

The Road to Ushuaia

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Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in the world, is more than a place on the map, it is a symbolic destination that becomes a Life List goal for many people. Young backpackers flock here to punch their ticket, retirees use it as a jumping off point for their dream trip to Antarctica, sailboat circumnavigators stop in on their way to or from Cape Horn, European overlanders have turned it into a must-attend Christmas and New Year's gathering and motorcyclists hold a Pan American Highway run in very high regard. In short, world travelers' journeys are not complete without a "been there" Ushuaia pin, sticker, patch, or for some, tattoo.

To get here, people often do extraordinary things. Men, women and families scrimp, save and sacrifice for years to enable their grand journey down the Americas to Ushuaia.

And to get here, people come by extraordinary means. When the goal is to get to Ushuaia, whatever it takes is the rule of the day.

The first Europeans in the area were Magellan and his fleet, the first people known to circumnavigate the planet. He started the journey in 1519 with 265 men in five ships. He survived a mutiny along the Patagonian coast but lost his life in the Philippines in 1521. When the fleet finally sailed back into their home port in 1522 one ship and 18 men remained. (If you'd like to learn more about this amazing journey of exploration of the unknown read *Over the Edge of the World* by Laurence Bergreen, highly recommended.)

There is a full scale reproduction of the Victoria, the only ship to complete the journey, here in Patagonia at Puerto San Julián, Argentina.



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When you walk up to the ship it is hard to imagine setting off into completely unexplored and uncharted oceans, certain to be filled with giant serpents and other unimaginable horrors, in such a tiny craft, only 30 m / 98.5 ft in length with a 6 m / 19.7 ft beam (width).



Illustrations located in the Mar Incognito area now known as the South Pacific off the west coast of Patagonia from a contemporary map of the world.



Illustration in the chart Magellan used for his voyage. The illustration is located in the Mar Incognito area now known as the South Pacific off the west coast of Patagonia. Lopo Homem, 1519, Collection of Marcel Destombes, Paris, France.

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The deprivations and hardships they suffered were extraordinary and there is little in modern travel that can compare.

But, even in these times, the road to Ushuaia still reflects and echoes the sacrifice, determination and perseverance Magellan's crew used to reach their goal.

Most of the people on the road to Ushuaia are Europeans. The people in Europe typically enjoy six to eight weeks of vacation annually and tend to work to live rather than live to work as Americans do, so they are more oriented to exploring the world than exploring their cubicle.

For example, we met a German couple earlier this week and we were the first American overlanders they'd seen in two years in Central and South America. It would be impossible to put any hard numbers on it, but the ratio of European to American overlanders here is probably close to 500 to 1, if not more.

Most of the Europeans here are Germans, which is the same thing we've observed elsewhere in our travels. Everywhere we've ever been there are more Germans than any other national group.

After the Marshall Plan rebuilt Europe, West Germany enjoyed a very high standard of living by European standards. Since the U.S. provided a security cocoon, Europe in general and Germany in particular were free to spend the money which would have otherwise funded their defense on the generous welfare states of their modern eras. Among the societal benefits in Germany were one to two months of vacation time for every job, beginning at entry level.

The jump start of the Marshall Plan, the ongoing economic and military investments of the U.S., the insulating sanctuary from external threats and the resulting generous welfare state with its extraordinary vacation benefits combined to create two generations of Germans with, among other assumptions, pre-conceptions and expectations, a very strong tradition of world travel.

The standard issue German means to reach Ushuaia is a Mercedes 4x4 truck with a camper box of some kind. There are scores of these rigs running around South America, some absolutely massive, some petite, but most are similar to the following examples.



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These rigs are relatively expensive but are capable of going just about anywhere. If they are limited in any way it is by their weight, which can be over 9,000 kilos / 19,841 lbs, and is more than some of the small bridges can support.

There are also non Mercedes 4x4 and 6x6 chassis in use, although they are comparatively rare. Here's one example of a 6x6.



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Smaller variations of the truck and van chassis with camper arrangements abound. In this class you see both 4x4 and two wheel drive chassis with just about every conceivable type of camper.



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There are also conventional, factory made platforms in use, some from the U.S., others from Brazil, Argentina and elsewhere.



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Some of these rigs get very large, as big or bigger than anything you'd see on an American interstate.



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And some are downright quirky.



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And once you cross over into quirky, you get into the entire genre of home made, back yard conversions.



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And that leads us into the iconoclastic, unique, completely out-there quirky, ways to get to Ushuaia.



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Polish Tractor Expedition

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Overland Scooters

The Road to Ushuaia



The Walking Expedition

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And once you get down to only two wheels you get into the bikes, our former mode of travel.

There are countless people down here on BMW GSs and quite a few on medium displacement bikes not sold in the U.S.



Having been ensconced in the cab of our rig while watching them battle the fierce Patagonian winds, they all have my respect, whatever they ride.

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But of all the people making their way down the road to Ushuaia the people I respect the most, by far, are the bicyclists.



Not only do they battle the same winds as the motorcycles, they have to push their own way through those winds, dodge traffic, battle the buffeting trucks, ride over and through miles and miles of gravel, and up and over mountains all for the reward, if they are lucky, of a cold campground shower, a wind whipped tent and a cup of dehydrated noodles for dinner.

The road to Ushuaia is long. And it is challenging. When you reach the end the only trophy is the satisfaction of knowing you accomplished your goal. In my view, no one earns that satisfaction more than the bicyclists.

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Douglas and Stephanie Hackney are on a two to three year global overland expedition.
You can learn more about their travels at: <http://www.hackneys.com/travel/index.htm>