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HISTORY OF THE STRAIT OF MAGELLAN

At the end of the XV century, the Portuguese discovered and monopolized the Cape of Good Hope. They thus opened up the first sea route to Asia and Oceania, a source of riches for European trade.

The Portuguese Ferdinand Magellan could not convince the king of his

country to outfit out a fleet to look for a passage to the Orient via America. Finally, it was the Spanish King Charles V who accepted Magellan's proposal in 1518. This was the beginning of the most extraordinary of the European explorations to discover the world.

On September 20th, 1519, the "Moluccas Fleet" set sail from the port of Seville under Magellan's command. On board was a young Italian Antonio Pigafetta, who left us an account of this expedition that departed from Spain with five ships and 265 men and returned three years later at the breaking point with only one ship and 18 men, having completed the first circumnavigation of the globe.

After reaching Brazil and thoroughly exploring the La Plata River, the flotilla headed south and, on November 1st, 1520, finally entered a strait that Magellan christened as the "Strait of All Saints" and that was later renamed the "Strait of Magellan". The lands to the north of the Strait were named "Land of the Patagones" (Patagonia) and those to the south "Land of Smoke" (Tierra del Fuego).



1520, Strait of Magellan

by Antonio Pigafetta

Five weeks later, the three remaining ships came out into a vast and new ocean with calm waters, for which it was given the name "Pacific Ocean". Magellan later died in a battle with natives on the Moluccas, and it was his pilot, Sebastián del Cano, who led the remainder of the expedition back to Spain after uncountable hardships and difficulties. The western sea route was open for Spain.

Later, between the years 1557 and 1559, Juan Ladrilleros sailed from Valdivia (Chile) and made a notable contribution to the knowledge of the Strait of Magellan, but the enemies of the Spanish Crown, the English, also used the Strait. The privateer Francis Drake passed through it (1557-1578) to sow the seeds of desolation in the Spanish colonies of the west coast of South America and, on the way, was the first to mention the fact that Tierra del Fuego was an island and not a great continent that stretched to the South Pole. He also completed the second circumnavigation of the globe.

The Spanish, alarmed by the unpunished passage of the English through the Strait of Magellan, decided to establish two cities in the area. Sarmiento de Gamboa, at the helm of this military and colonizing expedition, set sail from Seville in September 1581 with 23 ships and 3,000 people. A year and a half later, after extensive damage, he finally arrived at the Strait with just five ships and 500 people. The city of Nombre de Jesús was founded near Dungeness Point (the east entrance of the Strait), while the city of Rey Felipe was founded some 60 km (37 miles) south of the current city of Punta Arenas.

This attempt at colonization turned into a true disaster: the two cities' colonists and soldiers died of 1 hunger. Such was the extent that in 1587 the English privateer Thomas Cavendish managed to rescue a Spaniard, one of the few survivors of the tragedy. The rest were abandoned to their fortunes, and Spain forever renounced the colonization of the Strait of Magellan. The site on which the city of Rey Felipe was built was then named "Port Famine", a name that has lasted to modern times as "Puerto de Hambre".



1607 Mercator-style map, by W. Janszoon

During the first few years of the XVII century, the Dutch passed through the Strait on various occasions, until

they discovered the Cape Horn route in 1616. From then on and for almost two centuries, sailing ships of all nationalities generally preferred the Cape Horn inter-oceanic route to the Strait of Magellan. Some famous scientific expeditions, such as that of Commodore Byron or Bougainville, passed through the Strait. Thanks to the English hydrographic exploration campaigns of Parker King and Fitz Roy (between the years 1826 and 1834), an extremely precise knowledge of the Strait's coasts and the Patagonian and Fuegian archipelagoes was acquired.

In 1843, the Chilean governor sent Commander John Williams on board the schooner *Ancud* to take possession of the Strait of Magellan and found the colony of

Fuerte Bulnes on Santa Ana Point close to the famous Puerto del Hambre. In 1848, the new governor of the incipient colony, José de los Santos Mardones, abandoned Fuerte Bulnes due to the lack of fresh water and the poor soils. The governor then founded the colony of Punta Arenas (December 18th, 1848) some 60 km (37 miles) further north, on the site known up to that time as Sandy Point.

In the beginning, the new colony of Punta Arenas was no more than a military post where inmates condemned to prison sentences were sent. Some colonists slowly began to settle there, until a mutiny of the military garrison brutally reduced the population from 436 to 86 inhabitants. However, with the dynamism of its inhabitants, the exploitation of coal deposits, the hunting of sea lions and the extraction of timber, the city was reborn and the slow but steady migration of people from Chiloe, Switzerland, Spain, France and other countries contributed to the development of a small and thriving city (150 inhabitants in 1853, 805 in 1870, 1,095 in 1878 and 7,000 in 1898).

From the end of the XIX century until the opening of the Panama Canal (1914), the Strait of Magellan regained its importance as the main sailing route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Punta Arenas was transformed into a cosmopolitan port and the site of all types of exchange, business and trade. With the opening of the Panama Canal, the Strait of Magellan became significantly less important as an international sailing route, and this situation has lasted to some extent until today.

Starting in 1877 with the introduction of sheep rearing on both shores of the Strait, an intense regional shipping industry developed and numerous livestock ranches or estates were established, generally along the coast.

The discovery of oil, first in Tierra del Fuego (1945) and then in the waters of the Strait of Magellan itself, gave rise to an important industry that rallied in the 1980s with the exploitation of gas deposits and their transformation into methanol. To some extent, these activities brought new life to navigation through the Strait of Magellan. Currently, close to 1,500 ships per year pass through the Strait and about 50 tourist cruise ships gather each summer in the city of Punta Arenas.



Punta Arenas, Chile, from the Strait of Magellan, 2010.

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