

Charles Darwin on Tierra del Fuego: Yesterday and Today



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Much is written regarding Charles Darwin's visit of a few weeks to Galápagos Islands on HMS *Beagle*, mostly because of the resulting influence on his scientific thought later on. Visiting the islands today is a wonderful experience from all points of view, notwithstanding some sites could experience a kind of overcrowding. In popular spots several cruise ships and sailing boats may coincide, and many people on beaches and wooden trails do not end up having a completely 'wild' experience.

However, Darwin's wanderings throughout the Fuegian Archipelago and the southern tip of South America (Fig. 1) are overlooked. His pass throughout the "End of the World" as it is sometimes called was much longer, being the main task of Captain Robert FitzRoy's expedition aboard HMS



Fig. 1 A map of South America contemporary to Darwin's journey



Fig. 2 The inner waters of the channels and fjords around the Beagle Channel, once the nightmare of navigators, have recently started to see more visitors.

Beagle to survey the area of Tierra del Fuego and the Magellan Straits. The *Beagle*, much of the time with Darwin on board, spent many months in the extreme waters of Patagonia, Falklands (Malvinas) and Tierra del Fuego, arriving in 1832 and departing in 1834.

Is that pristine environment accessible today or did it disappear forever for common people? The answer is that nowadays the landscape is quite the same as you might have seen two centuries ago, possibly even 50. Perhaps some hanging glaciers have changed its aspect, receding in some cases before flowing into the Beagle Channel. But the lack of settlements like towns and *estancias* (farms) has not changed much since the old days of exploration. Only a couple of small cities serve as the gateway for exploring the region: Punta Arenas in the Chilean Magellan Straits and Ushuaia in the Argentine section of Tierra del Fuego. Both countries share the area, though the huge constellation of islands, channels and fjords that were once the nightmare of navigators belong to Chile (Fig. 2).

The extremely low human development in European terms was seen in Darwin's time as a downside. Today it is considered a blessing to have the chance to witness an environment as it was during the last millennia, after the last de-glaciation. One aspect is completely different, however. There is no trace of the ancient peoples that for thousands of years inhabited the area, particularly in the inner seas. Except for shellfish and bone middens mixed with earth, no other signs can be found regarding natives. Even descendants are quite unknown today or very old in age. As John Goldsmith put it in 1977 when sailing on a replica of the *Beagle* being filmed for the BBC:

Darwin lived in an age when huge areas of the world were undeveloped and untamed, where the spirit of man was still expansionist, where virgin country cried out to be settled and cultivated. In the late twentieth century, with our vast cities devouring and modern agricultural systems despoiling the land and our teeming populations—unimaginable to a Victorian—demanding that the process of destruction should continue, it is Tierra del Fuego which suggests life and the Brazilian jungles, torn up to make six-lane highways, bulldozed to make room for new towns and new industries, that suggest the death-process.¹

How long this wilderness will remain untouched is uncertain. The most remote islands and channels to the south and west of the Fuegian Archipelago perhaps will be a no man’s land for ever. They are too inhospitable, isolated, rough and dangerous. When surveying in the *Beagle* in 1827, Commander Pringle Stokes wrote on his journal:

The nature of the coast like all that I have hitherto described, to the westward of Cape Froward [the southernmost tip of the American continent], rocky and barren, an utter solitude, uncheered alike by man or any other animal, save a few water fowl, geese, shags, and penguins.²

But the more accessible Magellan Straits and Beagle Channel are being “menaced” by the slow development of new roads built by the Chilean and Argentinian governments. It is not a change that can be measured in just a few years; it will take decades. Chile has a master plan of approaching the extremes of its incredible labyrinthine southern coasts. Dirt roads are traced to sites like Yendegaia Bay in the Beagle Channel, between Ushuaia and the glaciers that flow into that watercourse. Argentina too has recently developed a controversial project for a road along the northern side of the Beagle Channel eastward. If built, it will be the end of pristine historical sites, as well as the known and unknown indigenous repositories that date back thousands of years. The aforementioned roads have no other purpose than to approach remote areas for recreation by car and SUV.

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Some of the events of the *Beagle* expedition (1831–36) happened along coastal sites of the Beagle Channel. As well, a previous expedition on HMS *Adventure* and *Beagle* (1826–30, captained by Philip Parker King) had relevant activities in the area of the archipelago. In some cases, the surveying of complex channels had to be done by whalers and small boats.

An especially eventful site is located slightly south of the Beagle Channel, in the coast of a short and narrow channel called Murray. It was there, in Wulaia Bay (Fig. 3), that Captain FitzRoy attempted to develop a settlement for three young Fuegians that were for some time educated in Britain (the



Fig. 3 South of the Beagle Channel is Wulaia Bay, where Captain FitzRoy attempted to establish a settlement

famous Jemmy Button amongst them). The trial did not succeed and was ended a few weeks after it began. Some years later the place also witnessed a massacre of missionaries.

Several of the sites that can only be approached by water can be visited today. Besides renting a sailing boat with crew in Ushuaia or Puerto Williams (a small Chilean village in the southern coast of the Beagle Channel), every austral summer some of the cruise liners that navigate from Ushuaia to Antarctica or round South America pay short visits to Cape Horn and other sites. Renting a boat maximises accessibility to any spot in the area, no matter how small or hidden, but is costly.

Perhaps the best and most realistic option to visit the area (to fully engage with both the history of exploration and the natural history of the surroundings) is to take one of the weekly cruises given by the Chilean company *Cruceros Australes*. They operate during the hottest part of the year with two vessels of 200 passengers, with landings in places like Cape Horn, Wulaia, glacier fronts, etc.

In particular, the visit to Wulaia Bay includes a walk to a view point from where it is possible to see the whole area, including Button Island and some other islets. It is also possible to wander throughout the shore and appreciate the remains of native settlements in the form of piles of shells of molluscs, burnt bones from seals and birds, rock splinters and even an arrow or a spearhead. The cruise company has organised a museum about the Fuegians inside an old building that remains there.

Another highlight of a Fuegian sailing tour is a visit to Cape Horn lighthouse. Weather permitting, a turbulent journey of rubber boats on a small inlet takes the visitors to the base of a steep staircase that scales the cliff. A wooden trail of several hundred

meters then leads to the tower of the lighthouse, as well as the home of a Chilean Navy officer and his family, where they live year round, facing the dark and ominous ocean that separates them from Antarctica.

Last but not least, “Glacier Alley” is a section of the Beagle Channel west of Ushuaia that houses several hanging glaciers on the north shore of the waterway, most of them with names of European countries like Italy (Italia), Holland (Holanda) or Germany (Alemania). All of these glaciers are ‘born’ in the ice field over the extensive mountain range, Darwin Cordillera. It is supposedly Holland Glacier that ruptured and threatened to sweep away Darwin’s boats in this story of rescue:

Our boats were hauled up out of the water upon the sandy point, and we were sitting round a fire about two hundred yards from them, when a thundering crash shook us—down came the whole front of the icy cliff—and the sea surged up in a vast heap of foam. Reverberating echoes sounded in every direction, from the lofty mountains which hemmed us in; but our whole attention was immediately called to great rolling waves which came so rapidly that there was scarcely time for the most active of our party to run and seize the boats before they were tossed along the beach like empty calabashes. By the exertions of those who grappled them or seized their ropes, they were hauled up again out of reach of a second and third roller; and indeed we had good reason to rejoice that they were just saved in time; for had not Mr. Darwin, and two or three of the men, run to them instantly, they would have been swept away from us irrecoverably. Wind and tide would soon have drifted them beyond the distance a man could swim; and then, what prizes they would have been for the Fuegians, even if we had escaped by possessing ourselves of canoes. At the extremity of the sandy point on which we stood, there were many large blocks of stone, which seemed to have been transported from the adjacent mountains, either upon masses of ice, or by the force of waves such as those which we witnessed. Had our boats struck those blocks, instead of soft sand, our dilemma would not have been much less than if they had been at once swept away.³



Usually one is unable to disembark near these hanging glaciers, owing to the lack of beaches and safety conditions. But one of them, Pia Glacier, though not visible from the Beagle Channel, lays inside a fjord and is a favourite spot for landing and watching large pieces of ice fall (Fig. 4). Several other spectacular glaciers that flow to fjords of the northwest shore of the island of Tierra del Fuego are also visited. These rivers of blue ice are surrounded by virgin forests and solitary beaches that have only recently started to see visitors, following decades of no human presence after the previous inhabitants vanished around a century ago.

A visit to the south of Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego becomes an amazing experience when accompanied with the reading of the journal or narrative of an early explorer.⁴ Since Magellan five centuries ago, the southernmost extreme of America left deep emotions—good and bad—on the memories of most of the travellers that dared to confront it.

REFERENCES

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Regarding Charles Darwin and HMS *Beagle* logs and journals, a convenient source on electronic format is available thanks to John van Wyhe, ed. 2002. *The Complete Work of Charles Darwin Online* (www.darwin-online.org.uk). As well, historical sea charts as *Cape Horn* and *Isla de los Estados* published by Zagier & Urruty impress showing the big amount of shipwrecks that populate those untamed waters.



Fig. 4 Pia Glacier, in Glacier Alley