

A SOUTH AMERICAN JOURNEY

In August 1926 my father at 20 years of age set sail from Australia in the Dom Pedro I, one of two steamships that left a day apart from Newcastle bound for Rio de Janeiro, to take up a position of Overseer on a coffee plantation at Bahia in the south east Amazon Basin. Later, blood poisoning and malaria forced him southwards from this 'God forsaken hole', as he described it, to seek and continue with a career in the pastoral industry in Patagonia for the next ten years.

Margie and my diversion eastwards in December 2008, away from our well beaten track to the African continent, was stimulated by a latent desire to follow my father's footsteps through the sparsely populated region of Patagonia.

We arrived in **Santiago**, Chile with the crumbs of Christmas pudding still on our lips and after an untimely flight delay of 24 hours when our Airbus 340 stained the Sydney Airport tarmac with a pool of hydraulic oil from a burst hose before take off.

Majestically overlooked by the snow-tipped Andes, Santiago is a conservative, modern metropolis of tree-lined boulevards, parks, squares and well fed stray dogs and whose grey neoclassical architecture of massive pillars and facades dominate with authority over the new. Like most South American cities and towns its footpaths are a hazard to the elderly tourist but my case was well compensated by years of Jenny Clark's regular aerobic and Tai Chi classes which put sufficient nimbleness in the stride!

After three days in this pleasant and relatively safe capital, we set off after New Year with twelve other well travelled young people on our overland truck adventure to cover almost 12,000 kilometres by road through South America, ending in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. We would learn essential Spanish quickly, buying our food and drink on the way, camp in two-man tents with the occasional luxury of a hostel or hotel, and remember not to deposit toilet paper in the loo but always in the bin beside. By habit, our combined forgetfulness probably clogged the sewerage systems of many towns and cities along the way!

Our first taste of the routine of camping was three nights at Pucon in an attractive camping ground beside **Lake Villarrica** and the experience proved that our choice of sleeping gear was excellent and we slept soundly most of the time. This quaint German style village has something for everyone, from the thrill seeking junkie to a couple seeking a romantic getaway. For me it was the challenge of conquering the forbidding snow and ice covered slopes of the still active Mt Villarrica volcano. Equipped or over laden with issued backpack, crampons, heavy waterproof clothing, ice axe, paddle and large video camera I set forth with guide, reaching well up into the snow and ice field. However for the first time in my life age suddenly imposed some disappointing and unfair limits and I had to humbly abort the attempt only 400 metres from the smoking top and victory. Gone is my will to conquer Mount Kilimanjaro! However the descent under instruction from my guide of sliding down a thousand feet of snow and ice slope on a plastic paddle, using the ice axe as a brake was exhilarating if not absolutely terrifying at first.

After several half day hiking excursions and exploration of the town we left Pucon and crossed the border into **San Carlos de Bariloche**, the gateway city of Argentina's Patagonian high country. Bariloche could be a replica of any town on the Swiss Alps and nestles on the shores of the beautiful Lago Nahuel Huapi, ringed by lofty snow-capped mountains. Here Margie and I went for long hikes in the National Park around the lake and took a cable car to Cerro Otto to record some spectacular views on film. Another day we were driven out to Estancia Patagonicos, a working Merino sheepstation, where the full day was spent horseback riding in gaucho saddles through the hills. A delicious hot lunch of vegetables, beef and mutton *asado* or barbeque was served with wine. Experiencing a taste of what it must have felt like for my father all those years ago, gave me a sense of peace and unreality and the desire to don a gaucho outfit and gallop away into the sunset!

From Bariloche to **Ushuaia**, Patagonia is a traveller's paradise of rugged snow-capped mountains concealing pristine mountain lakes, petrified forests, pre-historic sized glaciers, icebergs and camera draining panoramas. Its dramatic, wild beauty surpasses one's imagination or any other natural spectacle. It has been well trodden over a number of years by locals and international backpackers and is only just being discovered by the world's travel agents. Of course this region of the planet has only a small window of opportunity in the summer months, as the wind, ice and snow make some parts inhospitable in the winter.

Regarded as the adventure capital of Argentine with the world's best views, we sadly left Bariloche after three days of action packed adventure. Driving southwards for the next two weeks we passed spectacular scenery that went on forever and becoming 'old hat'. During this leg of the journey we stopped for lunch in the small village of Tecka near Esquel, not far from Estancia Tecka where my father started as Overseer, then section Manager and Stud Master. This large, once British owned sheep station carried 150,000 sheep, a Merino stud founded on North Bungaree, South Australian blood, and a small Romney marsh stud, together with a Hereford stud of 5000 cattle and 1000 horse and mule stock. All this region right down to Tierra del Fuego is the wool growing area of Patagonia and was developed largely by British Companies and capital back in the nineteenth century during wool boom years and staffed with people from the U.K., N.Z. and Australia. Their descendents are still here and their social life is still very much carried on in the traditions of their roots. The woolsheds in Patagonia are the largest that I have seen anywhere and machine shearing and the use of hydraulic wool presses probably came into use well before they did in Australia. Remembering the bleakness and winter severity of much of this treeless, Merino, Corriedale and Romney Marsh sheep grazing country meant that large numbers of sheep had to be held inside the woolshed and wool bales had to be stored for long and uncertain periods before shipment to England for auction. Counting out pens were usually covered, as well as plunge dips for the arsenical treatment of the Sarna scab mite – up to five times a year in those days. Estancia Curamalán was the greatest sheep station ever to be operated in Argentine. In its heyday it carried 300,000 sheep, 50,000 cattle, on some 280,000ha.

Before reaching the southernmost tip of South America we stopped in hostels for three nights at each of the very much backpacker oriented and tourist towns of **El Chalten and Calafate**, undertaking a guided ice trek with crampons on Viedma glacier; a launch ride up to the 4.5 kilometre wide **Moreno glacier** in the Los Glaciares NP where one can watch 60 metre high towers of ice collapsing into the deep blue waters of the huge Lake Argentino and become icebergs, and marvellous mountain hikes. At night we recuperated in the warmth and friendliness of small local restaurants to taste their delicious home-cooked fare with beer and wine at reasonable prices. You could be forgiven for thinking you were in Europe. We then left Argentine and returned over the border to Chile to camp for four days in the **Torres del Paine National Park**. Here we experienced some foul weather with rain squalls and incessant wind, the hallmark of the roaring 40's and 50's. Fortunately there were periods of better weather enhanced by the magnificent mountain views seen on the short hikes we did under the lofty, arrogant gaze of guanaco herds, one of the Camelid species of South America. Snow fell on the mountain peaks overnight on several occasions and a horse riding excursion was made a little uncomfortable by rain. Often buffeted by wind and rain, Margie and I slept snugly in our nylon tent under the cold conditions of the southern latitudes and during the day wore layers of clothing to keep comfortably warm or shed them when the weather became surprisingly hot. Throughout the journey we rarely went to bed before midnight and most mornings were up at 6 00am to take advantage of the splendid light for filming and of course to witness the marvellous sunrises.

Travelling on we made a brief stop for supplies at **Port Natales, Chile**, before walking through and filming a Magellanic penguin colony near Punta Arenas. We camped in a small deserted town on the edge of the Strait of Magellan which was actually built by Estancia San Gregorio in 1875 to house their staff, school their children, stockpile their wool and

skins, provide quarters for shearers; besides a maintenance garage, post office, enormous twenty stand shearing shed and wool room and roofed plunge dip baths. All were substantially built of the same architectural design running down both sides of the highway. The magnificent two storey homestead gazed down on the abandonment from a nearby hill. This was the first and principal property founded by José Menéndez. The Menéndez-Braun holdings grew to over a million sheep before the family assets were subdivided in 1974. Only a police post seemed to be still in use. It was quite nostalgic looking out from the woolshed yards over the Strait of Magellan and visualising my father passing this place sometime on the morning of 12th September, 1926 in the Dom Pedro I – a life of extraordinary adventures ahead of him. A dangerous list from a violent storm in the Pacific had wisely caused the steamship's captain to take the ship through the Strait rather than risk sailing the normal passage round Cape Horn. The second ship Dom Pedro II, which had been following in its wake never made it, disappearing without trace.

From here we drove to the car ferry terminal for the half hour crossing of the swift flowing waters of the Strait of Magellan as they poured from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. As we sailed across to **Tierra del Fuego**, we were escorted and entertained by playful pods of tiny black and white *Toninas overa* dolphins. It was then down to the end of the earth, Ushuaia, crossing back into Argentine and passing the turn-off to Estancia María Behety at Rio Grande where my father worked later as Stud Supervisor and Sheep Classifier for a number of years with the wealthy José Menéndez Behety family. This property carried a Corriedale stud founded on Little's 'Hui Hui' blood and a Romney Marsh Stud – approximately 160,000 sheep.

Ushuaia is a stunning destination, lying beside the Beagle Channel with a spectacular backdrop of the Fuegian Andes whose peaks dominate the skyline. We stayed at a picturesque campsite for three days and like many of the camps we have used so far it was well provisioned with toilets, showers, kitchen and dining facilities, bar and restaurant.

We explored the museums and streets of this once penal colony that is fast becoming a haven for international tourists on their way to Antarctica, a city of some 61,000 people. Not to be missed was a launch trip on the Beagle Channel to observe sea lion, penguin and cormorant colonies, and to look back at the unforgettable views of Ushuaia from the sea. So much to do here although the wind can often postpone or interrupt activities.

We left Ushuaia well versed and prepared by our South African driver Billie for the gruelling journey northwards up the eastern coast of Argentina until our arrival at the capital Buenos Aires, in seven days time. We entered Chile to re-cross the Strait of Magellan and then through the border post back into Argentina. The sheer vastness and isolation of this region meant that we would have some fifteen hour days of driving along lonely stretches through the sheep country of **Patagonia**. Unlike the western side where we struck gravel, most of the road surface here was of concrete slab construction and a lot of new roadwork was being undertaken to improve inferior sections. The country and its treeless, illusionary flat terrain looked very similar in parts to the bush country of the Riverina and the saltbush and bluebush look-alike species probably evolved from the same base stock when these two continents were as one, Gondwanaland. However, every so often you would drop down into a hidden shallow valley running eastwards to the sea, carved out by glacial and water erosion millions of years ago. Windmills were rarely more than fifteen feet off the ground due to the intensity of the wind and introduced trees around estancia homesteads and yards had to be protected by wooden barricades during establishment if they were to survive. Toilet stops beside the road required a great deal of thought from both sexes because of the eddying effects of the relentless wind and even peeing downwind could sometimes cause embarrassing results. Guanacos and rheas followed our progress with interest.

As we travelled northwards we crossed a number of huge rivers spilling into the Atlantic and in my father's time some of these could only be crossed by punt. On arrival at **Port Madryn** we joined land and sea excursions of sea lion and elephant seal colonies on the World Heritage Site, **Valdes Peninsular**. This was a fascinating experience and Margie's cameras ran hot. It was along these beaches that David Attenborough made the spectacular documentary of killer whales taking seal pups from the waters edge. Unfortunately this was the wrong time of year for this. We stayed here for three nights checking out the restaurants and bars overlooking the expansive beach. One evening while comfortably sipping a cool lager in a bar overlooking the bay we witnessed the whole city obliterated from sight by a dust storm whipped up by gale force winds which then caused chaos back at the campsite, demolishing some of our tents.

After Patagonia came the rich soils of the Pampas húmeda and sheep gave way to green crops and cattle. Trees appeared and Australian eucalypts began to dominate the countryside around homesteads and in shelter belts and commercial plantations. We arrived in **Buenos Aires** on the 27th January, 2009 and relished the comfort of four nights in a luxury hotel in the centre of the city after completion of the toughest section of our South American journey.

Buenos Aires is a city with a flavour of its own, blended from the intensity and sensuality of the Tango, the unfettered explosive emotion of a football game at La Boca, the numerous art galleries, superb restaurants and nightlife, all of which in part or whole satisfy the desires of any porteño or foreign tourist. Margie and I tasted most of these things, sometimes anaesthetised by the rhythm of life; I even performed on stage with a gorgeous female dancer in a provocative display of the Tango, went riding again on an estancia, walked and bus toured the city, lunched on board a cruise launch while sightseeing around the Port – and got robbed!!

Fortunately the latter experience was only a temporary downturn and a story of its own. It made us more street wise and perhaps become over-cautious. The loss of some money and thousands of photos on a card reader was not so bad because we both had all our Canon camera gear intact. After all, Margie had been well trained by her mentor Andrew Chapman and had a second back up on a hard-drive back at the hotel!

As we approach the tropics, clothing from hereon was shirts, shorts and sandals and virtually no covering at night so we lightened our load and sent our warm gear, including one sleeping bag, home safely by post.

We left Buenos Aires by Buquebus, a giant, fast car passenger ferry with aircraft style seats and cabin, which crossed the forty kilometre wide Rio de la Plata to **Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay** in one hour. This is a land of big rivers!

We walked the cobblestone streets of this charming little town with its intriguing history of smuggling and contraband before boarding our truck again and heading for the Uruguayan capital of **Montevideo**. Here we stopped at a hostel for two nights and enjoyed the sights of the city, watched the city's colourful Carnival that went on into the early hours of morning and provided some exceptional, relaxed photography for Margie. The next day we sauntered through the crowded Sunday market where five or six streets had been blocked off to display everything imaginable along footpath and roadway. People young and old strolled the city streets sipping the traditional drink *yerba mate* through a metal straw (*bombilla*) with a thermos of hot water cradled under the other arm. Every so often they would top up the gourd of tea leaves and pass it round to their friends. Bus and car drivers both in Uruguay and Argentina were often seen sipping their *mate* in one hand, steering with the other! Throughout our travels over this continent so far, we have had no trouble finding an internet cafe, sometimes free in the hostels, and usually there was an ATM, even in the very small towns.

We left Montevideo for **Salto** travelling northwest to camp overnight and relax in the hot springs there. The excellent highways through Uruguay are lined with Australian casuarinas

and gum trees and again we were passing huge commercial plantations of eucalypts. We left Salto in the pouring rain and crossed the border again into Argentine. It was then on to San Ignacio Mini to look over the colonial Baroque architecture of extensive stone ruins of a Jesuit Mission, one of thirty built by the Order in Brazil, Uruguay, and Argentina from the turn of the 17th century. This evangelistic experiment was a unique social, cultural and religious experience which followed the conquest and colonisation of America by the Spanish. Certainly one of the most relevant episodes in the history of humanity.

One of the unforgettable highlights of our trip were the spectacular **Iguassu Falls** which we viewed on a glorious day from kilometres of trails and steel walkways on the Argentine side. We then went through the time consuming ordeal of crossing the border for the tenth time, this time into Brazil. There were some anxious moments when I was refused entry because of a visa discrepancy but fortunately our driver was able to sort it out. We spent two days in Foz do Iguazu getting a much wider overview of the cataracts and main falls. Torrential rain spoilt the first day of filming but cleared the next to take a helicopter ride for some superb aerial shots. One evening our driver Billie threw out a challenge to race him at the professional go-cart race track in town. Eight of us accepted the contest. On the third lap my Honda powered machine whose seat had been delicately adjusted for me with a sledgehammer, threw its rear wheel in disgrace as it disintegrated during a four wheel drift on one of the bitumen S bends, ploughing into the grass edge. I was out of the race. At the end of eleven electronically monitored laps our driver had won. At least I was the only one to get some of the entry fee back! We had a great evening at the local restaurant once again enjoying the inches thick superior beef that this continent prepares so well. During the floor show I was again called upon to disgracefully perform on stage with some luscious but scantily clad brown beauties, this time in a Samba routine. Why me? The encore was embarrassing if not overdone but it was nice to hit it off in the Americas so well!

Our next destination north-westwards was **Bonito** in Brazil. Lying on the edge of the Mato Grosso, this is the gateway to the huge green wetland of the Pantanal which extends southwards into Argentine. Here we spent a day at a ranch snorkelling in wetsuits for two and a half hours drifting down a pristine, crystal clear river, marvelling at the many different species of fish and water plants. Tiny Capuchin monkeys scolded us from the forest trees above. At one point a large but harmless eight foot caiman watched us intently from the sandy bottom below as we floated with the current above him.

It was seven hours driving to Pousada Santa Clara in the **Pantanal**, our next stop and a relaxing three days on this tourist cattle ranch. The Pantanal is Brazil's major ecological attraction and its vast natural wetland harbours a density of exotic wildlife found nowhere else in South America. Although unusually dry for this time of year, we were able to do a number of walking trips with an observant and knowledgeable guide through the wet and dry open grasslands and prominent islands of heavy forest, spotting families of howler monkeys, coatis, agouti, armadillos, deer and a variety of bush birds and colourful macaws. Another day was had exploring the waterways of a large river in heavy rain where we drifted past grazing capybara, the world's largest rodent, and myriads of caiman crocodiles some of which we fed beside our canoe with freshly caught piranha. When the weather cleared, we spent several hours fishing for these voracious little fellows and caught a dozen or so each. We ate them for dinner that night, gratefully with all fingers intact. Margie and I had a most enjoyable afternoon horseback riding through woodland and open wetland where flood waters were slowly creeping in.

We left the Pantanal vowing to return one day and spend more time observing wildlife in the northern region during the winter dry season. Ahead of us were some long days of driving as we travelled eastwards towards Rio de Janeiro and the end of the overland journey. Along the way a late overnight camp beside the road brought us in conflict with heavily armed police who were looking for the culprit of a murder up the road. They ordered us on but we were too tired and exhausted to move so went back to sleep after they had

gone. We safely reached the east coast of Brazil and turned north up the coastal road, taking in the incredible vistas overlooking the blue waters of the Atlantic. We stopped for three days at the World Heritage Site and picturesque colonial town of **Paraty**. Its idyllic situation on the edge of forest and a beautiful bay encircling many beaches and 65 tropical islands makes it a real gem. We wandered the cobblestone streets dodging horse and carts to enjoy the architecture, the churches, galleries, boutiques and restaurants – a place where you can dine out or eat multi-flavoured ice cream and pay by the weight. A day was spent lounging on the decks of schooner sipping deadly caipirina's while we toured the blue water and islands in the bay and dived off the boat to relax in the water at island stops. No one mentioned sharks so we presumed there were not any!

From here it was a short drive to **Rio** and as we approached the city outskirts the traffic came to a crawl and it was hours before we reached our well appointed hotel not far from the beach at Flamengo. The squalor and delapidation of the favelas on the outskirts made our first glimpse and impression of this famous city rather depressing but it was soon overcome when we reached the beautiful inner circle with its white beaches, high rise buildings and spectacular mountain backdrops.

So here we were at the end of an extraordinary journey and time for fond goodbyes to our wonderful South African guide Minette and driver Billie, and Famoo, the departing truck that had been our home for the last seven weeks and brought us safely overland through some fascinating country.

Ahead of us was the next leg of our adventure, a week in **Rio - Rio de Janeiro!**

All over this continent, towns and cities are celebrating Carnival - the five days of revelry which lasts from the Friday to Ash Wednesday in February. But nowhere else is the pulse of a city beating stronger than in Rio. Already it had reached a crescendo as the streets began to explode with colour, song and dance to the mystical beat of the Samba drums. We travelled the Metro to join in and film these gatherings and celebrations as each suburb took its turn; to be dazzled by the colourful and outrageous costumes and shameless posing, to share the crush of people with apprehension and the gaiety with abandonment. Margie will have some amazing photography!

So much for the minor festivities and quirks of the most beautiful city in the world. The highlight of our Rio adventure was Sunday night, the celebration of our fortieth Wedding Anniversary with the multitudes and the first night of the Carnival extravaganza at the Sambodromo. One can only describe Carnival fever as a natural catastrophe that sweeps over everyone, regardless of social status. It is irresistible and a time of spirited festivity and excess that dominates the mundane lives and misery of ordinary people. We caught the train at 5.30 pm with our cameras concealed in backpacks and walked amongst the crowds with some apprehension through the slums, eventually finding our heavily secured, ticketed sector stand at the Sambadrome. We came early so as to get a good seat and already the thirteen stands were filling. Even before the first parade started at nine thirty, the evening had already erupted in a frenzy of samba dance and song among the thousands of spirited and costumed spectators. A huge array of enormous speakers blasted the eardrums with decibels of the theme tunes. Helicopters with TV crews flew stationary above and an overhead robotic camera travelled up and down on taut wires the length of the Sambadrome avenue to the applause of the expectant crowd as it passed. A member of an official cleaning team performed a few antics between the stands and received a hearty acclamation from the crowd. The anticipation and suspense was on knife edge!

And then the night sky exploded with fireworks! The parade of the first of the six Samba schools to appear tonight had begun. It took 20 minutes for the lead performers to reach our stand and 86 minutes for the last performer and float to pass down the kilometre long hallowed concrete avenue. Then the next school would begin their parade.

The colour and extravaganza of this performance has to be seen and felt to believe, as is the enormity of the spectacular floats and the luxuriousness of the thousands of costumed

dancers. So many people involved with the production of each dance school's parade and already plans for the design and theme are in progress for next year's Carnaval. Feeling weary, we left the Sambadrome by taxi before the last performance and eventually got back to the hotel at 6.30am for breakfast and bed. Over the week we did most of the sights of Rio including the cable cars to Sugar Loaf, Christ the Redeemer statue atop Corcovado Mountain, Copacabana, Ipanema and an excursion to the Tijuca Forest. Our favelas (slums) tour was cancelled because of security worries, although others did it without trouble - or insurance cover! Police were stationed in cars everywhere and most carried automatic rifles. This is a dangerous city but common sense will help you enjoy it.

And so we farewelled Rio, a place tainted with apprehension but bursting with exuberance and vivacity to the rhythm of life and mystical beat of Samba, both on the streets and the spectacle of the Sambodromo. Not to be forgotten is the glossy travel brochure signature of this famous city which sprawls on the long white sands of Copacabana and Ipanema where the lithe brown beauties of Rio display in skimpy costume and sometimes even brave the surf. Not to be outdone are those ordinary people whose sun baked and voluminous flesh is held precariously by the stretch and strain of meagre fabric and youth has long forgotten as they enjoy a place in the sun under the shadow of Sugarloaf and stern gaze of Christ the Redeemer.

We caught a jet from the airport for a five hour flight north-west to Manaus in the heart of the Amazon, stopping at the capital Brazilia on the way. Through scattered cloud we caught glimpses of the Amazonian rainforest and prominent rivers meandering through impenetrable jungle. It was not until we neared Manaus when the pilot banked the aircraft steeply to port that we saw the mightiest stretch of water on this earth! It was an awesome sight and belittled the other big rivers we had flown over. We followed the Amazonas for perhaps ten minutes before passing over the 'meeting of the waters', the place where the black tannin waters of the Rio Negro meet the white sediment laden waters from the Andes of the Rio Solimoes. The sharp division of colour runs side by side for up to 16 kms before mixing together as one. At this time of year the Amazonas is in flood and with an average depth of 50 metres can rise 15 metres and spread up to 50 kms wide through huge tracks of rainforest.

Manaus is a city of 2 million people isolated by jungle and linked mainly by this mighty river and airways. We toured the city by bus, fascinated by its old colonial architecture of mixed influences nestling amongst shaky sky scrapers and delayed new government projects - all being tarnished grey by mould and mildew. This time of the year it rains every day.

We travelled by a small river boat through the 'meeting of the waters', and down the Amazonas until turning north up the Puraquequara River, one of it's thousands of tributaries. The comfortable, eco-friendly palm-leaf thatched Amazon Village Lodge is very tastefully set in jungle on the edge of the river; reminding us of some of the African Lodges we have stayed in. It was a peaceful and relaxing four days waking up to the songs of howler monkeys and in the evening sipping caipirina's at the bar, listening to the screech of a macaw and the soft 'plop' of fish feeding amongst the flooded forest trees. We did some fascinating jungle walks with a well informed guide, visited a native village, taught how to use a blowpipe and dart, fished for piranha and went out one night on the Amazon River spotlighting and catching a small caiman – an awesome experience. The rain forest was silent and the animals quietly avoided us. Indians still hunt these areas with blowpipes but sadly now more often with the gun.

We finally returned to Manaus by river boat and prepared for little sleep over the next three days. Ahead of us was the ordeal of five flights to Rio, Buenos Aires, Auckland, Sydney and Griffith for our arrival in Hay on the 4th March 2009. Our incredible adventure was over but the experience will give more understanding to those footsteps we followed.