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DARWIN IN PATAGONIA



There is no doubt that chance can sometimes play a central role in the development of defining events in the history of humanity. Such was the case with Charles Darwin's opportunity to travel on the *Beagle*; it was without a doubt the most important experience of his life and was a key element in the development of his ideas about evolution and the origin of species.

Charles Darwin was born on February 12th, 1809 in Shrewsbury, England. He was the fifth of six siblings and was practically raised by his sisters after the death of his mother at age six.

In 1825 he began to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh, but postponed these studies to pursue theology in 1828 at Christ's College in Cambridge, encouraged by his father, Robert Darwin, a renowned doctor and businessman in England.

During his time at university, he met the Reverend John Stevens Henslow, a botany professor to whom Charles Darwin owes a great part of his love for natural history as well as his introduction to Captain Fitz Roy. It was J. Henslow who proposed that Darwin take a position as an unpaid naturalist with Captain Fitz Roy, since the latter needed a companion and gentleman of his own social class with whom he could get along with and share the trip, and who was not a formal part of the crew.

This expedition, entrusted by the British Admiralty, was preparing its second voyage to finish the cartographic work started during the first voyage between 1826 and 1830 under the command of Robert Fitz Roy. Fitz Roy took on the role of captain during the *Beagle's* first voyage after its first captain, Pringle Stokes, committed suicide in Tierra del Fuego.

The *Beagle's* voyage lasted almost five years, sailing from Plymouth Bay, England on December 27th, 1831 and arriving in Falmouth on October 2nd, 1836.

Its first landfall in South America was in 1832 in Bahia or San Salvador, Brazil, where Charles Darwin spent his time exploring the area, admiring the exuberance of the vegetation and the great number of new species that presented themselves before his eyes.

Continuing his exploration southward, it is important to mention his stay in Bahia Blanca, more specifically in Punta Alta. Darwin found this to be a place of great geological appeal that lent itself to the field application of the new knowledge acquired through the recent publication of the first volume on geological principles by the geologist Charles Lyell. It was here where he found enormous fossils of immense, extinct quadrupeds, and this discovery sparked his first doubts with respect to his religious beliefs.

The next destination was Cape Horn. It was on this leg of the voyage that the *Beagle* found itself in the most serious danger of shipwreck due to the high seas and constant storms, but it came through unscathed thanks to Fitz Roy's great skill as a pilot.

The *Beagle* then sailed to Navarino Island in order to carry out another of the voyage's main objectives: to return three natives to their homeland after they were taken to England some years before by Fitz Roy, who intended to carry out a very peculiar human experiment. The Anglican Church Mission Society chose the young and inexperienced clergyman Richard Matthews as a missionary to ensure that the seed of civilization and Christianity planted by Fitz Roy in Tierra del

Fuego germinated and bore fruit. Charles Darwin's encounter with the natives of Tierra del Fuego generated a series of comments and prejudices that negatively affected these ethnicities, especially in their later contact with the white man. They did, however, help Darwin understand the process of education and civilization, which were learned concepts that differentiated these savage men.

Once the natives Jemmy Button, Jork Minster and Fuegia Basket were left in Wulaia Bay together with Reverend Matthews, the *Beagle* continued its cartographic work, exploring a portion of the Beagle Channel now known as the Avenue of the Glaciers. This is where Darwin came to be considered Patagonia's first glaciologist, since he managed to quite accurately describe the geological formations based on the preexisting glaciers. A few days later, they returned to Wulaia Bay to rescue Reverend Matthews, demonstrating the failure of this attempt at evangelization.

In accordance with its cartographic objectives, the *Beagle* set sail once again for Montevideo, but Darwin stayed to carry out scientific expeditions in the area, and then made a long trip by horseback through Argentine Patagonia. On this trip he made numerous observations, for example, about the gauchos he met and the rhea and its similarities to the African ostrich.

One year later, the *Beagle* returned to Tierra del Fuego, where the crew found Jemmy Button in his savage state. Button expressed his intention to continue to live the way he was raised, thus dashing Fitz Roy's plans for evangelization.

After a landfall in the Malvinas or Falkland Islands, the *Beagle* was repaired on the Santa Cruz River in southern Argentina, and then sailed through the Strait of Magellan. Here, Charles Darwin once more displayed his great analytical capacity for describing the geology of the area and the importance of undersea forests, among other things.

Now began the voyage along the Chilean coast of the Pacific Ocean, and it was there that Darwin lived unthinkable experiences for a scientist in those times; for instance, the eruption of the Osorno volcano, the Concepción earthquake, or the discovery of marine fossils at more than 4000 meters above sea level. These experiences caused Darwin to reflect deeply on the contrast between the precepts learned in the Bible and the physical evidence found in the field.

This important experience helped Charles Darwin develop his famous theory on the origin of man, which was not published until 23 years after his return to England. This theory sparked an important intellectual revolution among its champions and detractors that continues to this day. The theory states that all living beings have evolved over time from a common ancestor or a small group of common ancestors through the process of natural selection. Charles Darwin died in Dawne on April 19th, 1882, and his remains now lie in Westminster Abbey together with the remains of Isaac Newton. Darwin's great legacy in Patagonia is embodied in the southern mountain chain that bears his name (the Cordillera Darwin) and its highest peak (Mount Darwin, with an altitude of 2,488 meters or 8.163 feet).

The passage of the *Beagle* and the young naturalist Charles Darwin through Patagonia left an indelible path that we now follow today, visiting the pristine landscapes that he himself explored in the past.



Darwin's Voyage, 1831-1835



Beagle Schooner sailing Cape Horn

EXPEDITION TEAM



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