



The Falkland Islands, November 2006

By Helene Cooper

Paul Theroux once said “As long as there is wilderness there is hope”. Well I think I have finally found a place that exudes such wilderness - AND hope that our planet can still harbour such places; somewhere yet to be spoilt by the wunderkind of encroaching ‘civilisation’; that has been likened to the Galapagos by some – but without the crowds; to Antarctica by others – but without mass landings from ships; and to the west coast of Scotland by a few – but with much more wildlife. There really is nowhere like it on earth: The Falkland Islands.

The term ‘Islands’ is definitely true - few people realise that the Falklands is actually a collection of islands with East and West Falklands making up the bulk of the land (the ‘mainland’) and numerous smaller islands in outlying waters. The best way to really discover the geography of the islands is to take the 8-seater ‘taxi’ planes from place to place. This shows you the huge expanses of wild ground, stunning turquoise coastline, numerous white sandy beaches, rugged quartzite peaks, sheepfields and odd remote settlement – and blissfully few roads!

The Falklands are perhaps not an obvious choice as a walking destination at first but with miles and miles of unfenced terrain without a pylon or suburban settlement in sight, such history that you felt you were treading in the footprints of numerous settlers who tried and perhaps failed to survive in this inhospitable environment, plus breathtaking seascapes and landscapes encompassing some of the world’s most intensive gluttony of wildlife it soon became apparent that this was a gift of a walking destination – yet to be discovered.

Basically people’s perception of the islands as being flat and boring are not true. On my first internal flight over the archipelago it felt more like the Lake District with rugged mountains, hardy tussocky moorland and stone runs - like our scree runs but with boulders of varying shapes and sizes. As a complete contrast the coastlines were stunningly beautiful. I thought I had woken up in the Caribbean such was the emerald colour of the water below, interspersed with powder white sandy beaches. Quite extraordinary.

I flew to three settlements in ‘camp’ – the name given to all those places outside Stanley. Firstly Pebble Island, one of the further outlying islands with a mountainous spine, wetlands and dramatic coastal cliffs. At 24 miles long a 4WD aided exploration as we travelled over the tussocky moorland, interspersed with startlingly bright yellow gorse bushes providing Daliesque splashes of colour at every view. Thousands of penguins breed on the island each summer and it is the only place in the Falklands where all six species of penguin known to visit the islands have been seen. Having been used to the restrictions (justifiably imposed) on human proximity to the birds in Antarctica, at first I felt awkward when the creatures insisted



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on hopping up close to me, to give me the once over. But I soon got used to the wonderful sensation of having complete beaches to myself, laying on the sand, snapping away, as their amusing antics entertained me for hours. I was in seventh heaven! Away from the penguin colonies there is a tiny and emotive cemetery containing the graves of three Argentine pilots shot down in their Learjet and not far from the main farmhouse settlement, a memorial stands for HMS Coventry, looking out to her final resting place just 10 miles off the coast.

At 4am I was up and about, unable to remain in bed in this incredible place. The early morning sun and unpolluted skies cast a photogenic light as I wandered peacefully along the four mile stretch of Elephant Beach, the longest sandy beach in the islands, stalking the red-legged oystercatchers, tempted to take a dip in the enticing South Atlantic waters. Maybe not.....

Port Howard provided me with a window in which to witness true life in camp – the endless sheep shearing (45,000 of them) by the immigrant Chilean workers, the coastal work undertaken by the Island's resident vessel, shopping at the one store for your £4 packet of cornflakes! Impossibly picturesque with the red barrel roofs, tidy green lawns, yellow gorse and blue harbour waters (filled with dolphins) I really enjoyed my stay here. With a lack of nearby wildlife sites, walking was the activity of choice and I had the entire mountain range to myself. And I do mean 'mountain' – at only 727m Mount Maria may not seem that high but the tough tussocky approach and ankle-turning boulder fields just below the summit made of an all day expedition. That night I was regaled with wonderful stories from the manager's wife about life pre, during and post the Argentina invasion including an hysterical tale of removing a cow and her recently born calf from the grass airstrip to allow a plane to land!

Last but not least, the world renowned Sea Lion Island. The most southerly inhabited island, at 5 miles long and 1 mile wide it is easy to cover in a day. Here you will experience your closest wildlife encounters, a constant photo snapping opportunity where you almost (but not quite) become satiated with the sheer overwhelming star appearances by penguins, whales, sea lions, elephant seals, albatross – the list is endless. It is extremely easy to lose one's bearings on such a flat island and even easier to lose oneself amongst the giant tussock grass which towers over humans and can lead you alarmingly to the edge of sheer cliffs without warning. Never get lost in one of these fields and find yourself trapped between an elephant seal and the sea! I spent a blissful day wandering at will, getting pleasantly lost, taking my own time, almost falling over penguin nests and burrows or sleeping seal-lion who uncannily merge seamlessly with their environment. Apart from at the breeding sites just outside the lodge I had every other spot to myself. Just me and 18,000 seals and tens of thousands of penguins!!!!

Finally to Port Stanley, where 95% of the population live. It is built along an estuary with a stunning skyline of mountains reflected in the harbour waters, filled with shipwrecks each



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telling a tale of the islands' maritime history. The original tin clad houses with their brightly coloured roofs (including one with a union jack!) sit alongside a rather incongruous Victorian stone terrace row and the newer 'Ikea-like' houses.

This for most people is the ideal introduction to the friendliness of the 'kelpers' or locals to the islands which is really quite extraordinary. Stanley is very safe and friendly in feel. It is a very close community with the obvious pros and cons that stem from this – you will hear the most wonderfully entertaining stories and also meet some interesting people passing through the islands, usually on business (gold and oil will both be excavated in the future). Even after a very short time I felt as if I knew everyone and everything that was going on.

The weather was superb – blue, sunny skies, no rain and warm enough for shorts and t-shirt. Food was superb wherever I stayed – due to necessity, standards of home-cooking are extremely high and there are some wonderful choices - Upland Goose Pate, Falklands oysters, seafood brochette of toothfish, salmon and king prawns, lamb steak, red snapper, tuna nicoise etc..... All local of course.

Gypsy Cove, 10 minutes from Stanley, was an absolutely perfect swansong to the islands. Beautiful sandy beaches and grassy dunes are home to gentoo penguin colonies who are too light to disturb the mines. Not a single civilian has ever been wounded by a mine since the end of the conflict by the way and the minefields that there are (around Stanley and Port Howard) are very well marked – you could not accidentally fall into one or cross over the fences as each post is marked twice with the mine designator sign. These fences provide a safe haven for the penguins, so close to the civilisation of Stanley, and they were completely undisturbed by my presence. Unfortunately this also use to be the site of many a beach barbecue for the locals pre-Conflict so old timers are a bit miffed on losing a prime party site to birds! Once again I had the whole place to myself and it was extremely peaceful to wander around the promontory, past the WWII gun emplacements looking out to Cape Pembroke's lighthouse and back to Stanley through the Narrows. The Stanley skyline emerged beautifully in the sunset with the outline of the Two Sisters, Mt Harriet, Mt Tumbledown and Mt Longdon, Wireless Ridge – all those names synonymous with the Conflict but quite stunning in their own right. Gypsy Cove provides a superb 360 panoramic view of all of the main landmarks of Stanley and with the deep blue of the sea and sky, yellow white sand and vivid yellow and green gorse bushes (the intensity of which has to be seen to be believed) it makes for an incredible finale to the Falkland experience.

Everyone has a yearning for some special part of the world. Having experienced both Patagonia and Antarctica I was keen to find that common ground that linked both. And thus the Falklands was a completion of sorts of my journey. Linking South America to the desolate continent that lay even further south. Bruce Chatwin apparently once pointed to a map of the Australian outback and yelled "Nothing there! Nothing there! Nothing there! I want to go there!" The Falkland Islands. The last blank space on the map they may not quite



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be but they certainly felt like it. We should all have the opportunity to experience this extraordinary place.



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