

Chile – A Test of Faith

My journalist girlfriend had accompanied me to film locations on three continents, in dozens of cities and backwaters during our two years together. Now it was my turn to tag along with her.

Nicola's professional skills were unquestionable. But my lovely mate wasn't the most organized person on the planet - preferring to trust that the universe will provide, over actual planning. We'd travelled together many times but usually with a movie's travel coordinator making the arrangements. Even then, the race to airports could look like a scene out of *Fast and Furious*. When she travelled alone, the question "where are you staying?" would often be answered with "I'll figure it out when I get there."

With nothing tying me to any particular place for a time, I trusted in Nicola and the universe to get us to Northern Patagonia, by plane, car and ferry, to a destination that was only a forest on the Chilean map.

Her assignment for *The Ecologist* magazine was to track down and bag an interview with one of the environmental world's most dedicated and effective crusaders, living in one of the world's more remote corners.

In the early 1960s, Douglas Tompkins and his then wife, Susie, were ski bums bringing in a buck here and there to support their outdoor sporting activities in Northern California and around the world. A high school dropout with a big brain and a low boredom threshold, Douglas became an avid rock climber and, at age twenty, started hiring himself out as a mountaineer guide. Waiting for somebody slower to catch up – whether on a mountain or in conversation – didn't suit his temperament. So, in 1964, he and Susie created their own business. It started on a shoestring but the outdoor-wear company they called The North Face was soon worth millions. He sold his shares to invest in a clothing company with Susie.

The new company was called Esprit and within a few years it was bringing in \$100 million annually. Somewhere along the road to that success, Doug and Susie divorced. He sold her his interest in the company, which left him a wealthy man. He said he was done with the clothing business because of its environmental impact.

His mountaineering had taken him to southern Chile where he'd fallen in love with the land, the sea and the mountains in sparsely populated northern Patagonia. He knew salmon farming was expanding along the coast. He knew timber interests were buying pristine acreage. He knew the glaciers were melting and the land needed a custodian. So he

moved there and began buying up everything around him. Working with the Chilean government, he created The Conservation Land Trust. Working with international environmental activists, he created The Foundation for Deep Ecology.

He was now custodian of the largest land preserve in the world, Pumalin Park, and over a million more acres of national parks and protected wildlife sanctuaries.

Bringing me along to Chile meant the trip was costing us more than Nicola would earn from her assignment. But we both valued adventure over money. And we both knew an adventure shared was an investment in a life together.

She also knew enough to override my objections that this was a stupid thing to do only two weeks before we flew off to Africa.

“I want to do this and I want you to come with me.”

Africa was my gig; this was hers. Opting out was not an option.

Santiago

We arrived in the Chilean capital after a thirteen-hour overnight flight, threw our bags in the room at the Crowne Plaza and went in search of a coffee injection – only to discover that Santiago’s idea of coffee was Nescafe. We skipped that, took a walk around downtown, had an early dinner and crashed around 8:00, sleeping for eleven hours. Nicola believed that after a long flight, the spirit has to catch up with the body. The theory, I suppose, is that spirits can’t fly as fast as a 747. My spirit was still waiting for landing clearance most of the next day.

The next day we took the funicular to the hilltop of Cero San Cristobol where Nicky wanted to visit the Church of the Immaculate Conception with its seventy-foot tall statue of the Virgin Mary. There, she insisted we light candles, cross ourselves in holy water and say prayers for a safe and successful journey. It might have been a good time to play my Get-Out-of-Church-Free Jew card but we both knew she was more Jewish than I was – and more Hindu and Muslim and Buddhist and Baptist and...

So, we sat in a pew and sent up our wishes.

The plan was to spend two nights in Santiago, then make the trip to Pumalin Park in a day, a distance of over a thousand kilometers. It would take us ten hours – unless we missed the once-a-day ferry.

Rather than describe this exercise of unquestioned fealty, it's easier just to list our itinerary – as it evolved:

- 1) Buy tapes for her recorder because she'd forgotten to bring any. It's Sunday and everything is closed. We wade through a crowd of 200,000 people rallying for presidential candidate Michelle Bachelet to find an open music store that sells cassette tapes.
- 2) Get to bed early so we can wake up early to catch a 7:00 flight to Puerto Montt. However, we'd met a nice young couple on the plane from L.A. who'd invited us to a screening of their friend's short movie. So, we go. They insist on taking us to the after-party where Nicola insists we stay until 1:00. We get to bed around 2:00.
- 3) Catch the flight to Puerto Montt. She's forgotten to secure our tickets with a credit card, so check-in takes longer than expected. Nicola is dying for a "real" cup of coffee, so we go to the airport Starbucks where we take ten minutes to finish our coffees and wind up at the boarding gate ten minutes after it has closed. A kindly attendant rushes us to a truck on the runway which takes us to the plane that's been delayed for ten minutes waiting for us to board. Passengers glare as we pass.
- 4) In mid-air, Nicola realizes she's left the folder with all her research and questions for her interview back at the Starbucks.
- 5) Arrive at Puerto Montt airport and pick up our rental car. The folder she'd left behind also contained directions to The Conservation Land Trust's Puerto Montt headquarters, along with the telephone number. She thinks she remembers the name of the street and we find our way there with a map picked up at a petrol station. Unfortunately, the city of about 50,000 is undergoing massive construction, so detours take us an extra half-hour.
- 6) Arrive at the Conservation Land Trust office to book two ferries that will get us to Pumalin Park. Unfortunately, Nicola has forgotten the office manager's instructions to bring cash for the ferries, so we go out to find an ATM. The only one we find is broken. With no time to lose, we have to trust the fates will provide one somewhere along the way.
- 7) Drive over a forty-five kilometer road that resembles the surface of the moon, trying to keep our car from breaking down and our insides from falling out. We rumble and race to the first ferry – which runs every hour. We've missed the earlier one and don't have an hour to spare waiting for the next. We cross the Reloncavi Estuary.

- 8) Drive like mad over fifty kilometers of road that makes the first one look like a superhighway to get to the once-a-day ferry by 3:00 or be prepared to sleep in our car overnight.
- 9) Somehow make it to the ferry at exactly 3:00, as the boatman is starting to move away from the dock. We're short seven thousand pesos (\$14) for the toll but he accepts American dollars. A twenty goes in his pocket.
- 10) Get off the ferry at Chaiten and drive another sixty kilometers over decent roads to get to Caleta Gonzalo, the lodge Tompkins has built at the entrance to Pumalin. We arrive after dark.

To me it's a minor miracle. To Nicola, it's a normal travel day.

Pumalin

Unless you're camping, the only place to stay in Pumalin is Caleta Gonzalo, an eco-resort with seven cabanas designed by Douglas Tompkins – who also supervised the restaurant menu, grew the locally raised meats and produce, and chose the beds and furniture. The cabins were small but large windows on three walls made ours feel more spacious. The beds were barely big enough for two.

We awoke the next morning in paradise. The cabanas overlooked Renihue Fjord that flowed into the Gulf of Ancud. It was bordered by a verdant mountain range splashed with patches of sunlight through a crown of dark clouds. Behind us were the snowcapped Andes. We drove into the park and took a two-hour hike to a waterfall. The trail was steep but sturdy and we found ourselves in the middle of a rainforest surrounded by giant Alerce trees, the “Redwoods of the Andes.”

Returning to the lodge around dusk, Nicola's folder was waiting for her. The office in Puerto Montt had contacted the airport and the folder had been couriered to Caleta Gonzalo the same day. Nicola's angels, as usual, were working overtime. We celebrated with a fabulous bottle of wine on the deck of our cabana, watching lightening streak across the fjord as the full moon shone over a volcano.

Rain fell in sheets the next morning, then tapered to a drizzle. A small boat was waiting for us at the dock and an old salt named Roberto ushered us aboard. Roberto was the

sole means of transportation from here to the far side of the inlet where Douglas and his wife Kristina lived.

The boat docked on a mussel bed where a flatbed truck hooked it up and hauled us in to a patch of sand fronting the Tompkins house. It was a wooden farm house, meticulously restored and painted pale gray, almost blending with the skies. We removed our shoes on the porch where Douglas and Kristina greeted us. He was tall and lean with receding white hair and intense brown eyes. She was maybe a decade younger, medium-length red tinted hair, wearing a plaid shirt and bluejeans. Her broad smile contrasted to his thin, slightly wary one.

They led us to a large country kitchen where we sat at a big oak table overlooking one of the pastures.

“You’re not vegan, are you?” Kris asked before serving us all plates of scrambled eggs with toast, butter and homemade strawberry jam. Douglas ate fast. Nicola savored a cup of brewed coffee.

We talked about international politics and the Chilean presidential race. Everyone expected the Socialist Party candidate, Bachelet, to win, Doug said, but her conservative opponent, Pinera, was a “neighbor” – the next inlet over - with whom they’d enjoyed “good relations.” Pinera, Kristine explained, was a conservative but also a conservationist. He’d helped the Tompkins win over government officials who were suspicious of the gringos buying up their country.

“There are still people who don’t like us,” Douglas flashed a crooked smile. “A lot of them don’t trust Americans. Can’t blame them.”

The American political scene appalled us all and there was little point in engaging in a chorus of Bush-bashing – though I did bring up the administration’s pulling out of the Kyoto Accords for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

“Kyoto wasn’t the answer,” Doug said. “It had no teeth and didn’t go far enough in its goals. I’m involved with something called Deep Ecology and we’re constantly coming up with better alternatives. Kyoto was actually counterproductive because it made it look like something was being done and we could all relax.”

“It was important in the respect of it being an international agreement,” Kristine offered. “But it’s not the answer.”

Kris refilled our coffee cups and Doug and Nicky took theirs into the living room to begin their interview. I stayed in the kitchen and talked with Kris.

She was the former CEO of Patagonia, the eco-friendly clothing giant known for its commitment to environmental protection and producing sustainable outdoor sports wear. She

and Doug had met at an ecology conference about fifteen years ago and the bond was instantaneous.

“We were both skiers – I used to be a mediocre racer but pretty good at slalom,” she said. “I’d spent some time in Venezuela growing up – my dad was in the oil business. Doug took me here on a ski trip. I’ve always liked South America and he had this vision.”

They divided their time now between this place and a similar one they had in Argentina where they’d also begun buying large tracts of land for preservation. She brought out a photo album and showed me pictures they’d taken of their various projects and the amazing landscapes they had preserved.

Two hours flew by when Doug and Nicky emerged from the living room.

“I told Nicola I’d show her the farm. Either of you want to come?”

I joined them on the tour. Kris chose to catch up on some reading. There was a misty rain but the temperature was mild. Doug showed us his sheep herds, vegetable and flower gardens. The views were spectacular in all directions. When we returned to the house, Kristine had prepared lunch for us.

We made arrangements to meet Doug the next day at the town he was designing in the southern end of the park.

On the boat back to the lodge, Roberto took a detour past a sea lion colony, hundreds of them lounging on the rocks. One could hardly see an island for the density of seal flesh.

The clouds cleared for our last day in Pumalin and we drove the length of the park through the most amazing span of forest either of us had ever seen. All of it might have been turned to timber if not for the Tompkins’ foresight and finances.

Doug met us at the entrance to the multi-colored, single story frame houses in the village of El Amarillo. He was there with two female college students whom he had hired to help with refurbishment. The town consisted of thirty-five homes and he had supervised every aspect of their construction.

This was once a thousand-acre farm that had been devastated by logging and cattle ranching. Doug had purchased it only three years ago and there was still much to be done. The soil had become too depleted for farming so Tompkins decided to create a village in which he subsidized housing in exchange for restoring the land to produce crops again.

His current focus was on beautification, not agriculture. One of the girls was studying architecture, the other landscape design. Tompkins gave them detailed instructions in Spanish as we spent the day walking the land.

He took photos of every pile of branches left over from clearcutting and every patch of mud his workers would have to clean up.

We said goodbye in mid-afternoon. Nicola had more than enough material for her story. She'd been taking photos of him and wanted to do a photo tour of the park while the light was still good.

Douglas looked disappointed to see us go. He had so much more to show and tell us about.

Nicola and I drove through rainforests, hiked to the glacier and took a path to a black sand beach created almost ten thousand years ago when the Chaiten volcano last exploded. She took pictures of a pod of dolphins playing close to the shore. We finished the day with a two-hour hike to the top of Cascades Altas Mirador. We sat on a rock, listening the splashing falls and the silence of creation.

No feature film could ever shoot here.

I would never have dreamed of coming here.

My world was expanded by Nicola in many ways.

This was a test of faith. It was confirmed.

In December of 2015, Douglas Tompkins was kayaking with friends in the frigid waters of General Carrera Lake. His kayak capsized. He was rescued by helicopter but he'd spent too much time in the water. He died of hypothermia. He was seventy-two. He was a great man.