

¿How much do you know about Tierra del Fuego?

Nearly 500 years ago, a group of explorers from the Old World approached the coast of an unknown land for the first time.

Dispersed fires and columns of smoke from the natives seemed to float upon the waters, in the mist of dawn: this mystical setting probably gave the island its name, Land of Fire. What once was a remote and inhospitable place today attracts thousands of people from all over the world.

Adventure, emotion, history and legend: find out all that the island has to offer. See the Southern fires for yourself and light up your imagination...

In order to help you figure out your own view on our land we include some travelers' impressions, some of which date back to the XVIth century.

"December 17th, 1832. [...] We kept close to the Fuegian shore, but the outline of the rugged, inhospitable Statenland was visible amidst the clouds. In the afternoon we anchored in the Bay of Good Success. While entering we were saluted in a manner becoming the inhabitants of this savage land. [...] Finding it nearly hopeless to push my way through the wood, I followed the course of a mountain torrent. At first, from the waterfalls and number of dead trees, I could hardly crawl along; but the bed of the stream soon became a little more open, from the floods having swept the sides. I continued slowly to advance for an hour along the broken and rocky banks, and was amply repaid by the grandeur of the scene. The gloomy depth of the ravine well accorded with the universal signs of violence. On every side were lying irregular masses of rock and torn-up trees; other trees, though still erect, were decayed to the heart and ready to fall. The entangled mass of the thriving and the fallen reminded me of the forests within the tropics -- yet there was a difference: for in these still solitudes, Death, instead of Life, seemed the predominant spirit. I followed the watercourse till I came to a spot where a great slip had cleared a straight space down the mountain side. By this road I ascended to a considerable elevation, and obtained a good view of the surrounding woods. The trees all belong to one kind, the *Fagus betuloides*; for the number of the other species of *Fagus* and of the Winter's Bark, is quite inconsiderable. This beech keeps its leaves throughout the year; but its foliage is of a peculiar brownish-green colour, with a tinge





of yellow. As the whole landscape is thus coloured, it has a sombre, dull appearance; nor is it often enlivened by the rays of the sun.

"December 20th, 1832. [...] When we reached the hill we found it the highest in the immediate neighbourhood, and the waters flowed to the sea in opposite directions. We obtained a wide view over the surrounding country: to the north a swampy moorland extended, but to the south we had a scene of savage magnificence, well becoming Tierra del Fuego. There was a degree of mysterious grandeur in mountain behind mountain, with the deep intervening valleys, all covered by one thick, dusky mass of forest. The atmosphere, likewise, in this climate, where gale succeeds gale, with rain, hail, and

sleet, seems blacker than anywhere else. In the Strait of Magellan looking due southward from Port Famine, the distant channels between the mountains appeared from their gloominess to lead beyond the confines of this world." **Charles Darwin**

An overview on the natural environment

Here is some information about the main natural features of our land, based on the most frequently asked questions by visitors. If you want more detailed information click here to get further recommended reading (link Extensive reading list)

Is Tierra del Fuego an island?

Tierra del Fuego was formerly the name given to the lands south of the Straits of Magellan, independently from how far south those lands could reach. Nowadays the name is applied to the archipelago formed by a main island and hundreds of lesser isles around south to Cape Horn and east to Staten Island. The name is used in Argentina and Chile, since the islands are a shared territory.



The main island of Tierra del Fuego is the largest one in Southamerica. It is situated south of the Straits of Magellan and has a total area of about 45,000 km². The Argentine east side and the Chilean west side are divided by the imaginary line defined by the meridian 68° 36'. When arriving at the Beagle channel, the boundary turns east and continues all along the channel which defines as Chilean territory all the islands to the south, including Hoste, Navarino, Picton, Lennox, Nueva, Cape Horn and many other islands.

What is the landscape like?

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We recommend to visit in this website our section How can we get to Tierra del Fuego or click here for some introductory notes to this virtual journey. We will help you build up your own image which may be completed with a visit to our photo gallery.

The northern area of the island are “pampas” (flat land) which are part of the Magellanic steppe. The infinite plains are dominated by the grassland (*Festuca spp.*) interrupted by small patches of shrubs (*Chililotricum diffusum* and *Lepidophyllum cupressiforme*). It is here where sheep and cattle find the best conditions to graze, mainly along the streams where they find “vegas” (mesic grassland) with high quality pastures. This imprints on the landscape a typically rural atmosphere. It is also possible to find in this area some representatives of our wildlife such as guanaco, foxes and many bird species. The road passes by the seashore which is an excellent opportunity to do some birdwatching if it is the right time. Migratory shorebirds from the Arctic come here to spend their non-breeding season in this Ramsar site (link a Costa Atlántica Natural Reserve)

The National route N° 3 is a very good “spine” to visit all this area, supplemented by the Secondary Roads N° 5, 8 and 9 (north stretch).

Enjoy the exclusivity of the rural architecture, very well represented in the “cascos” of some of the local estancias

As you drive south the topography starts to get hilly and some patches of forest start to appear, mixed with some fresh water ponds, lakes and streams. This area, in the middle of the island is called the “parque fueguino” (Fuegian park) because it combines both the grassland from the northern plains and the forest of the southern mountains. The most common species of tree here is the low deciduous beech tree or ñire (*Nothofagus antarctica*) among small valleys taken up by peat bogs.



You will be crossing the “heart” of the island, where the Corazón de la Isla Natural Reserve (link) is placed. Here also starts the mixture of different activities: sheep and cattle breeding with timber activities and sawmills. All along National Route N° 3 as well as Secondary Roads N° 9 (south stretch), 16, 18 and 21 you will also see a succession of smaller but beautiful “cascos” of estancias and a few sawmills. This is an area where guanaco and foxes may also be seen but beaver dams become more conspicuous, through their effect in the landscape. The great natural barrier between the north and the south of Tierra del Fuego is the magnificent Lake Fagnano, the largest body of fresh water in a wide valley eroded by glaciers.

The road goes uphill the Andes covered with the forest that rules the vegetation in this area. The most abundant trees are high deciduous beech trees or lenga (*N. pumilio*) with some patches of evergreen beech trees or guindo (*N. betuloides*) and very few ñires, described above. They alternate with some forest clearings with bushes such as the

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calafate (*Berberis buxifolia*) and the already mentioned mata negra. All along the wider and deeper valleys lay the large *Sphagnum* peat lands and some of the hanging valleys still hold the remaining glaciers of the last glaciation, which covered most of these mountains and valleys some thousand years ago. Some mountains rise to 1,500 m a.s.l., and the treeline is easily identified at about 650 m a.s.l. The National Route N° 3 crosses the Andes through the Garibaldi pass (about 450 m a.s.l.) and continues south, turns west and crosses the Tierra Mayor Natural Reserve, the city of Ushuaia, joining the coast of the Beagle Channel and finishes within the Tierra del Fuego National Park (Lapataia Bay). This type of landscape is also crossed by Secondary Road N° 33 which extends eastwards all along the Beagle channel leading to Puerto Almanza and Estancias Harberton and Moat, at over 100 km west of Ushuaia (link [What can we do in Ushuaia?](#))

What is the most representative wildlife?

All over the province, which includes Antarctica and South Atlantic Islands, there is a large variety of bird species. Some of the most representative ones are: penguins, albatrosses, petrels, sea gulls, terns, shags, oystercatchers, shorebirds, ducks, pintails, grebes, geese, ibis, vultures, condors, eagles, falcons and a large number of lesser birds, each one in its habitat, making up a list of about 200 species.



Among the indigenous land mammals the main

ones are the guanaco, the red or Fuegian fox, some rodents such as tucotuco and several species of forest rats and mice. The introduced mammals that became wild are the European rabbit, the Canadian beaver, the muskrat, the mink and the armadillo. Besides, the red deer was introduced in Isla de los Estados and the reindeer in the South Georgia at the early XXth century.

With regards the sea mammals, all over the Argentinean sea around Tierra del Fuego and the Antarctic sea the most common ones are the sea lions, several species of seals,

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dolphins (including the orca or killer whale), porpoises and different species of whales. Besides this, all along the coast of the Beagle Channel and Isla de los Estados offer the habitat for the Southern sea otter and the large river otter, both endangered species in our National Red List and vulnerable species for the IUCN.

How high are the mountains?

We are used to saying that the high mountain is at hand, meaning “at foot”. Very little effort is necessary to know an ecosystem that elsewhere is usually reserved only to sportsmen who can deal with high altitudes.

The Andes cross our country all over. In some provinces talking about “high mountain” implies driving for a few hours or trekking on a high-difficulty trail in order to be above 2,000 metres a.s.l., cross the treeline and meet some species of birds or the flora, or recent traces by glaciers or even the glacial ice itself. Such ecosystem is known under the name of “Andean desert” and is not so complicated to reach in the mountains of Tierra del Fuego.



The mountains around Ushuaia offer the possibility to know this ecosystem almost to every visitor who wants to, no need to go far away from Ushuaia city. For example, after driving or walking uphill from the city center for 7 km, and with the help of a chairlift, it is really easy to approach the Martial glacier (link a Centro de deportes invernales Glaciar Martial), at a little bit over 800 metres a.s.l.! However, this condition does not mean that you can forget about safety matters. You should take into account everything concerning any mountain walk or trek in nature, in order to avoid spoiling your excursion. Visit our suggestions on this subject at Walker Safety System (link, ver en What can we do in Ushuaia /Trekking)

Are there any glaciers left?

During past times our territory has probably been covered by the ice in all its extension, a natural phenomenon called glaciation. We invite you to imagine this process: low temperature leading to snowfall, never-melting snow accumulating on the top of the mountains, getting compacted till it turns into ice, later into glacial ice because of a strong compression leading to a density change. Then the huge accumulation of glacial ice starts to expand and flows down the slopes to the valleys, simply because of gravity. These giant moving bodies of ice are called glaciers. They behave as rivers do, and during low temperature periods, they ruled the high latitude zones of the earth. Experts know this process took place several times, but not how many, although the time when it last happened is precisely determined. The Fuegian Andes looked like present-day Antarctica between 125,000 and 18,000 years ago. Today we see the landforms left by this process, where the remaining small glaciers talk about their ancient grandeur. Some

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of the examples are the glaciers Martial (link a Centro de deportes invernales Glaciar Martial), Vinciguerra and Alvear (link a What can we do in Ushuaia / Trekking)

Once the ice mass retreated, the bare rocks strongly eroded, were surrounded by glacial deposits and small patches of vegetation which could survive while they lived together with the ice. Very slowly, the river banks along the valleys were covered by mosses, followed by more resistant vegetation, which consolidated some 10,000 years ago, until the forest got in. Coming from a still non determined refuge in the region, the Subantarctic forest started to grow and became the structure of most land ecosystems in the southern area.

What is the forest like?

Something to point out about the forest of Tierra del Fuego is the fact of being the closest one to Antarctica, hence the name of “Subantarctic”.



One of the most amazing features of the beech trees is their capacity to grow under very severe conditions, such as a thin layer of soil that sometimes does not surpass just 10 cm thick; steep slopes; wind exposure (sometimes winds over 100 km/h); an annual mean temperature of 5°C and rainfall varying from 300 to 5,000 mm (in southwest Chile). It is truly “extreme” conditions and it is here where this beech tree forest can grow. They are the support of thousands of living things forming this peculiar ecosystem. Out of the three species that mainly form the forest, two are deciduous: lenga (*Nothofagus pumilio*) and ñire (*N. antarctica*) and one is evergreen: the guindo (*N. betuloides*). Besides these three, there are other tree species which are much less abundant: canelo or Winter’s bark (*Drymis winteri*), notro or firebush (*Embothrium coccineum*) and maitén or pickwood (*Maytenus magellanica*).

The species mostly used in the timber industry is the lenga. For more detailed information see Ministerio de la Producción (link)

What are the peat bogs?

You may be hearing this word for the first time, which you could associate with “peat”. And you are right, since peat bogs are those spots where nature forms peat.

They are vegetal communities that take up the valley bottoms along the Andes range. Tierra del Fuego is the only district in our country where peat bogs lay on large areas. From a tourist viewpoint we are particularly interested in preserving them as important components of the landscape because of its texture, chromatic richness, etc., which contribute to the aesthetics of the natural scenery. They offer a beautiful contrast with

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the surrounding lands. From a strictly ecological perspective, they offer lots of benefits to nature, such as the possibility of knowing a specific biodiversity or the fact of being carbon sinks. Peat bogs (also called mires) are acid and humid media, sometimes compared to swamps, but with much less nitrogen. This is the only place where it is still possible to see some of the insectivorous plants of the region, living things which would not live elsewhere, growing on the fascinating surface of peat bogs.

On the other hand, there is some economic activity developed from peat mining whose product is mainly used in the agricultural industry in the more temperate regions of Argentina. For more detailed information see Ministerio de la Producción (link)

Man in Tierra del Fuego

Martin Gusinde, a Salesian priest who lived with the natives and devoted much of his life to the edition of his masterpiece “Los indios de Tierra del Fuego” said:

“The indian, free and skillful, has learned how to suit marvelously to his environment. The scarce goods from nature were submitted to optimize their use, he has developed his spiritual gifts and has known how to create an interior richness.”

“For hours and hours I used to sit down with them in a circle, like a student who is eager for knowledge, like a guest who returns constantly to his hut. I did my best to retrace completely from my European way of thinking, from modern value judgments and from personal feelings in order to be understanding and sensitive to grasp an extremely particular conceptual world. Didn’t Dr. Fausto say: ‘If you do not feel it, you will never get it’”

Who were the inhabitants of this land before Magellan’s expedition?

The first chronicles by Spanish, French and English seamen describing the natives of Tierra del Fuego were not very generous: “Savages”, “inhuman”, “inferior creatures” were some of the words used to describe these peoples.

Thanks to archaeological research it is known today that the first occupation of the area of the Beagle channel took place some 7,000 years ago and the descendants of this group of natives remained in the area until the early XXth century, all along the Fuegian channels.

The area where Ushuaia is located today was inhabited by a group of canoers who were very well adapted to sea-shore life. They were part of a larger group known as the Magellanic canoe people. When Europeans arrived, the canoe people living in the area of the Beagle Channel and south called themselves the Yamana or Yahgan. At present, a few descendants of this group, mostly half-caste, live in the Chilean town of Puerto Williams.

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But still remain today the places where the Yamanas spent part of their life. Totally adapted to sea-shore life, they fed on sea lion meat and fat, fish, birds and their eggs, mussels and crustaceans, as well as guanaco meat. When they decided to stop paddling the canoe they usually set up in some spots along the beaches, which we could compare today to a campsite. Once ashore, they put up a set of branches to make the structure of the hut (or tried to find one available) where they spent the night in family groups. Most of their leftovers, being shells in a large amount, were thrown away around the hut which formed heaps. Since the huts were made of tree branches, they all disappeared and the heaps all around compacted and were covered with grass. It is exactly in these spots that today anthropologists and archaeologists carry out their studies. The abundance of shells (“concha” in Spanish) gave them the name of “concheros”, or



indian middens. National and provincial regulations protect these sites which became part of our cultural heritage.(link a cuadro Areas Protegidas)

The northern area of the island, where the forest is not thick and it is mostly grassland, was occupied by another group of natives, considered pedestrian hunter-gatherers. In contrast with the Yamana, these people did not need to adapt to a new life-style since they could find on land all they needed. The ancestors of this group arrived from the north some 10,500 years ago, bringing their tradition of hunting land animals, mainly guanaco and small rodents with the help of their precise bow and arrow. When the first explorers arrived to this land they called themselves Selk'nam, but later they started to

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be called Ona. Their nomadic lifestyle made that all testimonies of this culture are dispersed in a very large area, which makes it quite difficult to researchers where to work. They base their decisions on ethnographic references, some works done in the area where the ground is removed or even on some oral information. Their arms and tools, their legends and beliefs are tightly related to those of the Tehuelche, the inhabitants of the northern side of the Straits of Magellan, from whom they probably descended.

The last representatives of the two groups described were Virginia Choquintel, Selk'nam, who died in Río Grande in the last years of the XXth century and Cristina Calderón who lives in Puerto Williams (Chile) surrounded by her family.

There were other two groups living in Tierra del Fuego: Haush and Manekenk or Alakaluf. The Haush were the first group who disappeared, leaving very few testimonies and the Alakaluf lived on what is currently Chile.

Besides the publications by the specialists, you can meet these peoples' culture through the tools and garments they made and used, displayed at any of the showcases of three museums in the city of Ushuaia: Yamana Museum, End of the world Museum and Maritime Museum, as well as the two ones in the city of Río Grande: Virginia Choquintel city Museum and José Fagnano Museum. All the museums also count on very good photographs taken at the end of the XIXth and the early XXth centuries.

More information about TIERRA DEL FUEGO

<http://www.tierradelfuego.org.ar/v4/eng/index.php>

FIN DEL MUNDO
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