FIND -ING FREY

Hut culture at the heart of Argentina's Patagonia

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SWIRLING CHAOS

A PATAGONIAN STORM howls its arrival far above Lago Nahuel Huapi. The Nubes lift is shut down, but we are hiking the Cerro Catedral ridgeline at 7,800 feet and getting blown sideways by sustained 50-mph winds. It's my first view of the southern Andes: mountain ridgelines stacked to the Chilean border and lush valleys feeding slender blue lakes. We're skipping the popular La Laguna lift-accessed backcountry zone and aiming for a rotten bootpack above a 3,000-foot convex, rollover slope to access a notched entrance into millions of acres of national park backcountry.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: The Refugio Frey at 5,777 feet.

ABOVE LEFT: Jorge Kozulj has been guiding in Patagonia for 15 years.

ABOVE RIGHT: En route to the La Laguna lift-accessed backcountry from the Catedral ski area.

OPPOSITE PAGE: K.C. Deane arcs one in honor of Emilio.

On the first day out of the gate, we follow UIAGM guide Jorge Kozulj through a notch into the Valle Van Titter that accesses the most famous structure in the Refugio system—the Frey hut.

I landed in Argentina's Lakes District the previous night. On my dark ride to the base village, the cabdriver communicated to me, in gesture and simple phrase-book vocabulary, that somehow I synched my first ski trip to the Southern Hemisphere with the arrival of the annual Santa Rosa storm. Even with my limited Spanish, those words I understood.

It had been a low-tide winter at the Catedral ski center. Brown dirt covered the Village Catedral, a half-planned, half-organic base area marked by chain storefronts and open-air food stands. Posted up in one of the rock-and-beam cabins, skier K.C. Deane, photographer Grant Gunderson, and I had been drawn here with hopes of exploring the deep European influences of a backcountry hut system.

Sitting approximately 1,000 miles and one expensive domestic flight southwest of Buenos Aires, Argentina's Lakes District serves as the gateway to Patagonia. Bariloche, with its chocolate shops, Bavarian stone architecture, and tour bus traffic jams, is the lakeside capital of the popular summer home region. Twelve miles up the two-lane access road rises Catedral, Argentina's original destination ski area. With 1,500 acres of inbounds terrain, 38 lifts, and another 1,500-plus acres of lift-accessed backcountry terrain, Catedral is Patagonia's largest resort.

High-dollar North American ski traffic now trends 600 miles north along the towering Andes toward ritzier resorts, such as Portillo, Las Leñas, and the wine region of Mendoza. But at Patagonia's doorstep, the mountain town of Bariloche, the ski center at Catedral, and the backcountry refugio system in Argentina's first national park resonate with deeper immigrant histories and much more of a past.

On the first day out of the gate, we follow UIAGM guide Jorge Kozulj, a Bariloche local and former Refugio Frey keeper of Croatian heritage, through a notch into the Valle Van Titter that accesses the most famous structure in the refugio system—the Frey hut. From the high point, Kozulj points out the route to the Refugio Frey, then orients us to a zone that has been his personal playground since he gave up college for a career in skiing, climbing, and guiding 15 years ago.

On the far wall sit steep, shallow chutes—reminiscent of the Canadian Rockies—running straight down from La Laguna ridgelines. On the leeward side, I drop a tight chimney entrance that opens into a featured deposition zone. Two turns later, I'm ripping wind-buffed Andean powder just 48 hours after leaving the North American summer to seek myth, culture, and a migration story deep in Patagonia's backcountry cathedral.

Argentina's open-arms policy toward the defeated Axis powers made Bariloche both internationally famous as an alpine expat refuge and as a haven for former Nazis escaping capture.

THE REASON

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT: In Argentina, local cuisine and dinner guests often reflect an international influence.

BELOW: Welcome to the Center of the Universe. Michelle Parker makes herself at home.

FOR MORE THAN A CENTURY, San Carlos de Bariloche has drawn migrants to its mountains. Germans and Swiss came first at the turn of the 20th century, constructing a remote mountain town with the architectural and cultural influences of Bavaria. Italians and Slovenians followed after World War I, trading political and economic upheaval in Europe for rumors of a region that rivaled the Alps in sheer mountainous beauty.

In the 1930s, national park designation, construction of a Bavarian-style timber-and-stone civic center, and the creation of the Llao Llao luxury hotel framed the town as a postcard destination. At the same time, Austrian ski champion Hans Nobl oversaw the construction of a tram and the Refugio Lynch at Cerro Catedral in 1939, creating Argentina's first destination ski area before most visitors had metal edges. But it was the postwar influx—due to Argentina's open-arms policy toward the defeated Axis powers—that made Bariloche both internationally famous as an alpine expat refuge and as a haven for former Nazis escaping capture.

To this day, Bariloche's sinister side cannot go ignored, with notorious Nazis tracked down as recently as 1995 near where uncontrolled tourist traffic clogs the city center. But the European waves also brought immigrants raised on alpinism looking to rebuild their lives, eventually turning a remote outpost of 3,000 into a national capital of skiing and climbing. The first alpinist spark was the 1931 foundation of the Club Andino de Bariloche by pioneering German climber Otto Meiling, Argentinean Juan Neumeyer, European immigrant Reynaldo Knapp, and Swiss-trained surveyor Emilio Frey, who became the first superintendent of Nahuel Huapi National Park. Club headquarters sit at the center of town, and its members built seven refugios that continue to shelter skiers and climbers.

Argentina thrives on both storm and chaos, so the first powder day in weeks represents a pure expression of that energy. Gunderson, Deane, and I hold our ground in the lift line then elbow forward as the Caballo chair at Catedral opens predictably late. The Red Bull Beyond The Line contest scene is in town, and at the top of the chair we find a pack of hungry freeriders eyeing the bootpack to La Laguna, which has been closed for the contest. Normally, the inbounds hike—a cat track—is open access, but the loose contest closure and the language barrier have created a gray area of confusion with ski patrol. Deane and I skin up and break trail around a stuck snowcat in order to stay one skin ahead of the madness. Laguna is *the* zone at Catedral, and our entrance has opened the morning floodgates.

As we skin through a misty fog to the steep, sporty chutes that exit to the Del Bosque chair, we link up with Michelle Parker, who has spent the summer in residence coaching for SASS Global Travel. Three days later, we're still storm skiing and weather holding at the SGT complex in Bariloche with coaches and campers, who have come for backcountry lines, an Asado meal plan, and Fernet-fueled nights.

A bigger concern than the storm, however, is hantavirus. An outbreak of this cabin-based disease carried by rodents had killed two locals, forcing us to alter our plan of visiting the Refugio Jakob and Refugio Lopez. But the Refugio Frey is still an option, due to a year-round hut keeper and a resident black cat named Emilio, who has kept rodents at bay.

The refugio system in Nahuel Huapi National Park is operated and maintained by the Club Andino primarily for summer trekkers and spring mountaineers. Completed in 1957, Frey is the only structure staffed during winter, but touring options normally include a seven-hour traverse to Refugio Jakob, a stone-and-wood longhouse completed in 1952. Kozulj's Andescross service also guides a multi-hut traverse between Refugios Frey, Jakob, Laguna Negra, and Lopez—a complex, high-exposure trip best attempted in the warmer months of September or October.

But our plan was now focused on finding Frey. So when the sky cracks blue the next morning, we pack in one frantic hour and make plans with Parker to join us.

REFUGIO CULTURE

WE OPT TO APPROACH FROM THE SKI AREA, purchasing café con leche in paper Pepsi-Cola cups at the Tage food stand, then uploading the six-pack chair behind Argentinean soldiers on rental skis. We notch into the Valle Van Titter and ski out the amphitheater bowl to the forested flats, an entire kit of camera gear and a sleeping bag dangling from Deane's overstuffed daypack. Then we start the skin.

The first refugios were built at Cerro López above the Llao Llao hotel and Monte Tronador on the Chilean border for early ski access in roadless, liftless areas. But as tourism came to Bariloche, skiing and climbing culture shifted from early centers to developed slopes and solid rock at Cerro Catedral, where Slovenian immigrant Dinko Bertoncelj took up climbing residence, started the ski school, and became the area's most influential guide in the post-war era.

That same 1950s decade, Emilio Frey backed construction of a refugio on Laguna Toncek with the purpose of sheltering climbers. Each founder of the Club Andino is honored with a namesake hut in a system, but Frey became internationally famous for its terrain and its access. The hut, like many in the system, was built with volunteer immigrant labor—nails and shingles carried one box at a time up the six-mile summer trail from the base area by passing mountaineers.

Parker's alternative route-finding, however, takes our track from the flat Van Titter basin up through a spooky, tangled forest of low branches. We emerge to trade skins for rotten bootpacks on sun-exposed, north-facing slopes. Eventually, we arrive unscathed at the stout stone structure on the frozen shores of Laguna Toncek.

I've stayed in tin or timber huts before, but the powerful architecture of Frey gives it a presence stronger than the full force of Patagonia's worst weather, which is likely why it has stood strong at 5,577 feet for six decades. The permanence of the construction is the result of two Italian stonemasons—Giacommelli and Santonato—who carved the one-piece lintel and every single stone for the structure by hand.

We stack our gear in the sturdy glass-paned porch and enter the refugio. The half-door separates the narrow benched hallway from the kitchen, with a sign identifying it as the center of the universe. The caretaker does not take reservations at Frey, so we haul gear to the second floor and unroll sleeping bags atop foam mattresses to claim space. It's a crammed two-story, four-room hut with a bunkroom that officially sleeps 40 shoulder-to-shoulder and seats fewer at three long wooden tables in the dining room.

Like much of Argentina, the refugio operates on a theory of organized chaos. When the hutkeeper, Fabien Fernandez, returns from refilling the water tanks by garden hose, we order a pizza and a bottle of Malbec. Après hour arrives with the calm of unplugged culture and no cellular service.

Tall spires sit framed in ski-stickered windowpanes and the bookshelves are crammed with photocopied climbing guides, hardcover Spanish literature, and outdated multilingual ski magazines. Brazilian snowshoers play cards in one corner, while two members of Washington state's Whatcom County Search and Rescue, including Lou Dawson's son, Louie, return from a tour, hang their skins to dry and place their liners by the hot stove.

Fabien turns his kitchen into a swirl with an Italian-influenced aroma of Argentinean cuisine. The meal plan at Frey is a good one, with pizzas for après, three-course dinners of soup, bread, dessert, and a main course cooked by the hutkeeper on the four-burner range. At about $30 a day per person for a bunk, breakfast, and dinner, it's affordable. But the most budget-minded skiers bring their own food, either paying $4 a day for kitchen privileges, or cooking by camp stove outside.

Groups start packing into the hut, from a local crew including the Red Bull Beyond The Line champ Tomas Blanc to a European film crew shooting Freeride World Tour vets, such as Seb Machard. The heavies roll in at dusk, looking sweaty and haggard, and we welcome them with a round of laughter when we learn they followed our torturous skin track.

As the stars come out, pasta is served, and it's a raging United Nations of Freeride, with a Mad River Glen local repeating the phrase "Gringo Tsunami" to Fabien, who speaks limited English but serves his guests with the constant enthusiasm of a dinner party host.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT:

The "Gringo Tsunami" goes to work in the Frey bar.

The host of the "United Nations of Freeride," Fabien Fernandez is the Frey hutkeeper.

"Do you have hantavirus?"
"I don't think so."
"Cool. Goodnight."

THE CATHEDRAL

THE WIND IN THE NATIONAL PARK IS SILENT and the Patagonian sky is a deep, dark blue as we rando race the Euros across frozen Laguna Toncek after a late breakfast of fresh baked bread and dulce de leche. Nothing happens early or quickly in Argentina, including breakfast, and Gunderson charges off afterward in a photographer's panic without a plan. We hit the first switchback, gain vertical to Laguna Schmoll, and watch as Parker and Deane angle up for jagged spires of sketchy, rocky lines on Torre Piramidal.

Deane scrambles up a rock-stepped tower in slick-soled boots, searching for a way in as the Euros standby. He retreats into a steep plan-B, his edges scraping wind scour at full volume, then running it out in a buffed apron to the flats with three turns. Parker follows with the same economy of turns, and we rotate aspects to chilled south-facing bowls, the preferred aspect opposite of the Northern Hemisphere. We lap featured cirques that steepen to vertical golden granite towers.

For rock climbers, the vertical cathedral spires at Frey are paradise, with hundreds of solid single and multi-pitch sport and trad routes. But the topography and geology also create a grand cirque of steep alpine bowls and hallway 35- to 50-degree couloirs easily lapped 1,200 feet at a time. Rather than sitting low like some other huts, Frey sits right in the heart of the zone, with lines converging back at the lake. From the heavy front door, it's a short skin across the lake to hundreds of shots notched into the spires and ridgelines, the longest couloirs measuring 2,000 vertical at a sustained 40 degrees. When the amphitheater of lines is tracked, we embark on exploratory missions into a trio of neighboring alpine valleys.

Luckily for us, the Santa Rosa graces the entire Frey landscape with a fresh coat of stable white. The story of the Santa Rosa is a fierce spring storm that arrives in Argentina five days before or after the namesake saint's festival on August 30. Fact or legend, the meteorological collisions of warmer spring weather and onrushing fronts slamming the Andes make late August and early September a stormy and snowy time of year in Patagonia.

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When Kozulj first started climbing here in the early '90s, with friends such as Luciano Firooenza, it was a much more climbing-centric scene, à la Yosemite's Camp Four. But Peter Luthi, a Swiss mountain man originally from St. Moritz, took up residence at Frey in 1995, acting as modernizer and mentor for a generation of Bariloche skiers and climbers. He taught them to move safely in the mountains, and many went on to careers as either professional guides, like Kozulj, or professional alpinists, such as Rolando Garibotti.

"Many teenagers, like myself, were looking for some wild adventures," says Kozulj. "He taught us how to read the snow, the danger, the snow warnings, just by his experience. So this crazy guy came in from Switzerland, didn't find his place down in Bariloche and in the society, and then he found his place in the Frey hut."

Luthi also modernized Frey with ingenuity, building a turbine-driven 220v micro-hydropower, an artificial ice-climbing structure, and water and beer systems during his decade as head hutkeeper from 1995 to 2005. Ski traffic was still slow when Kozulj worked on the summer Frey staff from 1995-99, but a convergence of factors, including the surge in available AT gear, the added comforts at the hut, and a career change led Kozulj to start guiding winter trips to the hut in 2001.

International ski traffic picked up after an overnight devaluation of the Argentinean peso in 2002, which suddenly made a world-class ski destination four times more affordable. Yet at the time, Argentina had no internationally recognized guiding organization. But in 2005, with sponsorship from Italians and training from a world-class team of European guides, Argentina earned international UIAGM guiding certification. Kozulj became one of the first UAIGM-certified guides in the country, and his ski business skyrocketed with media trips from Sherpas Cinema and The North Face.

"The environment at Frey is great, and it's easy in terms of what you can ski from the hut," says Kozulj. "You find people from all over the world—many fantastic skiers who travel the globe—and you meet them in Argentina at this meeting point."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: In South America, couloirs drain backward. But no matter. It's all a flush for Deane and Parker.

ABOVE: Finder's keepers. At Refugio Frey, cathedrals and spires await anyone with a sense of adventure.

OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP: After a short hike, Parker genuflects before Santa Rosa, and is rewarded with powder salvation.

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM: Mate-fueled poker.

THE NEW MIGRANTS

THE WIND IS QUIET THE NEXT MORNING as the Euros leave before dawn to get a jump on the most well-lit lines, skinning past SGT guide Skylar Holgate, who is sleeping outside in his bivy sack. We wait for breakfast and watch the red sunrise frame the peaks above the Frey. We leave when they take a second lap, switchbacking directly up a steep 1,300-vertical-foot slope.

Deane and Parker set a professional pace toward a 6,800-foot saddle with a view of 7,890-foot Torre Principal, the tallest spire in the zone. The wind is now in full force at the ridge, with a storm again boiling up from the valleys. When I finally reach the saddle, the duo roll over into a walled-in, choked chute, skiing elevator-shaft vertical back to the frozen lake in a one-two tandem.

Gunderson and I shuffle across the yellow wind-scoured pepper, then rip the hanging face we climbed, throwing up contrails for 1,500 continuous feet of powder with a panoramic view of Frey's high-alpine amphitheater. We look up and around at the beautiful bowl. In silence, we both appreciate the vision of the hardened mountain men who picked this spectacular skiing cirque as their New World paradise.

We spend two more days deep in storm skiing, as well as the Argentinean après culture of Asado meals and Fernet-fueled mixers. Before we fly north, we drive the scenic route past the Llao Llao hotel to soaring cliffs above deep blue lakes. We stumble upon a cemetery at the base of Cerro Lopez and discover headstones of immigrant Italian, Slovenian, German, and Swiss mountaineers who built the foundations of the refugio system. We look skyward to the 3,600-foot vertical cliffs and see gathering condors circling directly overhead. ❄

DETAILS, DETAILS

GENERAL INFO: For trips to Frey or deeper into the range, Bariloche local Jorge Kozulj's Andescross guide service offers custom trips (AndesCross.com). Full board for bunk, breakfast and dinner is $30 per night (ClubAndino.org). Mark Lasseter, founder of South America Ski, is a half-year Whistler local, whose custom tour business acts as a freeride concierge for bookings and logistics to Argentina or Chile (SouthAmericaSki.com). Late August and early September are historically good times to visit Bariloche and Catedral due to consistent storms and deeper snowpacks. Go later for bigger traverses or summit missions.

HOW TO GET THERE: Fly to San Carlos de Bariloche via LAN, Delta, American, or United. LAN and Aerolineas fly the domestic leg. August flights average $1,500 roundtrip and most require an international-to-domestic airport transfer in Buenos Aires.