

# TO PUERTO MONTT

Everything seemed to come to life as the bus traveled south. After leaving the harsh, dry Atacama Desert, I was now on a bus traveling through the most wonderful, lush landscape.

It reminded me of the United States Midwest. No, it was more like Europe with its metric speed limit signs, overpass signs, and lack of billboards.

Ruta 5, the southern section of the Pan American highway, was now four lanes wide with a median. Evergreens and beech trees gave cover as the cows and sheep grazed behind barbed-wire fences all under a heavy grayish sky.

I had touched this road three, four, possibly five times on this trip, the first time in South Dakota whilst on the bicycle where it was formally called the Meridian Highway and now known as US-81. Then again I traveled down the Pan-American in Central America, Ecuador, and Peru. Now here, ever more south, entering the “Land of the Big Feet”<sup>40</sup> 19,000+/- miles, the Pan-American highway is the longest road in the world, interrupted only by the Darién Gap between Panama and Colombia.

Buildings switched from partially constructed brick and stucco mud-colored boxes to wood-sided buildings with tin roofs. Void of

<sup>40</sup> It has been noted by Ferdinand Magellan, that Patagonia was populated by giants.

any unwanted artwork, there was a noticeable lack of garbage. Even the vehicles seemed cleaner.

Approaching Puerto Montt to the east was Osorno volcano, capped with snow. The tree line was lower here, around 3100'. Bolivia boasted the highest tree line in the world at 17,100'.

To compare:

- Rocky Mountain National Park: 12,000'
- Swiss Alps: 7200'
- Urals: 3600'

## PUERTO MONTT

From Puerto Montt, I was roughly 950 miles away from Ushuaia. I was closing in on the end of the road, quite literally. Ushuaia is where the Pan-American highway ends. That would be it, I would have traveled the entire length of South America north to south. Next stop Antarctica.

Then what?

It's hard to think about returning back the United States when there was so much to explore... but truth be told. There comes a time, many of them actually, when exploring becomes a task, and the task becomes a job, and you don't want a job so you have the urge to just stop. If only for two weeks or perhaps a month. Take some time to get to know the locals, build a routine, find out what exactly it is you have been lugging around in your rucksack.

Locate a quiet corner in the world to be silent. Open your

journal, review your history, remember those you have met and take time to reflect on your experiences. It is amazing how just a few notes in a journal can jog an archive of already forgotten memories.

But there is something inside you that prevents you from stopping. Perhaps curiosity with a side dish of wanderlust. You want to know what is over that hill, around this corner, in the depths of that canyon. Where is the promised land? Xanadu or Never-never land, where we may age, but we never grow up.

So you keep moving and looking and searching for adventure, a new trail, a bed to sleep for the night, a new friendship, or time alone. With all these new experiences, good—bad—indifferent, you become numb to things. Very little surprises you or shocks you. Things that would have sounded “unbelievable” become normal and acceptable. There are few stories that can be told that impress you, but there are those you meet who inspire and influence you. You and your next destination, your next decision because after all the world is amazing and you remain in awe of it all.

So I go to Antarctica and run the marathon. Then what? Retreat? Go home? Find a job, go back to what grown men are supposed to do. “Grown men worked, provided for their families, took up hobbies such as woodworking or fixing up a car from the year they were born. They maxed out their 401(k)s, went to happy hours with colleagues, and watched the nightly news with a glass of Scotch to conclude their day. Grown men spent their weekends at Home

Depot searching for hoses and light bulbs. They pretended to like their neighbor, so they could borrow their weed whacker.”<sup>41</sup>

No, I was not ready to retreat. I just needed something to pull me somewhere further away. Little did I know that that something would be a someone.

No matter, I was in Patagonia now. A distant land that I would never have imagined I'd ever have the pleasure to step foot on.

Puerto Montt sat on the northern end of Reloncaví Sound in the northern part of the Chilean fjords.

The air was cooler and crisper, and the smell of the sea was front and center.

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