

The Greats Icecaps

On the 30th January 1999 four Chileans, Pablo Besser, Rodrigo Fica, José Pedro Montt and Mauricio Rojas, reached Puerto Bellavista on the Fiordo Ultima Esperanza after having spent the previous 98 days travelling c400km with skis and pulks from the Jorge Montt Glacier in the north. The four claim to be the first to make the complete north to south traverse of the Southern Patagonian Icecap.

The first complete west to east crossing of the icecap from Fiordo Calvo to Lago Argentina was made in 1955-56 by Charles Marriot, Bill Tilman and the Chilean, Jorge Quinteros. Shipton in 1960-61 made the first partial north to south crossing and this has been improved upon on a number of occasions, notably by the Italian team led by Paolo Cavagnetto, which in 1992 managed to complete two-thirds of the journey, including crossing the crux section — the Chilean Corridor — which forms the main section of the Falla de Reichert. The Corridor is a huge trough at an altitude of 1,300m that cuts across the icecap in a west-east direction. The following year a Spanish-Argentinian expedition narrowly missed completing the entire traverse when they successfully negotiated the Falla de Reichert but were then forced to descend the Tyndall Glacier. In 1995 Harvard Fuchs's expedition, which included Pablo Besser, reached the edge of the Corridor in only 30 days but was forced to escape via Fiordo Peel. Besser was back for a second

attempt in '96 but again only reached Fiordo Peel.

Last year, starting on the 24th October, the four Chileans managed to reach the edge of the Corridor by the 9th December, then took a month to reach the far side, reaching a height of 2,250m before being in a position to descend to the southern glacier at 1,600m. Four hundred metres of fixed rope were used and at one stage the team had to make a quasi-free rappel of 150m. It was then a question of crossing the Altiplano de los Franceses to reach the Balmeçada Glacier and following it down to the Ultima Esperanza.

When looking at the evidence, is this any better than the 1993 effort by José Luis Fernandez, José Carlos Tamayo, Antonio Trabado and Sebastian de la Cruz, who made an exit slightly north to the Lago Grey? In order to pass the Falla de Reichert the Chileans left the icecap to pick up a pre-positioned food cache, then took around a week to regain it on the far side. The Spanish-Argentinian group kept to the ice and did not rely on pre-placed food dumps (as did the Chileans) but did take a 10-minute ride in a helicopter. It would appear neither team could truly claim the first complete crossing. However, the final point concerns the southern part of the Hielo Patagonico Sur, which Tamayo feels is arguably a completely independent ice field with no direct connection.