



BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith
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UNDER THE PINES

When Charles Darwin, the naturalist, set foot on Uruguayan soil in July 1832, he wrote in his diary that the coastline “is very uninteresting; there is scarcely a house, an enclosed piece of ground, or even a tree, to give it an air of cheerfulness.” Scarcely a tree!

By the end of the century that Atlantic shore was no longer barren. The windswept sand dunes were now covered by forests of long-legged, sweet-smelling pine trees. And aromatic stands of eucalyptus trees were right behind them. Wafted on the salty air blown in off the sea, these heady scents made breathing a sensual pleasure. It’s a shame the *HMS Beagle* couldn’t have carried Darwin back to Maldonado at that time. He would have been astonished by the vegetation and the all-pervasive air of cheerfulness.

I grew up along that shore, in the shade of those pine trees. The coast of Uruguay arcs gracefully east and north from Montevideo, where the muddy Río de la Plata mingles with the clear blue waters of the Atlantic Ocean. A string of pristine beaches all the way to the Brazilian border were too tempting for my parents to ignore, and we camped and picnicked on all of them at some time during my youth. My mother spread an old blanket under the pines while my father, my brother, and I lugged all the bags and boxes from the car and set up our campsite, usually just in time for lunch. A devilled egg never tasted as good as it did on those beaches. Nowhere else did a cup of tea, hot and strong and sweet, go down quite as well.

Pines are evergreen, coniferous, resinous trees. They are long-lived, have thick, scaly bark, and typically grow to heights of 50 to 150 feet. The main variety introduced to Uruguay was the *Pinus pinaster*, the maritime or cluster pine, which is native to the Mediterranean region. They were, of course, deliberately planted along the coast by far-sighted people to anchor the beaches and halt the natural erosion that inevitably happens when stiff onshore breezes meet the finest, silkiest sand. Once the trees had put down roots they spread a carpet of dead pine needles that added another layer of protection for the dunes. The needles lived up to their name by pushing up through the picnic blanket and pricking bare thighs, backs, and shoulders that, in the early days of summer, were already stinging from too much exposure to the sun.

Pine trees beget pine cones, and there is nothing better for starting a fire. We always had a primus stove to boil water and do what little cooking we did when we were camping. But on evenings with no wind we sometimes built a bonfire down by the water’s edge. Dry pine cones can literally explode when they catch fire, and the flames soon engulfed pine branches, driftwood, and the sun-bleached logs we occasionally found cast up on the sand. Once the fire had burned for a little while my father scooped up some hot coals and put them under a small grill—just a simple iron frame that stood about a foot above the heat. There he cooked sausages,

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good *chorizos* my mother got from the butcher down the road from where we lived in Pocitos. When the sausages were ready they were butterfied and served in a bread roll that had been lightly toasted on the grill. As the roll was squeezed in preparation for the first bite, the juice from the *chorizo* seeped out, seasoning the bread and usually running down the hand to the wrist. We grinned at each other, chins glistening in the flickering, golden light of the fire. Life on the beach was a hedonistic affair.

We actually lived just a short walk from a beach, but since Pocitos was a well-established residential neighbourhood, instead of pine trees there was a thicket of high-rise apartment buildings across the road from the sand, Copacabana style. The coastal neighbourhoods stretching east from there to the city limits were also residential, and there were no pine trees on those beaches either. These were urban beaches, packed with people in the late afternoons and on weekends during the summer. On a scorching Saturday

or Sunday you could buy delicious hot dogs and ice-cold Cokes from wandering vendors right on the sand, it's true. But you'd be surrounded by people of all ages, with suntan lotion and brightly coloured umbrellas, some lying on towels just inches from yours, playing radios and having conversations you couldn't avoid overhearing. It was a very different experience, nothing like the serenity and splendid solitude of more remote places further up the coast, where my family usually had the whole beach to ourselves.

And there was no comparing the quality of the swimming. Once beyond the city limits the coast was bathed by the Atlantic, and the water was clean and clear. You could see every mussel shell attached to the rocks at either end of the beach as you swam over them, even without goggles. And when the tides were right the waves were perfect for some moderately ambitious surfing. In his diary, the British naturalist also noted that "in our passage to the Plata" he saw "a great shoal of porpoises, many hundred in number. The whole sea was in places furrowed by them; and a most extraordinary spectacle was presented, as hundreds, proceeding together by jumps, in which their whole bodies were exposed, thus cut the water. When the ship was running nine knots an hour, these animals could cross and re-cross the bows with the greatest ease, and then dash away right ahead." About a hundred and twenty years later, we also swam in those waters, having just as much fun as Darwin's porpoises. Then we came ashore to dry off and have a picnic under the pines.

