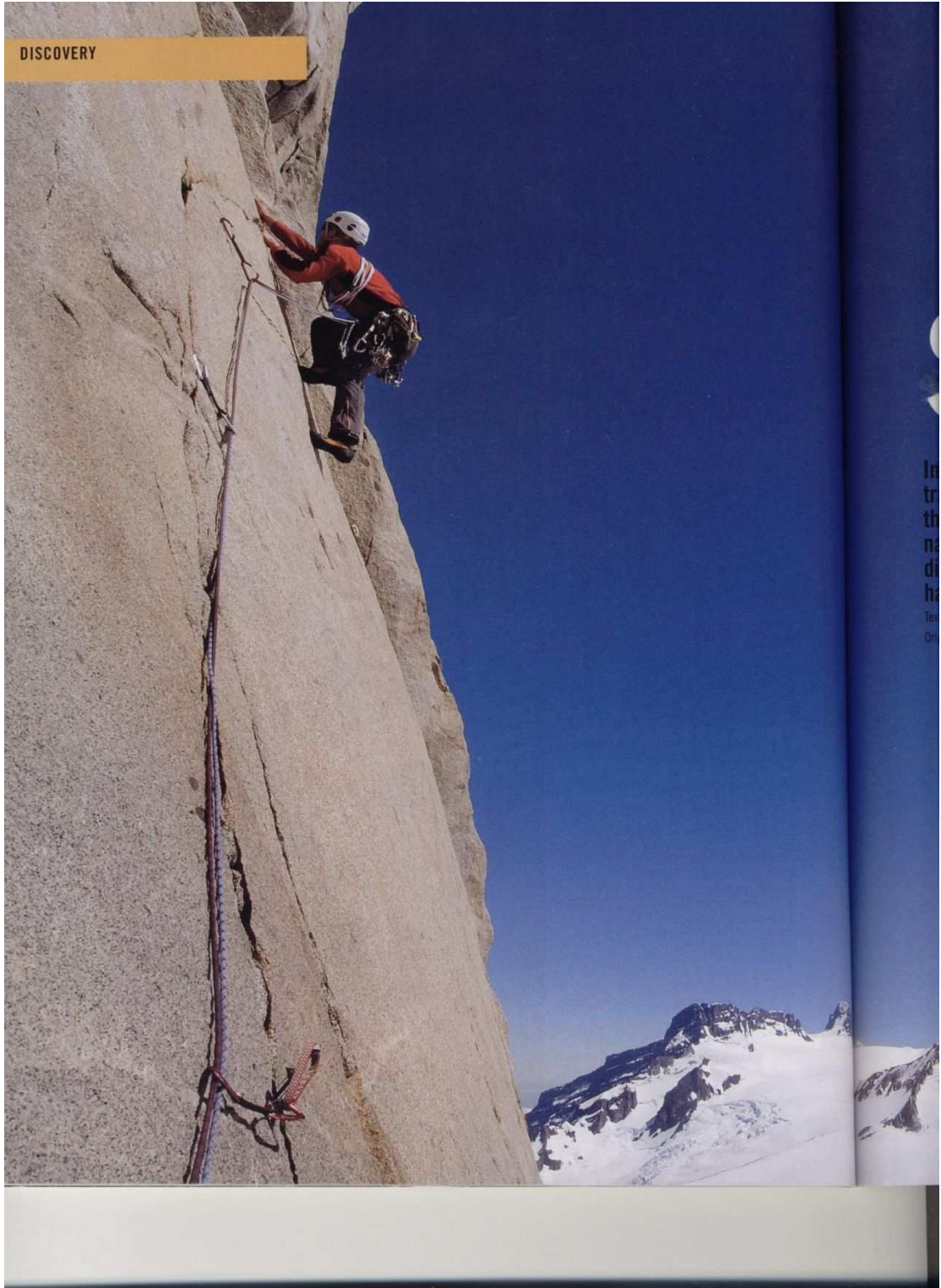


DISCOVERY



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# VERTICAL SPIRIT

**In December 2005 five young alpinists from Holland travelled to Chile where, far from the civilized world, they hoped to find virgin summits, mountains with no name and unclimbed rock faces. The routes that they did were neither long nor extreme but, hey, these guys had fun and isn't that what it's all about!**

Text by Ruben van Walen and Eelco Franz. Photos Menno Boerman.  
Original text in English.

Ruben van Walen halfway up *Perculator Addicts*. This pitch was quite similar to the S-shaped crack of the *Rébuffat* on the Aiguille du Midi.



## DISCOVERY

**W**e watched with awe and respect as ice-avalanches roared down into the big gorge looming in front of our base camp. A little worried, we studied the gorge and its flanking walls to find a way through to the glacier plateau above, where virgin rock was awaiting us. At this point however, we couldn't imagine moving through such dangerous terrain and decided to continue searching for a safe passage to the immense Cipreses glacier, which forms one of the largest ice shelves in the Andes outside Patagonia.

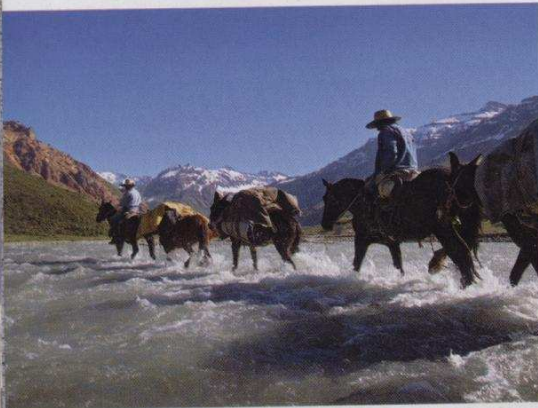
We had landed at Santiago airport five days before, had bought enough food for five people for three weeks and arranged a jeep to drive to the entrance of the Cipreses valley. Only a few climbers know this area. The first climbs here date from 1959 and the only other climbing parties to have visited did so in 1993 and 2005. Photocopied maps from the Santiago



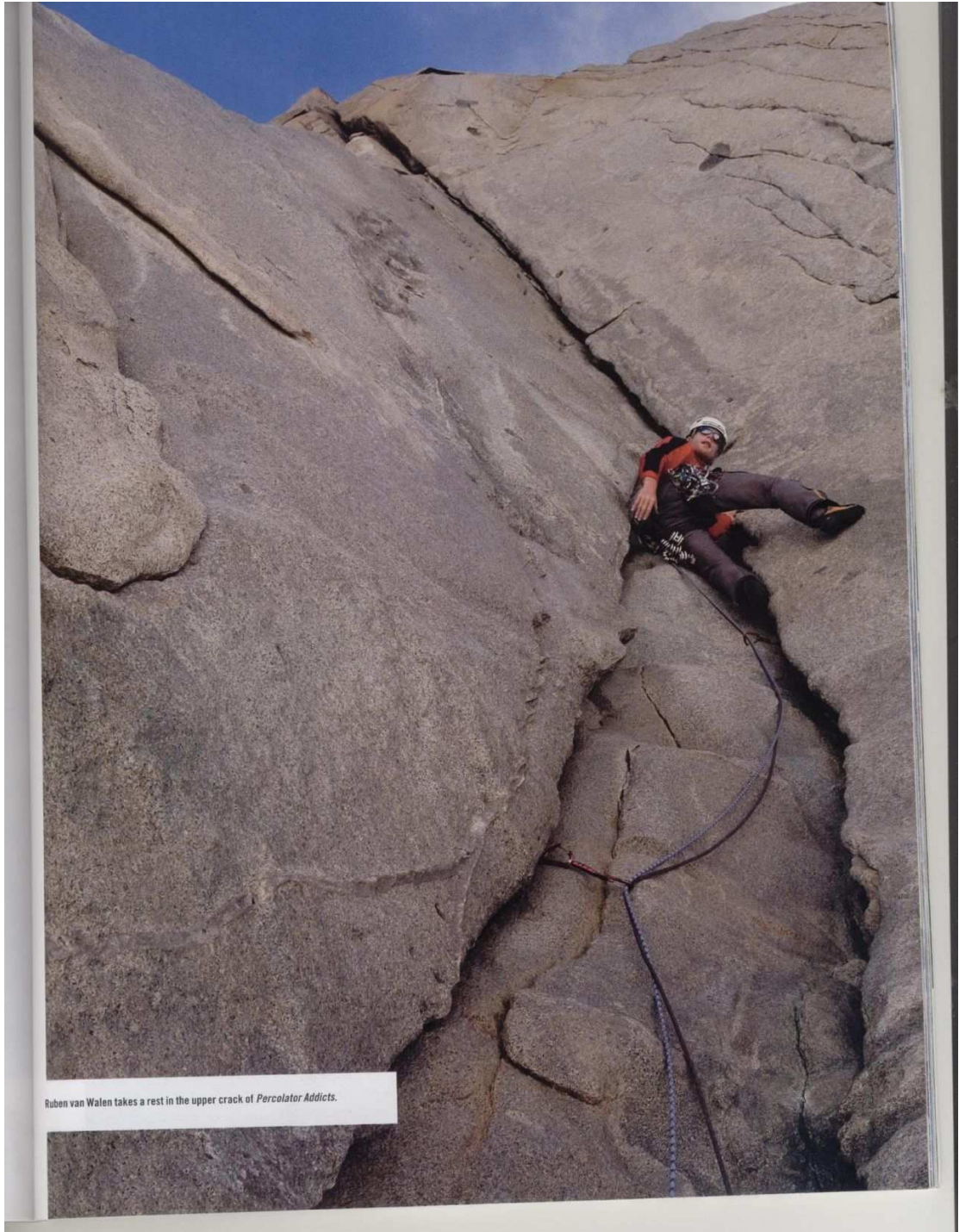
Approaching the peaks that we called the Aguja's Maxima. The routes that we climbed were on the back side.

Back in the Netherlands the plans for this expedition had arisen from reading about the great opportunities for new-routing in the Chilean Andes. ... we hoped to satisfy our desire for unknown mountains and unclimbed rock faces. Exploring a new area was what all of us always wanted to do. We were hungry for adventure.

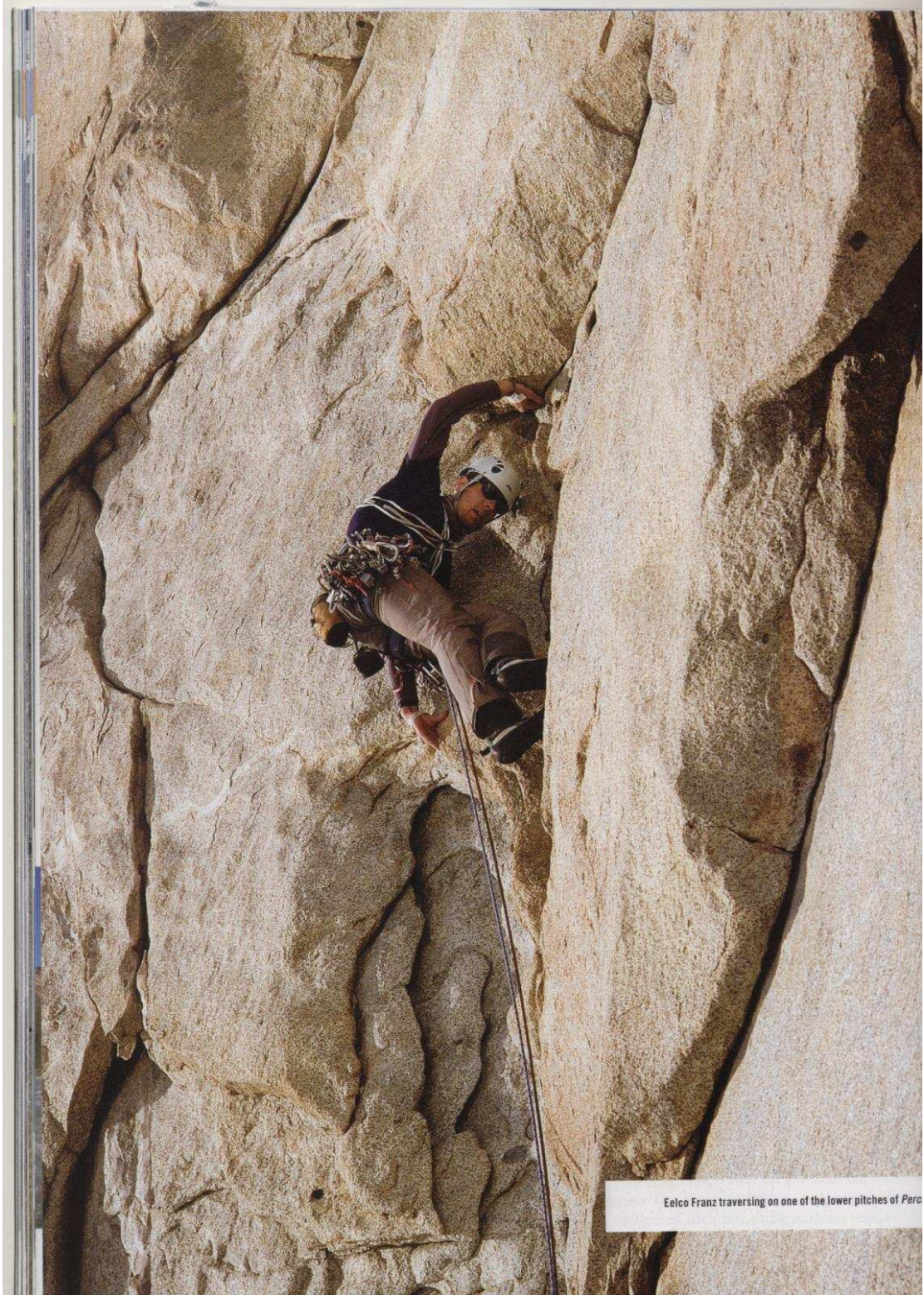
Crossing the Cipreses river. Easy work for the mules, wet clothes for us.



library were not really that helpful. Of more use were printouts of Google earth maps which, together with some photos taken by the expedition the previous year, were our only navigational aids. From the entrance of the Cipreses valley it took us two days of trekking - involving some seriously wild river crossings, imaginary pumas, snakes, spiders and burning hiking boots (they were drying too close to the fire) - to reach the end of the valley where we established our base camp. Back in the Netherlands the plans for this expedition had arisen from reading about the great opportunities for new-routing in the Chilean Andes. We were a party of five young and highly motivated Dutch climbers - Ruben van Walen, Michiel van de Ent, Michiel Engelsman, Menno Boermans and Eelco Franz - eager to go beyond the well-known European Alps (although, being Dutch, this will probably always be a bold statement). In Chile, we hoped to satisfy our desire for unknown mountains and unclimbed rock faces. Exploring a new area was what all of us always wanted to do. We were hungry for adventure. We explored the right flanking wall of the gorge, metre by metre, to find a passage to the upper glacier. This wall was our only remaining option after the previous day's hopeless reconnaissance. The recon ended on a ridge with beautiful views of unclimbed rock but, sadly, with no possibility of



Ruben van Walen takes a rest in the upper crack of *Percolator Addicts*.



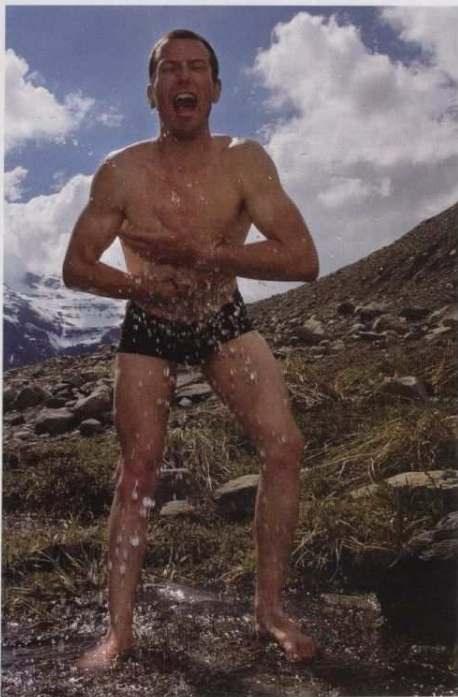
Eelco Franz traversing on one of the lower pitches of Perc

descending to the glacier below, the access barred by a 100-metre wall of overhanging rock. So today, watched by some guanacos, we were following a series of ledges to a point where only one small abseil/down-climb separated us from the glacier. This was our lucky break! We happily returned to base camp, jumping around excitedly, and celebrated the good news with a nice meal of pancakes, thinking all the time of the possibilities this approach would give us. We baptised the passage 'Dutch Alley'.

The following days were spent ferrying loads (40 kilos each) to the glacier and making an exploratory trip over the glacial plateau from an intermediate camp. This camp was situated on a moraine ridge on the lower Cipreses glacier at about 3600m. Its location allowed us to explore both the lower and higher Cipreses glacier. The lower section was surrounded by peaks that had already been climbed and seemed to offer

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Elco Franz taking a cold, but much-needed bath, near basecamp.



We climbed a col which gave us access to a glacier on the northside of Vulcan Palomo.

only climbing on granite of mediocre quality. Although the height of the walls (500 to approximately 700m) and the beauty of some of the peaks (one resembled the Aiguille Verte) stirred some interest, we soon concluded that our quest was to find perfect unclimbed granite and our own little 'Midi Sud' in the Southern Hemisphere. So we continued our search on the upper Cipreses glacier. The upper glacier was easy to reach via a diagonal snow couloir which was only exposed to rock fall in places.

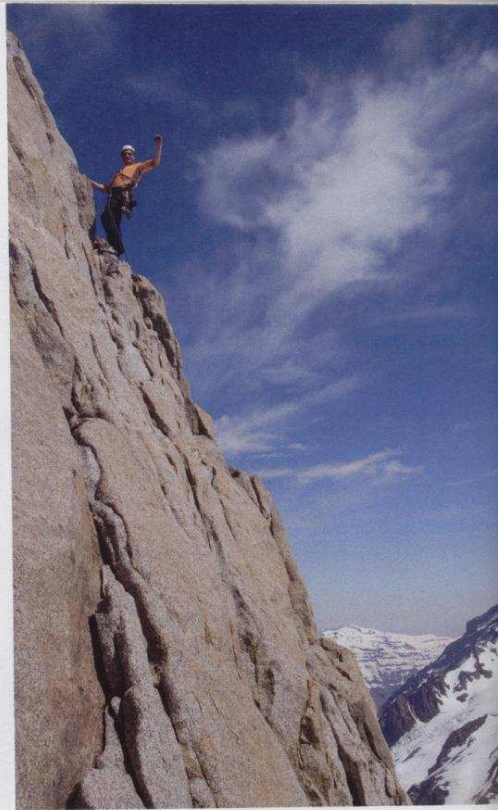
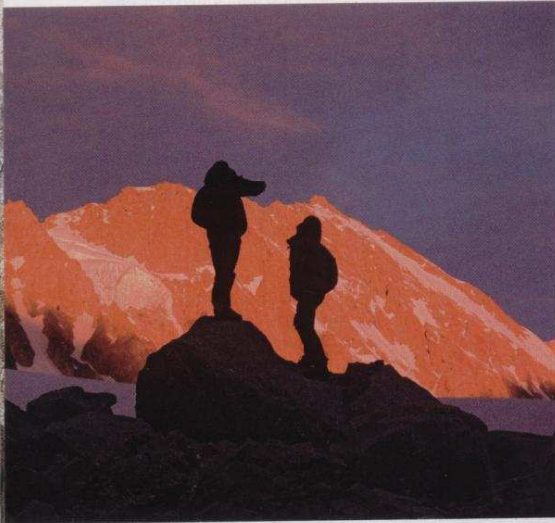
**Finally after a week of hard work** we set up our camp high on the glacier. This camp was situated opposite the Agujas de Palomo and right underneath a small group of granite peaks, which we later called (after climbing them) the Agujas Maxima. Immediately we started climbing on the untouched peaks of the Agujas de Palomo opposite the camp, of which the left-hand pair had already been climbed by the Chilean team the previous year. On Pt. 3970 we established a short route which we named *A Steady Diet of Nothing* (200m.VII-). An attempt on the neighbouring peak failed due to the dangerously poor quality of the rock. We managed to climb almost to the top but were forced to leave the summit untouched because of falling rock. It became apparent to us that good quality granite was not abundantly available on most of the peaks in the Agujas de Palomo range. A little disappointed, we turned our attention to the pillars and

## DISCOVERY

faces rising up immediately above our camp. And yes, there we were in luck. The granite was perfect. Long days of climbing found us high up on pillars, following untouched cracks and ledges. This must have been the feeling Rébuffat had when he first climbed his route on the south face of the Aiguille du Midi. Sharp granite and good holds for the fingers; we even found an S-shaped crack! But we were not in Chamonix, we were in a completely remote area on the other side of the world. No lifts, no sounds, no tourists. Only the mountains and us, watched by the condors. We climbed in teams and managed to establish two nice routes: *South American Aphrodisiac* (250m, VII) on the Aguja Maxima main-summit (3980m) and *Perculator Addicts* (300m, VII+) on the Aguja Maxima north-summit. What an incredible feeling, to feel the rock in your hands, knowing that you are the first person ever on earth to have touched it. This was the climbing we were looking for.

Since finding a safe entrance to the glacier and the establishment of the camps had taken us much more time than we had planned, we ran out of food and fuel and didn't have many climbing days left. We decided to climb the Volcan Palomo (4850m), because it dominated the views from our camp. It was quite an easy walk, but we really enjoyed it. Walking slowly with empty stomachs under intense sunlight was enough to exhaust us. We reached the summit by crossing a little pass in a line of peaks running north from the Volcan (Agujas de Palomo) and then continuing across

The view from our high camp.



Michiel van den Ent enjoying the climbing. It was amazing to climb on rock that nobody had ever touched before.

moderate scree and snow slopes. The views were impressive. We could see range after range in the border area with Argentina, hosting a lot of mountains which must still be unclimbed. We were probably the first party to reach the summit of the Palomo from the north-west (palomo means pigeon and the mountain gets its name from the glaciers which look like the wings of a pigeon). Having completely run out of supplies we returned to base camp and welcomed the gauchos into camp on the agreed day. All the gear was put on the back of mules and, with only one energy bar per person left, we started the one-day 55-kilometre trip back to the park entrance. Hallucinating about good beer and burgers, we dragged ourselves back to the relative luxury of a small farming village. Our hunger for virgin rock had been satisfied. ■



Los Cipreses national park is located 65km south-east of Rancagua, 150km from Santiago.



## CHILI Fact file

The best time to visit the Central Chilean Andes for rock climbing is between December and March (summer). From Europe it is best to fly to Santiago. From Santiago to Rancagua is about a five hour drive. From Rancagua to the entrance of the Rio de Los Cipreses National Reserve is about 65km along the 'copper highway' and then a dirtroad (a 4-wheel drive vehicle is necessary).

You have to register and pay an entrance fee at the CONAF office. With a bit of luck, you will be able to find a mule-driver (for example Don Angel Lara), from the surrounding houses, who will help with ferrying loads to the base of the glacier. A two-day hike along (and through) the Rio de Los Cipreses river brings you to Rincon de Los Guanacos at the southern end of the valley. On your hike in you will see yellow Trichahue parrots, red foxes, snakes, spiders and maybe even a puma.

When the mule-drivers leave, you are absolutely alone in an immense and remote mountain area. To reach the glacier safely, avoid the gorge and approach from the southern hills, via a series of ledges and one abseil. We camped about 500m up from where we

joined the glacier. Continue hiking over the glacier southwards until you pass the Aguja Maxima on your left. Ascend a steep rocky couloir to reach a snowy/rocky hill. We traversed east, passing under the Aguja Maxima, until we saw the glacier plateau in front of us with the Agujas de Palomo and the Volcan Palomo in the distance. This is a good spot to set up camp, as there is water close by in some small glacial lakes. This was our advanced base camp.

You can buy food in the supermarkets in Santiago and benzine for stoves in Rancagua. A 4-wheel drive rental car in Santiago costs about 120 euros/day. A mule will cost about 16 euros/day and a mule-driver about 20 euros/day.

