

CAMILO RADA

The uttermost ends of the Earth Mount Sarmiento – Tierra del Fuego

Geography, History and CORDARWIN.13 / UNCHARTED expedition

UNCHARTED: Cordillera de Darwin - Mount Sarmiento area



Cartographic details: UTM projection, Zone 18, Datum WGS 84, 50 m contours steps.

Who requires a digital copy of this map or the full version covering the entire Cordillera de Darwin, please contact Natalia Martinez (natalia@uncharted.org) or Camilo Rada (camilo@rsifa.cl)

Map caption – Mount Sarmiento

Fragment of the map of Cordillera de Darwin developed by Martinez and Rada showing Mount Sarmiento area and the five routes followed by the expeditions succeeding to summit on either the West or the Main (East) Summits.

(1) First ascent by the Italians Carlo Mauri and Clemente Maffei in 1956, who were members of the expedition led by Alberto De Agostini. (2) First ascent of the West summit by the Italian alpine group “Ragni di Lecco” in 1986. (3) Second ascent of the West summit by the “Sarmiento Twin Peaks Expedition 1995” by Stephen Venables, Jim Wickwire, John Roskelley, Tim Macartney-Snape and Charlie Porter. (4) Third ascent of the West summit in 2010, opening the route “La Odisea de Magallanes” (WI4+) by the Germans Ralf Gantzhorn, Robert Jasper and Jörn Heller. (5) Second ascent of the Main summit in 2013, opening the route “Suerte de Sarmiento” (D+) by Natalia Martinez and Camilo Rada.

At its southernmost end, South America breaks down to form a complex network of channels, fjords and islands that host one of the most inhospitable, remote, and unexplored mountainous regions in the world. The notorious explorer Eric Shipton used to call it “Fuegia“, a Patagonian region with its own character and charm, nestled at the heart of the “furious fifties“, a band of stormy seas dreaded by navigators.

Fuegia, technically would include all the insular territory of the Chilean Magellan province (Región de Magallanes) and Argentinean Tierra del Fuego.

Its highest and most prominent summits are located on southernmost end of the Andes, named Cordillera de Darwin after the famous naturalist. While traveling on one of the epic hydrographic expeditions sponsored by the British Admiralty, Darwin gave form to ideas that would change the human perception of the world.

Cordillera de Darwin is the only section of the American Andes that run East-West, covering 140 km and lying over the tectonic plate of Scotia instead of the South American plate.

Located entirely on Chilean territory, most of it can be accessed only by sea, and it is completely uninhabited, with the closest cities being Ushuaia (Argentina) 50 km to the East and Punta Arenas (Chile), 140 km to the North.

At these latitudes, the predominant winds come from the West. In the southern hemisphere, the continents leave a band almost entirely unobstructed around the earth, allowing winds to race freely and gather oceanic moisture. The southern tip of Patagonia is the only landmass in this path, and it is consequently hit with ferocious force, receiving heavy loads of rain and snow.

Fuegia is therefore the Andean region most exposed to the westerlies, dominated by thick clouds and roaring winds that continuously ornament its summits with the massive rime cauliflowers that characterize Patagonian mountains. It is largely that horrendous weather what makes Fuegia so seductive, unexplored, and mysterious: “the fatal lodestone“ as Shipton nicknamed it.

The region’s highest summit is Mount Shipton, reaching 2,568 meters and hidden in the guts of Cordillera de Darwin, but the most notorious mountain is Mount Sarmiento, which attains 2,207 m as it towers over the famous Magellan Strait.

A pirate story

In 1580 while chasing the notorious privateer Francis Drake, a mountain captured the attention of Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, who made a careful drawing and name it “Volcán Nevado“ (Snowy volcano). For centuries after, the comographers pictured a mysterious smoking volcano in the unexplored interior of Tierra del Fuego, inhabited by sea monsters, giants and tailed natives.

Its twin peaks were a centerpiece of Robert Fitz Roy’s narrative, who, together with Phillip Parker King, unveiled most geographical secrets of the southernmost end of America during the British Admiralty expeditions between 1826 and 1836 on board of H.M.S. Beagle and Adventure. Among countless discoveries, they realized Sarmiento’s mountain was in fact not a volcano, and renamed it Mount Sarmiento after its unlucky discoverer. Of course that right should be given to the native people, the Yaghan and Kawésqar who arrived to area about 10,000 years prior. However, after surviving centuries in the harshest climate of the world they couldn’t survive European colonization, slaughtered by both hunters and disease, and taking with them the legends surrounding the mountain that dominated their world.

In spite of the praises by Fitz Roy, Parker King and Charles Darwin who called it “the most sublime spectacle in Tierra del Fuego” the legendary fame of Mount Sarmiento arose later in the 19th century, when steam powered vessels made the Magellan Strait the most popular pass between the Atlantic and the Pacific, a golden age that lasted until the opening of the Panama channel in 1914.

At that time, thousands of travelers knew about that magnificent mountain always hidden behind stormy clouds, and the few who had the luck to see it, spread the word about its surpassing beauty and colossal size, as it was at that time perhaps the only place on earth where a city person could contemplate an ice wall launched vertically for more than 2000 meters at just few kilometers from the sea shore.

Many travelers enthusiastically lauded its sight:

“...we were fortunate enough to enjoy one of the most impressive scenes that my memory has recorded. ...set as in a frame, rose the magnificent peak of Mount Sarmiento, the Matterhorn of this region, springing as it appeared from the shore to a height of 7,000 feet. Sole sovereign of these Antarctic solitudes, I know of no other peak that impresses the mind so deeply with the sense of wonder and awe.

... I remained for some time utterly engrossed by the marvelous spectacle.”

John Ball, 1882

“I have attended many Alpine spectacles, I’ve read a hundred descriptions of enthusiastic climbers, but to my regret, I must confess that just once I’ve experienced the feeling mix of joy, admiration, fear and ... who knows, that I was prey of in front Mount Sarmiento.”

Giacomo Bove, 1882

Even Jules Verne drew upon it on his novel *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* in 1860. Soon after, the awe and fear was defeated by its charm, giving place to the first climbing attempts.

The conquest of the Ice Sphinx

The climbing history of Mount Sarmiento is one of the longest in America, starting at a time only a handful of mountains had being climbed in the U.S. and Ecuador, soon after the first ascent of Rainier and long before the first attempts to St. Elias, when no one knew Denali was higher and even before Foraker had a name.

It starts in 1882, when the geologist Domenico Lovisato made the first attempt, to just realize how he underestimated the superb challenge of its climb.

At the twilight of the 19th century, after the first ascent of Illimani in Bolivia and getting meters short to complete the second ascent of Aconcagua, the renowned mountaineer Sir Martin Conway headed South to attempt this mountain legend, reaching in December 1898 a point at 1000 m of elevation on the glacier that now bears his name. In spite of his failure, he established the best approach route, and with his tales the fame of the king of Tierra del Fuego grew.

With the twentieth century, the indefatigable Salesian priest and explorer Alberto De Agostini came into the scene, spellbound by the figure of Mount Sarmiento, attempting it on two occasions between 1913 and 1914.

Sarmiento’s fame grew more and more, Saint-Loup in 1952 published “it is definitely together with Cerro Torre, the most beautiful mountain in America” and many began to plan its assault.

De Agostini's youthful dream became an obsession. Without giving up and at the age of 73 he was back at the head of the best Italian alpinists of that time. In 1956, after persisting nearly two months of failed attempts, a bold alpine ascent was launched by Carlo Mauri and Clemente Maffei, who, fighting with fog and wind, finally crowned the mythical De Agostini's "Esfinge de hielo" (Ice Sphinx) .

57 years of spells:

Since then, many followed their steps, beginning with the Japanese expedition from Hokkaido University in 1965-66, led by T. Tsujii. The leader of the climbing team T. Saeki attempted Sarmiento's Southeast ridge together with T. Endo and M. Hashimoto, reaching 1,800 m of elevation but they were eventually forced to retract due to bad weather. Even though they didn't make it to the summit, the Japanese expedition made one of the greatest explorations of Cordillera de Darwin.

Later, lured by Sarmiento's spell, the Italian Giuseppe Agnolotti would organize three expeditions in 1969, 1971 and 1972, being deprived of the satisfaction of the West summit by just a few meters ... "Two pitches that we'll never do. An uncompleted victory, but yet, beautiful and full of suffering". He would title his book "Sarmiento: white hell".

In 1984 the Welsh Alun Hughes and Paul De Mengel would row in their kayaks from Punta Arenas to attempt the climb without success.

Three decades after the first ascent, Maffei returned to score another victory with the Ragni di Lecco, making the first ascent of the West summit* on Christmas Eve 1986.

In 1976 Cesar Perez de Tudela and Fernando Martínez made an unfortunate attempt that ended with the first and only fatal victim of the mountain, when Martínez was hit by a rockfall.

In 1991 the Argentinean expedition by Jorge González, Pablo Bello, Félix Memelsdorff and Guillermo Roque Gonzalez, attempted from Lovisato valley with no success.

Mount Sarmiento saw the first woman on its slopes in 1993 as the British expedition composed of Susan Cooper, Caradoc Jones, Philip Swainson and Henry Todd ventured to its climb, but without achieving the desired objective.

A star-filled expedition attempted to crown both summits in 1995. The team was composed by Stephen Venables, Jim Wickwire, John Roskelley, Tim Macartney-Snape and Charlie Porter. The team couldn't fulfill its ambitions, prevented by weather and unfortunate accidents. However, they returned home with the remarkable achievement of the second ascent of the West summit by a new route though the beautiful and previously-untrodden Southeast face.

In 1999 the Chileans Sergio Echeverria and Hernán Jofre accompanied by legendary American explorer Jack Miller visited the mountain. But bad weather prevented them from reaching their goal.

* Mount Sarmiento's climbing accounts tend to be confusing due to its two independent summits, and the fact that some expeditions had the secondary Western summit as main objective. To clarify this situation to the reader, the main summit is the East one at 2.207 m, about 60 meters higher than the West summit.

Also in 1999 another “spellbound” climber began his attempts. The German Ralf Gantzhorn, who returned in 2002 and then again in 2005 and 2010, in this last opportunity alongside the prestigious climbers Robert Jasper and Jörn Heller. After aborting an attempt to the North ridge at a similar point than Agnolotti’s 1972 expedition, they made a bold traverse of the West peak’s North face to join the 1986 “Ragni di Lecco” route and complete the third ascent of the West summit.

The year 1999, the spell also fell over the Brazilians Nelson Barretta, Nativo Fransen, Eduardo Lopez and the Argentinean Walter Rossini, who without getting discouraged by a first failure would return again in 2003 with the Chilean Julio Contreras, producing the award winning documentary “Extremo Sul” but without achieving the long desired summit.

The Chileans returned in 2002 with Cristián García Huidobro, Felipe Howard, Diego Vergara, Tito Gana, Pablo Gutierrez, Nico Boetch, Vivi Issa and Tali Santibañez in a remarkable expedition that despite the efforts would be rejected by inclement weather.

Then Andalusian duo Iván Jara and José Antonio Pérez Jorge would attempt it on 2004, and a year later from the same country would come the team of the famous Spanish TV series “Al Filo de lo Imposible”, with José Carlos Tamayo, Iñaki San Vicente and Mikel Zabalza. But in their words they “couldn’t even fight because of the weather”, having to turn around with neither summit nor images for the series.

In 2008, the Dutch Ronald Naar, Martin Fickweiler, Coen Hofstede and Edwin Klerkx made the first winter attempt, but after setting-up three camps, poor visibility kept them away from the top. And finally in 2010, a legendary duo by the climbers Erhard Loretan and Romolo Nottaris made an attempt but again without reaching the elusive summit.

In the austral winter of 2013, this 57 years spell of mischance on the main summit of Mount Sarmiento would be at last broken by a multidisciplinary expedition, with a very similar spirit of the historic one of 1956.

CORDARWIN.13 / UNCHARTED expedition

A 20 member expedition led by Gonzalo Campos and Gino Casassa, reached Mount Sarmiento on board of the sail boat Arco Iris, with mixed objectives that ranged from dendrochronological studies, installation of GPS and automatic weather stations, photography, filming, sea kayaking and mountaineering.

The climbing team was divided in two. First a reconnaissance team of Cristian Donoso, Mario Sepúlveda and Uber Quirilao explored the area and made an attempt to the West summit between July 21st and August 9th, providing invaluable information to the team targeted to the main summit.

The second team, composed by Natalia Martínez (Argentina), Inés Dussaillant and I (Chile) arrived on August 19th, setting up a base camp on Bardonecchia beach on the West side of the mountain.

With the forecast of a good weather window for the 23rd, the logistics originally planned for 30 days were quickly re-organized to take advantage of that window if it appeared.

Using a well established trail through the forest, and skis from 300 m up, once in the alpine we had to battle against bad visibility and constant winds sometime with gusts up to 140 km/h, often throwing us flat to the ground and being forced at one point to dig and get shelter on an ice cave at Vittore Col. On the 22nd we managed to set high camp on the North col, at 1,200 meters. The weather window did

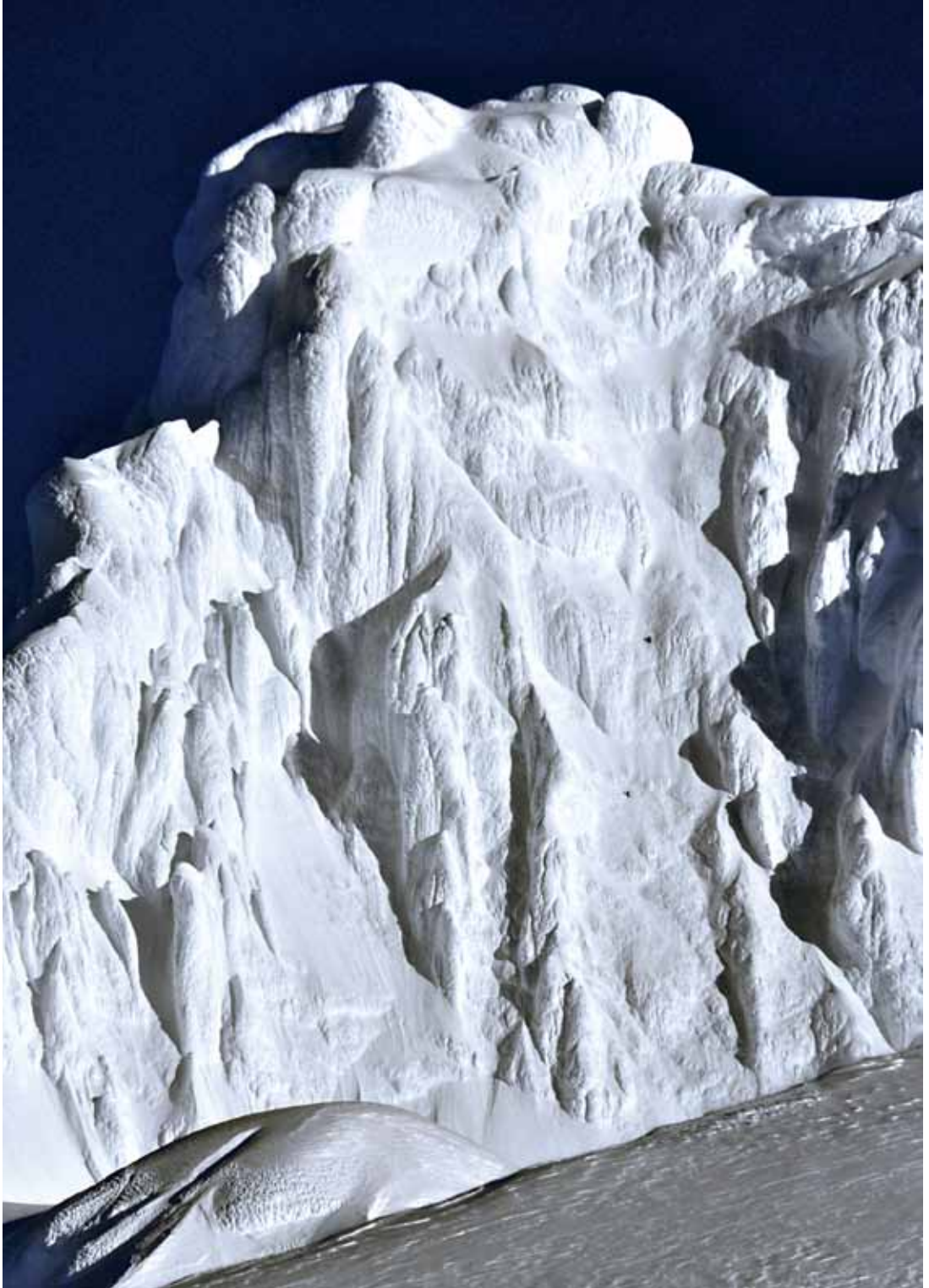


in fact open on the 23rd and luckily lasted to the 24th, when with all our gear and supplies we were ready to tackle the climb. Inés would wait for us at high camp and Natalia and I started at 3:45 am under dream conditions. The wind was nonexistent and the stars were sharply defined in all directions, silhouetting the bold mountains around us. We skinned up under a strong pale moonlight to reach the bergschrund shortly before sunrise, where we switched from ski to mountaineering boots and started the climb directly under the summit 400 m above us. At its weakest point the bergschrund offered a 5 meter overhanging wall covered by a ~80 cm thick rime layer. After a brief attempt to free climb it, we began to aid it switching the ax for a shovel to dig a trench diagonally upward, searching for the ice hidden under inconsistent and hollow rime.

Once assembled above the bergschrund, the route looked promising, and the view was just amazing. Above us the route to the summit unfolded elegantly though a straight gully surrounded by lush rime cauliflowers, very sustained but rarely exceeding 75° and offering excellent ice conditions for progress, although demanding to place protection. The rope quickly began to flow to the rhythm of axes and the tinkling compass of ice screws. It was a dream made true, a moment that will never be erased from our memory.

On the sixth pitch, that short winter day was getting to its twilight, and as we climbed self-absorbed, the shadows lengthened silently to brutally bring us back to reality with a bitter cold, reminding us of the urgency to climb. We knew the fantastic conditions would not endure, and might not be repeated for months. Indeed, before long the wind began to blow and our infinite horizon was reduced to the square meter lit by our head lamps.

The route chosen was based on a pretty bold bet, because the gully ended in a terrifying cirque flanked



Natalia and Camilo as two tiny points on the massive head wall on Mount Sarmiento's North face – Copyrights Ines Dussailant / CORDARWIN. 13

by massive overhanging ice mushrooms. However, a shadow we saw in some pictures led us to believe that one of the mushrooms on the left was disconnected from the wall, opening a channel that we hoped would allow us to escape into gentle slopes leading to the summit.

But as the hours passed, at each step the head lamp jumped nervously to the left looking for the exit, and we began to fear it was only a figment of our imagination. Suddenly at the next look the beam penetrated deep into the dreamed channel, offering in fact a straightforward way between two colossal ice mushrooms. It turned out to be a wind tunnel, strongly urging us upward to the snowfield and thus to the end of difficulties.

We were surprised by the brutal powder snow accumulation, but even waist deep we didn't care anymore, we were there, with only a short walk remaining to the summit. Although invisible in the dark, we could feel that the peak was there, at our fingertips.

After a break we decided to climb the two easy and evenly sized summit mushrooms (not to be confused with the two distinct summits, these are located on the ultimate point of the East summit), from which the second (East) proved to be the highest. Dancing with the gusts we inched to the summit, a point that consolidated a dream of years. It was August 24th at 22:45 h, more than 57 years since the epic and only previous ascent by Mauri and Maffei.

As we prepared for the decent, an orange moon rose over the horizon, becoming a witness to our joy, a reference point in the infinite space around us.

Throughout the long descent in the deep of the night, we stayed awake thanks to small pieces of ice incessantly sweeping the wall and pounding on our helmets. Exhausted but extremely happy, we finally reached the base of the bergschrund just in time for a second sunrise there, after a whole day on the north face of Mount Sarmiento. Dense as usual, the fog took its place and joined the wind: everything was back to normal. With one eye on the tips of our skis and the other on the GPS, we slowly made our way back to camp, at first simply a small dark spot in an all-white world, and then the realization of everything we wanted. At 10:00 h we finally arrived, exhausted but overwhelmed by a deep feeling of fullness after more than 30 hours of continuous effort.

They say dreaming is needed to digest experiences and set them to memory. We eagerly set ourselves to this task, and began the much-needed rest.

Acknowledgements

First of all to Natalia, my partner on this adventure and the main source of motivation at all times. To Inés who suffered and laughed with us all along the expedition, and whose help was key to the success of the climb.

Then, to the CORDARWIN.13 team, that supported us at all times and specially to Gonzalo Campos, who in the quest of his dream made real our own as well.

Also to our sponsor OR, who was to a great degree responsible of our ability to move forward in the most adverse weather, thanks to the advances technology of their garments. To Vertical, that has been always supporting us in one way or another. And to G3, as without their extraordinary backcountry skis, this climb would have been impossible.

And finally to Ana María Rada, a great example of the Patagonian kindness and Evan Miles for his help in the correction of this article.

Summary

On August 19th, Natalia Martínez, Inés Dussailant and Camilo Rada, set up a base camp on

Bardonecchia beach west of Mount Sarmiento in Tierra del Fuego, Chile. On the 22nd they installed high camp on the North Col at 1,200 meters and the 24th, Martínez and Rada ascended to the summit (2,207 m according to GPS reading) reaching it at 22:45 h, following a new direct route on the north face named “Suerte de Sarmiento”, 400m D+ (although remoteness and commitment due the characteristic weather might be consistent with harder grade, MD perhaps). They left the mountain on August 29th.



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“© CORDARWIN. 13”



After a long wait in Punta Arenas, the sailboat Arco Iris finally navigates towards Mount Sarmiento.
“© Ines Dussailant / CORDARWIN. 13”



While mountaineers were focus on the climb. The Arco Iris explores the West face of Mount Sarmiento and its surroundings. “© Guy Wenborne / CORDARWIN. 13”



Natalia crosses a log bridge as leaving base camp with the first loads towards the deposit at col Vittore. © Ines Dussailant / CORDARWIN. 13”



Natalia in the last ski descent as we leave Mount Sarmiento, in the background the Azul lake and Magdalena channel can be seen trough gaps in the clouds. © Camilo Rada / CORDARWIN. 13”



On a perfect night, Natalia and Camilo prepares to attempt a new line on the elusive Mount Sarmiento. © Camilo Rada / CORDARWIN. 13”



Camilo climbs aesthetic ice at the middle of Mount Sarmiento’s North face under perfect sunshine. © Natalia Matínez / CORDARWIN. 13”



Natalia pushing against wind and snow in our race to reach high camp on time for the weather window. © Camilo Rada / CORDARWIN. 13”