



Kay Ward on Operation Raleigh in Chile, becoming acquainted with the form of transport. (Photograph by Geraldine Prentice).

AN ADVENTURE IN CHILE

KAY WARD

It seems a long time now, since I struggled, on New Year's Day 1986, to Heathrow, heavily laden with rucksack, hand luggage and Operation Raleigh equipment, to join an expedition to Chile. It is even longer since I applied for, and received a generous contribution to my expenses from The Cairngorm Club.

Although principally a British/American run scheme, all nationalities are eligible, if the individual can speak English. Op.R is a 4-year round the world venture but individual venturers spend only 3 months on separate phases. Venturers from each host country are present, but in a country the size of Chile, they were far from local. I selected the S. American phase.

Among the faces peering out of the tiny skylight windows of the 'jumbo', which permitted us our first dusty red, sugar loaf panoramas of S. America, were British, Japanese, Singaporean, Hong Kong Chinese and a sole Italian. We met the Americans, Australasians and the Chileans on our arrival in Santiago, the capital of Chile.

The stated aims of Op. R are three:

- a) medical and scientific research
- b) community tasks
- c) leadership and adventure training.

To those I would add a personal fourth:

d) living, working and playing with 12 people of differing backgrounds and cultures, not all of whom spoke English, learning their different attitudes, prejudices and abilities. My group consisted of 1 Puerton Rican staff member, 5 Chileans, 2 New Zealanders, 4 English and 1 Scot - myself. My stereotypes were adjusted and sometimes reinforced. The 3 Chileans who spoke little or no English were unfortunately younger and less used to team living and had a distinctly mañana attitude to labour!

After a pause to adjust in Santiago, we had a long 65 hours journey in front of us to our first destination - Coyhaique, the main Op. R. base for S. Chile, partly by train - a rather down market orient express, partly by ferry, crowded amongst our bags on the soaking open deck. A further 8 hours by army truck, took our newly formed group to its first destination - La Tapera, about 60 houses nestled in the low Southern Andes. We emerged from our army lorry encrusted with road dust, looking as though we had travelled in a cement mixer. The village is surrounded by dusty, thorn-covered hills and forests past and present. For hundreds of miles, the 50 year old marks of the European pioneers scar the landscape, acres of stark burned woodland - clearance burning became a decade of smouldering destruction. Also, many of the Chileans are surprisingly un-Indian in their appearance - a quite different mark of the European influence!

Our first task was to resite the government owned store, from 3km

beyond the last shoddy wooden house, to a more central position, away from the dangerously potholed track which was the new road to Coyhaique - as distant as Inverness is from Aberdeen - and the nearest shopping centre - by horseback!

There were few tools, no local help and the only new materials supplied were frustratingly soft nails and cement powder. The gravel we shovelled from the river banks. The warped 20 year old wood and rusted corrugated iron we salvaged from the dismantled store, the destruction of which, with two crowbars, 1 pair of pliers, 1 hatchet and 2 buckled shovels, in 1½ days, shows the standard of construction, the state of the materials, or our superhuman strength!

The work continued for three weeks, by which time we certainly knew who the workers were. DIY was the Kiwis' forte. NDIY was the Chileans', with the British somewhere between. But we had to remember that the probable reason behind this was the selection procedure. British and New Zealanders (and other nationalities present) had chosen the challenge to raise £1400, allowing us to join an exciting expedition; we all had to be highly motivated before ever embarking. On the other hand, the Chileans mainly came from affluent families with servants perhaps, were younger, had only to raise £300 and regarded the venture as more of a holiday. The English of three of them was not good and although our Spanish left much to be desired, the fact remained that a 'them' and 'us' situation was arising. Were 'we' encouraging community living and a modicum of discipline, or were 'we' as 'they' thought, taking over without discussing anything? I felt that I had a greater burden to bear with the attentions of one of the most difficult and idle of the local venturers. He had no inclination for work or cooperation and somehow I had to instil in him some sense of pride in his community, to contribute to the common good. None of us were perfect but he had more difficulty than most, and I was faced with a discouraging problem of showing, despite the unsurmountable language barrier, by example, the standard expected. I wonder, did I succeed? Will he now work when he is weary or will he still sleep when he's overslept already? Will you hand round your treasured, really treasured chocolates, knowing that there may be none left for you to savour? It is hard, but so rewarding: that smile. Will you hungrily refuse the last piece and leave it for someone else, the giver? I struggled for two months and I am, I hope, a better person.

We had little time to ourselves - we worked like Trojans once the initial suspicions of the villagers were overcome, setting the wheels of our task in motion. "Who" I expect they thought "are these women without children, doing men's work, these foreigners?" We had occasional sanity-preserving days off, to explore the arid countryside, watched, from frameless, paneless windows and dark doorways by curious eyes as we picked paths through the scrub ... to what? - a lake, a few lonely huts, everything was new, so discovered with joy.

Eventually the store was complete and we rode through the mountain pass to Lago Verde, 50 miles to the north. The main 'road' travelled through Argentina, forbidden to those without visas. Anything military - all our food - was also forbidden, so we hid all our belongings on a tractor trailer, accompanied by one of the Chileans and left on horseback, crossing pebbled rivers, the sparkling waters of which shattered at each clattering step, beneath dark Glen Coe-like cliffs haloed by cloud, up and down rocky faces, dismounting as our saddles neared the horses' ears! I am not a horsey person but I developed quite an affection for my mount over the three days. I, nonetheless found her remarkably uncomfortable and unobliging throughout the long day.

Lago Verde was a very different, friendly little village. Though only 50m from La Tapera, and even more isolated from a shopping centre, it supported vegetable plots and gardens, had fruit trees, which, with careful bargaining and as odd gifts, supplemented our live meat *matté* and manna rations. If the meat was not dried or tinned in oil, it roamed our paddock. When killed usually by our hosts, it was skinned and smoked within one afternoon giving an unfortunately unchewable meal not unlike ageing climbing boots! *Matté* was tolerable if one enjoys tea strong enough to 'trot a mouse on' but for people like me, who give the mug no more than a passing glance at the teabag, it was a drink best avoided. That leaves the manna which was baked on alternate days and varied from bullets to quite pleasant. Even my Chilean friend exerted himself if pressurized and the sweat poured into the long kneading and we enjoyed surprisingly good rolls.

We were shown how to fish, Chilean style, with cans as rods, were entertained by the locals to folk songs and dances. We took to 'the bush' en masse. A few of us went 'solo' facing the horrors of possible wild boars and pumas. Perhaps worst though - one's own company. I challenged myself by going with minimum equipment, no food and no sleeping bag, for 27 hours. The vegetation was lush with thick bamboo which made bivvy building easier, and green parrots could be seen in the tree branches. There were no paths and no maps and all of our exertions ended in blunt machetted retreat from the impenetrable growth.

Our task in Lago Verde was to reroof the gymnasium, a tedious and unenjoyable occupation for us who had no knowledge or skill in this field. The rainbow of this ominously dark cloud was, that through leadership (or badgering) we helped some overcome their fear of heights. Throughout the three months we all managed to make and achieve a goal of personal satisfaction and self confidence. Everywhere there were silver linings - the rewards of endeavour and perseverance.

My final challenge was to return to Coyhaique, not by truck and horse as we came, but walking the 180 miles with rucksack on back. I was the only girl accompanied by 3 boys from New Zealand, Chile and England, one girl to astonish the simple peasants we met along the track: "A girl, and what a

smile!" My foot! - I had made the decision in a rash moment of enthusiasm; there was no retreat so I meant to enjoy myself, once I had conquered the panic of the first lift of my loaded rucksack, visions of days of steep hills rearing in my mind. The twelve days food and sleeping bag constituted the major part of the weight but also, I carried sleeping mat, groundsheet bivvy, evening breeches and jumper, a toothbrush, flannel, waterbottle, mess tin and spoon. There was the pain of blisters but that only lasted about 2 days, the toil of some of those hills, the weary plodding at the end of the day, the rain, the thought of ... three more nights of rough sleeping, yet another meal of dried beef; but I could always appreciate the comfort of a song on a wet day, the beauty of a sunrise when I coldly crawled from the draughty bivvy to light the breakfast fire, even the dry feet till river number 17, protected by new Yeti gaiters (numbers 17-23 were just too wide and deep); I floated on the joy of success, cruising in fifth gear for the final thirty miles, full of life, fitness and well-being.

Though I am now in Britain, working for my living in this 'civilized' society, close to London, I remember still though, that there is always someone who will value some help, which somehow, I can give, or you can give, and that there is always some challenge worth overcoming and that there is always something which is worth stopping to look at - it may be the silver lining for the day, which, if you inattentively blink, will vanish - a beautiful scene, a happy smile, that enlightening sunrise.

Thank you Cairngorm Club, for your help. I have benefited from, and enjoyed my experiences. I hope too, to pass on some of the knowledge I have gained, because it is a valuable which I can both give and share, increase and enjoy, without diminishing, for the rest of my life.

