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Special to The Globe and Mail
Tierra del Fuego, Argentina

TAN pastures and lightly powdered hills rolled like a sea in all directions as I sat on my pack beside the dirt road. Snow-capped mountains crowded the horizon — raw, ragged and white.

Nothing else was in sight. It looked as if I were at the end of the world.

In fact, I was. I was in Tierra del Fuego trying to travel to the southernmost town on Earth. Traffic was light. That is to say, no vehicles had passed in either direction for the more than two hours I had been on the road. Finally, far in the distance, a tall plume of dust heralded the morning's first arrival — a dilapidated sheep truck.

The beefy driver waved me aboard and three gauchos hauled me into the back. With dusty jackets, drooping mustaches, and weather-worn faces, these South American cowboys seemed to have stepped right out of a sepia photograph of the old Wild West.

Canadian cowboys have a reputation for reticence. These men were no different. After riding in silence for 10 kilometres, I gestured toward the scenery. "It's beautiful, isn't it?" "Si," they said, and I could tell they believed it. "You ... are going to your ranch?" Yes, they said, to work. "Have you lived here all your lives?" "Talavia no," one said with a grin. Not yet.

When we arrived at my turn-off, the gauchos bid me farewell and the driver insisted I take his sandwich lunch. "You keep it," he said in Spanish, shaking my hand, "I know I can get more." Then my new friends drove away and I stood alone in the immensity, admiring the breathtaking view. It was so quiet I

could hear my watch tick.

If you're the type of traveller who loves geographic splendour, tranquil settings, and friendly people, and if you're willing to venture to the end of the Earth (literally) to find them, then Tierra del Fuego is for you.

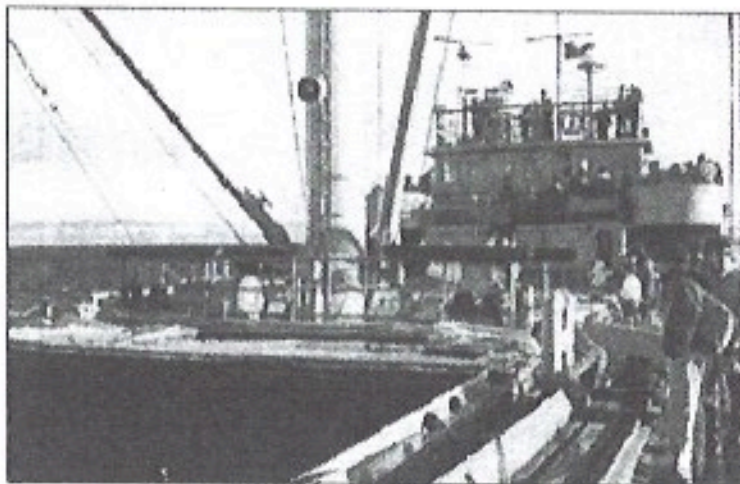
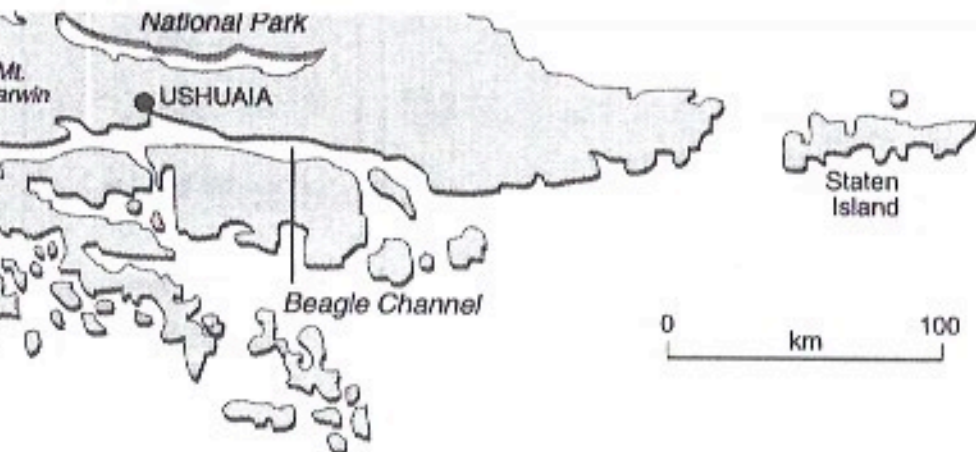
Tierra del Fuego is an island roughly the size of Ireland located at the foot of South America (the western half is Chile, the eastern half Argentina). It's remote, sparsely populated, and tremendously beautiful. It's also rarely visited, and its inhabitants look kindly upon wandering souls who have come for a look.

If those aren't enough reasons to visit, consider this: at the bottom of the island lies the quaint, scenic port of Ushuaia, Argentina, *the southernmost town in the world!* How could you resist? I couldn't.

Tierra del Fuego has long been a destination of adventurers and explorers. Local landmarks bear the names of Magellan and Beaufort, and the island's highest mountain range is the Cordillera Darwin. He would be pleased. When the HMS Beagle anchored nearby in the 1830s the naturalist noted in his journal: "The sense of sublimity which ... the forest-clad mountains of Tierra del Fuego excited in me ... has left an indelible impression."

Tierra del Fuego still looks much as it did in Darwin's day. The island is a cross between Norway and Alberta — rolling brown pastures, snow-capped peaks, and misty glacial lakes all surrounded by a dark cape of coniferous forest and a sweep of icy waters. Despite its proximity to Antarctica, a maritime climate keeps the weather relatively mild.

While the island's wilderness has survived, the indigenous Fuegians have not. By the beginning of this century, they had all perished from



European diseases and persecution, their only legacy being the island's name — Spanish for *Land of Fire* — which testified to their constant use of smoky fires to keep them warm.

I began my end-of-the-Earth adventure by flying to Punta Arenas, Chile, where I took a ferry across the Strait of Magellan, the passage which separates Tierra del Fuego from the mainland. In the days before the Panama Canal, this Strait was the terror of sailors around the globe. Countless ships and men were swallowed by its icy waters while attempting to pass between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in the stormy latitudes known as the "Roaring 50s."

Luckily, it was a gorgeous day when I crossed the infamous strait. Please see ISLAND—A11



Above left, the ferry from Punta Arenas, Chile, crosses the Straits of Magellan to Tierra del Fuego. Left, author enjoys the immense views and tranquility.

*Map by Rose Zgodzinski
Photography by Duncan McDougall*

Island at the bottom of the world

• From Page A10

on the Orompello, a small rusty ferry carrying 60 people, five cars, a few animals, and a ragged but cheerful crew. Not counting a limping German shepherd, I was the only foreigner.

Despite the Birks-blue sky, an icy wind bowled down the strait strewing whitecaps in its wake. Ignoring regulations, the captain graciously invited his passengers to crowd into the ship's bridge for warmth — the first of many acts of hospitality I was to experience on my visit. From this lofty perch, the crew, passengers, crying babies and barking dogs all

enjoyed a commanding view of surrounding mountains and glaciers.

Three hours later, escorted by a school of dolphins, our ferry docked in Porvenir, Chile, a tiny town that is the largest settlement on the western side of Tierra del Fuego. Except for two gauchos riding by on horseback, streets were empty. Fresh-cut sheepskins slow-danced with the breeze on laundry lines. Incongruously, a small flock of pink flamingoes stood knee deep in the frigid bay, looking decidedly lost.

I had intended to take a local bus from Porvenir across the island but was informed the next bus would not depart for three days. The following morning, eager to explore the rest of the island, I decided to hitch-hike east across Tierra del Fuego.

Hitch-hiking on the island is a good news/bad news proposition: the good news is that *everyone* offers to give you a lift; the bad news is that on certain roads, particularly on the west side of the island, hours can pass before anyone drives by.

It took me 14 hours to travel the 230 kilometres of dirt roads from Porvenir to Rio Grande. I rode in every type of ramshackle vehicle imaginable and met some delightful individuals. Gauchos on sheep trucks (once they had overcome their shyness) told me all about sheep ranching and horses. A gas truck driver named Ramon gave me play-by-play accounts of recent World Cup *futbol*

(soccer) matches replete with colourful epithets for the referees.

And two young oil workers in an old pickup truck were kind enough to drive me 20 km out of their way. "You're from Canada!" they said excitedly. "Wow! From Canada!" Finally, after a long pause, one of them spoke up: "Where . . . is that, exactly?"

As I crossed to the Argentine side of the island, the dirt roads became paved and settlements grew larger. But while spending a day in dusty, windswept Rio Grande (population 35,000), the largest town on the island, I discovered that island hospitality still thrives in the "big city."

As I was eating my breakfast on a bench, a man came out of his appliance store and walked over to where I sat. "You are a visitor here I think, yes?" he asked in Spanish. "Yes sir, I am," I replied. "Then please come in and have tea with us. It's cold out here."

After my tea-break in Rio Grande, I took a local bus four hours south until I finally reached the end of the road at the end of the Earth. If the truth be told, I had expected to find myself standing in a cold, nondescript community huddled on a barren shore. I was wrong.

Ushuaia, Argentina is a lovely, rustic coastal town set against a dramatic backdrop of snowy mountains, glaciers, waterfalls and a thick blanket of forests, with its tight cluster of houses facing south toward a

well-protected harbour, the Beagle Channel, and distant Antarctica.

Besides sampling local specialties such as lamb (of course) and *centolla* (king crab), I enjoyed the nature trails, abundant wildlife and shoreline and mountain vistas of nearby Tierra del Fuego national park, hiked to the Martial Glacier for a stunning view of Ushuaia and the Beagle Channel, and visited the quirky local Museum at the End of the World.

But despite all there was to see and do during the day, my favourite time in Ushuaia was sunset. Late each afternoon, I stood on a hillside overlooking the town and waited for the show.

Slowly, it began. As an opening act, the sun fell softly on the serrated horizon. In response, ponderous clusters of grey clouds donned scarlet, then purple, then finally, magenta. Snow on the surrounding peaks began to glow. Tall conifers swayed in the breeze. Above, the moon was a smooth stone suspended. And far below, as a finale, the Argentine fishing boats switched on their lights and the white, green, and red reflections flickered in the harbour. It was magical.

Shortly before I left Canada to start this trip, my mother asked me, somewhat jokingly: "Duncan, why do you insist on wandering off to the ends of the Earth?" Now I can tell her, with complete certainty, "Because they're beautiful."