

Tierra del Fuego

*« Allí termina todo
no termina : allí
comienza toto »*

Extrait de « Piedras Antarticas »
de Pablo Neruda

“That’s where everything ends... and no ends: that’s where everything starts”, wrote the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda about the southern lands of Patagonia and Antarctica, about the south of south America where had to end (or start?) our two years trip over the American continent.

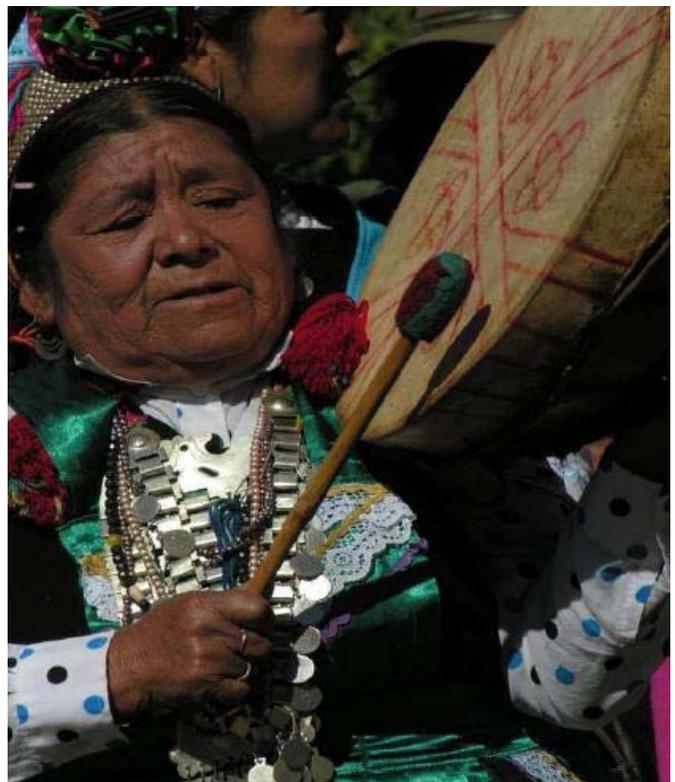
But before reaching the tip, we first had to cross a very long country : Chile, a 4300 km strip of land wedged between the Cordillera de los Andes and the Pacific ocean. The last time we wrote you about our “adventure”, we were just arriving to Santiago after spending four months at more than 3500 meters (11500 feet) in altitude. But we didn’t tell you about the shock we had when crossing on foot the invisible line between too very steamy volcanoes: the border between Bolivia and Chile.

For those who traveled

in countries such as Bolivia, India, other Southeast Asian and African countries, it’s

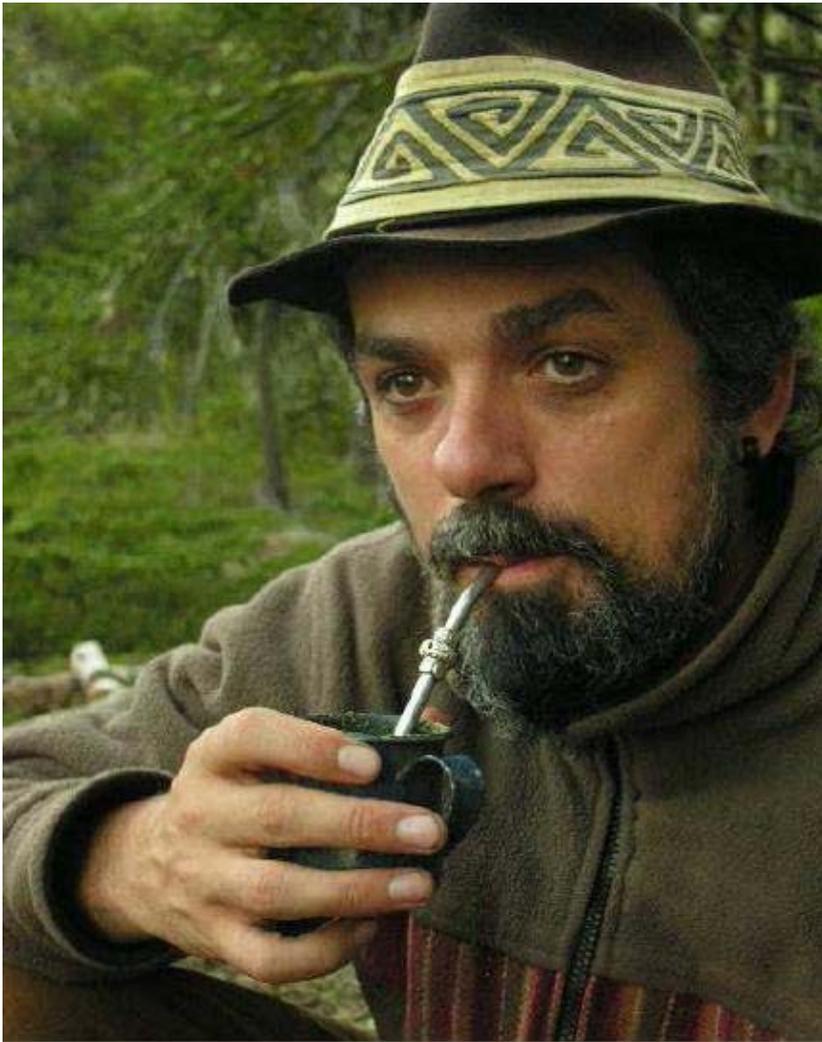
they can also figure out how surprising was the transition. Yes, leaving Bolivia to Chile is like crossing the US border to Mexico. All of a sudden, roads become asphalted and comfortable. No more dirt road, no more holes, no more endless hours suffering because of pain in your back and ass!

On that point, the change seems positive for travelers. But it’s not finished yet, the biggest



easier to understand what I mean. And for those who don’t know all those places but at least went to Mexico,

shock was to come : prices! Indeed, we absolutely didn’t expect prices to be so high (everything is relative :



Chile is cheaper than most European and North American countries, but coming from Bolivia, the poorer South American country, it seemed expensive to us). Moreover, as we arrived by the Atacama desert, the first place we visited in Chile was San Pedro de Atacama, nice little sandy town, but also the most touristy and consequently the most expensive place in the country. Pitching our tent in the cheapest campsite cost us more than three nights in a Bolivian hotel room! For the first time since we left the US in November 2005, we paid to “sleep outside” as we like to qualify it. Since the day we entered Chile, we stopped eating in restaurant (“comedores” or “place where you eat” in English would be a better

term, as we never really ate in those nice tourist restaurants, but always in “places where you have choice between rice and potatoes, rice and chicken or rice and beef and potatoes!), sleeping in hotel and abusing of bus trips! We rediscovered those magic places which are supermarkets, as the Chilean society enjoys them (believe it or not: there are no supermarkets in Bolivia!), where we could purchase our favorite meal: pastas!

Another really hard thing for us was the way Chilean people speak. Do they do it on purpose? I don't know why, but they decided one day they would not pronounce the “s” anymore. At the end of the words or just in the middle, they seem to

hate this vowel. After a year and half in Latin America, we thought we could understand every kind of Spanish. But Chile proved us we were wrong! Solidarity was very useful : David and me had to count on each other to understand . “What is he saying?” “I don't know”. “That's not a big deal, we'll ask again our way to the next one!” (translation from the French...).

It took us more than a couple of weeks to get used to the big change of mentality between Andean people, who are mostly indigenous people, and the more European rooted Chilean society. However, we don't want you to believe we prefer one to the other. Differences between people is the most important thing on the earth... Yes, we missed Bolivian disorder and huge open air markets, people happiness even in poverty, women colorful *pollera* and bowler hats. But we really appreciate to have hot showers in camp sites and in all kind of cheap rooms (without having to check before paying the room in case the guy tries to cheat you), to enjoy comfortable bus rides and a more occidental way of organization!

We didn't stay very long in the North. A week in the beautiful Atacama desert allowed us to say goodbye to the Andean culture. Indeed, on that side of the Andes still inhabit a Aymara population whose habits are much closer to Bolivian people ones than from the rest of Chile. However, I suffered a great deal not to find coca leaves on San Pedro market (my little bag filled with coca leaves had been con-

fiscated by the customs when we crossed the border!) as I usually did on Bolivia and Peru's ones. No more chewing, no more coca mate! (Instead, I replaced coca with Chile and Argentina specialty, which I adopted as mine : another kind of mate, made of a Amazonian plant).

In Santiago, the country capital, people were enjoy-

represents the biggest ethnic group in Chile, and the most politically and socially active. They resisted a very long time against the Spaniards, then the Chilean patriots when Chile acquired its independence in the 19th century. They have a strong character that we could experience by spending a few weeks among them.

During the release party, both *lonko's* wives and families where invited, as well as friends and strangers like us. We were lucky enough to witness a traditional ceremony made by a *Machi*, a medicine woman, who sung and played her drum (*kultrun*). This event was very symbolic : in spite of the last five years he spent in jail, the *lonko* simply said he would keep on fighting to get back the land of its people. Like many others in America and in the world, he doesn't fear death because death can't be worst than despoilment.



ing the end of a nice and hot summer. Another big difference between Andean people and Chilean is the time they go to bed. Like Spaniards, Chilean can't sleep before everyone sleeps, so you can wait a long time before enjoying the silence of the night. It drove me...crazy!

Anyway, we enjoyed the city, its museums, it's old monuments and a huge and colorful colonial house transformed in a empty, and by consequence, silent, hostel.

Pursuing our trip down south, we stopped in the Lakes region situated around Temuco, where live the numerous Mapuche people. Those indigenous

First, we were invited to celebrate the release of a political prisoner, *lonko* (chief) of a small community, who had been sent to jail on false accusations 5 years ago. He was accused to represent a "terrorist threat" according to General Pinochet anti-terrorist law created to have a better control on indigenous and students movements in the years of its murderous dictatorship in the 1970's. In spite of the return of democracy, this unfair and strategic law is still in use. In fact, Pascual Pichun, the *lonko*, tried to get back land which was traditionally owned by its community and confiscated by Pinochet 30 years ago and sold to a wood company.

To experiment Mapuche rural life, we moved on from Temuco to Lonquimay, a nice little town close to the Cordillera. In that part of Chile grow a kind of pine tree called Araucaria, which gives pinions every year. Strange coincidence : we just arrived there for the harvest of those big pine fruits (mid-March)! Another coincidence: we had already harvested pinions in Arizona in October 2005, helping a Navajo family who lived on it. Every five to seven years, Arizona pine trees give small black fruits that the Navajo take out from the ground (they never touch the branches to make the pinions fall), toast in oil and salt and eat or sell in small bags.

What a surprise when we first saw a Chilean pinion! Big, red, inexpensive on the market and annual. Indeed, the Pehenche (Mapuche of the *Pehuen*, name given to the Araucaria) harvest the fruit every year and live on it : they have no other way to get food and money, no fields (very few have small wheat fields), not much cattle.



Until today, the pinion harvesting season is very important and almost everyone help, even kids. Most of the Pehuenche, who usually live in wooden houses in small communities where kids go to school, leave their place and hike up to the mountains to their seasonal shelters made of Araucaria dead wood. During almost two months, they stay up there and live by collecting pinions and fresh water in the streams. They gather pinions, eat pinions, dream about pinions!

That's what we did too, helping the old Don Pedro and his wife who needed to collect enough pinions to fill 30 hundred pound bags: 10 for their own use, 20 to sell. With the money, they would buy wheat, rice, pasta, salt, sugar and of course, *yierba mate* (preparation for mate).

What a nice time we spent

with them, in the silence of the Araucaria forest, with no other companions than the couple, their two dogs and Don Pedro's horse! No noise, except the sound of birds and pinions falling on the ground night and day. We had to get use to eat only boiled pinions and drink mate, the Pehuenche gastronomy. And we did it!

In spite of the beautiful autumn weather, we knew we were entering the cold season. Winds and rains would come soon, changing the face of Patagonia. We left Lonquimay to reach Chiloe, the second biggest island of South America. Some people say it's the gate of Patagonia. Nice wooden colorful houses give an incredible warm feeling to this fishermen land. More

than half of the island is covered with endemic forest, blessed by very abundant rains!

Were we luckier than other visitors? A splendid sun shone over us during those days we spent there with our news Mapuche Williche friends.

One Sunday afternoon, as we said goodbye to Chiloe, we also took leave of Native America and its people. We still had to cross Patagonia, but we knew we would not meet much more indigenous people as they either had been murdered or simply died from disease and prayers carried out by White people. The weekly ship took us from our friends, to bring us in the heart of Mother Nature. She is been good to us, blessed us with more sun than rain, refreshed us with winds and gave us a good opportunity to rest in the silence of her nights.

As we were off tourist season, we discovered a very humble and quiet Patagonia. And we realized it was not so easy to travel in such a place when nothing is done anymore for tourists. For the first time since we left the other hemisphere, we had to hitch





hike on deserted dirt roads again. And we really enjoyed it!

We were lucky enough to travel on the Holly week, enjoying very long rides thanks to truck drivers carrying seafood to remote places for the Holly Friday family meals. However, we also experienced full hotels and had to camp in the middle of a city as no one had enough sympathy to lend us a square meter of lawn!

Even hitch hiking, we made it on time to Villa O'Higgins, last town on the *carretera austral* (austral road), where we took the only monthly ship to cross the Desert lake and its blue green glacier water. We then had to walk 40 km carrying our 20 kg backpack to reach Argentina. After visiting the most famous and beautiful places of Argentinean Patagonia, as the Perito Moreno, third biggest glacier in the world

after Greenland and Antarctica, we went back to Chile, further south (our route seems complicated, but you have to know there is no Chilean road which join Northern and Southern Patagonia : you either have to take a ship or to follow a piece of the Argentinean road). Back to Chile, I realized I liked better the Chilean side of Patagonia, which is quite different from the Argentina *pampa* (short yellow grass that covers thousands of miles): it receives all the rains which comes from the Pacific ocean but can't cross the Andes in the middle, so it's very green and covered with native rain forest. Moreover, Chilean Patagonia is much less developed, so less frequented : more humble, less expensive!

We took advantage of our stay in Puerto Natales to spend a few days in Torres del Paine National Park.

Unfortunately, Mother Nature could not retain her water any longer, so we turned into big humid sponges for several days; Snow even dare to fall and bother us!

We knew we could not spend more time on our way to the South : we took a ship to our last stop : Puerto Williams, the most southern town in the world (maybe you thought Ushuaia owned this title : it's wrong!). Luckily, we enjoyed a wonderful sunshine the day we arrived. We walked up the hill south of the small town and could see Ushuaia, situated 50 km farer North and separated from us by the Beagle Chanel which is also the border between Chile and Argentina.

By a very clear and peaceful day, we officially ended our two years trip over America. Were those austral lands, as Pablo Neruda



wrote, the end or the beginning? The shiny water of the canal was like a big mirror in which we could see again all the moments we spent with the American people, Natives and natives, all of you who welcomed us, behave with us

like old friends, taught us so many things.

How could it be the end? How the end could not be the beginning of something else, something great, something beautiful?

All of you are part of us

now and part of that beginning. We are sincerely grateful to all of you who open their doors and hearts to us, or who simply read our newsletters or sent us warm messages all over this trip.

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