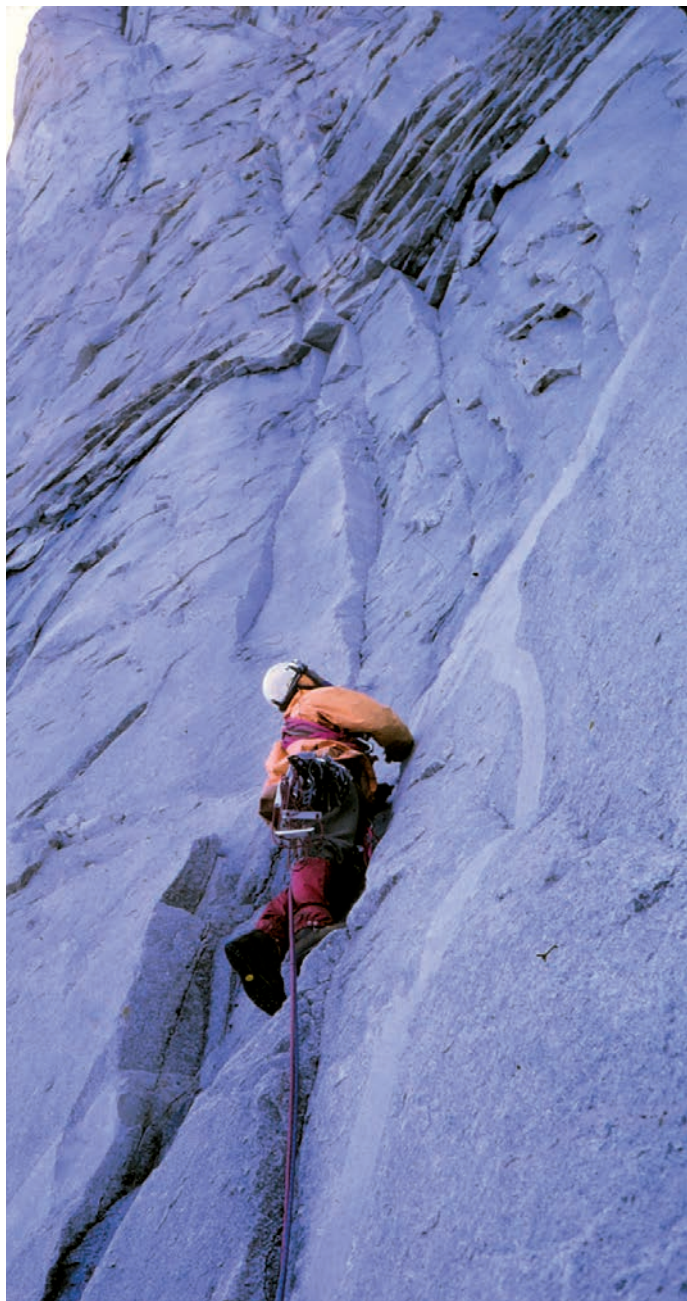
They established a bivouac camp, the 'Boeing Ledge', about halfway up the Face (so-called because this tiny sloping ledge looked deceptively big from below), from which they tackled the upper half of the climb. They used single-point suspension hammocks at this camp, which were incredibly uncomfortable to sleep in, but avoided them having to abseil down to their snow cave at the foot of the Face at the end of each day's climbing and then having to prussik back up to the high point the following day.

Doreen Scott, reflecting on the

expedition, wondered what had kept the wives so busy, and the reply was that was all the medical treatment to trashed fingers that they had to administer!

The 'South African Route' was at the time considered to be the longest vertical rock climb in the World, and perhaps it still is. Roger had climbed El Cap and Paul had climbed the Troll Wall, then when a Yosemite Ranger arrived at Base Camp to visit she looked up at the Tower and exclaimed something like "wow it really is bigger than El Cap".

The East Face route was not repeated until it was aid climbed again in 2004 as a 30-year anniversary, by another South African team led by Alard Hufner with Marianne Pretorius, Mark Seuring, Dermat Brogan, Voytek Modrzewski, and Michael Mason. They used a portaledge for camping at the Boeing Ledge, which made the bivouac much



Paul approaching the highpoint on our 1972 attempt. Photo Mike Scott



Paul preparing for the king-swing. Photo Richard Smithers

more comfortable than the single-point suspension hammocks used by the first ascensionists. Due to a threatening storm, they stopped just below the final summit.

In in February 2009 Nicolas Favresse, Sean Villanueva and Ben Ditto made the first free ascent of the South African Route on the East Face of the Central Tower graded A4/5.10. The Belgian trio, who 'redpointed' the climb, spent 13 days freeing the route and stated that the 1200m line contained some of the most amazing free climbing in their

big wall career and difficulties reach up to 7b+/5.12c, with sustained free climbing pitches mostly in the 5.11 range almost never below 5.10+. *One pitch is a very pumpy fingertip enduro corner while the other is a face climbing boulder problem with a spectacular sequence using a crystalline pocket. We added one bolt to protect this free variation (away from the aid line). Another main free crux of the route is a mega sustained steep 5.11+ offwidth which was very run out with the only number 6 Camelot*

we had. Three of the pitches were redpointed after the summit due to icy conditions."

In 2023 Tyler Karow, Cedar Christensen and Imanol Amundarian made a second free ascent of the South African Route, which they graded 5.12c, in only 8 days (after we took 2 months of which 32 days sieging the wall! How times have changed). "We managed to summit on day eight in perfect weather and sent the final crux on day nine in the rain," said Karow who reported as follows:





Merv Bivouacking on the Boeing Ledge. Photo Paul Fatti



Paul cooking on the Boeing Ledge. Photo Merv Prior

MAIN: Richard leading in the Main Dihedral. Photo Mike Scott





Richard leading near the top of the Main Dihedral.
Photo Mike Scott

Merv leading the first pitch above the Boeing Ledge.
Photo Paul Fatti



Just got back yesterday evening from a ten day mission on the East Face of the Central Tower of Paine in Patagonia. To our genuine surprise, Cedar, Ima, and I managed to pull off a team free ascent of the South African Route. We think this is the second free ascent of the route and the (fourth) overall ascent of this 4000 foot wall. We spent a total of ten days on the wall after our initial two days of fixing ropes from the ground. We managed to summit on day eight in perfect weather and sent the final crux offwidth pitch on day nine in the rain.

There are three distinct cruxes of the route. The first is a 5.11+ offwidth that almost didn't go down and the second is a 5.12+ enduro finger crack that I sincerely think is the best pitch of rock I've ever climbed in my life.

Today there are at least nine routes on the Central Tower, and Global Warming is changing the weather and rapidly melting the snow and ice. An Internet search for 'Central Tower of Paine' or 'East Face route on the Central Tower' will give you most of the above story plus incredible photos and video clips.

The story of the first ascent would not be complete without the anecdote about Piet Koornhof, the Minister of Sport and Recreation who presented a grant to the MCSA Expedition at a function in the Cape Town clubhouse. His speech was incomprehensible, and the audience was mystified until at the end he realised there was a problem and apologised that he had mistakenly read his notes from a speech to be delivered to the Rugby Union later that evening!

The MCSA expresses thanks to Paul Fatti who gave the 50th Commemoration presentation to Club Members recently and will never be forgotten as the visionary and inspirational leader of the SA Expedition that made this route and thanks to Mike Scott whose contribution and guidance made this Newsletter a reality.



In the Upper Dihedral, racing for the top. Photo Paul Fatti

Paul, Art, Mike, Richard and Roger after the ascent (Merv is in hospital). Photo Janet Fatti



MOUNTAIN RESCUE CONTACT INFORMATION



WESTERN CAPE

Cape Town

Tel: 021 937 0300
(WSAR)

HOTTENTOTS HOLLAND

Somerset West

Tel: 021 937 0300
(WSAR)

SOUTH CAPE

Plettenberg Bay, Knysna, George

Tel: 10177
(Metro)

GAUTENG

Johannesburg, Pretoria, Free State,
North West, Limpopo, Mpumalanga

Tel: 074 125 1385 (MSAR GP 1)
Tel: 074 163 3952 (MSAR GP 2)

KWAZULU-NATAL

Durban, Pietermaritzburg,
Drakensberg

Tel: 0800 005 133 (Metro)

EASTERN PROVINCE

Port Elizabeth

Tel: 10177 / 041 585 1555
(Metro)

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