

- Magellan et Darwin
- Glaciers et pampa
- Un peuple exterminé
- Entre Argentine et Chili

Darwin and Magellan could not have imagined, when they travelled and mapped the channels of Patagonia, that centuries later, a futuristic boat such as the Polar POD would travel south of these famous regions!

Here, the end of the South American continent where the Argentine and Chilean borders merge, is transformed into an archipelago from the Cape of Virgins in the East, to the Cape Pilar in the West, towards 53° South. From there, Tierra del Fuego extends to Cape Horn (Chile) and the Isla de los Estados (Argentina) for a total area of 800,000 km.

Lands, channels and fjords are cut in lace with the last jolts of the Andes in the west, culminating at 2,500 m. These peaks receive more than 2,000 mm of water per year, feeding the deciduous forest and the glaciers that go down almost to the sea. This forest contrasts with the cold desert of the thin steppe and thorny shrubs to the east, with a temperature that hovers around 5°C.





WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

The famous part of Patagonia's history begins on November 1, 1520, when the Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan entered the tortuous strait that today bears his name in search of a route to the Orient. 565 km further west, it leads to the Pacific.

Why Patagonia? The etymology of the word has been the subject of much research and controversy, and the only testimony comes from Antonio Pigafetta, one of the 18 survivors of Magellan's expedition around the world, where he describes the encounter with a "giant" with big feet "Patagoni". And since these "Patagonians" lit fires throughout - probably to keep track of the progress of the ships - these places became the "Tierra del Fuego" in Spanish, an expression hastily translated as Tierra del Fuego (Tierra del Fuego would be more appropriate)

Cape Horn is still today synonymous with shipwrecks, maritime dramas and danger for navigators. It was discovered in 1616 by Le Maire and Shouten and was at the time the obligatory passage between the Atlantic and the Pacific (until the opening of the Panama Canal) and then the gateway to Antarctica located only 1000 km further south.

Between the 17th and 18th centuries, a large number of ships came from England, Holland, France and Spain, some to hunt whales and sea lions, others motivated by scientific interests. In 1834, Charles Darwin, the greatest naturalist of the time, disembarked from the Beagle on which he had embarked for 5 years of expeditions under the command of Captain FitzRoy. He analyzed every rock, landscape, species and people that crossed his path. It was during this voyage that Darwin developed his famous theory of evolution. Between 1882 and 1883, on the occasion of the International Polar Year, a small warship of the French Navy, La Romanche, stayed 12 months in the channels of Tierra del Fuego to observe in particular the passage of Venus in the southern firmament.

And so before Magellan? Several indigenous tribes were already living in Tierra del Fuego before the arrival of the Europeans. The Onas (Selknam) were hunter-gatherers who shared the island with the Haush in the east. In the southern islands lived the Yaganes (Yamana) who feared the Onas. They were excellent navigators and lived from the products of the sea. In the west, in the most inhospitable channels, we find the Alakaluf who resisted the colonists the longest. There are no longer any Fuegian around Tierra del Fuego. These inhabitants resisted the cold by covering their bodies with animal fat. Many of them died when the settlers forced them to change this habit and brought back new diseases.

Punta Arenas, on Chilean soil, is the main city of the canals, it was created in 1848. Apart from tourism, it is the meeting point for all the polar ships that provide logistics for the bases of the sub-Antarctic peninsula. On the shores of the Strait, Port Famine and Fuerte Bulnes bear witness to the difficult colonization of the southernmost inhabited region on the planet. Dawson Island is a former Salesian mission where Yaganes, Onas and Alakalufs were grouped together from 1892 to 1911 to protect them from adventurers and unscrupulous gold diggers, but also with the aim of "civilizing" them. It will be transformed into a vast morgue, the natives being decimated by tuberculosis. At 55° South in Argentine territory, Ushuaia - which means "bay open to the west" in the local language - is the southernmost city in the world; it is there, in Yagane and Ona country, that the Reverend Thomas Bridges founded an Anglican mission in 1870. Nowadays, Ushuaia has about 70,000 inhabitants, and in the streets, Chileans, Argentinians, English, Italians and Yugoslavs mingle with the last Fuegian mestizos.

Traditional regional activity, the fishing of centolla "crabs" (or Patagonian king crabs), has become, since the 1930s, an important industry that has experienced a real explosion.

Today, the regional economy depends mainly on sheep and cattle breeding, oil and gas extraction.



FOR MORE DETAILS

Literature :

- The voyage of the Beagle – C. Darwin
- The Patagonian Hare - C. Lanzmann

Fine books :

- Patagonie, le Grand Sud – P. Escudero & C. Domens