

Deep South

-a journal of travelling





Deep South - an introduction

Are those banjos I hear? Nah, this South is so much deeper than that. The Earth has seven continents, and one is vastly different from the rest. There were no polar bears, no igloos and no Father Christmases where I headed, though. Quite the opposite. The best way to get there was via South America, and while I was the neighbourhood I thought I might as well pick up where I left, roughly four years prior, and continue the trek through planos, pampas and pantanals. As icing on this southern exposure cake, I got to spend New Year's in one of the world's most commonly recognised party cosmopolis, Rio. And that's the story of how I completed my continent checklist.



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The bluewhite legendary historicity of football

Montevideo, Uruguay
Friday, November 7, 2014

To summarize: Montevideo is spacious and relaxed, has a surprisingly solid selection of beer and was the host of the very first World Cup final, in an 84 year old stadium that still stands.

Fast-paced. Bustling. Crowded. All idioms many metropolises and/or capitols would easily put on their calling cards. All descriptions that would feel very out of place in Montevideo. In fact, if 'crowded' found itself in the Uruguayan capitol, even in the pub district of La Ciudad Vieja after midnight on a payday Friday, it would nervously excuse itself and haul a taxi to get on the next speedboat across Rio de la Plata. Even if 'bustling' and 'fast-paced' assured it that they could do this,

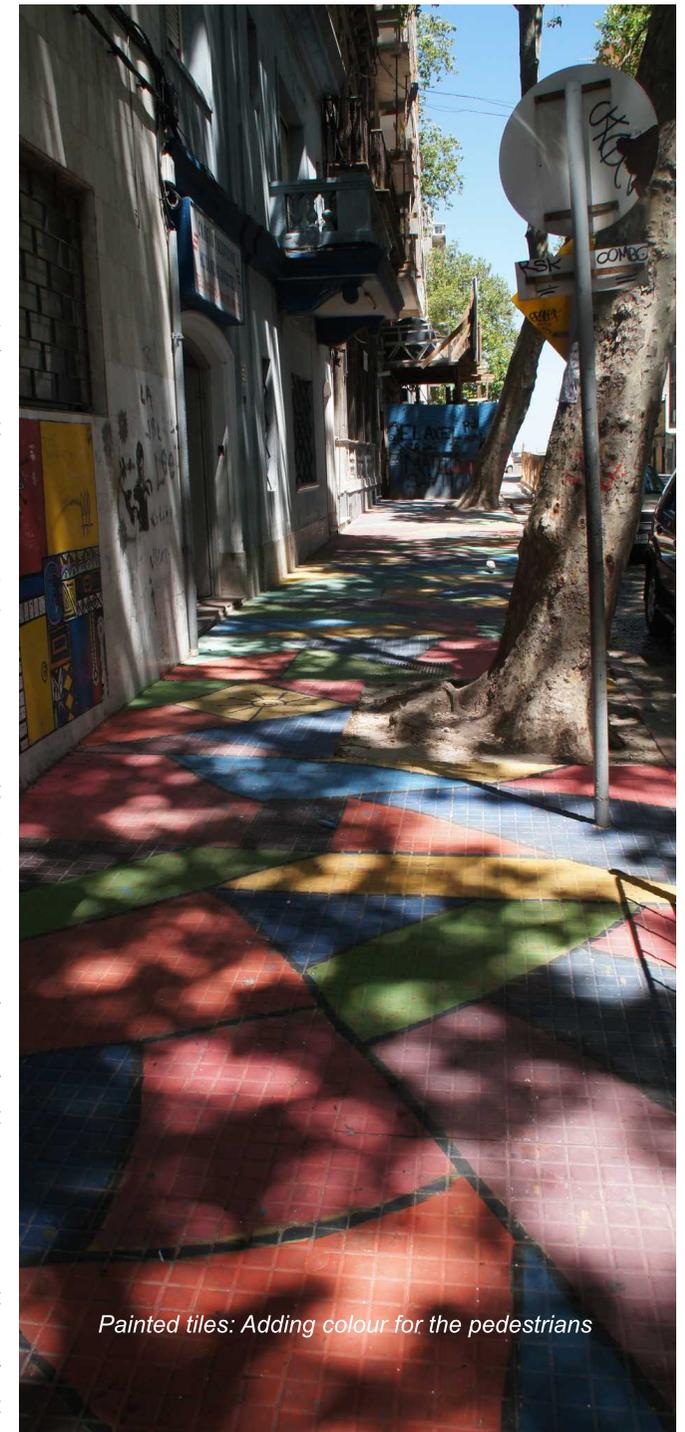


Chivito: the most traditional Uruguayan dish: a steak between two slices of bread, garnished with lettuce and tomato. Sometimes they add

bacon, fried egg and ham for that extra cholesterol-y breakfastness, and call it Canadiense

together. Solemn. Relaxed. Spacious. Now those are some words that Montevideo can stand by and give the thumbs-up. Even in the restaurant district, on a Friday night, eating my chivito and sipping my Patricia, the vibe was laid-back and cool. Solemn, relaxed and most of all spacious. But I didn't magically materialize at Plaza Matriz. Lets start from the beginning, shall we? What beginning, then? The one where the singularity and our whole universe was in a hot dense state? No, because just like Ken Hamm, I wasn't there. The one on Dec 21:st 1974 when I unweepingly crawled into this world? Maybe not, but pay attention to that date, it might be important later.

The one with me applying for time off in order to go travelling to far-off places? Could do that, but no-one wants to read about my overtime and workhours spent between that point in time and this. Nah, let's start with what all journeys start with: A step. A step out of my office baby, a step into the lift, a step into my friend's waiting car. And a step through the security at the airport, and I was on my merry. Due to the random nature of flight times, most airlines and airports put a minimum layover time between flights. In Guarhulos/TAM:s case that minimum time is 1:30. My booked flight was scheduled to land 1:25 before my connecting flight, which obviously ruled out the morning flight, so they changed me to the afternoon one. Seven hours later. As a bit of an extra neener-neener my flight landed on Guarhulos more than an hour early, meaning I would have had a pleasant 2:30 layover had they let me keep my first-booked flight, but



Painted tiles: Adding colour for the pedestrians

ended up with a nine hour instead. And Guarhulos is not the most wondrous airport in the world. Never did I leave the airport, and yet twice I went through the demeaning process of security. Nevertheless, at long last I landed in Uruguay, the country with the, by far, most impressive football record per capita. And so I found myself on Plaza Matriz in the Old Town, eating the Uruguayan staple steak-and-veggies-sandwich known as chivito, and sampling one of the local beers, Patricia. As Uruguay is one of those countries that aren't USA, Canada, UK, Ireland, Belgium and Sweden, I had not even entertained the embryo of a thought of any other type than lager; something that I was soon to be proven mistaken about. And pleasantly so. The sky was indescribably blue, and the sun was probably all yellow-like. Had there

been some streaks of white clouds, the heavens would have made a spitting image of the Uruguayan flag. The one with the yellow sun and the blue-and-white stripes* that is. Apparently there's another one competing for attention: The blue, red and white of Russian design. An explosion of Russian settlers, displaying their patriotism, perchance? Yet another invasion of wealthy Russian tourists? Not exactly, but it did turn out that the great eastern bear had at least some symbolic connection to this alternate banner being hoisted from cars and windows and painted all over town on walls and fieldstones. Upon closer examination, the stylized letters FA were printed on some of them, and after apt altavisting I found that it was the party flag for Frente Amplio (Broad Front), a left-wing coalition party boasting a roughly 52% majority.

With nice 25 degree weather and a fully charged GPS watch on my wrist, I strapped on my walking sandals and embarked on a promenade that would take me 30 kilometres around town. Those sandals had not been worn for over a year, my feet were not used to them, and by nightfall I had blisters and ache. No reason to complain, though; better get my feet used to them anyways, get some hardening built up, right?

In 1930 the very first Football World Cup was held in Uruguay. The host nation proved the most effective, and won the final played on Stadio Centenario in Montevideo. The vividly painted stadium still stands, still holds the biggest games (both club and international) and remains one of the most historic sites when it comes to football. That would make it an excellent site for a football



Plaza de Independencia



Stadio Centenario: Where the 1930 World Cup final was played. Uruguay won.

kids at the pool, tied my shoes and went for a run along the beach promenade. I was on a lookout for a certain village without a street, as I had heard it would be situated not far from Rio de la Plata, almost at the edge of the blue Atlantic. But I couldn't find it. I guess it could be on the Argentinian side, as it supposedly has Pampas behind it, many hundred green miles. I'll have another look in a couple of weeks. Though nice and safe and not overly exciting, the downtown and central areas of Montevideo are not as cosy as La Ciudad Vieja, nor as vibrant come nightfall.

My hotel was situated on the pub street, and if I ever was in doubt that I was in a town, I would not need to look further than next door. Lo and, indeed, behold: There was an Irish pub! An interesting lack of Guinness, Magners and Kilkenny was made up for by the local brews of Pilsen, Mastra and Davok; all of which boasted a lager and an oscura (stout-y but not as full-bodied). Mastra had a pale ale and an amber ale, and Davok even an IPA. The surprisingly splendid selection of cervezas aside, I'm a bit conflicted as to how important Montevideo is as a travel destination. Relaxed and stress-free for sure, but I know that many people take the ferry from Buenos Aires for a day trip to Montevideo. Perhaps that is a better choice, I guess I'll know in a couple of weeks, when I have tried the reputed bustyness of BA.

*) Heja Blåvitt!

Fun factoid: It is well known, to those who know it well, that the risk of getting bitten by a shark is way smaller than getting bitten by Uruguayan football star Luis Suárez. That is not the case in Montevideo, however: Rio de la Plata possibly hosts at least one shark, but Suárez is nowhere to be found in Montevideo. Him playing in Barcelona, and all.

museum. Therefore, in Stadio Centenario, there is a football museum. I drew the short straw however, for it was closed due to maintenance.

Free guided walking tours can be found in all major cities in Europe, and apparently so in Montevideo as well. Unfortunately I couldn't find an English-speaking one, but thanks to the wonders of modern electronics, an audio-guided tour found its way as an app on my phone, and so I perused the not-at-all narrow streets of La Ciudad Vieja. There are tourist buses as well. Mock all you want, but the system of hop-on/hop-off combined with the brief audio summaries provided through borrowed headphones is a great way of exploring large areas of a town,

including the hard-to-reach outskirts. Try to get up early, though, in order to make the most of the fee. Mine took me to botanical gardens, shopping centres and most importantly along the Rambla, the road and pedestrian/cyclist/rollerblade/snakeboard lanes along Rio de la Plata and its beaches. Along the shoreline, the locals gather holding their gourds with Yerba de Mate, clutching their thermoses. Some go fishing, and everywhere families join for football, barbecue and socializing. After having sat on a bus most of the day, occasionally walking through parks and shopping districts, I found myself needing to move. As such, I dropped some things off at the hotel, including, I suppose, the

The balance-bending crossing of undulating Drake

Ushuaia, Patagonia, Argentina
Tuesday, November 11, 2014

To summarrrrrize: The vessel M/V Plancius sailed from Ushuaia and across the wavy waters of the Drake Passage, eventually reaching Antarctica.

Note: Due to the nautical nature of this part of the journey, I shall attempt to write this chapter in Piratese. That's not my first tongue, nor my second or third, but I'll do my best.

"Arrrrgh! 'Tis be the land-dinghy, awaiting to take you to the harrbour of airrrborrne vessels" said the fellow at the other end of the pipe, "Be thee prepared?"

"Aye", I bellowed, and so sauntered yonder.

The tides were wrong for my flying ship, and so I embarked another vessel, sailing earlier than presumed.

At eight bells I reached the port of embarrrrkment, Ushuaia, the southernmost city there is. At the galley, the king crab was served, and fine eating it was.



Permission to board

After inventory I set foot towards the supplies store, and many a wooly item was bought, preparing me for the cold winds and rough seas that lay ahead.

Down to the harrbour I struggled and embarked on the M/V Plancius, the finest sea-faring vessel there be. Flying the Dutch flag, her ice-strengthened hull were to carry me and a hundred mates south and south and south some more.

At six bells she set sail, leaving Ushuaia to saunter through the Beagle Channel before traversing the unforgiving Drake passage.

Storms were a-brewing, twenty knots the wind was blowing, and the sea was a harrrrrsh mistress. Leaving Cape Horn behind, the faces of landlubbers and seafarers alike bore a greenish tint. Many a chore was on the roster, as the seasoned explorers lessoned the freshlings on all sorts of matters, be they wildlife, weather or wilderness explorations.

"Thaarrrrr she blows" bellowed the bearded, Scottish expedition leader Kelvin. And lo and behold, there in the rocky waves swam a pod of orcas. Killer whales, they arrrrre known as, or Pandas of the sea. Majestically swimming in pace with the vessel, the pod of cetaceans was a sight to behold, but my camera was not as kind. Norrrrrr therrrrr.

Steady as she went, the Dutch dinghy steamed on rising and lowering with the unkind waves, until after days and nights the icebergs were seen on the horizon. Antarctica was reached, and the passage was crossed.



King crab, downed with local imperial stout



Beagle on the Beagle

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that the Drake Passage is also known as the Drake Shake. The Drake Shake additionally being the traditional dance of the locals, as well as a drink (basically an eggnog from penguin eggs, on the rocks).



The first sight of Antarctica

To summarize: We stepped onto continental Antarctica and saw lots of penguins.

As we sailed into the Antarctic archipelago, the waves decreased significantly. It was a stunning day; a few degrees below zero, hardly any wind and undescrivable blue skies.

Even though just sailing in the untouched wilderness is breathtaking enough, with many an opportunity for blue-white landscape photos, the main purpose of this long journey was to set foot on actual Antarctic soil. And so, we loaded the zodiaks and whipped away towards the nearest island, Cuverville Island.

As we came closer, the cacaphony of birds could be heard, and a faint scent of guano could be sensed; the island was home to a large colony of Gentoo penguins, the by far most numerous species of penguins in the area. My camera's memory card filled up quickly. Not only are penguins quite photogenique, what with them being not in the least shy and moving rather slowly on land and all, but to shoot properly in wintery conditions, one has to pimp the camera settings a bit.

Shooting RAW is essential to find the right whitebalance in post, and the tricky exposure needs to be bracketed, meaning that the camera takes three rapid shots; one normal, one under- and one over-exposed. Those are some tricks I picked up while attending a photography workshop on board.

I also attended some biology seminars on the way down, and can therefore give some details on Gentoo penguins. They are the third largest penguin species (after Emperor and King), they have red/orange bills and a white headband from eye to

The wibbly-wobbly swagger of Antarctic wildlife

eye. At this time of year, their main source of food is krill, which explains the reddish tint to their guano, and also the clearly defined border between the unspoilt ice and snow and the red of the rookery.

Much rarer in the peninsula area are the Adélie penguins, but the occasional specimen does show

up. They're slightly smaller than the Gentoos, and are entirely black-and-white, with black bills. One such had found its way to Cuverville and settled with the Gentoos. And finally, on Cuerva Cove, a colony of Chinstraps were spotted, and with that all three species to be expected on the peninsula.



Whale bones



*The ridge is where all the cool penguins hang, apparently.
Inserted, clockwise: Antarctic shag;
Chinstrap penguin; Adelle; Gentoos holding hands; Weddell's seal*

Not all antarctic avians are flightless, though. On the way across the Drake we saw several petrels, terns and albatrosses. Spending hours, days, and in the case of the wandering albatross, months without landing, these birds can be found even in the middle of the ocean, far far away from land.

Speaking of birds, we were on constant look-out for tits and boobies, but alas, they didn't show. The Antarctic shag did though. True story.

Apart from seabirds, penguins and the odd whale, the most commonly seen animals of the region are seals. The area is host to three species: Weddell seal (from the Weddell sea east of the peninsula), the Crabeater (which is a misnomer, as they eat krill and not crab) and the intimidating Leopard seal. I was unfortunately not blessed with spotting the leopard, but I did get to see a crabeater and a few Weddells.

Amazing divers they are, the weddells; down to five hundred metres they hunt their prey, and can be subaquatic for an hour at the time.

The most significant thing that can be said about wildlife in Antarctica is how close they get. As human impact is minimal, the animals have hardly any fear of humans, and especially the penguins can wobble straight up to you if you're still and calm. Antarctic wilderness is pristine, and tourism is heavily regulated. No organic material, such as food, drink and tobacco will be brought ashore, and if one hears and abides the call of nature, what is produced must get back to the ship. And any boots, tripods, rucksacks and velcro strips had to be thoroughly vacuumed, and the boots had to be brushed and sterilized before and after every shorelanding.

And so, a huge box had been ticked off: Visiting all seven continents of the world. Although, visiting Antarctica is a rough, hard and expensive deal, the uniqueness and undescrivable beauty of the land is well worth it, and the giant checkbox is just icing on the cake; let me tell you, in no uncertain terms, that no still pictures, no BBC documentaries narrated by Sir David Attenborough and no Happy Feet 2 can make justice to what it's like. The colours, the smells, the wind, the sun, they all combine their powers into making a visit to the last continent an incomparable experience!

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that all penguins are excellent divers. If one were to spot the entirely black-and-white species doing somersaults while hunting for krill, that would be Adélie, rolling in the deep.



Polar plunge: Penguin version

The thrill-seeking coolness of polar pursuits

Antarctic Peninsula, Antarctica
Wednesday, November 19, 2014

To summarize: In Antarctica, we did a bunch of cool activities, including snowshoeing, photo workshops, camping, mountaineering and kayaking.

The M/V Plancius is a basecamp, from which everyday activities set off. Once each morning and once each afternoon the zodiacs get ready to take people on various adventures.

Myself, I had signed up for all included activities, missing out only on the diving (which would have cost extra, and I would have had to lug my equipment half across the world, and I would have

had to buy equipment, and I would have had to take a course in dry suit diving).

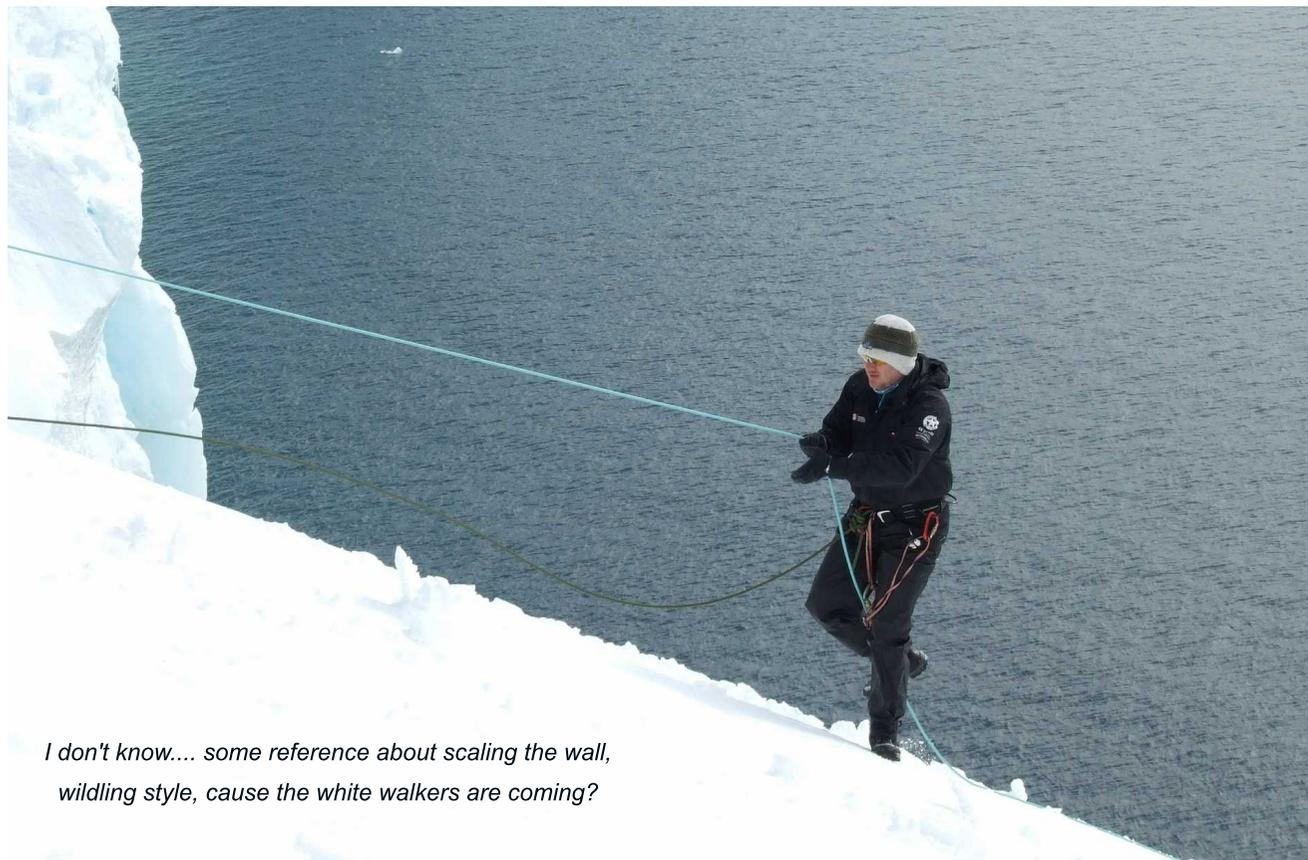
But yes, zodiacs brought us ashore on Danco Island, and through the guidance of professional photographer Dan, penguins and icebergs were caught on film. Or, you know, SD-cards. I like to think that composition, exposure and whitebalance was flawless.

Next up on the activities menu was snowshoeing. Basically, if you can walk, you can snowshoe. And reaching the better viewpoints is just so much easier when you can be all legolassing on top of the everchanging snow than sliding about in your gumboots.

Sitting on top of a snowridge, with astonishing views of glaciers, mountains and the clear-blue ocean, in complete and utter silence, is something I'll recommend to any and all.

Although most of the nights were spent on board, a unique opportunity arose the very first night in Antarctica proper: To spend a night camping on land. Clearly I took the chance, and with the gear provided (bivybag, two sleeping mats, sleeping bag and liner) it was in no way cold. Anchoring the tents with chunks of snow, preventing it from flapping in the wind, actually made for a night's real good sleep, quite different from the snorapalooza usually provided by one of my cabin-mates. I admit however that it didn't feel exactly like camping: Due to heavy regulations no food and alcohol was to be brought on shore, and any and all waste (including, but not limited to, whatever waste the human body may produce) needed to be taken back to the ship. Is it then really camping if there is no beer, bonfire, barbecued hot dogs, some douche playing Sweet Home California on guitar and midnightly pee-visits to a reasonably distant tree? Yes. Yes it is, for on Antarctica all you thought you knew is out the window and recreated in its own, unique manner.

Safely returned on board, there were no reason to



I don't know.... some reference about scaling the wall, wildling style, cause the white walkers are coming?

just hang about; new shores to land on, new challenges to meet, new activities to partake in. The seasoned mountaineer can spend full days mastering the glaciers and cliffs of Antarctica. The less so can at least get their crampons on, harness themselves through professional guidance and, as I did, abseil away on the icy slopes. One of the more useful skills when ice-climbing is knowing how to stop when you uncontrollably slide downhill on butt or belly. We were therefore taught some of the

techniques used, with or without ice-pick, and it was good fun. One of the more laid-back activities to be done is zodiac cruising. It's an excellent way of getting another perspective on the ice, the wildlife and the icebergs. The crew were as adept at steering the zodiacs as they were at relating interesting tidbits about seals, calving and trapped airbubbles. For instance, the almost other-worldly cobalt-blue-turquoise colour that defines so many icebergs, is

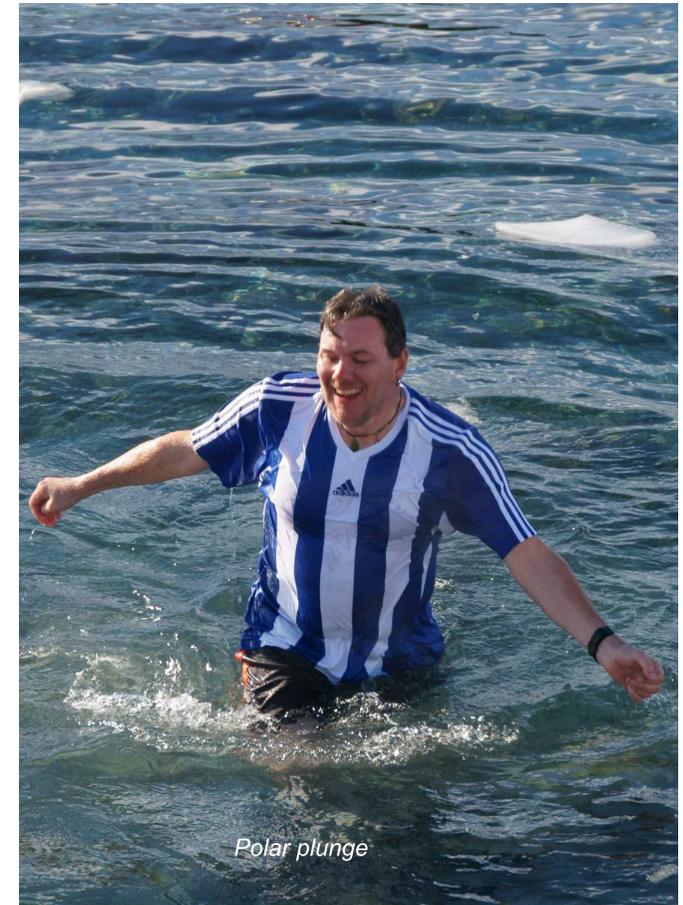
caused by the many tiny airbubbles trapped in the ice, and then compressed into an ovaline form, thus refracting the light in a certain manner. And that is why any Antarctic bay looks like some giant has spread huge blobs of toothpaste upon its waters. As the clouds rose and the wind increased, it seemed a while that I would miss out on the perhaps most looked-forward-to activity. But through the skill of the captain and the knowledge of the expedition leader we found calmer waters,



Paddlin' the ship canoe? Oh, you better believe that's a paddlin'!



Fun factoid: On board were a large group of Chinese travellers. After having camped on a hitherto unnamed island, and not having quite understood the concept of peeing in a bottle, the island is now named Nieve Amarilla.



Polar plunge

and the sky cleared up. We geared up in wetsuits, sunscreen and sprayskirts and waddled into the kayaks.

Closer to the Antarctic waters is hard to get without actually getting wet. The tranquillity is unrivalled. We paddled around icebergs and islands, on grease-ice and through chunks of sea-ice. We paddled round New Idaho, and the calm and quiet was a highlight of the trip.

But I did eventually get wet. A water sign as I am, and seldom fearing neither the wet, nor the cold, I jumped at the chance of dipping in the Southern Ocean. Slightly below zero, the water was chilly

even by my standards, but the feeling of having done an actual polar plunge, and thereby completing a goal that I didn't know I had (to swim on the shore of every continent) was pretty unbeatable. Too bad I had no chance of getting warm until we were zodiac:ed back on board. And too badder that I had to wait until all my roomies were finished before I could have a hot shower. But still, more than worth it!

So, in addition to regular shore landings with just hanging with the penguins, M/V Plancius is indeed a basecamp, full of activities.

The solitary-induced

themselves (and despite the three daily meals prepared and delivered by our excellent 'hotel' staff more often than not had their own pot noodles and rice-for-brekkies), the divers had their own clique, the Dutch grouped together, as did the French, and so on.

Us in the less defined sections spread out, and amongst the most frequently dined and conversed with, apart from roomies Roger and Richmond, were a quartet of young ladies from New York, Swiss miss Sabine, Kiwi Bellatrix, King Edward of Andorra, Melanie from UK and Orlock from Romania. In the bar hang, quite frequently, Desmond from the American east coast and Ryan from its west, and a sort of unofficial bar tab

contest started amongst us.

So yes, the Antarctic cruise wasn't all wilderness and penguin poo. At one point we even encountered what, under the circumstances, could be considered civilisation: An on-and-off operating British research station called Port Lockroy. After the natural harbour had been used as a whaling base in the early 1900's, the British took over in the 40's, where they studied wildlife, meteorology, the ionosphere, tides.... normal stuff. Nowadays some of the research continues, but is mostly focused on biology and if and how eco-tourism affects it. As it seems, the penguins really don't seem to care if the odd human turn up every now and then, which is a good thing. The main reason for keeping the place



A good son wears his life-jacket and writes to his mum

Antarctic Peninsula, Antarctica
Saturday, November 22, 2014

I was not alone on the ship. Roughly a hundred passengers joined the team, crew and staff of M/V Plancius and Oceanwide expeditions. And clearly some degree of social mingling was expected, and saluted. For privacy reasons some or all of the names mentioned may have been altered.

To summarize: I met some awesome people and sent a postcard from Antarctica to my mum.

The cabin was probably originally built for three. Yet four full-grown men crammed themselves and their luggage (including one set of diving gear) into the home for the next eleven days: An international quartet consisting of Rudolph from the Netherlands, Roger of Canada, Richmond from South Africa and me, Martin, from Sweden.

Soon enough people sort of gravitated towards smaller groups. Obviously, the Chinese kept to



Sub-zero barbeque, but Switzerland, USA, Canada and Sweden are used to the cold

necessity of social mesh

staffed is its function as a museum, a gift shop and a post office. As all proceedings go to the UK Antarctic heritage fund for preserving wildlife, I didn't feel bad for spending a few pounds on a USB-stick in the shape of a penguin, a hedy (definitely not a buff, that would be copyright infringement) and sending a few postcards.

Cruises don't necessarily have sun chairs, limbo tournaments and shuffleboard, but all cruises worth their salt would have at least one barbecue. A variety of grilled meats, baked potatoes and corncobs were served on the aft-deck, cleverly drowned with glühwein and classic alpine after ski music, including, but not limited to, Abba, the Chicken

Dance and 50's rock'n'roll. The party lasted well into the small hours of the night. Or at least an hour or so, before it kind of got to chilly to be outside in party get-up.

Every day three meals were served, and on the open sea the dining could be a wee bit unpredictable, as the chairs, plates and glasses not necessarily stayed put. Needless to say, fancy-schmancy wine glasses with high legs were put aside during the Drake Shake, in favour of sturdier thick-bottomed numbers. Apart from the obvious beer and occasional wine, the beverage of choice was often hot cocoa. Sometimes plain, sometimes with rum, kahlua or bailey's. All of which, of course can be



Fancy Garden Party at Port Lockroy



found pretty much all over the world. A drink that few people will ever enjoy, but that I did, is a Pernod with just one piece of ice. Thousands-year-old Antarctic freshwater ice, that is.

As we, after long days and nights at sea, disembarked in Ushuaia, our little group became ever smaller. A last few drops of coffee with Ryan, Roger and the New Yorkers, and off to the airport we went. Quite a few familiar faces were on the afternoon flight to Buenos Aires, but eventually all roads that once crossed must split, and so it was goodbye to Melanie, Richmond, Sabine and Desmond as they took their leave for the Argentinian capitol and I for the Bolivian.

And the bar tab contest? That I won.

Fun factoid: Port Lockroy has the southernmost post office in the world. As such, post sent from there takes the longest to reach the North Pole, and the local kids must write their letters to Father Christmas as early as mid-May to be sure to get what they want for Christmas.



Almirante Brown, an Argentinean Antarctic base



Potosi, Bolivia
Wednesday, November 26, 2014

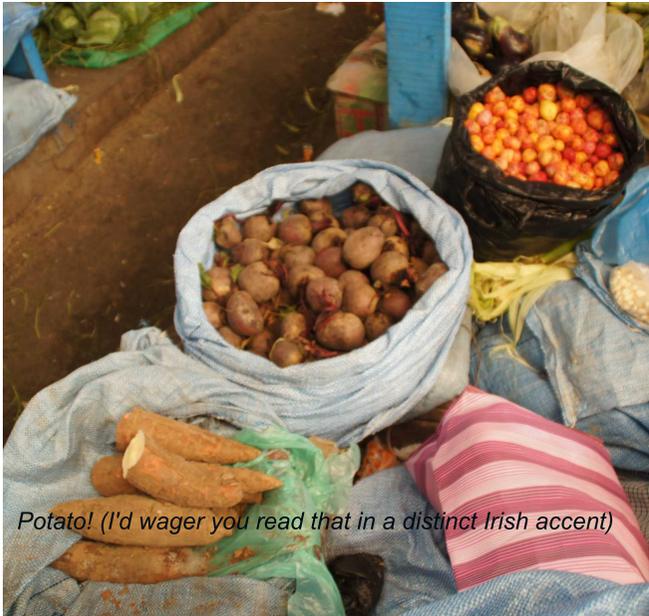
To summarize: I flew to high altitude in La Paz, watched Aymaras do their textile skills and went into the silver mines of hell.

The dizzying highs of plurinational Bolivia

El Alto is the highest airport in the world, and most of La Paz not much lower. Last time I was here, roughly four years ago, I had slowly ascended from sea level to 3-4 km and basically stayed there. This time, however, I flew in from the +0 of Ushuaia, via the +25 of BA and the +400 of Santa Cruz, and the effects wouldn't wait. After having checked in,

gone for lunch and checked the interwebs I decided a quick nap would do me good. A nap that lasted the rest of the day, as it were.

As I had reached the highpoint of the trip, literally, I had high hopes of repeating what might have been the highpoint, figuratively, the last time I was in the neighbourhood: Mountainbiking down the world's



Potato! (I'd wager you read that in a distinct Irish accent)



Best milk chocolate evarr! And so Sudamérica 2010-11



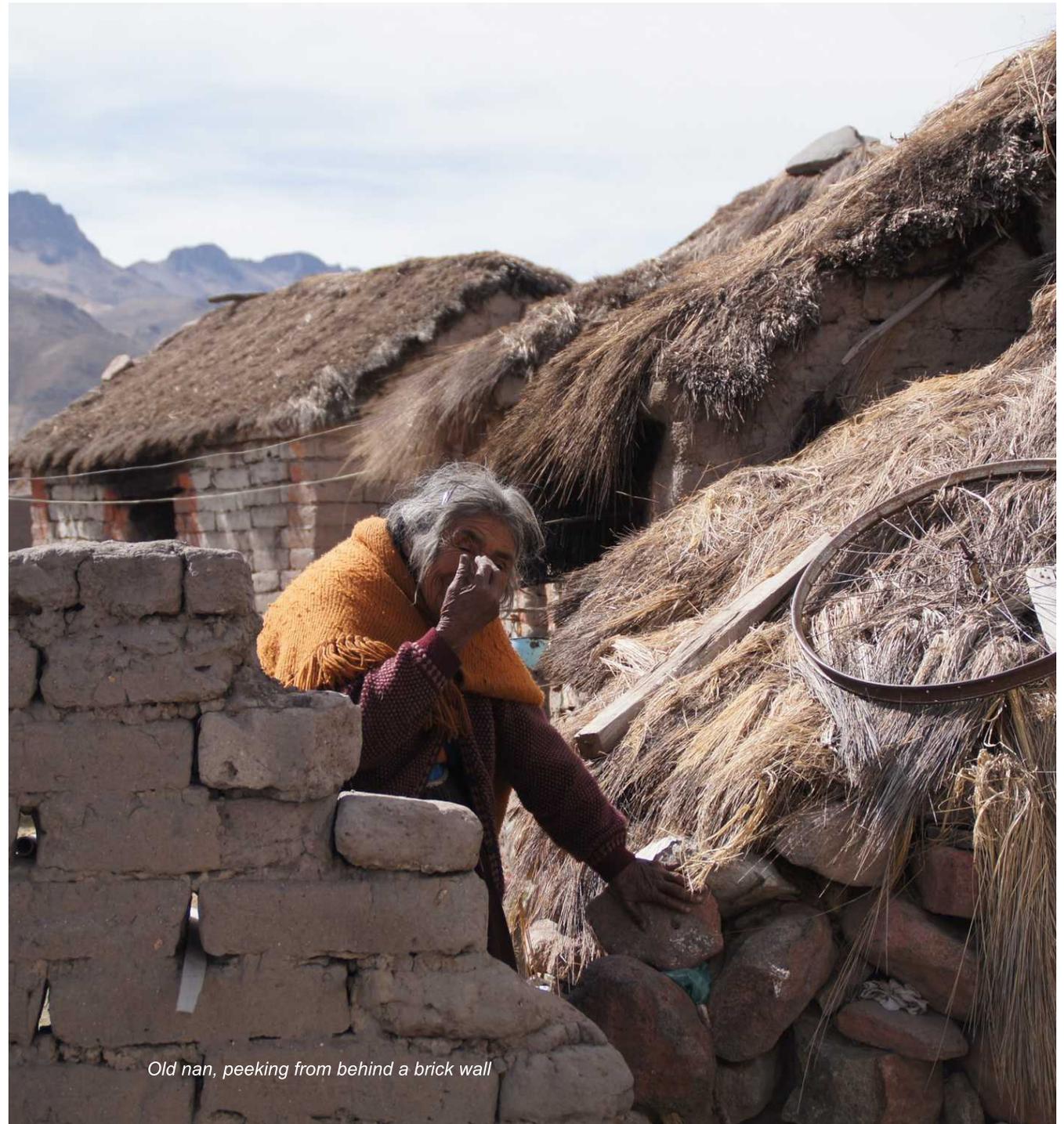
Bolivia, land of perpetual road blocks from disgruntled workers (often miners) on strike

most dangerous road. However, the booking office was closed due to it being Sunday, and they would open at 9 next morning. As the day of death-defying downhilling would mean pick-up at 7:30 and I didn't have a Tardis, I had to put the pedalling off.

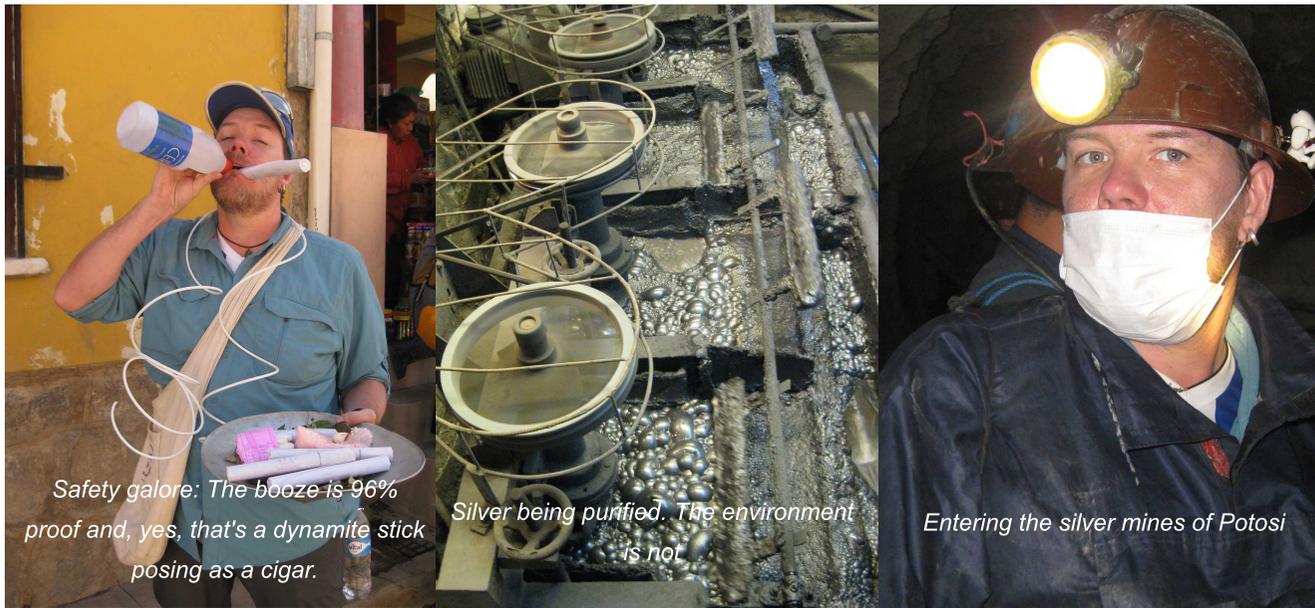
Instead I opted for one of those free walking tours around the city.

Two very enthusiastic and entertaining locals led a large flock of westerners around what is technically not the capitol of Bolivia (Sucre is). They shared tales of how the infamous San Pedro prison is more of a small city in the city, with hookers and blackjack and drugs. They told of Bolivia's shaky democratic past, including presidents who were crazy, or evil, or both. They told about the age-old traditions of burying llama phoeti, coca leaves and 96%-proof booze as a sacrifice to Pachamama, Mother Earth, before any building construction could start. They even shared that in order to properly please Pachamama, a human sacrifice needed to be claimed by the earth, and in order to do so, builders would go to the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak, find a drunkard no one would miss to fill with booze until he would pass out, and thereafter be put into the ground for Pachamama to claim.

Roughly four years ago, I went with Dragoman from Quito to La Paz. It was now high time to continue that journey. A large group of mostly Aussies and an unusually high percentage of couples set off in the large orange-and-white truck, led by tour leader Linda and co-driver Zebulon. Leaving La Paz and its sister city El Alto behind, we headed for the wilderness, eventually reaching the small community of Livchuco. The road seemed straight and wide towards our destination, but as is often the case in Bolivia, the road was blocked by disgruntled protesters. This time it was miners who were protesting the horrible conditions and low pay,



Old nan, peeking from behind a brick wall



Safety galore: The booze is 96% proof and, yes, that's a dynamite stick posing as a cigar.

Silver being purified. The environment is not

Entering the silver mines of Potosi

and so had blocked the road, creating a several kilometres long line of waiting vehicles. Thanks to some offroading and the very modest bribe of 50 bolibobs (around 5 euros) we eventually got moving again. Livchuco is populated by Aymaras who live off the land, and especially the llamas and alpacas that feed on its vegetation.

Skillful textile-makers they are, and we were shown the ropes, so to speak. As to their skills at cooking the cameloids, let's just say the soup was served in very nice bowls.

Back in civilisation, but still on altitudes of more than 4000 metres, Zeb maneuvered Eva the truck through the narrow and steep maze-like streets of Potosí. Once the most populous city in the New World, this town lives, breathes, shits and dies silver. Ever since colonial times, the surrounding mountains have been mined for silver in a ruthless fashion. Back in those days, slaves were used, but circumstances hasn't changed much. The miners, exclusively indigenous people, have no choice but to work under horrifying conditions, doing hard

labour at high altitude, using equipment and materials they need to buy themselves. The tunnels are narrow and claustrophobia-inducing, the ore is transported on trolleys pushed by hand (no electrical trains here) and the security measures regarding handling the dynamite and, most importantly, its detonators, are nonexistent. Add to the fact that dealing with the depression this kind of work triggers means drinking heavily, the risks of accidents increase sharply. And if broken bodies due to heavy labour and the daily risk of getting injured or killed in uncontrolled explosions and cave-ins weren't enough, the risks of getting lung cancer due to constantly breathing the silica dust is 100% or so close it makes no matter. Oh, and silver is not the only metal in the mountains; zinc and lead features heavily, and so the contaminated masses and the water used to treat the ore spoils the area, leading to lead related diseases and fucked-up environmental issues for centuries to come. All for a select few to get filthy rich from the silver; the other 99% just get filthy.

Potosi is on roughly 4000 metres above sea level, as indicated by the name of one of its nicer restaurants, The 4060. The town itself is bustling with life, both hispanic and indigenous, and its night-life rivals that of La Paz. In addition, even if its products taste as bland as most non-western countries' lagers, Potosi hosts the world's highest brewery, Potosina. And the beer is bottled in 1 litre or 3 litre bottles.

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that according to the constitution, a president can only serve two terms in the country of Bolivia. Evo Morales got over that little hurdle by changing the official name from República de Bolivia to Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia. Putin now plans to be the indefinite ruler of Russia using the same tactics, in turn changing the name from The Russian Federation, to United States of Russia, to Democratic and Totally not Despotic and In Fact Really Friendly and Nice to Children and Puppies Justice-filled Equal Solidary Democracy of Russia, to Putinistan. And so on, and so forth, in that manner.



After visiting a silver mine in Potosi

Uyuni, Bolivia
Monday, December 1, 2014

To summarize: Went to salt flats, took photos. Went through national parks, took photos. Went to Bolivian-Chilean border, took no photos.

The perspective-bending kodak moments of flat salt



Make no mistake, Extreme Fun Pub doesn't hide their business idea. To get their guests shit-faced, rat-arsed or possibly rat-faced.

On the altiplano, geological conditions sometimes yield unusual results. One such is Salar de Uyuni, the biggest salt lake in the world. As such, the town of Uyuni, though sleepy in its own rights, hosts a large percentage of travellers and backpackers, eager to visit the stunning landscape in the area. The nights would be spent having high altitude pizza at Minuteman's and drinks with ekivoque names (such as Sexy Llama Bitch, Multiple orgasm and Llama's nipple) at the aptly and humbly named Extreme Fun Pub.

But first things first. Uyuni was once an important train hub, and remnants of that era can be seen around town, in the form of statues of railroadian nature, the display of Bolivia's supposedly first locomotive and a vast train graveyard.

Loading up in some landcruisers, we headed out



I choo-choo-choose you.... and there's a picture of a train.

towards the salt flats for a day of SD-card-munching activities, where photographs were taken of salt pillars and their reflections, trains and landscapes.

Lunch were held at Incahuasi, a largish island in the salt flats. Rising high above its surroundings, the rocky and cacti covered outpost serves a great viewing point of the flatness around it.

The main reason for visiting Salar de Uyuni is of



Depending on what drink you ordered, the jug and props that sometimes came with it could be surprising





Farty smells and strong wind....



Hot springs, well worth it during an otherwise freezing day

course to take silly photos. The flatness and whiteness makes it impossible to hang up any sense of distance, and as such, forced perspective can be used to great effect; small objects appearing big, big

objects becoming small and people taking all sorts of sizes. Leaving Uyuni behind and heading toward Chile, the drive took us through Reserva Nacional de

Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa, a large area of connected national reserves. Other than stunning high altitude landscapes, the volcanic activities provides lakes of unusual colours, geysers and hot springs, and a great many flamingoes. A long days drive, including a border crossing can be a dull affair, but interspersing it with legstretching and shutterfriendly pit stops in breathtaking (both figuratively and literally) landscapes makes it more than worthwhile. And a dip in the 40 degree waters of the hot springs sure help warming up the body after having endured the low temperatures and strong wind that the barren and high altitude environment produces.



Reserva Nacional De Fauna Andina Eduardo Avaroa, high up in the (lack of) clouds

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that Flamenco Day is on December 1:st. As chance would have it, that was the day we were in Eduardo Avaroa, and therefore got to see the pink long-legged birds. Any other day, and they wouldn't have been there. What are the odds? Well, 1 in 365 I suppose.

The Lunar Landscapes of Chilean Sampling

San Pedro de Atacama, Chile
Wednesday, December 3, 2014

To summarize: Two days in Chile with spacey scenery and good eating.

A long drive through no man's land, after having technically left Bolivia, brought us to the border into Chile. With all the efficiency and politeness one would expect from border control people, the first step into the world's most elongated country were made some mere two hours later, and as it had become dark, we got well use of the best invention since sliced bread (the headtorch, that is) when setting camp.

San Pedro de Atacama is located by a natural oasis in one of the driest places on earth, the Atacama desert. Its mildish climate, reasonable altitude (2500 masl) and stunning surroundings bring in many a traveller, eager to sample the fine dining and wining and to go mountain biking, trekking or mountaineering.

The main attraction of the area is La Valle de Luna, Moon Valley, though.

Erosion through wind and water has shaped the rock into eerie shapes, narrow cave corridors and vast sand dunes, creating an extraterrestrial and almost surreal feel.

Its dry, remote and rocky conditions made it perfect for test driving the Mars rovers, and the similarities to the Moon in certain parts of the valley are spoken of near and far.

Upon arrival, the scenery didn't strike me so much lunar as Tatooine, and I half expected Tusken raiders upon the cliffs. Climbing the oddly-shaped rocks and creeping through the sometimes pitch black tunnel caves was great fun, but an uneasy feeling descended soon. Sand people, or worse? It turned out that this very day, what seemed like all of South America's high schools had their yearly excursion to northern Chile. A vast army of teens crawled all over the place, making it difficult to find a reasonably solitary spot for the supposedly spectacular sunset spotting. Difficult, but not impossible, as it were, and quite a few snapshots were taken of the sun setting across the dunes.

The differences between Chile and Bolivia are bigger than the vast no man's land that distances them. Gone were the dust and the cameloids, to be replaced by vegetation and cattle. Rather than almost exclusively seeing indigenous people, the streets were a mixture of hispanics, indigenous, gringos, what have you. There's a



La Valle de Luna

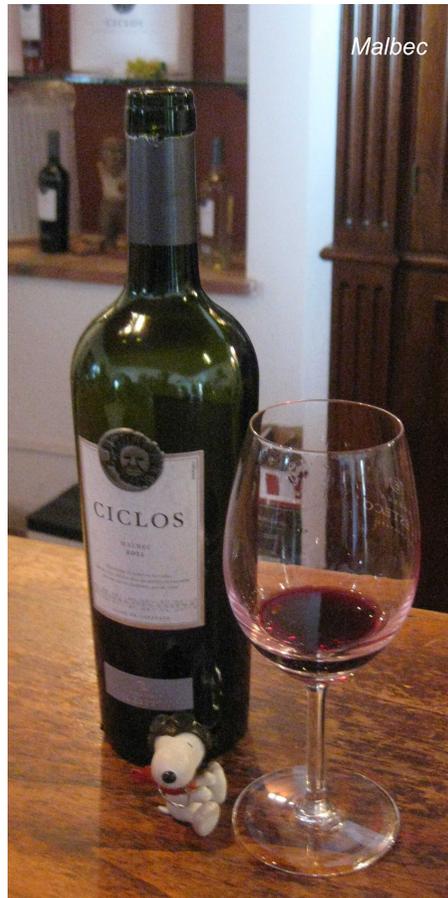
much more western feel to Chile than Bolivia, and a less off-the-beaten-track. The main difference would be the foods and beverages, though. From stringy, often overcooked llamas and beef from very old cows served with a pile of cold potatoes and colder rice, to tender steaks, juicy mash and fine wine goes the gastronomical journey, and supposedly the next stop along the line will be even better: Argentina.

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that some believe that NASA landing on the moon is a hoax, and was in fact done on a soundstage in Hollywood. That is, of course, utter hogswallop. Truth is, they staged it here, in Valle de Luna.

The wet splashiness of winey Saltayate

To summarize: I entered Argentina for the third time ever, floated gently down the stream and enjoyed some awesome meat and wine.

Salta, Northern Argentina, Argentina
Saturday, December 6, 2014



Malbec

The third time I entered Argentina was the most troublesome. The first time, I went through customs at the airport, had my thumbprint taken, and spent almost a day in Ushuaia. The second time, I disembarked the ship and simply strolled into the country, spending half a day in Ushuaia. The third time, a large orange truck entered through the Chilean border, containing a handful of Australians, who need visa to enter the country. Axel and Nigel had missed that part, and were as such held back an hour or so, while the rest of us simply waited. Eventually all was cleared, and off to Salta we drove.

Salta is the adventure capitol of Argentina, with possibilities for bungyjumping, trekking, ziplining and so forth, and so on, in that manner. However, we opted for some white water rafting. After a scenic drive through the mountainous lakescape (or possibly lakey mountainscapes)

of the area, by a system of dams and to Cañon de Rio Juramento, we got our helmets on and our paddles in hands and got ready to gently float downstream.

And gentle it was; after previously having tried some grade 4 rapids in Rangitata, New Zealand and grade 3:s in Tennessee, the Salta waters proved fairly non-white for me. The swirlies never reached above grade two. It was still good fun though, the water was warm and splashing the other rafts was pretty much encouraged. All but one stayed in the raft the entire float, at least until the last part, where most would opt to roll off and float downstream instead.

Salta is a decent-sized city and one could, if one were so inclined, easily find blokes around the plaza who would buy US Dollars for 12,5 pesos apiece rather than the official rate of 8,5. It's illegal, however, so I totally didn't do that. Uh-huh. Vibrant nightlife and a plethora of



And just seconds later, the Big Splashy War of Salta 2014 broke out



Winery in El Cafayate



A day dedicated to finer samplings

The clippity-cloppity meatness of ranchy lifestyle

restaurants signifies this northwestern jewel, and for good reasons: there are those who say the best beef in the world is produced in the area, and I tend to agree. The steak, cooked to perfection and served with the best mash outside of Sweden and a delightful Malbec, was at least the best meat I've had in South America. Viejo Jack is the place to go for a good steaking.

Even though Argentina has a selection of decent beers, most steaks would prefer a nice red as company, and not far off lies El Cafayate, one of the more important wine districts in the country. A full day of wine tasting was on the agenda, including a ridiculously posh lunch at a high class winery on top of the hill, overlooking the surrounding vinescape.

A few malbecs and at least one torrontos I fell for, but the day was far from over. In the town square there was a free wine tasting going on, mainly for the locals, with half a dozen or so wineries represented. And so, I got to practice my tounge, both for tasting and for speaking Spanish.

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that the currency in Bolivia is Bolivianos, shortened BOB. As Bolivia is the default country of South America, all other countries' currencies end with bob. As such, the currency in Chile is Chillibobs, in Argentina it's Archiebobs and in Belize it's Beelzebobs.

Rio Ceballos, Central Argentina, Argentina
Thursday, December 11, 2014

To summarize: I gauchoed up; horseback riding, guitar playing, meat eating, beret wearing, lassoing and wine-tasting at an Argentinian cattle ranch.

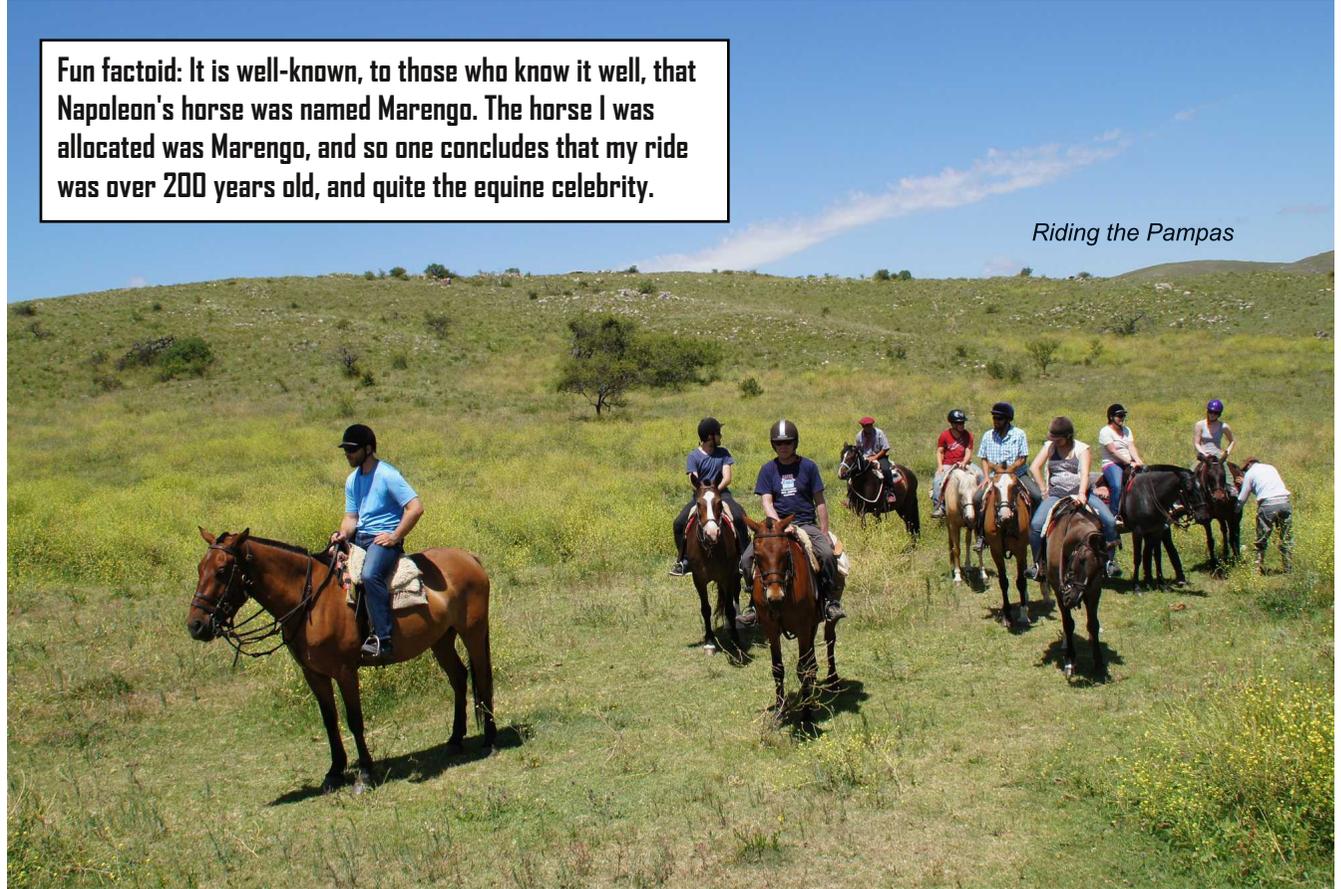
After a couple of days filled with wine-tasting and partying, it was about time to have a couple of days of wine-tasting and partying and horseback riding. A long drive took the gang from the wine region of Cafayate to the cattle-filled hills of the Pampas, many hundred green miles. Rio Ceballos, and the ranch of Kevin welcomed us with open arms and an abundance of wine, as had been done for Drago

passengers for fifteen years.

An Argentinian of Scottish descent, Kevin tended the ranch and its 6000 acres of land that had been in his family for a hundred years. His fondness for fine wines and meat and affinity with horses, combined with his entertaining story-telling and impeccable English accent made him an excellent host. During the first night's wine-tasting, he told

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that Napoleon's horse was named Marengo. The horse I was allocated was Marengo, and so one concludes that my ride was over 200 years old, and quite the equine celebrity.

Riding the Pampas





Another Man's Cause



*Where is the horse and the rider...?
Rohan-like at the mighty Pampas.*

of his family history, bits and bobs about Argentinian ditto, the Falklands and the insane dollar-to-pesos debacle. Intertwined was a game of guessing the essence and a whole lot of facts about the wines we were sampling.

Next morning we got up, ready for a day on horseback. Whether the horses were ready for us is a different question, but words from the wise say they were. Natalie, in particular, having grown up on a farm and ridden since before she could walk, was as giddy as a kid in a candy store. On Christmas. With its parents gone and babysat by its favourite aunt. Her enthusiasm was contagious and made the ride more enjoyable for the rest of us, most of whom had sat on a horse at most 2-4 times. As extremely well trained and calm as the

horses were, putting a bunch of n00bs of various ages on horseback is going to stir some problems, but the rides were still fairly bereft of incidents. Other than Lee nearly got kicked and Keith, on the upper scale of age, actually fell off and onto his back, things went well. My horse Marengo would constantly try to eat, which they're not supposed to, and I had to tug the reins ever so often. Eventually pretty much all of us felt confident and familiar enough to actually venture a bit of canter (which is like third gear after walk and trot), and no one fell off.

Music and gaucho lifestyle go hand in hand, but the local minstrels played neither country, nor western. Traditional latin music, including samba (which in Argentina is, quite contrary to the upbeat Brazilian

type most of us would associate it with, a sad ballad-style number) and tango. Us in the audience got to participate playing the rhythm section, dancing was encouraged (it didn't occur as such, though there was much twerking) and I got to try the charango, a ukulele-like local instrument with five double strings.

After the performance a jamming session took place, with piano, guitar, congas and harmonica, and a truck blues was improvised. After the talk of the war of 1982, I decided to thrum the strings of the A-minor, G, F and C and sing my version of Another Man's Cause, helped out by Carlos on charango and Jack on drums. And there was much rejoicing.

Similar to when you go skiing, after a big night out

you still easily get up the next morning, ready and eager to shred those slopes, or rather in this case, ride those horsies. Before that, though, we had to catch our food for the night. The gauchos and gorgeous guide girls showed us the ropes, so to speak, and we all had our tries at throwing the lasso; first at a very stationary tree trunk, and then at very mobile calves. Some of us managed to snare the tree, but none caught a calf.

The day before had been spent in the lowlands, with quite a lot of trees, bushes and other vegetation, but this day we rode up, to the Top of the World, the highest point of the ranch and with a nice view of the surroundings, including a glimpse of Cordoba, our next destination. The landscape, much more grassy up high, and more windy, could easily have passed for Rohan. Other than the occasional appearance of potrosis (smaller enclosures of low stone walls), the whole experience was quite Rohirrim-esque.

A stay at an Argentinian cattle ranch is not complete without a big-ass barbecue. Asado, they call it. It's a tradition, or an old charter, or something, and it's as meaty as a Belgian Blue. Different cuts of beef and some delicious sausages, downed with Malbec and the odd tomato made for an excellent last meal at the ranch.

As is my inclination when travelling, I tend to buy headwear. Sometimes ones of questionable quality just to get some protection from the rain and sun, sometimes nice handiwork, sometimes just a baseball cap with a logo from wherever I want to brag about. As the gaucho headwear is very defining, and I seem to fit in one, I bought a nice gaucho beret. At the same time, I contributed to the local schools, as the proceedings from the merchandise went straight to the community.

Buenos Aires, Capital Federal District, Argentina
Monday, December 15, 2014

To summarize: I practised my art guesswork in museums in Cordoba, my dancemoves in clubs in BA and my language skills in pubs in Baires.



After a few days in rural Argentina, it was high time to get more urban-like, and as such, the university town of Cordoba, Argentina's second largest, became our first destination in search of culture and concrete.

Sophie is highly into art; however, her husband is not, and so I met up with her at Museo de Bellas Artes Evita Palacio Ferreyra to check out mostly contemporary and fully Argentinian art. Some fine work, overall, but the most striking was the Carlos Alonso exhibition. His paintings depict horrific abuse of women and abduction of children, presented in a disturbing and vivid style. The pieces were made during the years 1976 and 1983 and are therefore a protest and presentation of what atrocities the military regime of that period committed.

A stone throw away from Evita Palacio Ferreyra is Museo Emilia Caraffa.

Upon arrival it was closed, though. A sign informed us it would open at eight, and with a special event, as it were: The 100:th anniversary of the museum. Awaiting the grand opening, we enjoyed some nice malbecs and torronteses at a nearby bistro. The grand opening draw in the crowd, but not overly so. Free champagne and sushi mixed with the art and a select few artists, and the beret I purchased at the estancia made me fit in perfectly.

The first leg of the tour was coming to an end, and a farewell dinner in a very golden-era-of-hollywood-themed restaurant was held, for those who were to leave in Buenos Aires. After dinner, a few of us went to a nearby nightclub, and after midnight, birthday boy Russ brought out the bubbly. Music was pumping, masses of people were raising the roof, and although I don't dance (I never dance), two Chilean girls convinced me to abandon my

The arty-party rhythm of urban culture



The matron of Argentina, Evita Peron



Cementerio de La Recoleta



Don't blink. Blink and you're dead. They are fast. Faster than you can believe. Don't turn your back. Don't look away. And don't blink.



Floralis Genérica!

principles, just for one night.

Free walking tours are, as ever so often, a good way to be introduced to a city. Tour guide Christina took me and a reasonably smallish group around BA:s city centre, showing Casa Rosada, Café Tortoni, the obelisk, Las Madres and so on. And all over the widest avenue in the world, 9 de Julio, supporters of the president gathered to celebrate the 31:st anniversary of democracy in Argentina. The celebrations would last well into the night, with drums and firecrackers. It was soon time for another pre-dep meeting though, with a successive dinner. Afterwards, fernet cola and rubios was had as I struck up a conversation with some locals, thus practising my Argentinean. Los Malvinas son Argentinas was a phrase often repeated by Ellena, and the barkeep gave me a free beer, on account of us being 'tocayos', an Argentinian term meaning

two people sharing the same name.

Exploring BA is doable on foot, and with my gps-watch and my trainers I set off towards La Boca, tracking my route. The massive La Bombanera, the football stadium used by Boca Juniors, dominates the northernmost area with its blue-and-yellowness. The colours are found all over the surrounding blocks, and hint about what's to come. The rest of La Boca, especially Caminito, is extremely colourful, literally. Here the blue and yellow is accompanied by reds, greens, purples, all shades of the rainbow.

To get to La Boca from the city centre however, one has to pass the cobbled streets of San Telmo. On Sundays that trot takes considerably more time, since market stalls cover the narrow walkways. Flea markets and arts and crafts dominate the scene, and the recurring themes for home made trinkets seem to be football, Evita, Mafalda and tango.

Heading north, I aimed for two of the possibly most well-known landmarks of BA: Floralis Genérica and Recoleta Cemetery. The mausoleum-massive graveyard is also known as La Ciudad des Mortes, City of the dead, and has some very elaborate final resting places, the most famous of which is, of course, that of Eva Peron.

It's tricky to find, though, as she's listed under her maiden name. Of course, once you make your way through the maze (or possibly labyrinth) of graves and find a huge crowd in front of one random tomb, that'll be where Evita sleeps.

That night, local team Racing Club de Avellaneda played Godoy Cruz for the championships. Naturally, tickets were impossible to get, but after Racing's victory the streets were filled with happy fans waving the blue-and-white banners and wearing their blue-and-white jerseys. The



Under a blood-red sky in Buenos Aires



Fritiof & Carmencita, mayhaps? Tango show at renowned Café Tortoni in BA.

celebrations would last well into the night, with drums and firecrackers. As tickets were unavailable and football also can be seen in Brazil, I instead opted to see a tango show. At classic Café Tortoni, the minstrels played up, out came an older lady with an impressive and deep singing voice. Eventually the dancers came on stage, tangoing away. However, the performance was quite tepid, and if I pay to see a tango show I expect there to be tango at least 3 songs out of 4. At Tortoni, the ratio was 1/4, and as such, I discourage going. Try any of the hundreds of Milongas scattered all over town (especially in La Boca) instead.

With the constant humming of the AC drowning out the intermittent bangs of drums and firecrackers, I had a good night's sleep in Buenos Aires before hitting the road up north, Brazilian way.

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that the reason for the colours of Boca Juniors is due to the fact that the team sent a man down to the harbour to see what flag the first ship hoisted. It was Swedish, and hence the yellow and blue. Rumour has it that he first passed ships from Poland, Indonesia, Austria, Monaco and Peru before finding the Swedish one, but that would have been mightily confusing as Boca Juniors' main rivals, River Plate, sports white and red.



Racing Club de Avellaneda, Argentine champions of 2014.

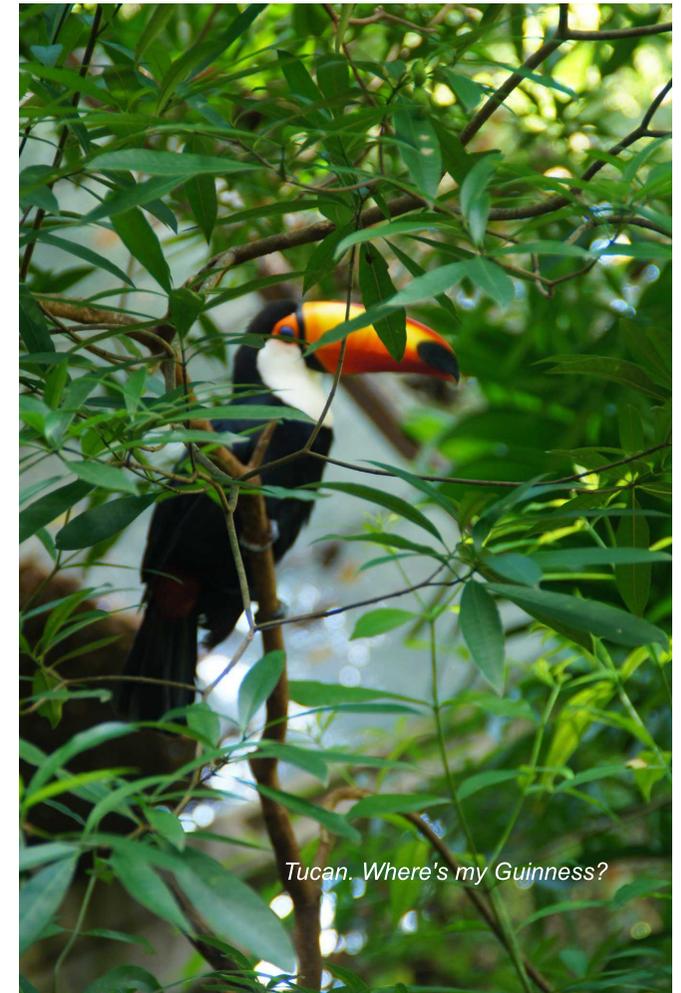
The splashy vastness of trinational hydraulics

Foz de Iguacu, State of Parana, Brazil
Friday, December 19, 2014

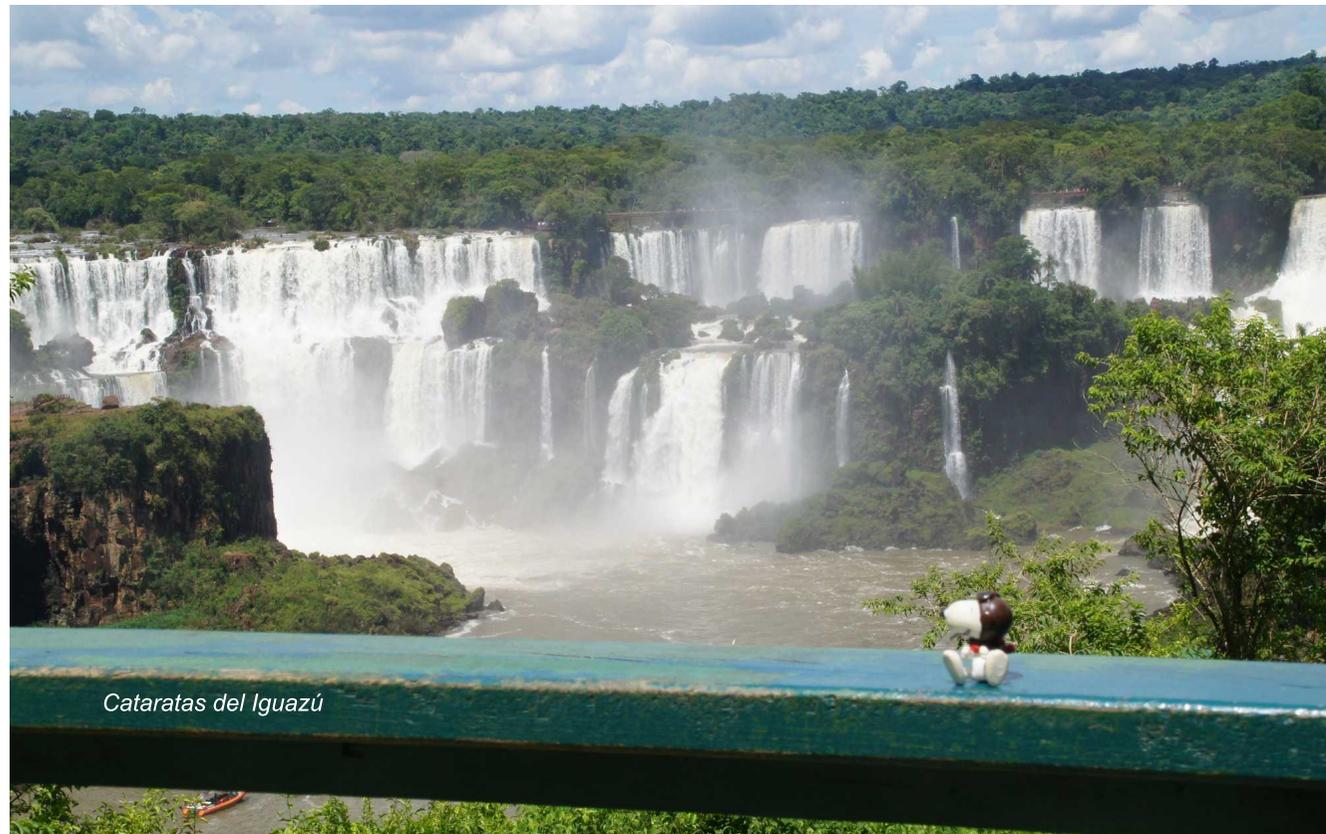
To summarize: I saw a lot of water, either freefalling off cliffs or being stopped from doing so. Also birds and a border.

Eager to be where the economy is stable and not as eager to leave the place with the best beef in the world, we waved good-bye to BA and headed north towards the Brazilian border. We still had a few more days in Argentina, though.

Stopping at the old jesuit ruins of San Ignacio de Mini, we reached Puerto de Iguazu in time for Murray's birthday. Just. An overland trip is not as it should without at least one truck breakdown. And just after lunch, the breaks' pneumatics stopped functioning, so Zeb got into grease-monkey mode, whereas the rest of us went into social drinking mode. Believe it or no, but spending an entire afternoon in the shade outside an outdoors shop by a service station is more entertaining than one might imagine, and a great way to get to know the new passengers. The delay forced us to bushcamp, though, but since it was by a nearby lake, that wasn't half bad.



Toucan. Where's my Guinness?



Cataratas del Iguazú

At Puerto de Iguazu, two familiar faces reappeared, as the Germans that left in Cordoba had reached the falls the day before. After having visited the three country corner where the borders of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay cross, we had a birthday dinner, as well as a last-beef-in-Argentina meal. As chance would have it, Wayne, one of our new passengers, was also a birthday boy, so much happy birthday was sung.

Alongside Victoria, Niagara and Angel, Iguazu counts as the top four of the world's waterfalls. Where Victoria is tall and reasonably wide, Niagara



Iguazu falls

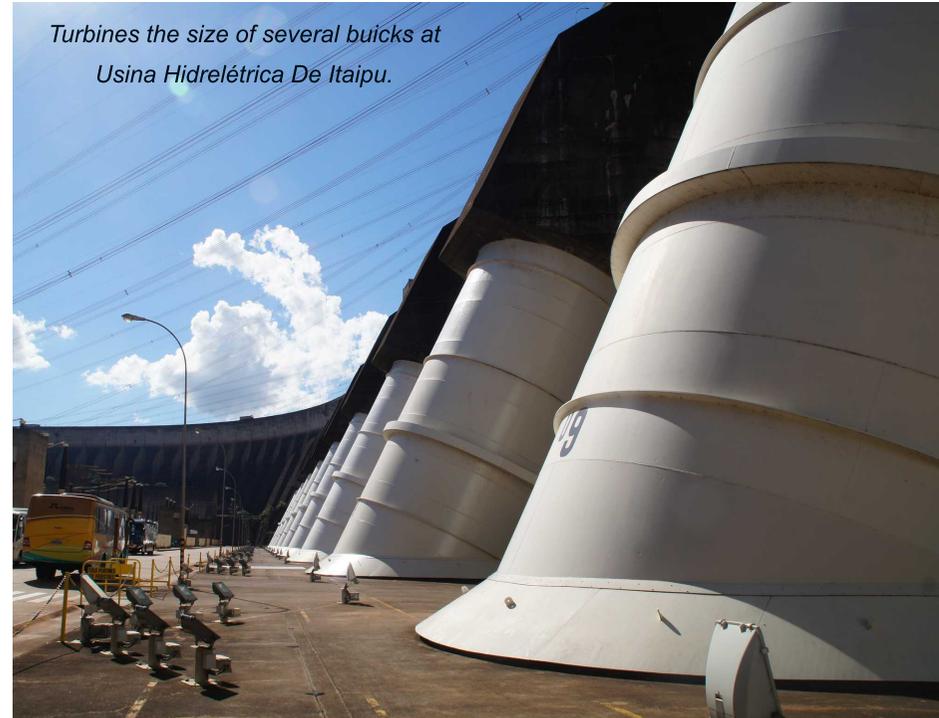


Iguazu falls. And yes, that's a lifejacket.



Not a Norwegian Blue

is a huge wall of water and Angel is as tall as tall can be, Iguazu is a collection of many falls, some of which are wide, some of which are narrow, some of which stair their way from above to below via a series of pools, and all of which are wet. After a guided drive through the jungle, we put our dearest belongings in dry-bags and took off on a speedboat through the rapids and to the bottom of the biggest falls. The cascade of vapour Victoria splashes up is impressive and can be seen from a great distance, but the Iguazu steamcloud is not far behind, and equally wet. Splish-splashing in my wet clothes, I explored the rest of the many falls for the obligatory photos and posing, set off to send some postcards and got ready to cross the border.



Turbines the size of several buicks at Usina Hidrelétrica De Itaipu.

Border crossings can be all sorts of pain in all sorts of arses. The crossing between Argentina and Brazil was smooth as. We didn't even have to carry our bags through customs, and the only paperwork needed was to fill in the usual details (name, nationality, purpose of trip and so on), and off to the land of the samba we went.

The campsite had a bar, working wi-fi, nice amenities, kitchen area, hammocks, a ping-pong table and, most importantly, a pool. The day had been hot and humid, and a swim in the pool and a nice cold poolside beer helped out a lot. Before late, though, it was time for bed, as the Iguacu falls beckoned for the next day.

Before going to the falls on the Brazilian side, a nearby bird park was visited, with many a colourful parrot. There was a touristy opportunity to have a parrot sit on your hand while having a photo taken. I opted out on that, though, because, you know, touristy. Also, I fear that were I ever to hold a parrot (especially a Norwegian Blue) I would get the urge to scream in its ear, banging it against a desk, tossing it into the air and declare it an ex-parrot.

On the Brazzie side of the falls, the distance from viewpoint to water is usually greater than in Argentina. That makes for better viewing as a whole, and less splashyness. The closest fall though, Devil's Throat, is close enough that there is a footbridge for those who feel the need to get wet.

Foz de Iguacu, the actual town in proximity of the falls, hosts more tourist attractions, including the massive hydroelectrical powerplant and dam of Itaipu (meaning 'singing stone'). Getting there via the local bus network is easy and cheap enough, but once there, it gets a little touristy. Neither the dam, nor its upstreams lake, Lago Itaipu, can be seen from where the bus stops, and guided tours are required. I swallowed my touristic-loathing pride and went on with it, because, you know, it's a dam! And dams are damn cool, especially for any civil engineer.

One of the largest, if not the largest, hydroplants in the world, Itaipu is a joint venture between Brazil and Paraguay. It produces 75% of Paraguay's energy needs, and 17% of Brazil's. About 7.7 kilometres across, 275 metres thick at its base and a height of 200 metres, the construction is huge. The amount of concrete used would fill the Maracana Stadium 27 times over. 60.000 cubic metres flows through every second, and the plant produces 250 GWh per day. That's a lot.

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that the main cause of death for Norwegian Blues is pining for the fiords. Though eager to sustain a likeness to their original environment in all their aviries, the Parc des Aves were unaware of that, and so its small population of Blues is now an ex-population.





Itaipu. It's bigger than a breadbox.

Corumbá, Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil
Sunday, December 28, 2014

To summarize: In a few activity-filled days I celebrated mine own birthday as well as christmas, saw heaps of wildlife, was as much in/on the water as out of it, and met some new people.

The Pantanal is an area covering 150-190.000 sqkm (roughly the size of Uruguay or Tunisia), mostly in Brazil, but also Paraguay and Bolivia. It is more often than not referred to as swampland, but the more correct term would be wetland, as it is a patchwork of rivers, streams, islands, savannahs, forests, all gathered in a basin of sorts, surrounded by mountain ranges, thus making it more water than land in the rainy season and vice versa in the dry. Before heading into the Pantanal, however, we spent a couple of days in what is known as the eco-tourism capitol of Brazil: Bonito. The first thing we saw upon entering the campsite was another overlanding truck, though of a different colouring. Its small group of passengers

and crew, we soon found out, was going to follow the same itinerary as us, more or less, all the way to Rio, so we might as well get acquainted with the gender-balancing group (balancing the male-heavy Dragoman group, that is). And just like that, I left my thirties and entered whatever stage in life comes after. I treated myself to a birthday wifebeater (a genuine RipCurl for 15 brazziebobs, roughly 4 eurobobs; has to be legit, yes?) and got ready to go snorkelling in possibly the clearest riverwaters in the world, Rio de Prata. Snorkelling is a bit of a stretch, though; facedown-floating would be more accurate. The guide was completely clueless. He had no idea about bouyancy, he forced everyone to wear life-jackets and he constantly used the thumbs-up for OK. That is something you never ever do while wearing a mask and being in or near water. Any professional worth its salt know this very basic knowledge. I highly recommend going to Rio de Prata, but make sure that your guide knows what signs to use in water, and who considers life-jackets optional rather than mandatory.



Tapir, an unexpected swimming companion

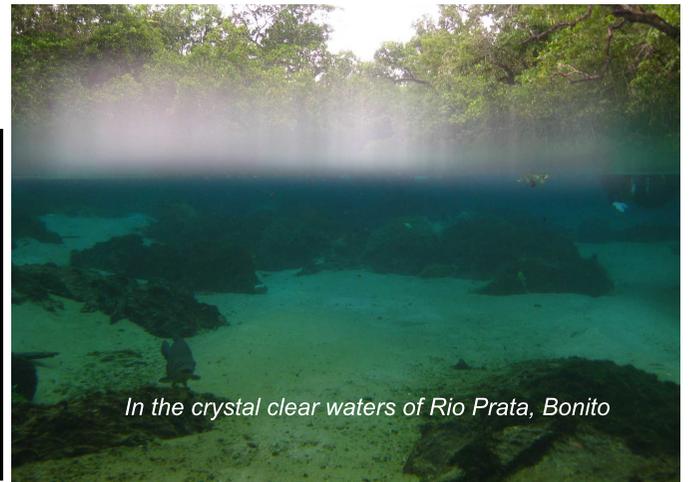


Freshwater can sometimes be all but muddy

The self-celebratory activities of xmas y wetness



At the communal pool in Bonito, we entered the water in many ways



In the crystal clear waters of Rio Prata, Bonito



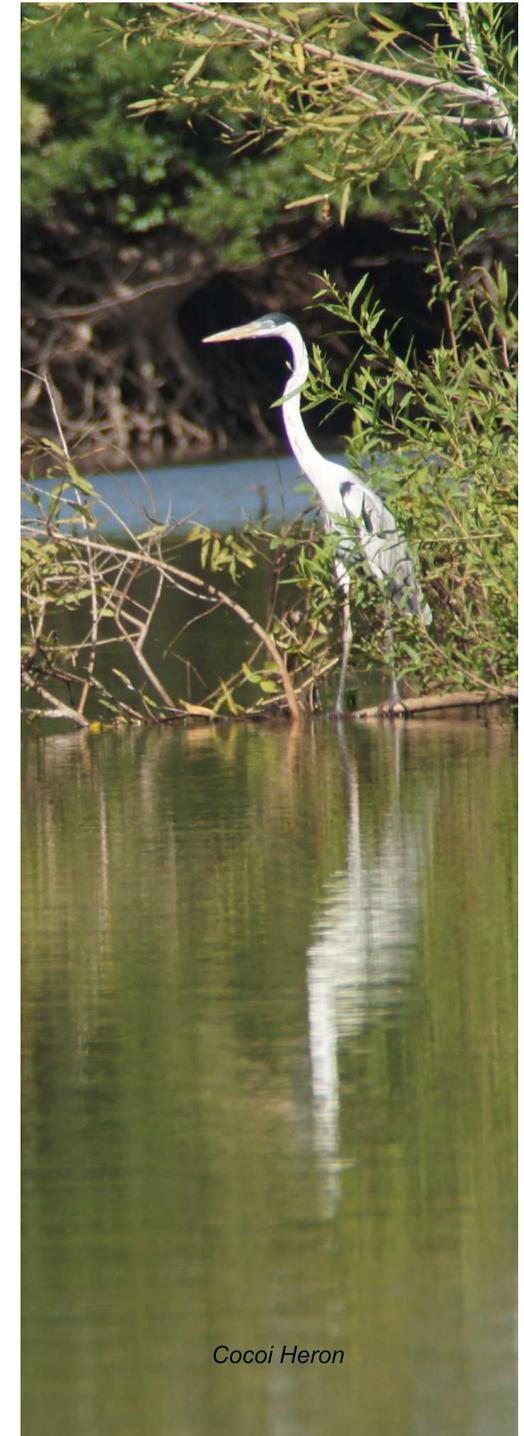
Piranha fishing, reasonably successfully so

I didn't let that drag me down; the waters were indeed crystal clear and filled with fish and a tapir, the food was great and the hammocks were gently swinging, and it was my birthday! And so, we all went out for a celebratory dinner, where I sampled the local reptile (cayman) and happened to go to a free booze-tasting (Taboa, the cinnamon liquor of the region).

Getting in the pool is a great way to treat a slight hangover. Getting in a natural pool is greater. Getting in a natural pool through means of zip-lining and trampoline is greater still. Doing so with the new acquaintances from the other truck is even greater still, so that's what I did.

But Pantanal beckoned, and we heeded. A sight to behold, I'd imagine, seeing a caravan of sorts with two big-ass overlanding trucks, orange following yellow. Eventually we reached our christmas destination, Estancia Santa Clara, in the Pantanal, after having travelled the last hour or so on in places muddy dirt roads in a bumpy 4x4. The area has some of the greatest biodiversity in the world, what with the differing and versatile biotopes and all. Most animals you'd normally associate with South America (barring llamas, marsupilamis and alpacas) can be found here: Tucan, capybara, parrots, tapirs and jaguars. And piranhas. The toothy little carnivores roam the waters, and so we set out for some piranha-fishing. Baiting with pieces of beef, the nibbles were obvious but cautious, and hooking the little munchers proved tricky. I caught one, though (far from everyone did), but in a way they caught me as well. As the bigger ones stay in deeper waters, a good way to reach is to wade out a bit. So there I was, waist-deep in piranha-infested waters, with caymans circling about and baby piranhas nibbling at my feet. The wilderness was explored; by boat, by car, by foot and by horse.

And the wildlife was there for anyone to see and photograph: Caymans, capybaras, howler monkeys, deer, coaties and more birds than I can word. Herrons, vultures, storks, kingfishers, you name it. But the highlight came just as we were heading back towards the estancia for christmas dinner after a night safari: A jaguar. And I don't mean the high-end car. The big cat. Well, this specimen was rather small, it being a youngling



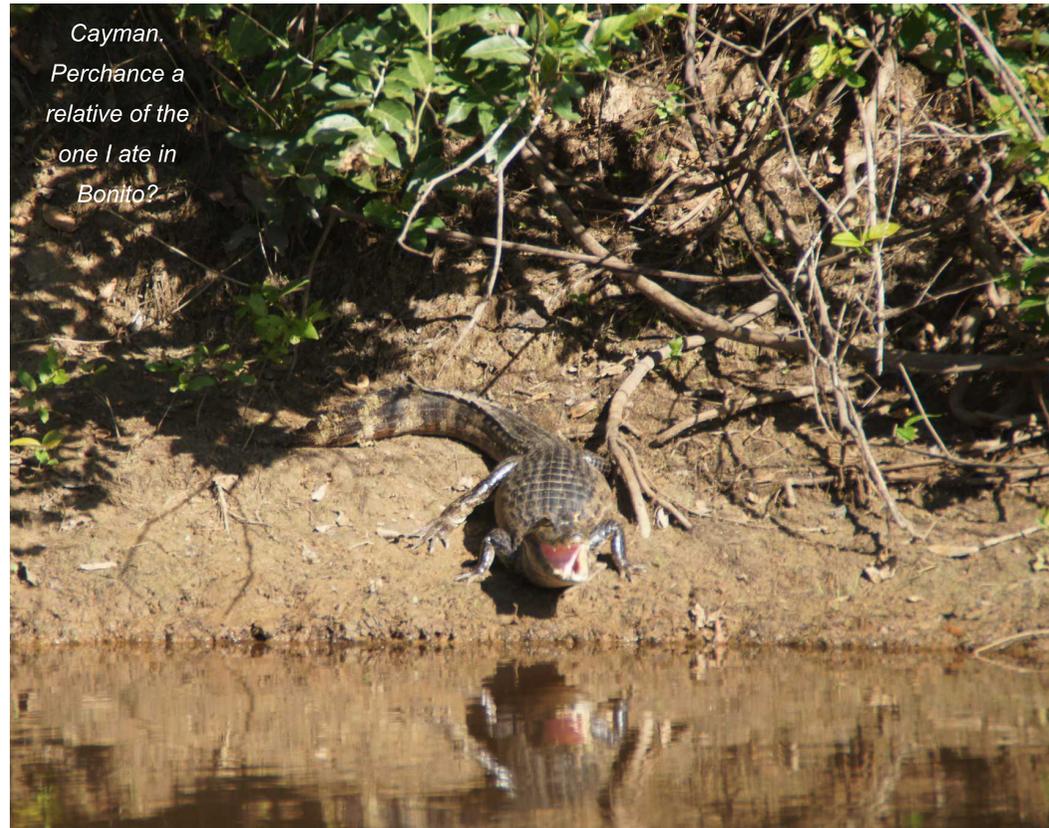
Cocoi Heron



The Fisher King is one of my favourite Terry Gilliam films. The King fisher is one of my favourite birds.



Howler monkey. Though this guy (yes, it's a male; the females are brown, whereas the males are black) is silent at the moment.



Cayman. Perchance a relative of the one I ate in Bonito?



Capybara in the Pantanal



Leaving the Oasis gang, to go to a servo for christmas day feasting



Leaving the Pantanal, to go to a servo for christmas day feasting

and all, but still. Unfortunately it was too dark to take a photo. Christmas was spent with friends, new and newer. The day before christmas eve, a tradition died, or at least got put on hold: I didn't watch *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. However, a new tradition might have emerged, by means of watching *Love, Actually*. Come christmas eve, a spread of meats, including peccary and turkey, was downed with the local brew, payed for by an ingenious system of beads, so as to not needing to bring the wallet to the pool area. The currency, obviously, was coined beadibobs. With no access to Swedish telly, I bemoaned the lack of Donald Duck, but Zeb made a good duck impersonation, so all was well. We were chilling in the pool, with beers, after all. The festivities included painting fingernails in various christmas symbols (I got a christmas tree and what I first assumed was a christmas lobster, but upon further investigation turned out to be a reindeer) and singing karaoke. *I Just Called...* and *I Can See Clearly* were on the machine, interpreted by myself and various yellow truckies

Unfortunately *Fairytale of NY* wasn't available, so we did that one a capella. And thus, the hottest christmas I've experienced was celebrated.

On christmas day, which would be the actual day for celebrating christmas for the rest of the truck, we set off for a long day's drive, camping by a service station for the night, having a traditional christmas spread of crackers, cheese, salami, grapes, the works, and handed out our secret santa presents. With a budget of 5 brazziebobs or less, it was more about shits and giggles than actual thoughtful gifts; constantly smoking Sam got a lighter, bald man Jack got a hairbrush, and Pythonite me got a parrot pen, ready to be knocked on desks and screamed at. And just like that, x-mas had come and gone and we set off towards the coast.

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that there are in fact only three species of bird: tweety-bird, duck and eagle. The tweety-birds are small and feed off breadcrumbs brought to them by retired citizens, ducks are any birds in or by water, and eagles are big carnivores that will poke your eyes out given a chance.

The salty pressure of coastal waters

Paraty, State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Tuesday, December 30, 2014

To summarize: I dove.

It took two long driving days, but finally the truck came to a halt at our penultimate destination, Paraty by the Atlantic. A small town by the sea, with an old town centre with cobbled streets and horse carriages. And from its pier, a vast amount of boats was ready to take tourists out to the archipelago. Some small, some big, some of which offered free caiprinhas, so obviously we chose that one. Jumping from the boat's roof deck with pool noodles and waterproof cameras, it was nice to once again feel the saltiness of sea water.

Upon arrival back on land, to much delight, was the return of the yellow truck. There was a challenge of beer (and other beverages) pong, orange truck vs yellow, and Oz vs the world. We were defeated in

both occurrences, but who weeps for that; the purpose of beer pong is hardly to win. Soon the raindrops started falling, and what better idea then, than to get in the ocean waves?

The next morning was an important one; We had to be at a certain place in town at 9, and I needed to wake Zeb up at 8:30.

Eventually we got in the taxi and headed off for the dive shop. Despite my three hour walking, phoning, checking and doublechecking the day before, our booking apparently had fell through. No matter, there were still places left, and off to the marina we went. All other diver's were Brazilians, and so Zeb and I got our own English-speaking dive guide. Betty from Argentina was enthused and very sweet, and soon the boat set sail, bearing west by southwest, towards Ilha dos Meros. Since it was my first dive in quite some time, I left my camera onboard, in order to have complete control, to much chagrin. Fairly poor visibility,

but awesome rocks, fishes and starfish. And suddenly, a wreck appeared: a plane wreck (20-seater or similar) lay underwater, and I longed for my camera. Even moreso, as we turned past some rocks and lo and, indeed, behold: A Christ the Redeemer! A man-sized copy of the more famous ones in Cusco and Rio, it stood there on the bottom of the sea, arms out-stretched, all covered in corals, algae and kelp. How he got there is anyone's guess;



The free Caipirinha boat trip also featured lots of swimming



Dive buddies



Diving out of Paraty: Starfish



Boats boats BOATS!

I suppose Jesus's magical walking-on-water powers suddenly stopped functioning. The second dive proved less awesome, but with some cool rock trenches and the fact that my camera was there to document my constant travel companion's first dive, it was all OK.

Back at the marina, Betty offered Zeb and me a ride into town in her hippiesque Fiesta. As we hadn't really seen town, the Argentinian, who had lived the last 14 months in Paraty, showed us around the cobbled streets.

She told us the piratey history of the town (at one point it was comparable to the Caribbean in terms of pirate activity), how it now is the town with most homicides per capita in Brazil, showed us the awesomest model boat shop ever and joined us for drinks. I bought my first ever flip-flops (or thongs, if you will), and she drove us back to our campsite, in time for dinner.

A chat with two of the yellow truckies, it turned out that they had a non-stop, 42 hour bus ride from Rio to BA later, and lamented the upcoming boredom. I promised to make a list of stuff to do to be entertained on a busride that long, and finished it on the truck to Rio, ready to be delivered on our upcoming mutual New Year's Eve festivities. But that's a different story.

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that in the Tupi (the local indigenous people) language 'Paraty' means 'river of fish'. As the word is also identical to the old-timey Portuguese word 'paraty', meaning 'pirate', many a hardened pirate captain not fluent in Tupi thought that to mean that the town and it's bay was a free-for-all pirate stronghold, thus explaining its importance in pirate history.

Rio de Janeiro, State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
Sunday, January 4, 2015

To summarize: I went to Rio, partied in the new year on Copacabana, saw yet another Redeemer, and experienced the extreme polarity in richness-poverty.

The explosive crowdedness of humid January

It's not the biggest city in Brazil, neither is it the capitol. But Rio de Janeiro is undoubtedly the most well-known, the most visited and possibly, nay probably, the most vibrant. Even moreso for the major festivities, the Carnival and New Years. An estimated 2 million people flock the various beaches of Rio for the last day of the year, and 2014 saw me as one of them.

A scenic drive along the coast brought the orange truck and its passengers from the home of pirates to the home of party. 'Ooohs' and 'Aaahs' were exclaimed upon viewing some big statue atop a mountain, far off in the distance. The streets grew busier, the buildings grew denser, and soon we disembarked the orange vessel for the very last time. The time for repacking was now; no more camping



Carioca Aqueduct



Lapa/Santa Teresa, Rio

At the Copa....



....Copacabana



gear or hiking boots were needed, and several items of clothing had to find their way to a laundrymaster, stat.

'Twas the night before New Years, and officially the last day of the tour, except for those who were to continue on to Cusco. As such, a farewell dinner was had, even if almost all were going to stay in Rio until after New Years.

On New Year's Eve, I switched to another hostel, as my trip with Dragoman was technically over. Moving to the bustling and hip Lapa district up north, it turned out that Matthew had his new accomodation just a few blocks away. After settling in, it was about time to get ready for the night's

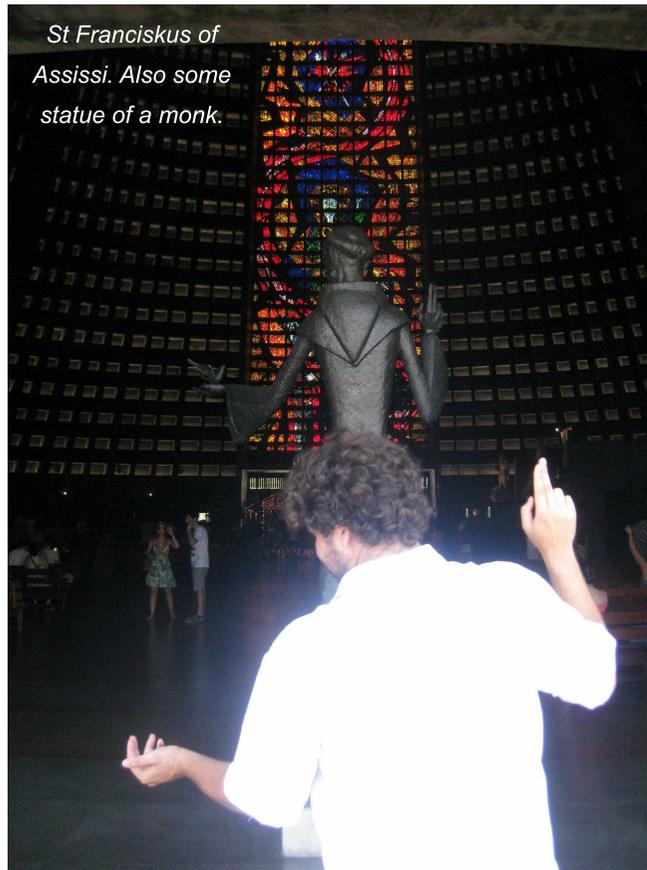
festivities. A seven course menu was set, I collected my tux at the dry cleaners and walked into my travel humidor in search of a fitting 12-o'clock-cigar. No, but seriously, a new year party at any of the beaches in Rio has its own set of musts and shoulds, and we were heading to the busiest of them all: Copacabana. It's BYO, although stalls and vendors cover the area. And as a tradition, or old charter, or something, NY celebrations should be in white. I already had my white boarders and singlet, but set out to buy some more suitable white shit, such as a dressshirt, a hat and a waistcoat. I found the booze, and a hat, for as little as 10 brazziebobs, but scored naught on the rest. Plans had been made on meeting the others at a certain time and place, but there were still time to kill, so we went to a nearby dive for a beer. The Brazilians are very friendly and talkative, and don't really care if us gringos don't speak a word of Portuguese other than 'Cerveja' and 'Obrigado'. We had an entire conversation with an emotional roller-coaster of a man, using sign

language, photos and business cards; first he was exalted over his 7 year old son, then grieving his dead mum (or possibly wife), then proud of his sign-making business, then cheerful because it was new years.

Arriving at the decided meetingpoint on time,



A farewell to the Dorsettians



St Franciskus of Assissi. Also some statue of a monk.

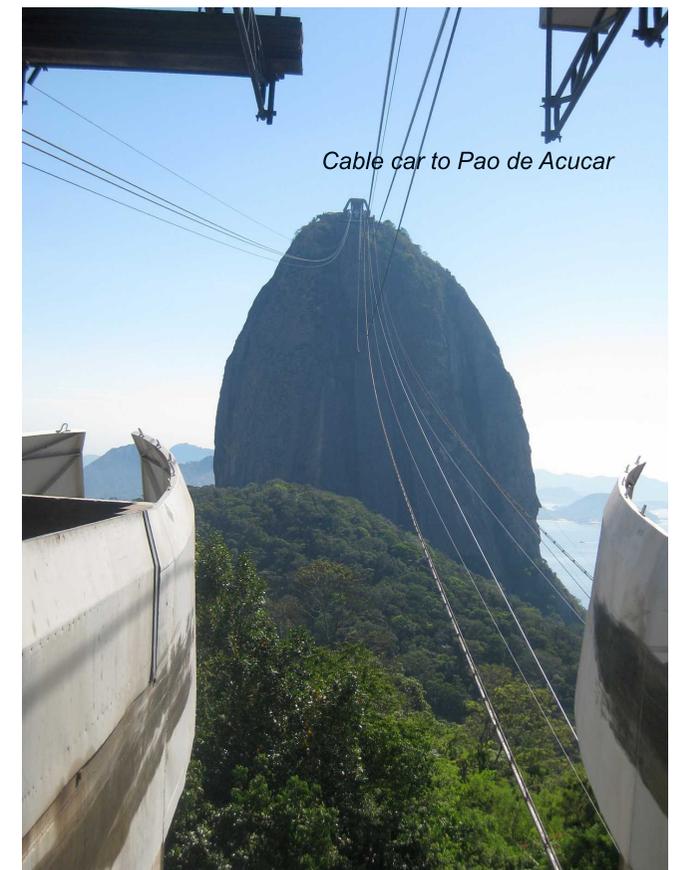
others soon emerged, and we felt eager to head out on the beach, an idea shared with an awful lot of others. As it were, the couples stayed on the footpath, whereas our young single hip people hit the sand, thus dividing the rather large group into more sufficient portions. A different New Year's than usual it was; no dinner, no fancy clothing, but instead heaps of sand and fun conversations. At the strike of midnight, I popped my baby Chandon (champagne is still a must on NYE), there were hugs and kisses all around, and the most magnificent fireworks imaginable exploded in the night sky above the ocean waves. On the party went until it was time to go home. Getting hold of a taxi on New Year's is tricky enough in ordinary cities,

but in Rio, by Copacabana, one might just as well hope to find a functioning teleportation device. And so, we walked. On and on we walked, northwards through tunnels and past street food vendors, on streets and through parks. Some in flipflops (or thongs if you will), some in someone else's thongs (or flipflops if you will), some in the odd pair and some barefoot. Thongs are easily lost in the sand. Northwards we walked until we found operating taxis, and all and sundry made it back home safely. On New Year's Day, or International Pizza Day as it's also known as, all was quiet.

I ventured a very strenuous hike among the extremely steep streets of Lapa and Santa Teresa, in search of a decent pizza place, which I found by Arco de Lapa, the big white aqueduct turned street art gallery. However, the day was far from over. The Dragoman truck had left early morn, but most of us were still around. As Pauline and Anthony were to leave the next day, and the rest of us were spread over town, left to our own devices, we met up at the rooftop bar of Windsor, with an excellent view of Copacabana and surroundings, for farewell drinks. One by one, two by two, my fellow co-travellers wandered off, until just me, Matthew and Carl remained. Heading out to a bar in Ipamena, I had the most frightening taxi ride: The windscreen was partly covered by a tv, that was on. Hardly had we gotten in the cab until the driver offered us weed, and as it turned out, cab driver was just his bread job; he was a DJ. Safe to say, I felt relieved once we arrived at our destination. The night ended fairly early, though, as the next morning had touristy shit on the agenda.

There are many sights and many queues to lo, behold and wait in when visiting Rio, especially during the busiest, barring carnival times, time of the year. Luckily I was at this point so much buddies with those in the yellow truck that I got to go with them on a city tour, where pre-arranged tickets and

the power of small, organised groups let us swiftly pass the humongous lines stretching from the major tourist spots. First up was Sugarloaf mountain (Pao de Acucar), and its cable cars. Towering high above its surroundings, the views from atop are excellent, and the camera went clickity-click, sometimes just focusing on the city and landscapes sprawling beneath, sometimes with me, Snoops and/or my friends from the yellow truck obstructing or enhancing the view. In the scorching heat, many a bottles of water were drunk, and after Pao de Acucar, it was a relief to get in the relative coolness of the Metropolitan Cathedral of San Sebastian. With the outside hideously designed in concrete, to the geeky resembling a Dalek, the inside was vast



Cable car to Pao de Acucar



Clockwise from top left:

Possibly the second coolest Christ the Redeemer statue in the world. Definitely top-thirty.

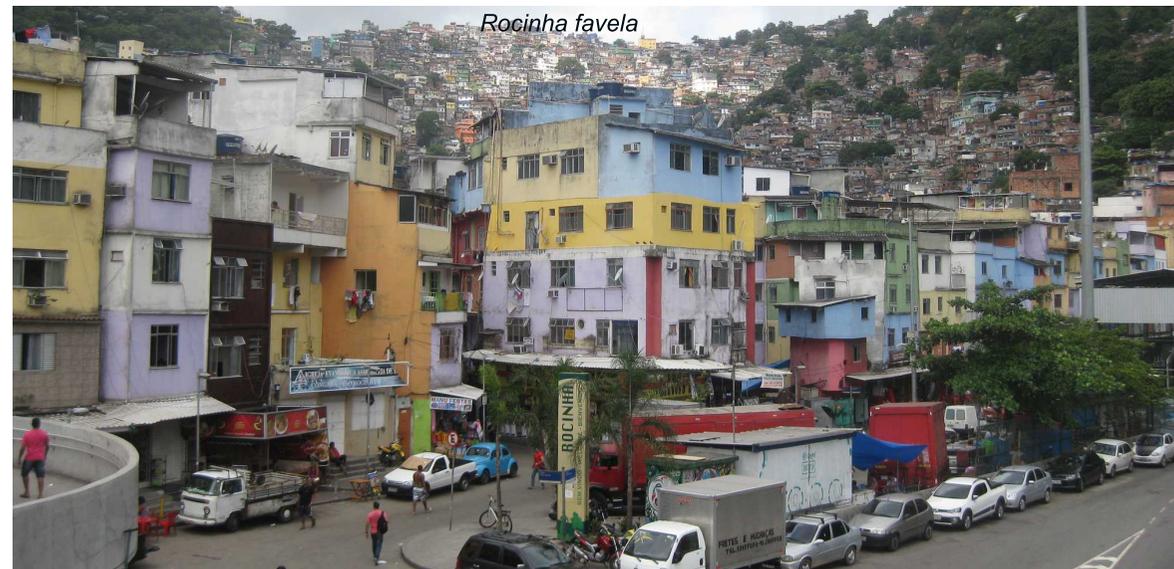
View of Rio de Janeiro from the Corcovado

Of course, one can do the Jesus pose on the escalator, with no redeemer in the background. That's actually cooler.

Crowded at Escadaria Selarón, aka the Lapa Steps



Rhythm is a dancer



Rocinha favela

and tastefully, yet lavishly decorated. The designer, Edgar Foncela, meant for just that, to show that an ugly exterior can still have beauty within, where it really counts. Close by the cathedral, via the aforementioned Arco de Lapa, is Escadaria Selarón, the Lapa Steps. Covered in tiles, depicting artwork and cultural symbolism from many countries all over the world, the steps make an impressive and colourful sight. The touristy crowd subsides the higher up you climb, so it's definitely worth it, ascending all the way up, Rocky-style (Rocky's tile?).

The most famous landmark of Rio, and in fact viewed as one of the seven modern wonders of the world, is of course the iconic 30+8 metre Jesus statue atop Corcovado. The timing was off for our little minibus, and we had a choice of waiting three hours and take the shuttle to the top or go straight ahead and walk uphill the last bit, an ascent that reputedly would take 25-30 minutes. Most of us opted for the latter, and so started climbing. Under any other circumstances, the time estimate would be accurate or even a bit pessimistic, but in over 40 degrees heat, humidity reaching almost fog level and an extreme n00b in thongs, it did take a little longer. It was a fun climb, though, as we fantasized about the infinity pool that might or might not be found atop, complete with free caiprinhas, ice bars and waterslides. The infinity pool was, of course, not there, but other things were: A huge statue of Cristo Redentor, Christ the Redeemer (or the Reindeer, as he's sometimes jokingly referred to), and about 33 billion tourists. A third of them were doing the obligatory outstretched-arms-pose, a third were on their knees photographing the first third with Jesus in the background and a third was doing both, donning their iPhones or GoPros clutched to their selfie-sticks. Again, the view from atop was astounding, and even though drenched in sweat, we posed and snapped happily away. The walk down was obviously way less strenuous, and Winnifred and I even skippity-hopped parts of the way down.

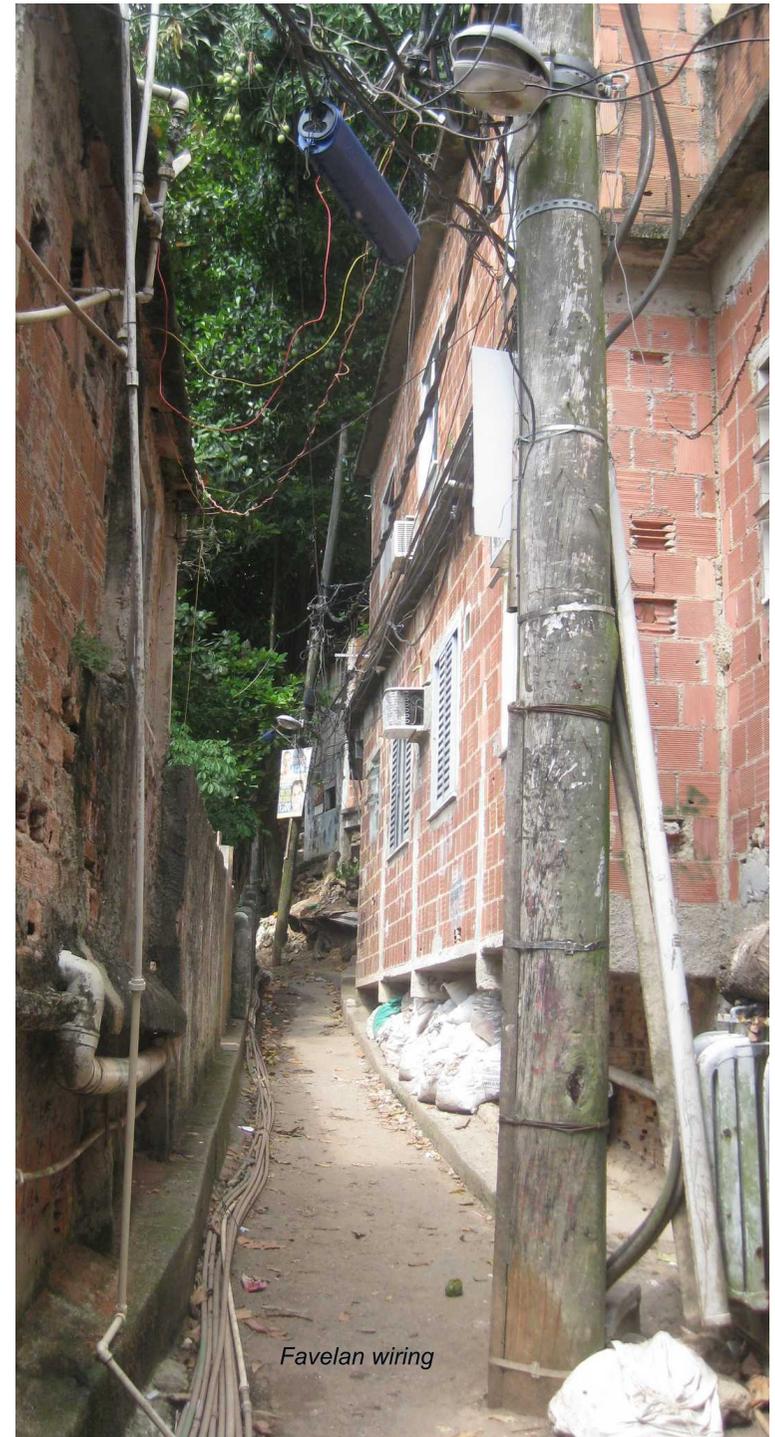
The day was not over, though. In addition to the yellow truck soon on its merry, and Lauren and Winnifred heading off on their own, it was also Tina's birthday. A combined farewell- and birthday dinner in Flamengo took place, after which, again, people dropped off into the night. The happeningest place in town is Lapa, though, and so a few of us headed there, finding

a huge outdoors serving spot and ordered in Torres de Cerveja, beer towers. The streets were filled with partying people, spontaneous samba and the occasional drum orchestra. But all good things must come to an end, and so it was farewell to those of yellow colour as well. I still had some touristy things to do, though. I booked a tour of a favela, the shantytowns of Brazil. Climbing the steep mountain sides, where land is cheap compared to the flatter areas near the ocean, the favelas are home for the low of income and education, as well as drug dealers and cartels. Rocinha was the destination for the day, and we were guided from way up top, through the narrow (and sometimes extremely narrow) alleyways mazing their way through the brick-and-mortar houses. Sampling the local delicacies, visiting an art workshop and watching a drum performance with dancing kids were parts of the tour, as well as our guide telling us about the killings and shootings and gang wars that usually take place. An experience hard to describe, as the

heat and, not least, the smell, adds to the feeling of poverty one gets of this place. Still, the inhabitants seem to take the cards they've been dealt in good humour.

As the trip was reaching an end, I went from poor Rocinha to posh Ipamena. The main goal was to shop for presents, and I found what I was looking for, and more: even Snoopy got a present, namely a pair of Snoopy-and-Woodstock thongs. With all of my shopping done, and all of my touristy shit covered, and all of my friends gone or leaving, I started mentally and physically preparing for the end of this odyssey. It has been a rollercoaster of a ride, and a trip of polar opposites: The cold of Antarctica and Altiplano and the heat of inland Brazil; the dryness of the Chilean desert and the humidity of Rio; the questionable llama knees of Bolivia and the tastiest, most tender beef in Salta; the high altitudes and the low, the posh hotels and basic camping. I love rollercoasters, and this has been a hell of a ride.

Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that a barge from which they shot fireworks for new year's caught on fire this time. It happens ever so often, in fact so often that it has become a tradition, or an old charter, or something, for the partying people on the beach to make bets on if and when a barge will catch fire.



Favelan wiring



Up the sugartop



The various anecdotes of backpackery awards

To summarize: Awards and special mentions

Any and all trips have their ups and downs (in this case, quite literally) and their collection of amusing, tedious, pleasurable or downright gross moments and incidents. Accomodations, scenery, food, professionalism, amenities and people met along the way vary greatly, and that's part of what embiggens a trip, and therefore the traveller. As such, I always hand out (completely virtual) awards in a number of categories, The Backpack Award. But before I do, let me list a few incidents, anecdotes, idioms and so forth and so on etc etc that helped shaping this trip. It's a tradition, or an old charter, or something.

The trip's....

....most frequently yelled name: **Andy!**

....unluckiest phone: **Matthew's iphone had a bad toilet experience.**

Really bad.

....worst guide: **The "snorkelling" "guide" in Rio Prata**

....biggest time optimist: **Carl and/or his dad**

....keenest eyesight: **Whether the driver or the guide, but whoever spotted the jaguar in the Pantanal night**

....biggest city: **As I flew in to Sao Paulo, the city sprawled as far as the eye could see, all the way to the horizon, creating an almost Coruscantian sensation**

....fish: **Piranha**

....bird: **Gentoo penguin**

....rodent: **Capybara, or giant guinea pig**

....christmas wish: **A hippopotamus. Nothing but a hippopotamus will do.**

....sleepyhead: **Our resident aussie doctor**



....colour: **The toothpaste menthol blue of the icebergs**

....clothing: **Lifejacket**

....head wear: **Gaicho hat**

....foot wear: **Thongs (or flipflops, if you will)**

....most unexpected party: **Truck breakdown at a service station, people got their drinks on right after lunch, because.... why not?**

....pleasant surprise: **Wasn't ill for more than a day, and that wasn't that severe**

....trail of clothes: **Carl's**

....currency: **[country]bobs**

....spanish teacher: **Ellena insisted on us having the entire conversation in Spanish. Porteñan Spanish, even.**

....team colour (sports): **Blue-white. Not only my baseball cap, jersey, the flags of Uruguay and Argentina, but of course also Racing, who won the championships while we were in BA**

....team colour (trucks): **Yellow, white and orange**

....innovative idioms: **'Evolutionize', 'linguistic sponge', 'snorist', '[descriptive] shit', and so forth, and so on, in that manner, etc etc**

AND THE BACKPACK AWARDS FOR 2014-2015 GO TO:



The **Cotton Backpack** (for best accomodation) - **Hostal Santa Lapa, Rio**

The **Plush Backpack** (for best transport) - **Speedboat by the falls**

The **Glass Backpack** (for best hang) - **Santa Clara in the Pantanal** (other nominee: the game room in the estancia)

The **Rubber Backpack** (for best adventure experience) - **Antarctica**

The **Copper Backpack** (for most price-worthy experience) - **Free winetasting in La Cafayate**

The **Brick Backpack** (for best city) - **Rio** (other nominee: Cordoba)

The **Granite Backpack** (for best landscape) - **Antarctica**

The **Terry Backpack** (for best swim) - **'It's starting to rain' - 'Let's jump in the ocean!'**

The **Fur Backpack** (for best nature experience) - **Pantanal**

The **Khaki Backpack** (for best guide) - **Betty**

The **Silver Backpack** (for best eating) - **Steak, grilled to perfection (extremely rare), served with mash and a nice malbec at Viejo Jack's, Salta**

The **Malt Backpack** (for best drink) - **Boj smoked porter** (other nominees: any malbecs)

The **Gunpowder Backpack** (for best fireworks) - **New Year's in Rio**

The **Celluloid Backpack** (for best photo) - **Old nan peeking out from behind a wall**

The **Jade Backpack** (for best cultural experience) - **Favela tour**

The **Velour Backpack** (for softest experience) - **The Pantanal was as much about hanging in the pool and hammocking as wildlife**

The **Calico Backpack** (for best surprise) - **An underwater redeemer**

The **Magma Backpack** (for hottest chick) - **A certain dive guide**

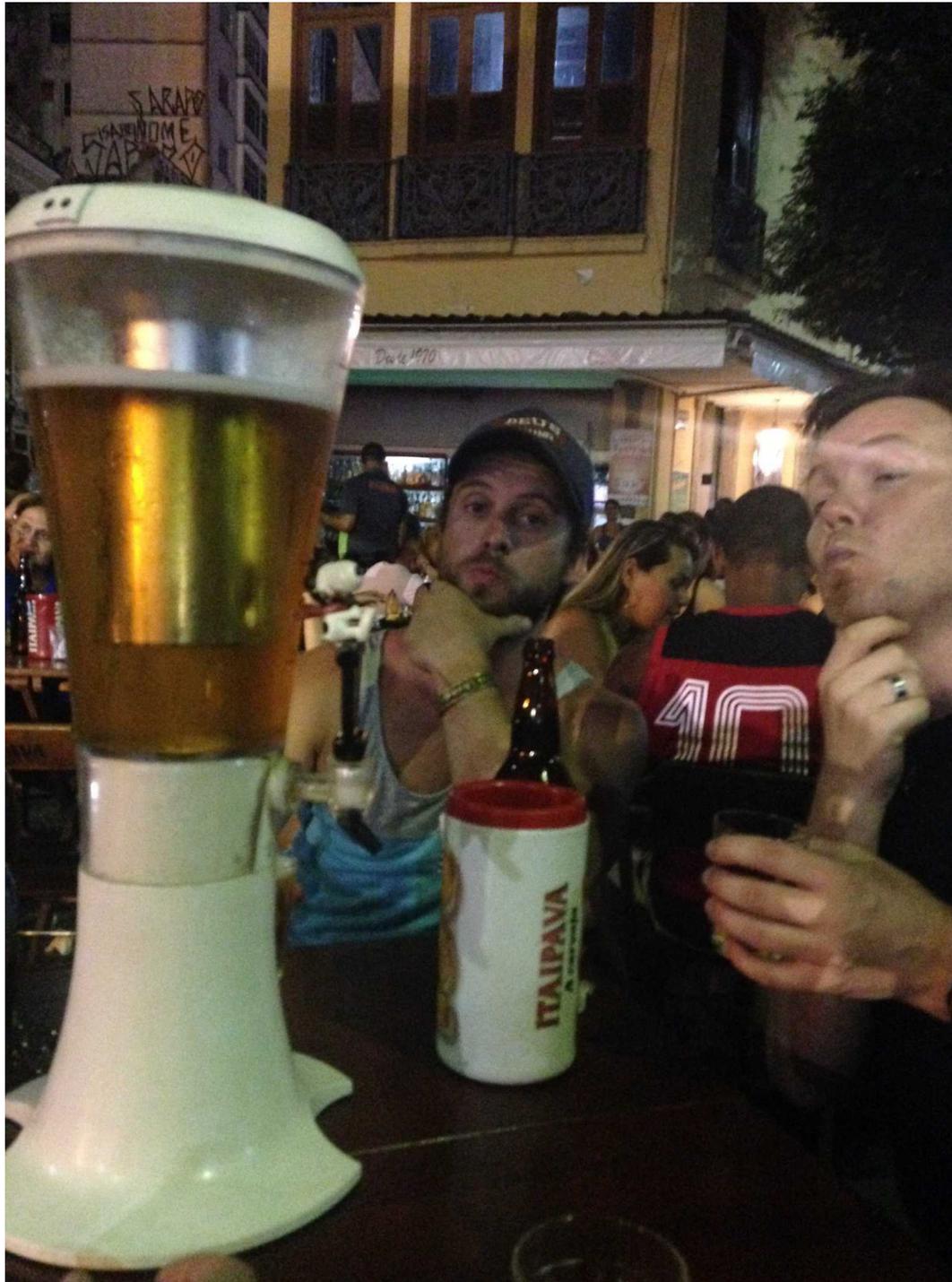
The **Vinyl Backpack** (for song of the tour) - **Hey! Jiggity-jig: It's "Dominic the Donkey"** (other nominees: "I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas", "Fairytale of New York", "At the Copacabana")

The **Worsted Backpack** (for best penguin) - **The cheeky lone Gentoo who fearlessly walked straight into our polar camp and waddled away, the way Gentoos do**

and last, but not least:

THE FROZEN GOLD BACKPACK (for best experience in total, Antarctica) - **Polar Plunge**

THE MELTED GOLD BACKPACK (for best experience in total, South America) - **Estancia in Argentina**



Fun factoid: It is well-known, to those who know it well, that 'factoid' means a statement many assume as a true fact, but is in reality not. In similar vein, 'tabloid' means anything that looks like a table but really isn't and 'polaroid' essentially means 'tropical'.





Are those banjos I hear? Nah, this South is so much deeper than that. The Earth has seven continents, and one is vastly different from the rest. There were no polar bears, no igloos and no Father Christmases where I headed, though. Quite the opposite. The best way to get there was via South America, and while I was in the neighbourhood I thought I might as well pick up where I left, roughly four years prior, and continue the trek through planos, pampas and pantanals. As icing on this southern exposure cake, I got to spend New Year's in one of the world's most commonly recognised party cosmopolis, Rio. And that's the story of how I completed my continent checklist.

