



The Fitz Roy group, as seen from the road to El Chalten. This last stretch of road, as well as the streets of El Chalten will soon be paved, forever changing the atmosphere of this wild, remote place.

# The Stalls

## Waiting out the Patagonian Winds

Story and photos by Dr. Brian Irwin

**C**LOSE THE DOOR, GRINGO!” Emelio shouted, as the door to the Patagonian refugio burst open. Curtains flipped up and over their rods, my water bottle blew over and the Italians shifted silently on the beechwood benches, looking at each other until Jon swung it shut, sealing out the valley’s incessant winds.

As I shifted my ass on the bench, Jon flipped out the screen on his camcorder. Its speaker spewed the relentless scream of air blowing off the Hielo Sur. The video was a self-documentary of Jon, windblown and battered, trying to hike uphill but getting blown backward with inflated cheeks as his shirt snapped at his pack.

“The worst part is the haulbag is missing.”

I was depressed and bored of wondering what happened to our cache. We’d been waiting for over a week at basecamp in the Rio Electrico Valley, waiting for stable climbing weather. This is a pastime in Patagonia; often it’s the only thing expeditions

to this corner of Argentina do. Slackline walking, card playing and heavy drinking are all important skills to have at any Patagonian basecamp, and regardless of your luck with the region’s notoriously infrequent and short weather windows, you’ll come home better at all of them.

Pressed up against Piedra del Fraile, the enormous glacial erratic for which our campground was named, were a row of open, now retired, horse stalls. The dilapidated structures were presently being used as cooking and organizational space for anxious climbing teams at Fraile, all of whom hoped for stable skies. As I dashed from the refugio toward my stall, cold, speeding ovals of water bounced off my eyes. The imposing granite spires Aguja Guillamet and Mermoz loomed over the wind-torn trees, fighting desperately to stay upright as hurricane-speed winds pressed against their sturdy branches.

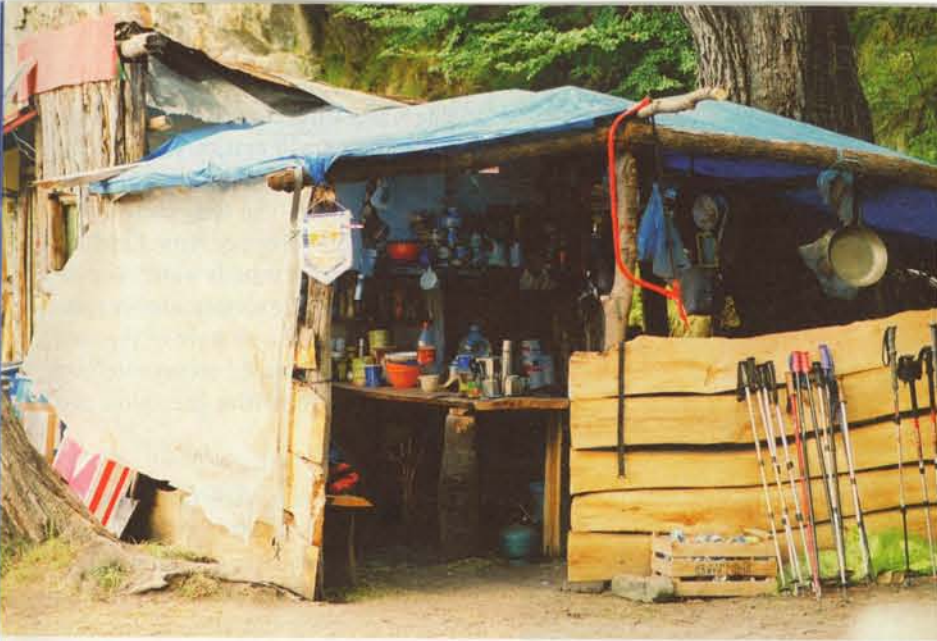
I sat on a mulebag, drinking coffee diluted by the rain leaking through the stall’s roof. I stared as drops fell onto my hood and rolled forward into my pale drink. A tattered coil of retired rope lay submerged in a puddle in the courtyard, its lasso shape preserved in caked mud.

**Y**OU GUYS FROM THE STATES?” Emelio asked as he leaned over the stall’s wall. “What are you cooking? Why do you have so much cheese?”

We’d met Emelio and his family the night before over cups of maté. They were locals who hiked into the valley for a weekend camping trip. He leaned back against the face of the huge boulder, pulled out a joint and lit it. Smoke rolled across his face, tangling in his beard as it cart wheeled and drifted into our stall. He glanced at his wife, who carefully wiped her fingers dry in her cleavage prior to accepting his pass.

She took a drag and looked at me.

“Fumada?”



L: This stall was occupied by the Lycos Spiders, an Italian climbing club with an impressive history of first ascents in Patagonia. R: Emelio's youngest boy riding 'the bull'.

*“Slackline walking, card playing and heavy drinking are all important skills to have at any Patagonian basecamp...”*

Her sons ran shirtless in the dark night, jumping in puddles as everyone else at Fraile slept. I caught a glimpse of the delighted kids in soaked cotton and wool clothes as they dashed past our stall. I adjusted the pit zips on my jacket. I looked over at my thousand-dollar rack, overpriced tent and down at my Gore-Tex shoes.

The stove sputtered as it ran out of gas, laughing at me as it crashed. I was embarrassed. The only happy

people in Fraile that night were Emelio and his kids.

When I opened my eyes in the morning, the glow of the tent's green fabric meant one thing: sunny weather. I dragged my earplug out of my ear. When it popped free the silence was shattered by what sounded like an airplane taking off from my vestibule.

We weren't climbing today. We weren't even going up to look for our gear.

**T**HE COURTYARD IN FRONT OF THE STALLS was protected. Bright blue orchids waved in the wind, taunting the battered lenga trees on the other side of the stream. The puddles were dry; the ropes now swung coiled in the filthy hands of Rodrigo's sons as they played gaicho. They grew up in the shadow of these great peaks and played hide-and-seek daily with some of the world's best alpinists. Yet they wanted to grow up to be something better: just like their dad.

“Papa, Rico es mal!” echoed across the courtyard.

Emelio's boys pushed each other, fighting over whose turn it was to ride “The Bull,” a rusty 55-gallon drum suspended from old rope between two trees.

Rodrigo's eldest lassoed both of them; they all burst into laughter and ran off toward the stalls.

Emelio and Rodrigo's children go to school together. Emelio visits Fraile often. Although Rodrigo doesn't speak a word of English, Emelio and I talk quite a bit during the week. Over mate one afternoon, drifting in and out of "Spanglish," I picked his mind, curious to hear what a local has to say about living in the most idyllic mountain town in the world, one that is on the verge of ruin from overdevelopment.

"You must love living in Chalten, eh?"

"It's OK, but different now. Too much money coming in, not enough money staying. The people who visit are nice, but they have everything. And they come here, wait for weeks and try to lay claim to Cerro Torre too. Then what?" he asked.

"I don't want to climb the Torre." I say defensively, internally denying that I could even succeed at scaling perhaps the most notorious finger of rock in the world.

"It's just too much...how do you say...hype. Everyone wants to be famous. To look famous."

"I just want to have fun," I replied. "That's why I climb."

"Are you having fun waiting...?" His words were cut short as his giggling children tackled his legs. He darted off, chasing them with his arms in the air.



The entrance to Piedra Fraile. Cerro Electrico and the eastern slopes of the Fitz Roy group loom in the background.

The nasty fluid flowed over my lips, stinging their small cracks. I caught the chunk of soggy roof in my teeth and spit it into the puddle. The hazy cone of my headlamp's light dropped from Emelio's face down onto the muddy water. The asbestos floated on the surface, slowly spinning. Through the new hole in the roof water once again tapped on my forehead with the eerie, repetitive precision of a metronome.

**A** WEEK LATER, THE TEETH OF MY CRAMPONS scratched their way down the quartz and granite face of Cerro Solo as I carefully rappelled. I loosened my grip and allowed the thin cords to slide through the belay device as I carefully balanced on a narrow ledge. Two moves later I stepped back onto the glacier, crunching into the firm neve.

As we descended, my mind slipped back into a courtyard with flowers but was sharply ejected back into reality as my crampon snagged a small imperfection in the glacier. Up the valley, thick precipitation shrouded the towers. For just a moment, the weather's lasso loosened. Pink light quickly melted the spires' granite tips out of the storm, allowing the giant ice mushrooms on the summit of Cerro Torre to glow brightly for a second before the churning, grey wall of clouds once again swallowed them.

Far below me, on the other side of the massif, rain was falling on the tattered roofs of the stalls. It was dreary but I was content I had summited. I had slipped

through a tight window of fine skies that few short-trip visitors to the massif are blessed with. I knew I was lucky, and not just for the climb, considered by most to be easy by Patagonian standards, or the weather. As my hands flipped coils of new rope over my head, I visualized a trashed piece of cord floating in a puddle. I imagined the roar of the wind tearing through Fraile. I pictured the sway of the drafty cabin that Rodrigo's family calls home. And my ears rang with the sharp laughter of three boys in wet sneakers splashing in the mud.

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**T**HE LYCOS SPIDERS hadn't left the refugio's table all week, except for the occasional lap up the Bacher ladder. They too moped around, occasionally arguing with each other, but for the most part sitting silently and reading. I watched their matching red warm-up outfits shifting through the scratched window of the refugio as I sat on a rock rereading *Hills Like White Elephants*. My feet ached as they dangled in the boiling eddies of the milky Rio Electrico.

That night, back at the stalls, the festering continued. "That stuff is disgusting!" Jon screamed, his voice

echoing through the broken-down structures.

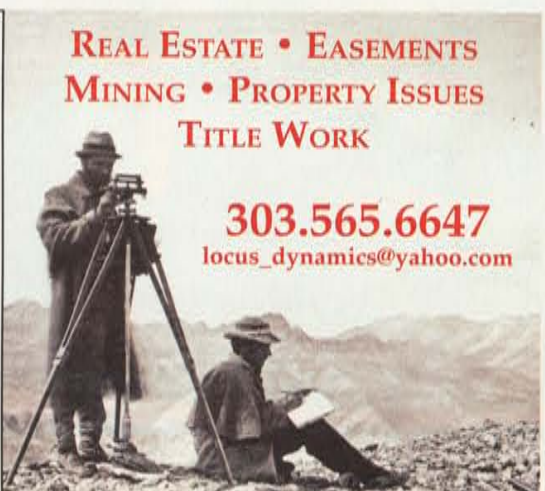
He shivered after he took a sip of the cheap liquor, exhaling forcefully to blow the rancid vapor out of his nose. He passed me the cup. A smashed, empty whisky bottle floated in the puddle to my right, a thin meniscus of yellow liquid in its neck was all that remained. As I lifted the mug to my chapped lips, booze splashed into my eye. A flake of the asbestos paper that comprised the stall's roof dropped into my drink.

"You going to drink that, Gringo?" Emelio asked, as he lit another joint.

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