

That so much of the region still remains unexplored is due almost entirely to the physical difficulties of travel there. For during the last 50 years, many attempts have been made to penetrate it. The chief problem is presented by the weather, said to be some of the worst in the world. Heavy rainfalls for prolonged periods; fine spells are rare and usually brief and, above all, there is the notorious Patagonian wind, the savage storms that often continue for weeks at a stretch, with gusts up to 130 mph. The terrain too is unusually difficult.

— Explorer Eric Shipton on his Patagonian journeys in *Land of Tempest* (1963).

We had been shuttling around in planes and cars for five days and were relieved to finally arrive at the Fitz Roy basecamp. We were tired and set up our tents quickly. After dinner, we settled down to what should have been a peaceful night's rest — anywhere else in the world, that is.

The concert began with a drum roll off the glaciers above. "What's that?" I muttered in my groggy haze.

"Nothing," groaned Casey from his sleeping bag. "It's just a little wind."

The distant roar quickly became a freight train that slammed into our tent. The nylon hut strained under the load, poles bowing and rainfly flapping hysterically — then all was quiet. Casey and I bolted upright and exchanged concerned glances. This was the fabled wind we'd been warned about, followed by a driving rain that pummeled us so hard it was as if we were camped inside a snare drum. To my chagrin, sleep was not on the agenda that first night.

We awoke the next morning to a mix of snow and rain. It was not pretty. Allan Bard poked his head into our tent to check for

IN PATAGONIA

by David Goodman



CASEY SHEAHAN

*The 747 of bird droppings:
"Hit the deck, incoming condor!"*

signs of life. Grinning maniacally, he tried to put the best face on the night's events. "Welcome to Patagonia," he bellowed over the whine of the wind. "Have a nice day!"

It began as a simple proposition. We would travel to Patagonia, the southernmost region of South America, and an area steeped in legend and mystery. To mountaineers and explorers, Patagonia is best known for two things. First, there's its unique landscape. Dry grassy plains known as pampas are flanked by spectacular ice-plastered granite spires and the only ice cap outside the polar regions. Second, it is notorious for being home to some of the most ferocious weather in the world, where the legendary "Roaring Forties" winds blast with relentless force. As to why four Americans were there, we had come with a humble mission shared by skiers the world

over: We wanted to go spring skiing.

The crew that assembled for this pleasant sojourn was a diverse but curiously well-matched one. Allan Bard was a veteran climbing and skiing guide from Bishop, California, whose storytelling prowess was rivaled only by his skiing talents. He was joined by his Bishop neighbor Allan Pietrasanta, a mountain guide cum entrepreneurial businessman, whose quiet demeanor would melt with enthusiasm whenever he was set loose in the hills. Casey Sheahan was the editor of a certain California-based ski magazine. His zeal for fly fishing vied with his passion for powder, and his ulterior motives for coming to Patagonia became alarmingly apparent as he frothed over every clearwater



ONIA

Patagonian ski report: NW winds at 140 mph, 200 feet of windslab over a rock-hard base, all runs open, no lifts running. Location: Fitz Roy snowfields, Argentina. Skier: Allan Bard

stream we passed. It fell to me, a writer and skier from Boston, to provide some balance to this quartet: I was the unrepentant Easterner who would rudely interrupt the California Boys' soliloquies about skiing big bowls and deep powder with my own rapturous descriptions of skiing spruce thickets and ice flows in howling winds. My affection for skiing in such environments was, I assumed, what made me eminently qualified to appreciate skiing in Patagonia.

Each of us was drawn to Patagonia for the same reason other explorers and dreamers have gravitated here over the last two centuries: it's the end of the earth, and it had captured our imagination. Patagonia refers to the region below the fortieth parallel,

spanning both Argentina and Chile. It includes the southernmost habitable areas of the western hemisphere. Once the roaming ground of a few nomadic Indian tribes, the area was settled near the turn of the century by an unlikely collection of British and European sheep farmers who still run their isolated farms, or *estancias*.

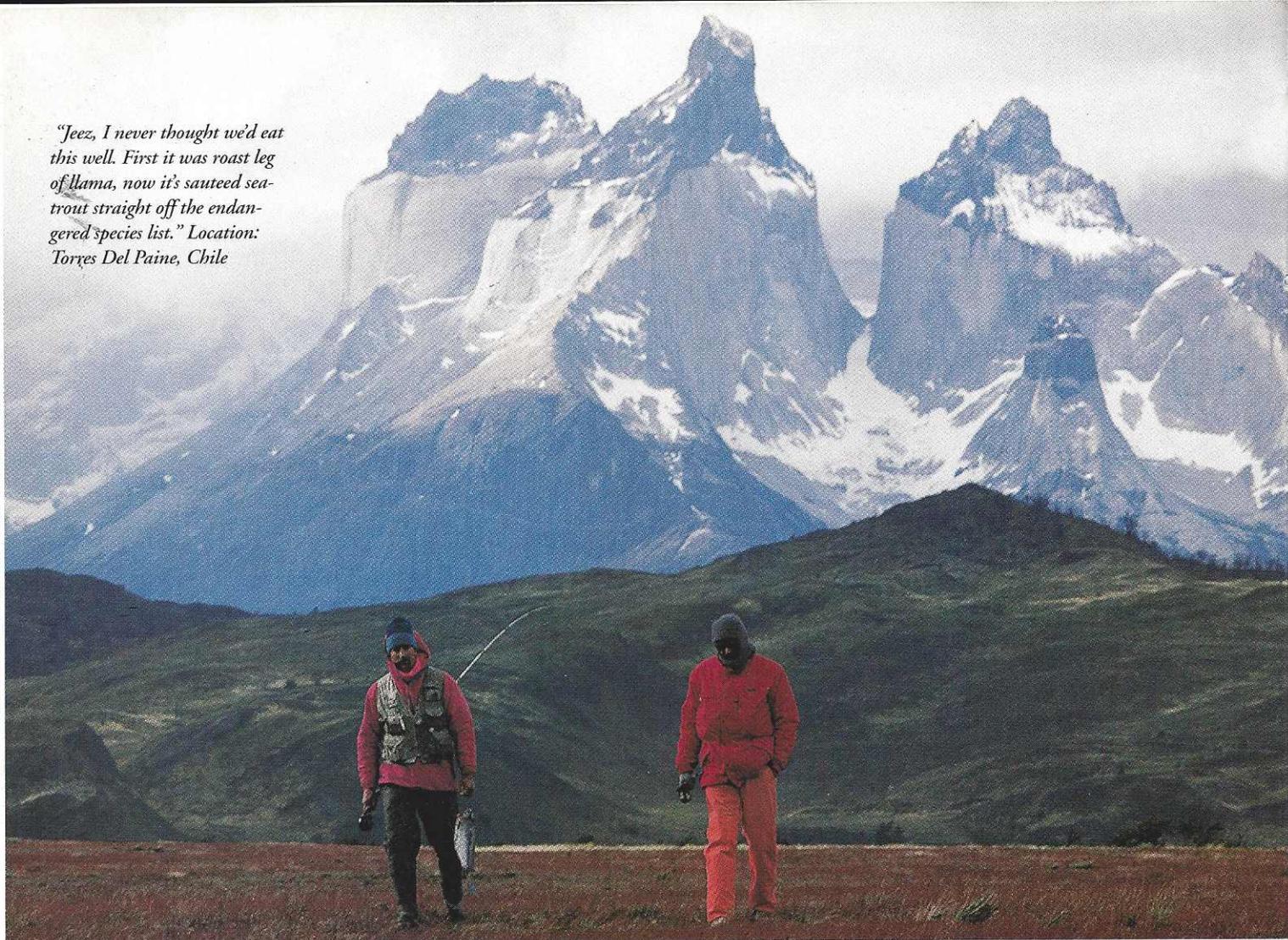
Our destination was Los Glaciares National Park in Argentina, which encompasses part of the Patagonian ice cap and includes the towering granite spires capped by Mt. Fitz Roy. We planned to spend a week circumnavigating Fitz Roy and its sister peak, Cerro Torre. We estimated that this would involve several days of hiking and skiing on the ice cap for anywhere from one to four days,

depending on conditions. The plan was simple, elegant and, as we soon learned, wildly optimistic.

To reach the ice cap, we would have to drive across 300 miles of the arid, sparsely populated pampas. We set out from Punta Arenas, the southernmost city of Chile. Our initial excitement for the journey turned to concern for our survival when we were presented with Punta Arenas' finest rental car: a battle-worn, eight-year-old Chevy Blazer with four bald tires and two ailing spares. Our adventure was beginning sooner than we had bargained for.

Swallowing our doubts, we were soon bouncing over the lonely dirt roads that snake

"Jeez, I never thought we'd eat this well. First it was roast leg of llama, now it's sauteed sea-trout straight off the endangered species list." Location: Torres Del Paine, Chile



The critical moment came on the third day, when, in a fit of cabin fever, we drained our alcohol stocks. That meant only one thing: It was time to ski.

across the South American prairies. At one point, we came to a screeching halt when someone spied what they thought were flamingos bathing in a roadside pond. We piled out to inspect and, sure enough, a dozen or so pink flamingos threw bored looks our way and returned to studying the pond for meal possibilities.

Soon after sliding a hostile Argentine border guard a few American "gifts" to ease our passage, we were sailing across the most desolate expanse of land we had yet encoun-

tered. Low gray-green scrub dotted the rolling countryside, and grazing sheep stared quizzically at the dust-belching four-wheeled animal in their midst. We took in this pastoral scene for miles until we noticed that the car was no longer enjoying the ride. Sheahan looked out the driver's window, Bard looked back from the passenger window, when both declared simultaneously, "It's on my side." Sure enough, we were victims of a rare and highly inauspicious phenomenon: a double blowout.

We congratulated ourselves for our foresight in bringing along two spares, but using them both left us in a bit of a bind. The remaining few hundred miles of pampas would have to be crossed with no further problems or else, as Bard put it to us delicately, we were going to become part of the food chain out there in desperadoland. Pietrasanta took the wheel with a mandate to keep us alive. About the time he took over, the road turned into what can generously be described as a hiking trail with tire ruts, as we heaved and slammed our way forward. The only signs of life we passed were a haggard

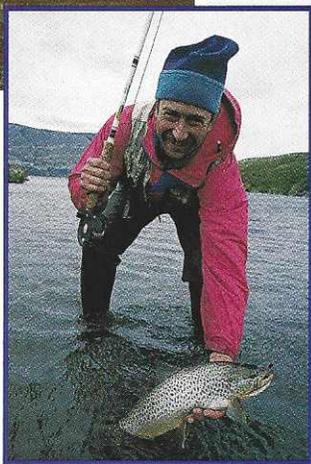
crew of three European mountain bikers beating a swift retreat from the windswept plains.

Before long, we came upon a frontier police officer's house, only to find him and his pickup stranded in the middle of a nearby river. We hauled him out, and proceeded on to where a friendly Argentine road construction crew generously agreed to bail us out by fixing our tires. We had dodged the bullet — for now.

We made it to park headquarters with only one more flat tire. When we finally extricated ourselves and our gear from our vehicle, we were treated to the reason we had traveled this far. Looming above us, swirling in and out of a smoky shroud, was the silhouette of a row of enormous granite towers. Leaping up toward the sky from an ocean of ice, they dwarfed the surrounding countryside. In the middle of these peaks we could make out the tantalizing outline of Mount Fitz Roy. Clouds clung to the sides of the massive 11,070-foot granite spire, teasing us by only revealing one section of the mountain at a



Down here, you point 'em south for powder. Skier: Allan Pietrasanta



CASEY SHEAHAN

Allan "Top of the Food Chain" Bard. Darwin would be proud.

time, then swallowing it up as quickly as it appeared. We stared silently, captivated by this magical performance.

The fleeting view of the mountains fired us into action. We planned to spend a day hiking to the Fitz Roy basecamp and climbing up to ski the glaciers on the east side of the mountain. We would then hike for another day and climb onto the vast ice cap that covers the area on the west side of Fitz Roy. Once on the ice cap, we would have to ski as quickly as possible to minimize our

exposure to the merciless weather there, and escape down a pass just south of the Fitz Roy Massif. From there, we could hike back to our car in about a day. We figured a week or so would allow us the time we needed. Fitz Roy, however, had other plans for us.

We had hoped to hire packhorses to do what is rightfully animals' work, but the gaucho was nowhere to be found when it came time to go. So we shouldered our 80-pound packs and served as human gear barges for the hike into the Fitz Roy basecamp. Upon our arrival, we were greeted by a ragtag group of climbers and hangers-on whose sunken eyes, long faces and maniacal laughs told a sordid tale. Pairs of Spaniards, Italians, Argentines and New Zealanders each had a grimmer saga of sitting out the horrendous weather in their single-minded pursuit of climbing this peak. The Italians had already been there a month and were vowing to stay as long as it took to get up the peak. The Spaniards were reduced to laughing incessantly. We never did find out their story. The Kiwis had already been warming their derrieres in basecamp for two weeks, but

were insisting, "All we need is three fine days, three fine days. With three fine days we can get up and down Fitz Roy. S' right, three fine days should do it, mate."

For our part, we had taken to heart the warnings about what Patagonian weather could dish up, and prepared ourselves accordingly. Our gear for coping with this environment was chosen carefully and methodically. Most important among our arsenal was a broad selection of alcoholic beverages, a good quantity of Peet's coffee, several long novels and in Bard, a storyteller and jokester whose repertoire appeared to be inexhaustible. We also brought skis and parkas on the off-chance the weather might allow us to get out of our tent.

Our preparation proved to be right on. For two days, we sat in our tent getting lashed, pummeled and blasted by rain, snow and wind. On our second day, we stole away for a soggy hike to a nearby glacier, but the gray skies didn't yield. The critical moment came on the third day, when, in a fit of cabin fever, we drained our alcohol stocks. That meant only one thing: It was time to ski.



The author skiing authoritatively.

*I could hear the scrape
of metal edges across
ice-crusting snow and
saw him reappear below,
nervously sideslipping
the steep throat of the
couloir.*

The skies suddenly became friendlier as we hiked up a treeless ridge toward the snowfields and glaciers visible from basecamp. Patches of sunshine broke through just as we crested the top of the ridge. We looked up to see looming before us the granite giants: Mounts St. Exupery, Poincenot and Fitz Roy, whose towering summit was still obscured by a boiling cloudbank. As we gazed in awe at the sight, a giant condor soared above us, floating playfully on the thermal air currents.

We headed up a nearby snowfield, a perfect long slope sweeping down from a high ridge.

Sheahan and Bard took up positions to shoot a few photos and ordered Pietrasanta and I to climb up to the top of a steep gully and ski it. This was to be my season opening run after a seven-month lay-off, and I began to make noises about starting on more casual terrain.

"Any chance I could get in a warm-up run?" I asked sheepishly.

Bard looked surprised. "Aw, *you* can ski it," he chided me. I shuddered at the thought of backing off the first run of the trip in front of my reputable partners. I silenced my chattering mind and followed Pietrasanta up to the top of the gully.

I stood and watched as he carved one turn and dropped out of sight over a sharp horizon line. I could hear the scrape of metal edges across ice-crusting snow and saw him reappear below, nervously sideslipping the steep throat of the couloir.

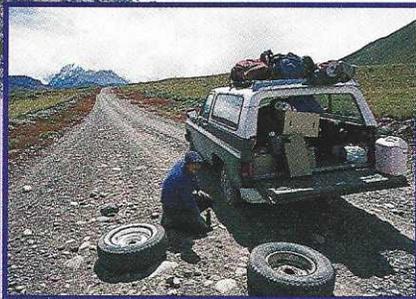
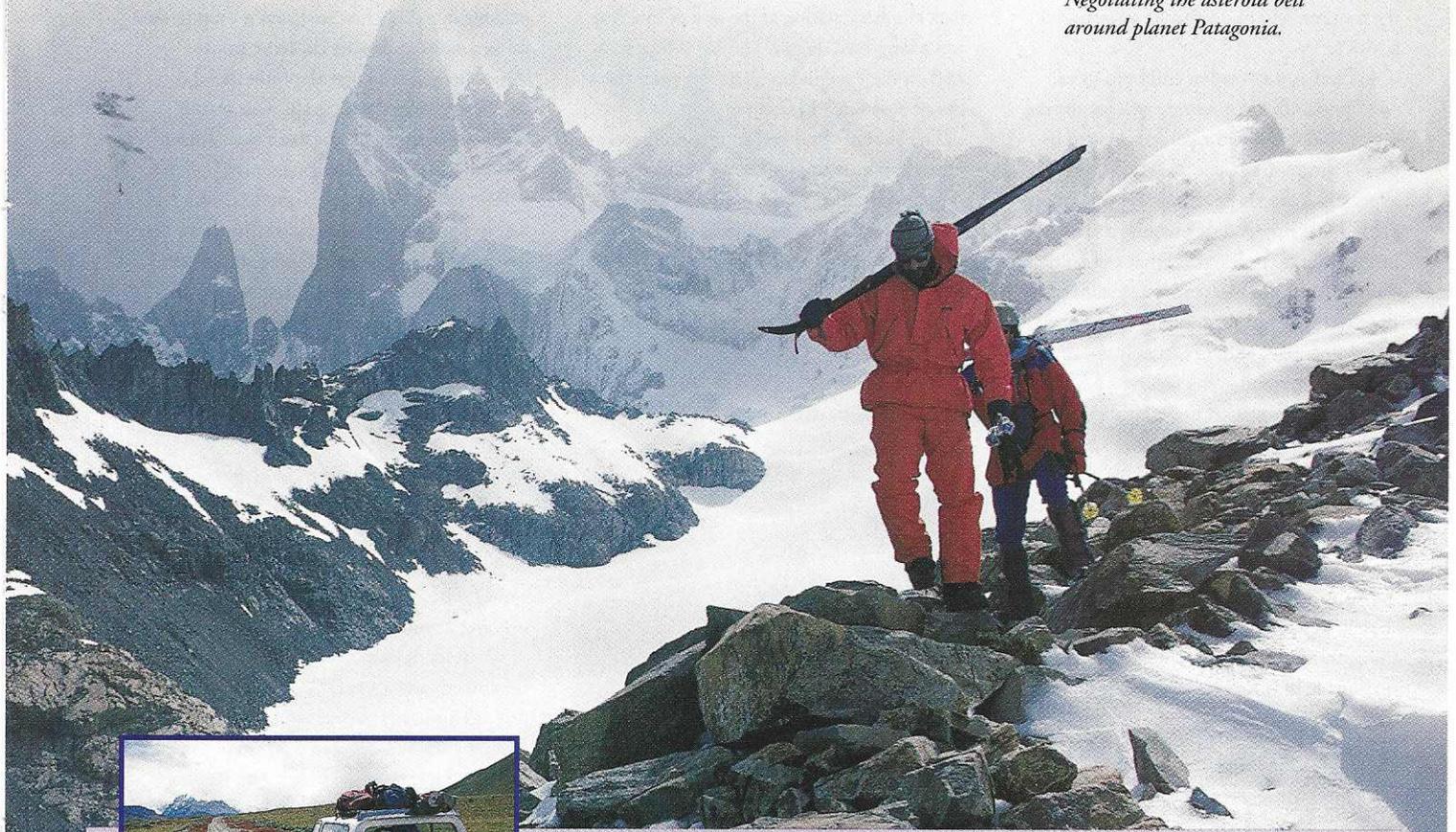
It was my turn. The photographers waited expectantly as I peered over the edge of the gully. I wasn't happy. I tried to shut out the mental babble that was telling me I'd pay for this run the rest of the season, but it just wouldn't shut up. Slowly I started sliding,

then planted both poles and jumped 180 degrees to face the opposite direction and a beautiful open slope that lay between me and the paparazzi. They lowered their cameras, disgusted, but nothing could dampen my enthusiasm for getting to the bottom of my first run in one piece.

I had all of two seconds to revel in the feeling of being on skis again when I went to make my next jump turn, only to be rudely reminded by a face full of snow that I wasn't going to be getting a lot of air while hauling the kitchen sink on my back. Midway down the slope, I finally heaved the pack off my back and blasted through a set of turns on perfect corn snow. I hiked back up all smiles. The season had begun.

We skied the slope for all it was worth over the course of the afternoon. But the skiing became secondary to our world-class gawking: Every snack break and occasional fall was an excuse to stop and gaze at the summits. Reasonably good weather held out, although we got a healthy taste of body-slammng Patagonian breezes. We made the most of the

*Negotiating the asteroid belt
around planet Patagonia.*



CASEY SHEAHAN

*"I see what the problem is,
these are silk-belted radials."*

DOCUMENTOS, POR FAVOR!

We started our road trip in Punta Arenas, Chile (cost of Miami to Santiago roundtrip flight on LanChile Airlines: \$799, plus \$342 roundtrip to Punta Arenas. You can also buy a 21-day maximum "Visit Chile Fare" for \$349, which allows you unlimited travel through Chile for 21 days. Call 800-735-5526). We rented a four-wheel drive Chevy Blazer from the local Hertz dealer, Don Pedro Delisle, for the two-day northward journey to the Andes. You can contact him at 1064 Lautaro Navarro, Punta Arenas, Chile Tel.011-56-61-222013. Cost: \$450 per week, which included four bald tires, two leaky spares and a pass to take the car across the border (called an *autorización para*

conducir — absolutely critical). We never passed a *gomeria* (tire repair station) without getting our tires patched.

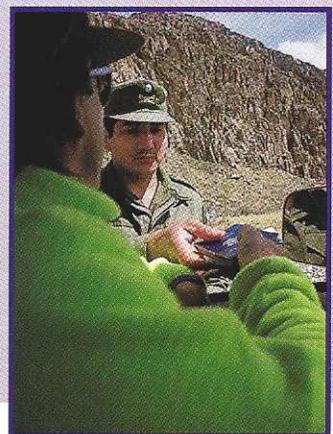
In addition to supplies of food, beer, warm clothes, camping and fishing gear, we brought a "Baja 500" survival kit of spare radiator hoses, cans of Fix-a-Flat, hose clamps, duct tape, baling wire, a tow rope, a five-gallon gas can, wrenches and screwdrivers. For the border crossings, our supply of American cigarettes and girlie magazines got us through with a quick stamp and a smile. Road maps of Patagonia are poor; local service stations have more detailed charts and we found decent topos of the Fitz Roy region at the photocopy shop in Calafate, Argentina. Food and lodging were much cheaper in Argentina where a rapidly devaluing austral bought us rooms for four in a nice hotel at \$28, a dinner for four for \$19. These prices dropped another 35 percent by the time we left.

In Punta Arenas, you'll find decent digs at the Hotel Colonizadores (double room; \$38. Address: 21 De Mayo 1690, Punta Arenas Tel: 011-56-61-228144). A friend in Calafate, Jorge Peterek of Patagonia Wilderness plans to lead guided trips (using XC skis, sleds and small packs) on the Patagonian Ice Cap in September. You can

book a trip through Inner Asia Expeditions, 2627 Lombard St., San Francisco, CA 94123; 415-922-0448.

For further reading about Patagonia, try *Land of Tempest* by the legendary British explorer Eric Shipton (available as part of *The Six Mountain Travel Books*, Mountaineers Books, 1985). You might also read *In Patagonia*, a popular literary travelogue by Bruce Chatwin (Penguin Books, 1977). For great seafood and steaks in Punta Arenas, visit Satito's Bar. In Calafate, don't miss Michelangelo's. Tell 'em the boys from POWDER sent you. — C.S.

*Please, please, please don't let
him find out about those Punta
Arenas parking tickets . . .*



ALLAN BARD

20-hour daylight and staggered happily down the mountain to our campsite at around 9 p.m.

As kind as the weather had been to us, conditions still did not bode well for the ice cap crossing. While the pampas basked in partial sunshine to the east, we could see angry black clouds hovering over the ice cap behind Fitz Roy. It didn't require a vivid imagination to realize that what was going on out there was not pleasant. The California Boys were already abandoning the original expedition plan, talking excitedly about heading down and going fishing.

It hadn't dawned on me until about that time that they were actually quite serious about their fly rods. I hadn't a clue about the fishing plan until Punta Arenas, when I naively asked Sheahan what the silver tube was in his ski bag.

"Planning a little fishing?" I quipped snidely in our hotel room, chuckling at the thought. My experiences catching mutant marine life in Boston Harbor had unfairly soured me on the sport, and I was feeling self-righteous.

Sheahan looked at me, politely masking his shock at my ignorance. "Of course," he fired back. "Patagonia has some of the best fly fishing in the world. You don't think I'd come here just to *ski* . . ."

A few days later we were packing at the Fitz Roy park headquarters when I noticed the same tubes emerging from the Bishop Boys' ski bags.

"You guys fishermen, too?" I asked cheerily, trying to hide my concern that I was about to venture into the mountains with a bunch of beer-guzzling minnow muggers.

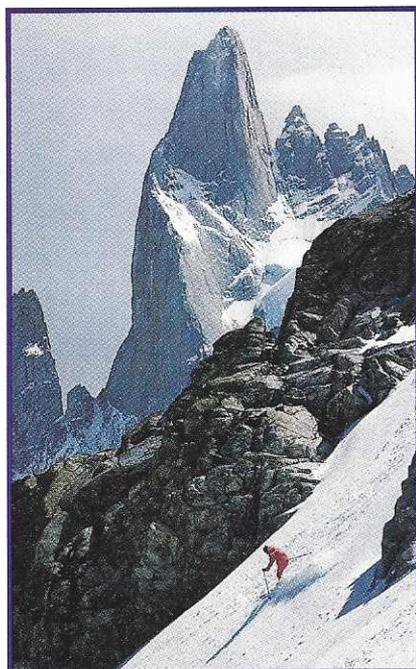
"Anglers," Pietrasanta corrected me. He and Bard then began telling me about how they had almost forsaken climbing for fishing these days. I paled at the thought, but did my best to keep up a polite front about the subject from then on.

The next day we headed up for a foray onto a glacier below Fitz Roy. It was a broad, flowing *mer de glace*, as the French call it, or "sea of ice." We roped up and climbed the gently sloping tongue. The higher we went, the more powerful the gusts became until we reached a col and struggled to maintain our footing. From there, we could look down onto the heavily crevassed glacier that fell from the base of the mountains. Fitz Roy and Poincenot towered more impressive than ever, the clouds parting to reveal the technicolor gold, rust and gray shades of the rock. To

Bard and Pietrasanta, both veteran Yosemite rock climbers, staring at the face of Fitz Roy was a long-held dream. The 6000-foot rock wall on the Patagonian giant was twice the size of Yosemite's El Capitan.

The blast of wind and an incoming storm finally drove us back from our vantage point. We yanked off climbing skins and forsook the rope for the descent. But as we started down, the snow was anything but cooperative. A three-inch layer of wet glop over a crusty base grabbed at our skis with each movement.

"Hey, Bardini!" I hollered. "How do you ski this stuff?"



ALLAN BARD

Fangs for the memories. Skier: Allan Pietrasanta below Poincenot.

"Unweight the corners of your mouth and send 'em," he replied with a grin.

"But this is Sierra Cement," I said. "You guys eat this stuff for breakfast."

"Wrong, pal," he said, casting a knowing glance at Pietrasanta. "We don't ski *this* garbage. We wait until it turns to corn." With that, he hopped his way through a strenuous series of parallel turns and waited at the bottom of the first drop.

I followed, struggling at first. But my deliberations about how to ski were quickly overtaken by the awareness of where I was skiing. Turns suddenly became effortless as I followed in Bard's graceful tracks, eighting his line and gliding downward. I turned to see Sheahan and Pietrasanta doing the same. The thousand-foot slope whooshed by dreamily as we descended into the shadow of the spires.

We reached the talus slope and were packing our skis when we heard a thunderous ice and snow avalanche cut loose from somewhere in the huge amphitheater above us. We exchanged worried glances at this reminder of the power of these mountains. We had dodged another Patagonian bullet.

Rain fell in sheets that night, and even I had to part with my hope of getting onto the ice cap. Patagonia was not to be served up to us so easily. We packed the next morning — the California Boys chomping at the bit to start chucking flies — when the basecamp squatters came out to bid us farewell.

"Three fine days," chanted the now-glassy-eyed Kiwis. They were planning to give the mountain another seven weeks in order to get their three days. The Italians just grinned and chuckled at us and continued playing board games. The Spaniards were still laughing at nothing in particular.

We headed down the road and the fishing began with a vengeance. No stream or river was safe from my partners' casts. Even I began warming to their devoted worship of the fly rod when it came time to eat. The catches grew more impressive as we crossed the border back into Chile, where Bard and Sheahan were pulling in two-foot sea-run brown trout, which I obediently wolfed down.

In Patagonia, success is a silly concept. Just to be in the presence of these mountains, to survive the harsh weather, and to make it across the desolate pampas is a gift. To accomplish pre-established objectives is merely frosting. Patagonia gives itself to its visitors on a windborne whim; it takes back its treasures decisively and just as mysteriously. Patagonia's beauty lies in its ability to defy all efforts to control and civilize it. There are few places on earth where one can experience an area so remote, so wild and untamed. Man is incidental here, a privileged guest, at best.

There is a local legend that any visitor to Patagonia who tastes the berry of the ubiquitous calafate bush is driven to return to taste it again and again. By that account, we must have had a good sampling of them, because somewhere between the pampas and the high and wild summits, Patagonia cast its spell. All of us talked excitedly about returning to this land's end outpost to pursue — well, whatever it allows us to. As for me, I can taste that berry already. ❄️

Boston's David Goodman last reported on the skiing at Maine's Mt. Katahdin in the January issue.