



ISLA GRANDE TIERRA DEL FUEGO

by Marcus Demuth

I had just climbed from my kayak aboard the Jop which was anchored in Puerto Aguirre, an eight-mile wide uninhabited bay in Tierra Del Fuego at the southeast tip of South America. The Jop, a 40-foot sailboat, had sailed into Puerto Aguirre the night before. Peter, her builder and Captain, had invited us onboard for dinner.

I was overcome by envy. How could these sailors have such a good time, sailing around the world with no visible signs of exhaustion and seemingly no hardships (such as having to drag their boat a quarter mile every morning and every night)? What is a trip without carrying one's camping kit and food bags from campsite to low water line? Finally, how could they keep their sailboat so clean and dry? I was certain I had chosen the wrong mode of transportation for all my past travels, and quickly imagined myself onboard a sailboat on my next trip.

As they showed me their comfortable seats from which they could look out, shielded from the weather, they acknowledged that kayakers travel more 'in' the water than sailors who travel on it. After drinks and dinner in the comfort of the forward cabin and dining room of the Jop, I imagined how wonderful it would be to sail along the shores of Tierra Del Fuego for a couple of days. (Well, maybe three days.) Any longer, and I was certain I would tire of this too-comfortable way of travel with little effort and exercise aside from the task of changing sails. I loved Peter's Jop and yes I was a little envious, but the feeling lasted less than an hour.

I lost nearly all my enthusiasm for a sailing venture on the Jop when I realised that the ship had no steering wheel. The entire navigation and steering process is automated. A computer and GPS system steer the boat around reefs, harbour walls and over oceans. In case the computer fails, there is an independent back-up computer. If this back-up system fails, there is a third back-up just in case. All the high-tech accoutrements of sailing turned my thoughts to the next morning when I would slide happily into my cold, still-wet drysuit and paddle for 12 hours to set up my tent on the spongy ground of Tierra Del Fuego.

It was Day 19 of our attempt to circumnavigate Isla Grande Tierra del Fuego, South America's largest island. Approximately the size of Ireland, it has never been circumnavigated before. We estimated the expedition would last somewhere between six and eight weeks. We were on, if not ahead of, schedule having paddled about half the distance of 1,100 miles in a little less than three weeks. Little did we know that just two paddling days after leaving Puerto Aguirre, our expedition would come to a grinding halt.

MISSING KAYAKS

This was my first expedition with a partner. On past solo expeditions around the Falkland Islands, Ireland and on a small island in Iceland, my biggest wish during inclement weather was to have a paddling partner I could play cards with while sitting out a gale in the shelter of the tent. Before we were able to start the trip and paddle into the first gale, my paddling partner Biff ►

"WE DO NOT TAKE A TRIP, A TRIP TAKES US."

JOHN STEINBECK

Opposite: Caption required...

and I were forced to play cards for two full weeks in Tierra Del Fuego while waiting for our kayaks to arrive.

We had arranged to have our kayaks shipped from New York City to Ushuaia, Argentina, where we intended to start our expedition. The shipping company had confirmed that our kayaks would be at the airport in Ushuaia on the day of our arrival, but they were not. After a tiresome two weeks of back and forth with the shipping company's agents, we learned that they were in fact unable to deliver our kayaks to Ushuaia but that they could be shipped to Punta Arenas, Chile instead. Apart from losing two weeks on a quickly closing weather window in order to complete our trip successfully, the new launch location of Punta Arenas posed no major problem since we would have passed it during our trip anyway. Ushuaia, our former launch site, would now become our midway point.

CORDILLERA DARWIN

With Punta Arenas as our launch site, it meant we would experience the main attraction of Tierra Del Fuego first: The Cordillera Darwin. The Cordillera Darwin is a 150-mile wide mountain range featuring steep peaks almost entirely covered by ice. The result is a landscape which looks as if the Himalayas were sunk up to its base camp altitude, with only its tips protruding from the light green waters of the Pacific and the canals of this most southern part of Patagonia. At many points, huge glaciers expand from the mountains through the deep cut valleys of the Cordillera Darwin and end with a dramatic finish; steep walls of deep blue ice calve into the ocean.

Our friend Kiko from Punta Arenas suggested we paddle early in the morning from about 05:00–11:00 and then again in the evenings, since the winds would be strongest during the day. Like paddling in the Falklands, it is somewhere between hard and impossible to paddle during the day in this very windy region. Our first two paddling days were almost windless and therefore perfect to become accustomed to the heavy loaded boats, the new environment and to make the necessary mental shift to begin a two-month voyage.

After these first two days of paddling we left Punta Arenas. The road which runs along the shore soon ran out and no

more of the occasional houses were seen. Before reaching Ushuaia, we would travel 400 miles through wilderness with no sign of civilisation.

We paddled alone along the snow-covered peaks through the 2–3-mile wide canals seeing neither person nor ship for the next ten days. It was close to midnight on New Year's Eve and a full moon was rising fast on the horizon. The little wind we had encountered over the past ten hours of paddling died down to nothing. We decided to take advantage of these perfect conditions and paddle into the New Year, committing to the ten mile crossing to Darwin Island. Our minds were completely occupied by our full moon paddle over glassy waters, the phosphorescence our paddles left in the water and a group of four dolphins which swam beside our kayaks through the illuminated night.

Those conditions failed to carry us to our destination. We were in the middle of our crossing when thick, black clouds began to cover the full moon. What had been a bright and luminous night was now almost pitch black. The winds picked up to a steady 30 mph beam wind, so that even smaller waves presented themselves as unpleasant surprises in what was then almost complete darkness. We could barely make out the outline of the mountains of Isla Darwin, our night's destination. To our frustration, the shore we were seeking to land on seemed to consist of a solid line of cliffs. After an hour of hand-railing along the cliffs, they began to recede and a small natural harbour with a gravel beach graciously offered us a place to land, set up camp and sleep.

GOOD PROGRESS

In the following days we launched before sunrise to beat the strong winds during the day; however, they did not often materialise. As a result, we often continued paddling through the day as much as 12–14 hours each day. We reached Ushuaia, our midway and refuelling point after only thirteen days, about twice as fast as we thought it would take. This meant we still had more than half of the food we had purchased in Punta Arenas. While we were glad to have made such fast progress enabling us to allow more time for the second leg of the trip, we were sorry to have passed through one of the most beautiful parts of the planet in such an

absurd rush. Nonetheless, our minds were set on accomplishing our goal. Since we were completing the first circumnavigation of Tierra Del Fuego, we felt we had to paddle as long and far as we could on days when the winds were down. At some point we would have to return to our lives back in New York City and we were still aware of the fact that we had lost two precious weeks of paddling time before setting out.

On our thirteen-day leg from Punta Arenas to Ushuaia, we paddled through the canals of South Patagonia along hundreds of islands and many glaciers, some of them calving multi-storey, house-sized chunks of light blue ice into the ocean with a thunderous sound. It rained almost constantly as the clouds hit their first land mass after travelling for thousands of miles over the open water.

Although the landscape was breathtaking and the many waterfalls eliminated our worry about sources of drinking water, the environment was otherwise harsh. In Canal Brecknock and Canal Cockburn, it was almost impossible to find a campsite either level or on dry ground. Our search for campsites after several hours of paddling often extended the day by another hour or two. Each attempt to camp found us climbing repeatedly in and out of the kayak to continue looking for a spot where we could plant ourselves for a night. We quickly learned to compromise meaning that we would sink, along with our tents, only 3–5 inches into the wet and spongy terrain instead of disappearing to our knees.

As we moved further east towards Ushuaia, away from the Pacific Ocean and towards the Beagle Channel and further inland, the terrain quickly improved. The rain lessened and we saw birds and sea lions again. The sun even came out for hours at a time. The clouds lifted and we realised that, for the past seven to eight days, we had been paddling and living in a mostly dark, soggy and lonely environment. Not only had we not seen any people, boats or other sign of civilisation in the past week but, with the exception of a single lonely sea lion colony, we had not seen any wildlife: not a single bird nor land-based animal. Just as we were becoming aware of the change in scenery and mood, a modern, vinyl-sided, suburban-looking residential building appeared right on the water's edge behind

a sharp bend. It stood majestically in front of a 200 foot waterfall.

LONELY OUTPOST

It was the Punta Timbales Station of the Chilean Armada, one of several outposts dropped by the Chilean Navy at one of the loneliest and most forgotten places it is possible to find on a map. Although the purpose of these stations at the edge of the world was beyond us, each housed a young Chilean Armada officer and his family for one year. (I couldn't help but think of the family stranded at the Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*.)

Although it was Armada policy that the family could receive neither friends nor family as visitors during their entire year of service, we had been instructed by the Armada to check in at this station to report back that its occupants were alive and well. The young family was allowed to take us in for one night.

We were eager to hear about their life in this remote outpost. The couple cooked for us, showed us their station and explained that they were not allowed to leave the house together since the VHF radio had to be tended around the clock. (Maybe we should have given them one of our handheld VHF radios as a gift, enabling them to go on a walk together without neglecting their duties.) They said we were the first and probably the last visitors they would have during their year-long stay at Punta Timbales. The only duty of the station's personnel is to hail any ships that may pass the station via VHF radio. Based on our few sightings in the past week, we figured that this was hardly a full-time occupation. When we asked how many ships would pass each day, the answer was: "Some days, one ship. On most days, none."

MIDWAY POINT

We set off once again. After approximately 40 miles or one-and-a-half days of paddling, we landed in Ushuaia, Argentina, the midway point of our trip. After crossing the Chilean–Argentinean border a few miles west of Ushuaia, our plan was to restock food supplies and replace lost or broken kit items. In addition to shopping, we had to check in with the Argentinean Prefectura Naval for customs and immigration purposes as Tierra Del Fuego is roughly divided by Chile and Argentina. ►



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While the Chilean side is almost uninhabited due to the elevation and icecaps of the Cordillera Darwin, the Argentinean side has approximately 100,000 inhabitants who live mostly in the two cities (Ushuaia and Rio Grande). Interestingly, today's Argentinean jurisdiction over Tierra Del Fuego includes not only the eastern part of Tierra Del Fuego but also the British-governed Falkland Islands and South Georgia.

The Falklands War in 1982 did little to diminish the claims of Argentina's government to the Falkland Islands and South Georgia. If anything, they were reinforced. When we walked through Ushuaia and Rio Grande we saw countless war statues, memorials, flags and all types of public memorabilia intended to remind the passer-by that the Falkland Islands are still not lost and should someday be Argentinean. However, it seemed that the Argentinean State's passionate concern for this territory is not equally held by the Argentinean people. Indeed, every person with whom I spoke (especially kayakers) started to laugh when asked to which country the Falkland Islands did or should belong. The answer was usually "Great Britain" or "Who cares?"

Tierra Del Fuego had been the Achilles heel of Argentina before. The so-called 'Beagle Conflict' was resolved only months before Argentina invaded the Falkland Islands in 1982. The conflict had begun when the former military junta of Argentina

laid claim to three Chilean islands east of Cape Horn, threatening occupation. Due to Papal intervention, a peace contract and resolution was reached in the eleventh hour and war was avoided. The fallout of this conflict was that Chile gave support to Great Britain in the war which followed. These recent conflicts might explain the large presence of Armada and Coast Guard personnel in a region which boasts neither significant population nor maritime traffic.

BIG BROTHER

Both the Chilean Armada and the Argentinean Prefectura Naval began micro-managing our expedition from the moment they learned of it. Multiple times, before and during our trip, we had to present ourselves, our gear, health certificates and insurances to Julieta, our assigned Coast Guard officer. Just when we thought we had jumped through all hoops and were ready to leave Ushuaia at 07:00, she appeared at my tent at midnight to let me know that strong winds were expected in the morning and we were not allowed to leave Ushuaia.

After this unexpected visit, I was surprised to meet three more Coast Guard officers just seven hours later at my tent. Their assigned task was to make sure we did not leave before the winds settled down (which they did at noon), to make a final gear check (signal mirror, helmet, flares etc.) and to take photos of us. The photos were to be printed out and distributed to fishermen, people living along our

route and to coast guard stations. Thus, wherever we went, people would know who we were.

When we arrived at a small fishing village after one day of paddling, a lonely fisherman in one of the six small fishing boats greeted me by asking "Donde es la otro kayakista?" (Where is the woman kayaker?) Biff was just around the bend, 200 yards behind. Whenever and wherever we met people, they knew of us. We also had to agree to call Julieta, our assigned CG Officer, twice a day from our satellite phone to let her know our position and that we were alive and well. We became close friends with Julieta, a young, energetic and loving Coast Guard officer with a great sense of humour and passion for both kayakers and kayaks. We felt looked after and hence safe. This would turn out to be an illusion, however.

THE REAL CHALLENGE BEGINS

We were on our way again. Leaving Ushuaia towards the east, the incoming swell and winds of the Southern Atlantic emerged in the Beagle Channel approaching Cabo San Diego, the most south-easterly point of South America. After two days of paddling since leaving Ushuaia, we left the protection of the Beagle Channel and found ourselves in a different environment. We now paddled in high swell; the coast to our left was dominated by cliffs which made landings either difficult or impossible for many hours of paddling.



We knew the days of relatively easy paddling were over. It seemed that there were few, if any, protected places to land. The coastline consisted of either cliffs or bays open to the south, the direction from which the swell was coming and creating huge, dumping surf. From that point onwards, every paddling day had to be well-planned and required a reasonable weather window based on an accurate weather forecast. Unfortunately, an accurate weather forecast was impossible to obtain. When we asked Julieta during our twice daily phone calls about the maritime weather forecast for the next three days, we were told that the following day would be 'windy' and that there was no weather forecast beyond that.

WEATHERBOUND

We had a two-day break from the challenges of the upcoming coastline. Our worries about landing possibilities, winds and swell were muted, and even quelled, by the truly magical place in which we now found ourselves. We were weatherbound at Estancia Español, a farm in the large bay of Puerto Aguirre (where we met the Jop). Although the farm had been abandoned in the 1970s, it felt like the owners had just left. All the buildings needed were some paint and the odd nail or screw. Otherwise, the farm appeared to be in great shape thanks to the solid workmanship of its former owners. The ponds around the farm teamed with beavers and wild horses slept and fed on grass in front of the house. It was a Garden of Eden, inaccessible to

anyone except by sea or horseback. Only the distance to the nearest neighbours and what must have been a long, difficult winter could possibly explain why the owners would have made the painful decision to leave.

While being weatherbound at Estancia Español, we plotted through the charts and tried to prepare our trip along a coast we, and everyone we asked, knew very little about. The east coast of Tierra Del Fuego had never been paddled before and little was known about this stretch of coast in general. Due to the absence of any natural harbours and a large tidal range of 39 feet combined with an extremely flat seabed, the east coast of Tierra Del Fuego was a no-man's land for mariners of every sort. Even the experienced captains of the sturdy Antarctica-bound sailing yachts we talked to in Ushuaia were not able to help us. They did not have any experience along the east coast since they pass by it 200 miles or more offshore. We were about to paddle a coast no mariner had ever travelled before.

WEATHERBOUND AGAIN

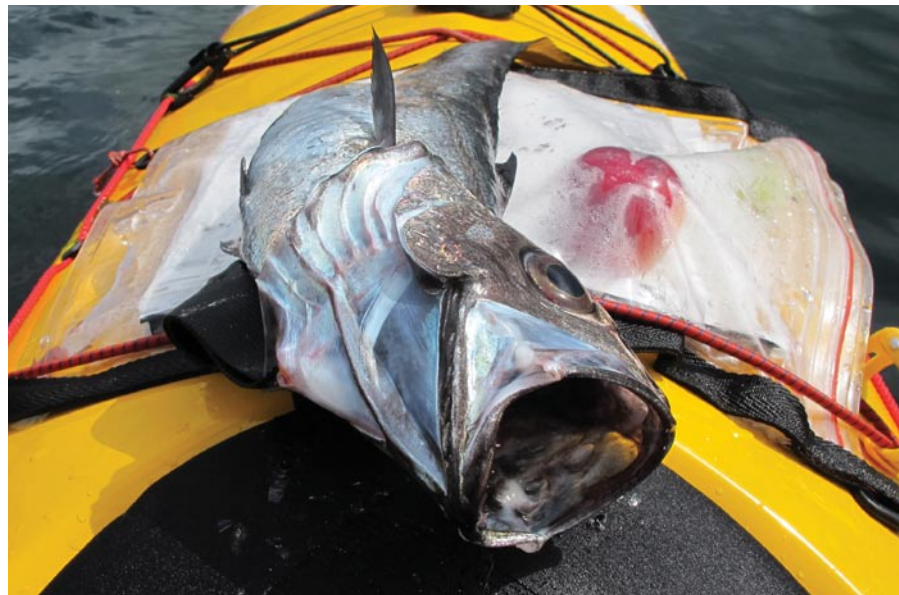
Two paddling days after leaving Estancia Español, we found ourselves again sitting out strong winds. For three days and nights we sat out 50-60 mph winds on a land spit just one mile southeast of Caleta Falsa having just rounded Cabo San Diego, the most south-eastern point of Tierra Del Fuego. When the winds died down to a manageable 15 mph, we quickly packed our tents and made it onto the water. Only

30 minutes into the brief lull, however, the winds picked up and were again at gale force. We turned left and paddled towards the abandoned farm building at the far end of Caleta Falsa.

A group of five friendly ATV (all-terrain vehicle) drivers had spent the night at the cabin and were just about to leave. They not only surrendered the cabin to us but also gave us information about the inaccessibility of the terrain, information which would eventually become quite valuable. It was a two-day drive to the closest dirt road, a hundred miles away for these nimble four-wheel drive vehicles. They went over extremely spongy terrain and there were many rivers to cross in order to reach the end of the dirt road, where their four-wheel drive cars would await them.

For the next twenty-four hours we no longer felt that we were at the end of the world. Minutes after the friendly gang of five left on their ATVs for Rio Grande, a group of four horseback riders arrived at the cabin to claim the other half of the building for the night. Just like the ATV riders, they left after one night for their four-day long trek to a ranch (estancia) 100 miles to the North. The horseback riders were completely unaffected by the storm force winds and were out of sight only fifteen minutes after they left the cabin. It seemed ▶

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that everyone, or at least everyone we had met in the past twenty-four hours, was moving, travelling and having a good time.

KAYAK LIMITATIONS

As in Puerto Aguirre when I climbed onboard Peter's sailboat, I experienced a nagging feeling: I wondered if I had chosen the wrong mode of transport to experience this part of the Earth. It was never as apparent to me as it was then but, as a kayaker, you depend much too much on the winds. Fifteen to thirty miles of (head) winds on land still allow you to hike, to ride a horse or to ride a bike. However, a manageable wind on land translates easily into 30–45 mph winds on the unobstructed sea (based on Paul Caffyn's calculations in his excellent article *Offshore Winds* about the increase on wind speed on land compared to on ocean; see <http://www.nswseakayaker.asn.au/magazine/26/wind.htm>).

Strong winds which make travelling on land unattractive can make travel on water by kayak all but impossible. Caffyn maintains that "once a wind rises over 30 knots, paddling progress into the wind grinds to a halt". Under these conditions, a sailboat would tack its way towards its destination, a hiker would only comment on the breeze and a horseback rider would adjust his hat. We, however, were preparing for a fourth day without paddling and for the prospect of many more days of playing cards and waiting for the winds to drop. After congratulating myself for years for the wise choice of my kayak as a craft to explore places inaccessible to the non-paddling population of the world, I became painfully aware that it has its limitations. We were weatherbound 80 miles north of Cape Horn, 100 miles away from the closest dirt road and civilisation, with a slowly but steadily dwindling food supply.

CONSERVING SUPPLIES

We had anticipated long stretches of non-paddling days during our trip in this windy and cold part of the world, and packed extra food for each leg of the trip in order to make up for the days in which we would not make mileage. In addition, we each brought several emergency meal packages consisting of freeze-dried food. We would normally loathe this type of food but it might come in handy in the case of a longer-than-expected stay in an area where

we would be unable to replenish food. We'd come to such an area.

Having spent three days on the land spit just outside of Caleta Falsa, we were now sheltered from its winds at the abandoned farm building of Estancia Policarpo. Abandoned in the 1930s, the farm consisted of five buildings (three of which the wind had blown to pieces). Our idea was to stay for one night in one of the remaining buildings which had a wood burning oven and some bunk beds and to launch the following morning with the intention of making a serious dent in the mileage account towards Punta Arenas. We had reason to believe we would be on the water again soon. We had received a favourable weather forecast by satellite phone and the winds seemed to have settled down considerably during the night. We agreed that our stormbound days would be over and that, by sunrise the following morning, we would again be on our way paddling for 10–14 hours a day towards Punta Arenas.

A BRAVE ATTEMPT

At 05:00, after dragging our kayaks and gear in three separate trips a quarter mile to the low water line through mud, we were on our way. We paddled a zig-zag course through the reefs protecting the bay. Leaving Caleta Falsa behind us, we proceeded in a northwest direction along the coast. After only ten minutes of paddling, a slight headwind of 5–10 mph developed. Very slowly, the winds became stronger. Mother Nature was slowly turning on a fan with a dial of ten or so increments. The winds increased slowly but steadily.

After ten minutes of witnessing another 'four seasons in one day' demonstration, our hope was that this phenomenon could also work the other way around. However, an hour later we were still paddling in 30–40 mph headwinds and in breaking seas which became gradually steeper. Since the coastline on our left consisted of cliffs and did not offer us a visible landing option, we made the painful decision to turn back to Caleta Falsa, the only viable place to land. There we were again, for the fifth night.

Although in the following days the winds were still up and we measured wind speeds of up to 60 mph in our bay, we maintained our hopes of continuing the trip and continued to stick to our usual routine. We

got up shortly before sunrise to assess the bay and beyond, hoping for a lull which would enable us to launch and leave Caleta Falsa behind for good. If the seas and winds were still up, we would set the alarm for an hour or two later between 05:00 and 06:00. We would then set the alarm for 08:00 after which we would wake up, fire up the stove, make coffee and continue to look out the window and wait for the winds and seas to die down. This became our new daily routine, interrupted by the search for firewood, the occasional card game and a walk along the beach.

UNEXPECTED VISITOR

On our ninth day of gale-force winds, we had an unexpected visitor at Caleta Falsa. A helicopter, which we would later learn was the only helicopter in all of Patagonia, flew over the bay and landed at the Estancia. The helicopter was in this region to fly two Irish fly-fishing tourists and their wilderness guide to a remote river for a day of fly fishing. The pilot and the fishing guide, both familiar with the terrain, spotted our kayaks and decided to land since they had never seen kayaks on this stretch of coast before and assumed we were in trouble. We thanked the pilot and the guide for their concern and offer to help, but politely declined and assured them that we were slightly worried but not in danger. We were still hopeful that we would be able to paddle again soon. Before saying goodbye, however, we asked for the number of the pilot's satellite phone. We figured it was better to have it and not use it than the other way around.

All the time we kept our promise to call the Coast Guard daily; to tell Julieta we were safe. When we spoke to her a day after the helicopter visit, she offered us the option of a Coast Guard boat to pick us up as even stronger winds were forecast for the next few days. After exploring our options and counting our remaining food supplies, we agreed and accepted her offer.

WAITING FOR THE BOAT

The boat would pick us up the following afternoon at 14:00. Although we were not yet in immediate danger of running out of food, we wanted to avoid a situation which we would be unable to cope with due to dwindling resources. Our food ran low, as did the battery on our satellite phone. We feared that every phone call would be our last.

I thought about Jon Krakauer's protagonist in his book *Into The Wild*, Chris McKandless, who survived for 112 days in the Alaskan wilderness. Chris McKandless was unable to walk out of his self-chosen hiatus from the civilised world since he was unable to go back to the highway where he had been dropped off 3 months earlier. The river he had crossed previously without any difficulty had risen so high that he was unable to cross it. Chris McKandless died weeks later due to starvation. He was only 30 miles away from the closest highway.

We packed everything and dressed ourselves in our drysuits at 08:00 in case the boat showed up early. We assumed we had to paddle out past the reefs to the boat to be picked up. After 08:00, we took half-hour turns looking out the window into the stormy bay, waiting and watching for the Argentinean Coast Guard boat. We had the VHF radio turned on in case we were hailed by radio. We were a tad early but we wanted to be ready, just in case. The boat was not there at 14:00 which we found logical since the storm would make the passage difficult. But there was also no boat after 14:00. We waited all day, but gave up hope that the boat would reach us when it became evening.

The next morning we called Julieta who was surprised to hear the boat did not pick us up the previous day. She asked us to call back in an hour so she could find out about the whereabouts of the ship which was supposed to come from the Coast Guard station in Rio Grande. In this hour of not knowing, we feared the worst: had the ship sank in the storm? After an hour, we received the message that the ship had never left Rio Grande, since the conditions were too windy. However, we learned later from various people living in or around Rio Grande, including members of the kayak club, that the Coast Guard station in Rio Grande does not own a ship, boat or any form of vessel. The Coast Guard station in Rio Grande did not only lack a ship, but also a harbour or pier which could accommodate any sort of vessel. We never found out why this non-existent ship was promised to us with an ETA of 14:00. I am certain this misunderstanding was not a language or communication problem, since Julieta spoke fluent English. Maybe the reason was a communication problem between Julieta, who was stationed in ►



Ushuaia, and the Coast Guard station in Rio Grande?

When we spoke again with Julieta, she confessed that the Coast Guard had no resources whatsoever to help us (the Argentinean Coast Guard does not have helicopters). When we asked her if this meant that we were totally on our own, she answered, “Yes, you are on your own. We cannot reach you by land, air or sea.”

REALITY STRIKES

Our immediate response to this was four-fold. First, we immediately hung up the satellite phone since we were wasting precious battery power which was already very low.

Second, we realised that the 400mHz EPIRBs we were wearing on our PFDs were useless. If we had initiated the EPIRB in an on- or off-the-water-emergency, the US Coast Guard would call the nearest Coast Guard station to our location to help us, namely the CG station in Rio Grande: the Coast Guard station with no boats or any other resources, which had just told us we were on our own.

Third, we became a bit upset that we had had to call the CG twice a day, using precious satellite phone battery life, only to learn that they would be unable to assist us

in any way. The statement that the Coast Guard would search for us if we did not make ourselves heard for 48 hours was completely false.

Our fourth reaction was to realise that the only way out of our now potentially harmful situation was to paddle out. So we tried it one more time. We made our last break-out attempt the very same day, since the winds seemed to have died down a little. The winds had only shifted, however. Because we were protected by a hill we did not realise that the storm was still blowing outside the bay. During our last break-out attempt, we encountered the strongest winds and the highest and steepest seas. We estimated the waves to be 7–8 m with the tops breaking off. It was very challenging to make a 180 degree turn in this elevated sea state, but we both made it back safely and upright into the bay.

FINAL ESCAPE

As we reached the shore close to the farm building, we both knew that was our last attempt to make it out of Caleta Falsa. This was the last paddling chapter of our expedition. It was less a decision to end the expedition than a realisation that we had run out of options and food. We felt that we had worked our way through every available option and that the only solution to our soon-to-become dire situation was

now unavoidable. We called the helicopter pilot we’d met two days earlier with the little remaining battery power on our satellite phone. We were picked up a day later and taken to the nearest town. The one-hour flight passed over the terrain we would have been forced to walk if the helicopter had not seen us three days earlier.

During the helicopter ride we crossed countless rivers, some small but many quite wide, fuelled by many days of rain. When I mentioned that we had been planning to walk the distance if they had been unable to pick us up, the guide and the helicopter pilot slowly shook their heads. “No es posible.” ■

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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More photos can be viewed at www.marcusdemuth.com/photos.aspx