

700 km through Chubut

The Fontana Riflemen Memorial Horse Trek

In the spring of 1885, an expedition of thirty riders, led by Argentine Commander Luis Jorge Fontana, crossed what is now the Province of Chubut from the town of Rawson on the Atlantic coast to the Andes in the west. They were accompanied by almost three hundred horses laden with firearms and supplies necessary for the long trek over a vast and unknown territory.



Near Paso del Sapo.

This intrepid group was called *Los Rifleros* (The Riflemen), a group composed mostly of Welsh settlers who had emigrated to Patagonia twenty years earlier, joined by a few Argentines and men of other nationalities.

After riding for just over a month, the party reached *Cwm Hyfryd*, the Pleasant Valley, today called *16 de Octubre* –an area which now holds the towns of Trevelin and Esquel. It was the fertile, beautiful western land that the Welsh settlers had heard so often being praised by their “brothers of the desert,” the Tehuelche natives. As a reward for their endeavour, the Argentine government awarded a square league (6,250 acres) to each of the expedition members, which enabled each to bring their families from the east and start a new Welsh colony beside the Andes. It wasn’t long before this new settlement played a decisive role in settling the sour disagreement that Argentina and Chile were having over their border. It was agreed that the British Crown should arbitrate, and the dispute was resolved in 1902 by applying a “real occupation” criterion: the Welsh settlers chose to live under the Argentine flag, and therefore the land was awarded to Argentina.

Every 24th of November, today’s Chubut Riflemen Company, an association formed by descendants of the original 1885 *Rifleros*, set off from Trevelin on a memorial ride to the nearby *Sierra Colorada* cliffs, the heights from where the original explorers viewed the valley for the first time. The thirty Riflemen dress up in period clothes for the occasion. Donning leather hats and jackets, they lead pack horses and carry their rifles strapped on their backs. Many other riders come along to enjoy the spectacle, and, in some years, the number of riders can reach one hundred, including some distinguished visitors, such as Sir Robin Christopher, the British Ambassador to Argentina and his wife in 2002. The local *Gaucha* Association never fails to participate.

Three years ago, when we were working on our book *Rocky Trip*, Sergio Sepiurka and I were invited to participate in this event. On that occasion, I was there just to get some good photographs for our book. Since then, I have developed a habit of joining their party every year, just for the fun of the ride itself and to enjoy



Towards Arroyo Pescado.



In the background: the Fontana Cliff.

its wonderful atmosphere.

November 2005 saw the 120th anniversary of Commander Fontana's expedition, and somebody came up with the idea of re-enacting the whole trip from Rawson to Trevelin –following as closely as possible the original *Rifleros'* route, a total distance of over 700 kilometres (about 450 miles). This trip had been made before in small groups, but this time the goal would be to gather all thirty riders needed to equal the numbers in the original expedition.

Many logistical problems had to be resolved before we could start our trek from Rawson. All of us lived in the Andes region, so our horses would have to be transported by truck to the Atlantic coast; various sanitary and legal requirements had to be fulfilled before the animals could be sent there; we had to place enough bales of good hay at locations on our way where we anticipated there would be no available pasture; unlike the 1885 Riflemen, we could no longer organise hunting parties to acquire *guanaco*, *mara*, and *ostrich* meat or eggs, so our daily meals having to be provided for in other ways.

After these and a great many other details had been sorted out, there were finally twenty of us who were committed to making the trip. Our forty horses were shod and blood-tested at home, all the associated legal forms were completed, and then the animals were trucked to the grounds of Rawson Zoo. There, they were unloaded and left to forage and graze under the fixed stares of the caged lions and tigers (of whose presence they curiously took no notice). Following a generous contribution by Chubut's Culture Secretary, a team of the *Gendarmería* (Border Police Corps) was assigned to cook our meals and provide us with drinking water for the entire duration of the trip.

Our band comprised riders of all ages (teenagers to pensioners) and occupations and was enriched by new-found companions from many walks of life: ranchhands, cattle breeders, public servants, businessmen and many ordinary working men. For almost a month, we were all focused on the same thing: to become, with pride and honour, *Rifleros*. We were all able riders, but, beyond that, some were very good horsemen and were a permanent source of knowledge for those of us who were not as experienced. We were even accompanied by a young Welsh actor, who was an enthusiastic participant and who brought a camera to record a travelogue of our trip.

The party set off on November 1st and followed the road that snakes past the myriad of small farms that dot the lower valley of the Chubut River. Many people came to their farm gates to greet us, some displaying visibly emotions occasioned by the Welsh-Argentine blood coursing in their veins. We passed through idyllic landscapes of alfalfa plantations and fruit orchards, but also had to withstand inconveniences of the heat, and, in the evening, the clouds of mosquitoes that attacked us and the horses with equal passion. We covered 50 kilometres on that first day, reaching our overnight stop on the outskirts of Gaiman after a twelve-hour ride. Just before getting there, we surprised the local people by parading through the streets of the town, with the President of the *Rifleros'* Association disporting a large Argentine flag, as is customary on these occasions.

From then on –a bit unexpectedly for some of us– a competitive spirit of the ride emerged: early in the morning, he who was most adroit at striking camp and saddling up was on his way ahead of the rest, and he who rode a fast-paced horse would make good use of it, sometimes reaching the day's destination a long time before those with less nimble mounts. This imposed a hard and stimulating rhythm to our trek, which, over time, I learned to appreciate and enjoy.

Some days we covered just 25 kilometres, other days more. Some days we rested gratefully. On the leg from Las Chapas to Las Plumas (which formed part of the famous Edwin's Crossing, where water and pasture are very scarce), we set our one-day record of 70 km. As one would have anticipated, given that we were in Patagonia, we weathered strong headwinds, rain and even hail. On sunny days we had also to endure the fierce heat radiated by the vertiginous cliffs that line part of the way. Unlike the early trips when the countryside was open, fences erected to pen in livestock and mark farm boundaries frequently forced us to stick to the road, rather than roam freely. We followed paved highways and desolate gravel roads, most of the time with

no traffic in view. For much of the time, the stony hard shoulders were very hard on our horses' hooves. At night, some slept under tarpaulins on their saddle blankets, while others pitched small tents. All our stopovers are shown in the map ([download](#)).

Our fellow riders and their ages were as follows:

Eduardo Andino Miguens - 67 (President of the Rifleros Association)

Jorge Wilson Thomas - 62

Eduardo Antonio Miguens - 39

Omar Itxassa - 52 (our guide)

E. Gabriel Davies - 36

Trevor Williams - 68

Héctor Garzonio - 77

Mario A. Miguens - 37

Oscar Kansas Jones - 57

Nantlais Evans - 71

Miguel Julián - 24

Vicente Evans - 76

Guatavo Morales - 34

Harry Lukens - 23

Marcos Pinto - 44

Damián Evans - 18

Tomás Rosales - 38

Matthew Rhys - 31 (the Welsh actor)

José Calvo - 58

Jorge Miglioli - 57

Ronal Eibion Davies - 42 (who came along on foot)



At the end of the trek.

We reached Trevelin just over three weeks after we left Rawson, in time for the November 24th ceremony and the celebrations and parade on the 25th. For me, the trip was an unforgettable experience. I learned to appreciate the beauty of the high towers of multi-coloured rock and even the barren steppe, with the slow rhythm of the horse's pace, attaining only one kilometre each eight to ten minutes. At that speed, as time passes by, one starts to feel as if, rather than a mere spectator, one is a part of the landscape itself. *Las Plumas*, *Cañadón Carbón*, *Los Altares*, *Piedra Parada* and the vast, lonely plateau assumed a new dimension, the very same one the pioneers knew more than a century ago. I also learned that nothing compares with sharing so much exertion with people if one wants to discover their true nature. And I was surprised at the love that slowly grows within oneself towards one's horses. No matter how much one had sworn at them when they got skittish or stubborn on some difficult passages, they were always our noble and indispensable partners in this demanding trek. Tired as we were at the end of each leg, their welfare was always our first priority. Only after ensuring they had drunk clean water and had enough grass to graze or alfalfa hay to eat, would we take care of ourselves. The gentle whicker they murmured when they saw us coming with a bale of green alfalfa was like music to my ears.

Back home, several days passed before I could readapt myself fully to normal life. Later, I was not surprised to hear that some of my companions felt the same way.

Jorge Miglioli

P.S. At the end of our trip, the November 24th ceremony was held at the historic No.18 School (the place where in 1902 the Welsh settlers stated their choice of nationality to the British arbitrator). It was raining heavily and no one could expect our audience to walk up the steep, muddy hills just to watch us getting our certificates from the provincial and municipal authorities on the top of Fontana Cliff. Nevertheless, a documentary had



The author.

been shot during the trip and the producer deemed that the final scene of we Riflemen viewing the valley from the heights was essential. So on April 22, 2006, eight of us saddled up to finish off the trip. We had a good asado (a lamb roasted on the spit) at Elmer Pugh's farm and afterwards set off. It was a sunny autumn afternoon. The view from up there was indeed spectacular, with the ripe valley glowing like gold. The scenes were finally shot with the aid of a helicopter, the only intruding sound in an otherwise totally peaceful landscape.
