Beyond Patagonia

A personal account of the nature, general history and potential for mountaineering of the Cordillera Darwin of Tierra del Fuego and the islands of the Beagle Channel and Magellan Straits, South Chile.

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Plates 23–26

The scheduled flight from Santiago to Punta Arenas must be one of the most spectacular in the world. It follows the spine of the Andes from the massive bulk of Aconcagua to the stunning spires of Los Torres del Paine, passing over the graceful symmetrical cones of Chile's volcanic zone and the vast glaciers of the Patagonian ice-caps. On one memorable occasion we succeeded in persuading the pilot to make a slight detour for a closer inspection of Fitzroy and Cerro Torre. The contrast between the endless, brown, empty plains of Patagonia to the east and the numberless peaks and ice-fields to the west is almost unbelievable. Yet for all the grandeur of 3000km or more of mountains, for me a greater attraction lies to the south and west of Punta Arenas, across the dark waters of the Magellan Straits in Tierra del Fuego and the islands near Cape Horn.

Punta Arenas itself, until comparatively recently, was a small port servicing ships passing through the Straits, the isolated sheep and cattle stations, and the even more remote mining enterprises. However, in the last two decades there has been a phenomenal increase in the population. Undoubtedly the discovery and exploitation of extensive oil deposits in E Tierra del Fuego and its strategic importance as a naval base have both been factors, but the main reason for the growth has been the central government's policy to encourage development and investment in the remoter regions of the country, in the form of tax concessions and other incentives. In the case of Punta Arenas a Free Zone operates, where imported goods can be purchased with no duty added. High-rise offices and ultramodern shopping precincts are fast replacing the traditional timber frames and corrugated iron roofs of the old port. Today's ovijeros or gauchos ride into town in brand new tax-free Chevrolet trucks and leave loaded with the latest television and video sets.

Despite all these changes one is still left with the feeling that Punta Arenas is very much a frontier town, an outpost of civilization, dependent on its two flights a day from Santiago, or the weekly ferry; the land link with the rest of the country involves a marathon drive through Argentina, until recently a trip fraught with political difficulties because of a long-standing border dispute in the Beagle Channel. The Patagonian wind gusts almost continuously off the bare hillsides, creating dust devils on every block corner, whilst across the Straits the long, low bulk of Tierra del Fuego stretches towards a western horizon where, on a clear day, the single dramatic ice-clad fang of Monte Sarmiento guards the entrance to a maze of channels, islands and mountains

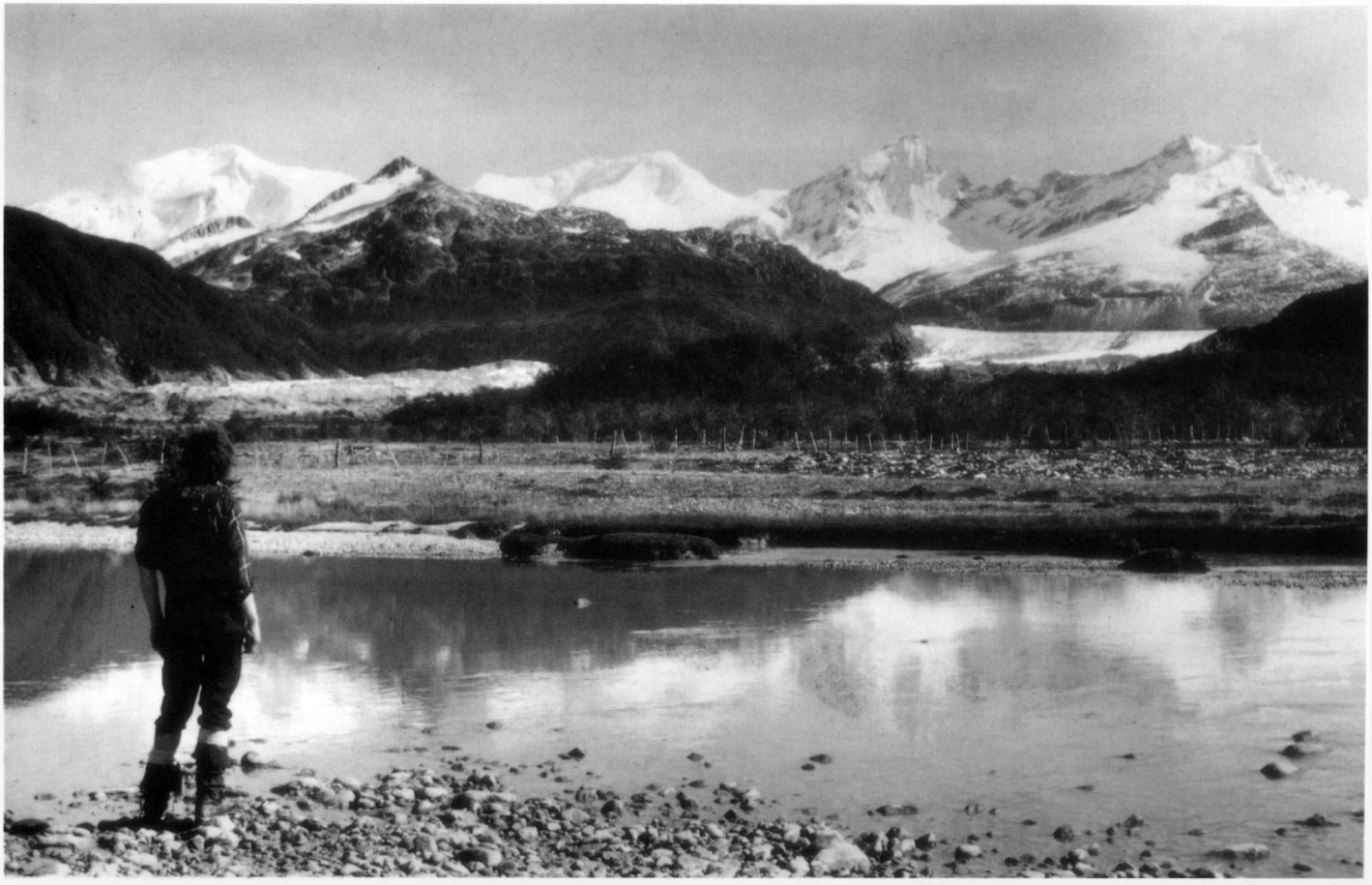
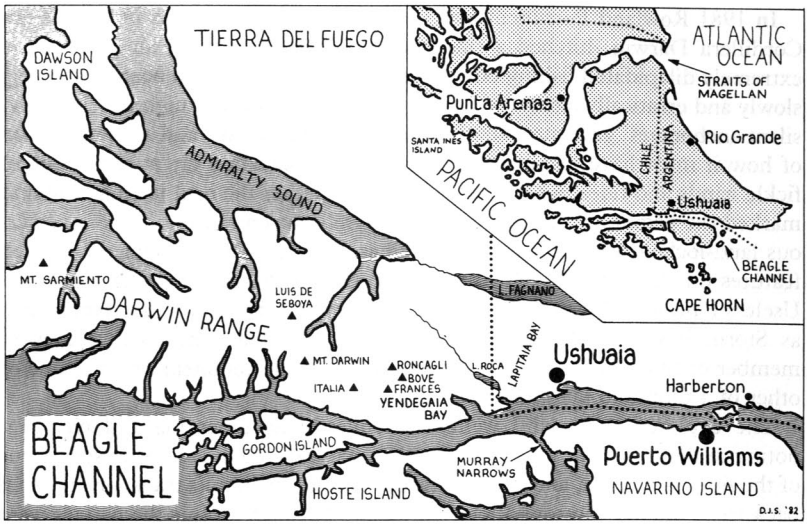


Photo: Don Sargeant

23 *Looking NE up the Yendegaia valley towards the snout of the Stoppani glacier and unnamed peaks of the Cordillera Darwin.*



which makes up one of the least explored wilderness areas of the temperate world. Though the warning beacons lit by the Indians, to ward off the mysterious invaders of Magellan's fleet, have long since been extinguished, to be replaced by the gas flares from the oil rigs, the Cordillera Darwin and the islands remain, in essence, unchanged since the last retreat of the great ice flows that formed them.

Eric Shipton called Tierra del Fuego the Fatal Lodestone, and certainly for me there is a magnetic attraction about the area which compels me to go back; perhaps it is due also to the Calafate, a common thorny shrub with a black, bitter-sweet berry, the eating of which, so it is said, will ensure one's return. Whatever the truth, the mystery and challenge of the mountains, the lonely shores and the bleak windswept headlands are reason enough.

In purely mountaineering terms, there are greater challenges to be found on the mainland, in areas such as the Towers of Paine and the peaks surrounding the ice-caps, but as an arena for exploratory wandering, independent of all the bureaucratic demands of other more famous ranges of the world, the Cordillera Darwin and its satellites are unrivalled. I have often found that an objective chosen by studying old maps and charts, or forgotten accounts in the panelled silence of the RGS map room, becomes almost incidental when I am faced by the actuality of being in and passing through all the complex patterns of this unique region.

The history of exploration of the Channels is long and varied, and for the most part it is inextricably linked with the great sea-voyagers of the past. Magellan, Drake, Fitzroy, Roncagli, Slocum have all sailed these complicated waters, but it is only in the last 50 years that the interiors of the islands and the coastal ranges have begun to be explored. However, the absolute necessity for an amphibious approach to the mountains ensures that the link with the great navigators will continue.

In 1981 Rowland Perriment and I, after spending six weeks in the eastern Cordillera Darwin, hitched a ride back to Punta Arenas on an ancient and extremely dilapidated fishing boat. The week that we spent on board, chugging slowly and erratically along the Beagle Channel, stopping at nightfall in lonely, silent anchorages, gave me a new perspective of the islands, and an appreciation of how it must have felt in earlier times, when salvation lay at the mercy of fickle winds and tides, when I did not know whether the next jutting headland marked the beginning of open water, or merely the entrance to some treacherous land-locked fjord. This experience has also lent a new poignancy to such features on the charts as Obstruction Sound, the Straits of Little Hope and Useless Passage, whilst one can readily understand the reasons for names such as Storm Bay, Port Ideal, Icy Fjord or Cape Desolation. Each and every member of those intrepid crews must have his name commemorated in one or other of a thousand landmarks.

The explorers came and went, meticulously documenting and charting, noting in their journals and logs masses of scientific data, collecting specimens of the flora and fauna, and on meeting the native inhabitants transporting them back to an innately curious Victorian world. Through all this the natives were treated with a lack of understanding and callousness that has so often characterized civilized man's behaviour to his more primitive fellow.

The story of the Yahgan or Yahmani tribe of Indians, a race of nomadic hunters and fishermen who used to inhabit the Beagle Channel and the islands to the south, has been recounted in a remarkable book—*The Uttermost Part of The Earth*—by E Lucas Bridges, now unfortunately out of print. This is an absorbing account of the trials and tribulations of one family of missionaries and settlers during the latter half of the last century. The author describes the founding of the settlements at Ushuaia, Harberton and Via Monte in Argentine Tierra del Fuego, but it also gives a sympathetic portrayal of the everyday lives and traditions of the Yahmanis and their more warlike neighbours in the hills, the Onas. It is a story that has echoed throughout the Americas, one in which the European can feel little pride; where a zealous pioneering spirit saw fit to shoot as vermin the Indians whose lands were coveted for sheep and cattle, where thousands of hectares of primeval forest were put to the torch for the same reason, or where a misplaced Christian vision demanded the 'education, clothing and housing of ignorant, pagan and naked savages', with the result that storm-toughened bodies soon succumbed to the ravages of influenza, measles and other less salubrious afflictions of western man. The effect on their spirits of a strange religious dogma, reinforced by a superior technology, was equally catastrophic. The irony is that many of the missionaries themselves were unable to survive for long in the more remote outposts, whilst the last pure-blooded Yahgan died in a squalid shack on Isla Navarinho in the 1960s. Through all this Lucas Bridges and the other members of his family treated the Indians with a rare compassion and understanding, so that the lands comprising Estancias Harberton and Viamonte became the last sanctuary of these dispossessed people.

The Yahgan presence is everywhere still. Along the shores of sheltered Yendegaia Bay one comes across a series of curious grassy mounds, hollow in



Photo: Iain Peters

24 The SE face of Pico Roncagli, Cordillera Darwin.

the centre. Digging up the shallow turf reveals layer upon layer of empty shells, sometimes even a broken bone implement or arrowhead—for these are the sites where generations of Indians set up their temporary shelters, crude constructions of hides and branches, usually open to the sky. Always they would return to the same site, and so the mounds grew. On one occasion, whilst attempting to reach and climb the Teeth of Navarinho, a jagged ridge of small mountains behind Puerto Williams, we came across a grave, on an overhung ledge on a steep and rocky hillside. The skeleton lay intact, surrounded by the few artefacts necessary for its journey. I find it difficult to believe that these people have gone, for their spirit is as tangible as the trees, valleys and mountains themselves. On a small island in the Wollaston group, near Cape Horn itself, are the remains of a lonely mission station; just a scattering of bleached boards and broken shards of pottery lying amongst the straggling nettles, the only reminders of an ill-fated, alien creed which succumbed to the very elements that nurtured the savages whose souls it sought to save. Anyone in the region should try and visit the small museum at the Puerto Williams naval base. Here examples of Yahgan artefacts have been preserved, along with the local fauna and flora that has outlived them: it serves as a salutary reminder to us all, whether mountaineer, missionary, scientist or tourist, to go carefully and with respect amongst another people's culture and heritage.

It is not really surprising that the Cordillera Darwin and the islands have been so little visited by the mountaineer. Remoteness is, of course, one good reason, though in this age of international jet travel the criteria of remoteness begin to have extra-terrestrial rather than merely international implications. In 1982 Angus Clark, one member of our four-man team, was unable to leave with the rest of us and had to follow on a week or so later. We left a series of hastily written, somewhat cryptic instructions for him at such widely diverse locations as the British Embassy in Santiago, a cheap boarding house in the red-light district of Punta Arenas, and the sergeants' mess in Puerto Williams. Three days after leaving London he was sitting at Base Camp 30km up a little explored valley, above an unnamed glacier, an hour's walk from the foot of the 1800m spur we had come to climb: he had made a series of lightning transitions from Jumbo to smaller jet, to a tiny Cessna, then to a fast patrol boat (courtesy of the Chilean Navy), from there to the back of a saddle horse (courtesy of the Carabineros de Chile), and finally to his own two legs. Though he was with us in the flesh, I felt sure that Angus's karma was still adjusting to the rigours of passport control at Heathrow. Making a landfall in the mountains is thus fairly straightforward, but progress from that point onwards is governed by two major imponderables, the ubiquitous forests of southern beech which cover the lower foothills, and the weather.

The forests of SW Chile comprise Darwin's temperate jungle or rain-forest, jungle being the more succinct description. I have been very lucky over the years in not having to contend overmuch with the utter chaos of straggling branches, countless fallen trees, malignant mats of sodden, scratching shrubs and bottomless, marshy hollows that comprise a Fuegian wood. From the accounts of others one soon gathers a heightened perception of the true meaning of impenetrable. To those who on reading this might be inspired to

make a visit, one word of advice: guanaco. Find yourself a guanaco and salvation is at hand. These graceful, hardy cousins of the llama are found in large numbers around the Cordillera Darwin and on the larger islands. Centuries ago they must have encountered the same problem, but a perennial desire for the sweeter summer grass above the treeline has resulted in a network of tortuous paths which have all the well-trodden hallmarks of an alpine hut bash, without the paint splashes or streams of panting, sweating continentals in stripy stockings and immaculate breeches belting past you at high speed. Like their human counterparts the guanaco tend to defecate in well-defined places, and to stumble across one of their conveniences seems like a true homecoming. One inestimable advantage of the forest is as an abundant and readily available source of fuel. It is possible to light a fire in the foulest of conditions, such are the wonders of Meta tablets. Also, if one is lucky, one can find idyllic glades and meadows between the lateral moraines of the glaciers and the woods, which provide superb, sheltered camp-sites within easy striking distance of the peaks.

Above the tree-line, the weather becomes all-important. The main mountain mass lies roughly on an east-west axis, though the complexity of the topography of the high Cordillera with its peaks of 2000+ metres means that the main peaks are extremely exposed to the prevailing west and southwest winds. At 54 or 55 S, the winds here have all the force of the Southern Ocean behind them, and these combined with a high precipitation can result in long periods of blizzard conditions. Those with experience further to the north will require no further description of their ferocity. Prolonged bad weather can occur at any time of the year, but it would appear that late November and the whole of December might be the best months for climbing, though at this early season rivers swollen by melt waters constitute a serious hazard.

Generally speaking the west or windward faces of the Darwin range are easier angled, consisting of continuous snow and ice-slopes, the ascent of which, whilst not presenting problems of a high order of technical difficulty, would involve the negotiation of complicated crevasse systems, giving long serious routes open to very fierce weather. Conversely, the leeward faces are much steeper, of mixed terrain, with excellent potential for superb routes, similar in scale and difficulty to the great north faces of the European Alps. An added advantage of climbing on the east and northeast sides is that it should be possible to find more sheltered camp-sites, close to one's chosen peak, enabling rapid ascents to be made. When the wind is from the northeast fine weather usually prevails, but shifts in wind direction can occur at bewildering speed. Each outlying island has its own peak or massif, often with an accompanying ice-cap. In particular, Islas Hoste, Clarence, and Santa Ines, together with the peninsula Munoz Gamero contain large areas of mountainous country, almost totally unexplored. These are lower hills, rarely rising above 1400 metres, but as in Northern Norway the climbing starts at sea-level, and any lack in vertical height is more than compensated by the remote situation and exposure to the Pacific storms. Despite the vagaries of the climate, the sheer magnificence of the fjords and channels, where large glaciers fall directly into the sea, makes low-level exploration a worthwhile and practicable alternative when conditions higher up become impossible.



Photo: Don Sargeant

25 *NE face of Mt Bové (Bové was first climbed by Eric Shipton and party in 1962, via the S face.)*

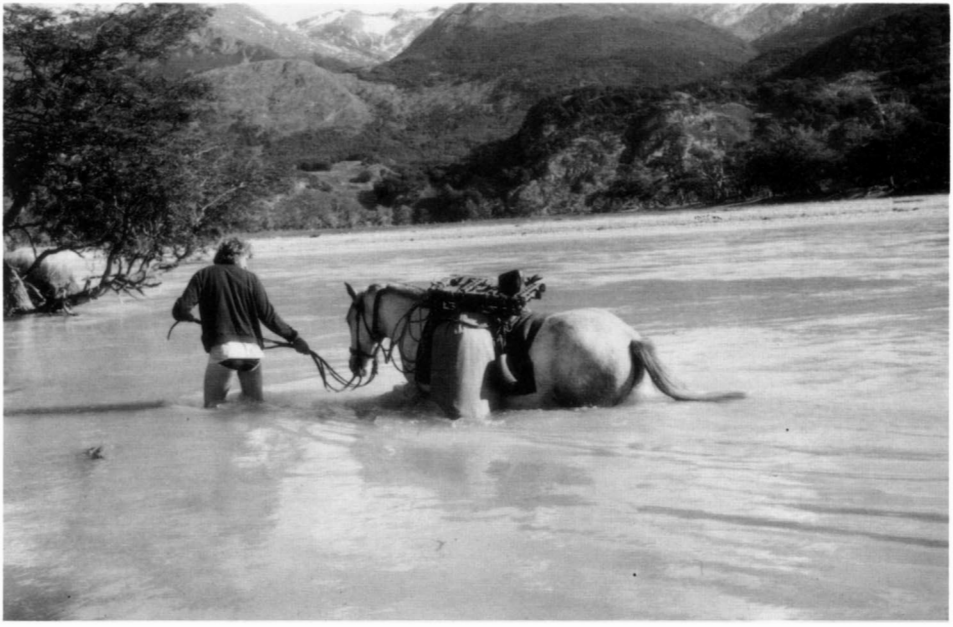


Photo: Iain Peters

26 *Dave Harber fording a glacial river in the Yendegaia valley.*

In January 1985 three of us spent a month on Isla Santa Ines, an island about the size of Skye lying to the west of Punta Arenas and the Straits of Magellan. The interior of the island was an unknown quantity, being almost completely unmapped. As far as can be ascertained we were the first people to explore the central ice-fields, and although we discovered no new Fitzroys or Fortresses we were, for the first time, able to reach the highest point on the island and look across to many peaks, glaciers, valleys and lakes. This island is also reputed to be the home of a southern hemisphere troll or Yeti, with a taste for stranded fishermen and shipwrecked sailors. We did not see it.

Initially we found, for the first time ever, that the Chilean naval authorities viewed our objective with a jaundiced eye, apparently because the sea area to the west of the island is a restricted naval zone. There was a strong rumour circulating in Punta Arenas that during the Falklands conflict a British carrier was lurking thereabouts, from which, with the tacit approval of the Chileans, long range helicopters would make reconnaissance and 'other' sorties to the important Argentine naval bases at Rio Grande and Ushuaia, from whence came the notorious Super Etendards and their Exocet missiles. The much publicized crash-landing of a British Sea King near Punta Arenas lends more than a degree of substance to this rumour. Be that as it may, three gringo 'andinistas' did not seem to pose any great threat to national security, and after the go-ahead had finally been given the navy went out of its way to help us.

The supply vessel Aguila duly dropped us off on the shores of Icy Fjord with a rather vague arrangement to pick us up four weeks later, further down the coast. We carried no radios, though Renny Croft, as a last minute gesture to the gods of Mountain Leadership, packed his carton of miniature flares, whose expiry date had long since lapsed and whose combined candle-power was less than that of a box of used Swan Vestas. With no fixed objective we were free to indulge in that much-loved climbing phrase, 'just going to have a look'. True to form the weather was also Skye-like: it rained, even above the snow line, whilst lower down those twin scourges of the northern hemisphere, the midge and the cleg, were here replaced by a microscopic red mite, whose continual feasting in the inner groin at times drove us to prolonged immersion in glacial torrents and endless fruitless searches of grimy sleeping bag interiors and rank thermal underwear. Nevertheless, the sense of total isolation, commitment and the need for self-sufficiency were a million light-years away from Chamonix or Llanberis. The full implication of our situation became apparent on two separate occasions. The first was when I contracted an infection of the inner ear which became excruciatingly painful, to the extent that my piteous cries of agony penetrated the pleasantly comatose state of inertia induced by the Walkman set belonging to Renny. In order to return as quickly as possible to the delights of Brahms or Dire Straits they would administer another dose of Fortral and allow themselves a brief moment of reflection as to who would make the long swim back to Punta Arenas. Luckily the condition only lasted a couple of days, though I took care to utter a slight groan now and again in order to justify a further fix. The other occurrence was due to a slight miscalculation on the part of the food organizer who shall remain nameless, as a result of which our reserve supplies were broached quite early on. However, our rendezvous site

beside a small bay contained a vast mussel bed, a resource which was sadly depleted by the time the navy came to pick us up. We had, with astounding foresight, brought a rod and line with us, but though the waters of southwest Chile are reputed to be one of the world's richest fishing grounds, the local fish were not going to be deceived by an obvious cheap foreign imitation of the real thing. After losing all our three spinners in the kelp beds, moules Santa Ines became the 'plato unico', although we had the doubtful benefit of decaying garlic and unidentified mixed spices to help ring the changes. A much more tangible advantage was gained by the possession of two bottles of cheap Pisco, a rough grape spirit. This certainly helped to while away the days of waiting.

Perhaps this last trip sums up the excitement I invariably feel as the prospect of another expedition to Tierra del Fuego becomes likely. I would surmise that it is similar in many respects to that of those who discovered the Alps in the so-called Golden Age of mountaineering. The Cordillera Darwin alone stretches for 160km. Only a handful of the peaks have been climbed, and these by their easiest routes. It has been suggested that the weather and topography make climbs of great technical difficulty impossible. This is nonsense. Ability, patience and the necessary enthusiasm will undoubtedly unlock many of the finest secrets of this elusive region.

Today it is becoming increasingly difficult to find mountain areas devoid of exploitation. The Himalaya has de-afforestation, trekkers' trails and attendant rubbish, Alaska has pipe-lines and air-taxis, the mountains of Africa volatile political upheavals, the Alps people, huts and ski-lifts, and in most places there is a thriving bureaucracy, whether in the shape of officialdom, or national organizing and safety committees. Here at 54S 70W there are only the natural elements untouched. Long may it remain so.

I would like to make one further point: whilst in no way wishing to stir up a hornet's nest of conflicting political affiliations, I must state that over the years I have met with nothing but kindness on the part of the Chilean people, whether they be in authority, as the Carabineros (police), the navy or government officials, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, the disenfranchised poor fishermen and redundant gauchos. One example suffices. I once left my wallet containing passport, money, visas etc in a ramshackle bar in a poorer area of Punta Arenas. After a lot of panic-stricken searching, I eventually returned to the bar, to be greeted on arrival by large grins, muttered variations on the 'loco gringito' theme, and wallet and contents intact. Now if I'd been in La Paz or Caracas . . .

I have tried to give a personal impression of this wild and beautiful region, and would not hesitate to recommend it to those with a yearning for remote mountains, whatever their technical ability or inclination. The Cordillera Darwin and the islands of the Beagle Channel have given me many unforgettable experiences, in spite of storm or failure on a chosen route. The sight of 80 or more condors circling lazily above one's head, the hollow whistle of the wind sweeping across their huge wings, or a solitary, sentinel guanaco silhouetted against the stupendous séracs and hanging glaciers of Bové's E face, the echoes of its staccato warning bark filling the silence of the Stoppani glacier, these are images and sounds that will remain.