POLVO

Even farther S., the Pan-American Highway, unpaved at this point, passes a mule track (km 1,024, not signposted), at the very end of which is the town of Polvo (pop. 87, Census of 1935). Mutton, lanolin, wool, and cactus fiber are the main products. Many travelers regard Polvo as the true Gateway to Patagonia. It was perhaps here, in 1832, that General Juan Manuel de Rosas began his mission of subduing the Indians. The conjecture is reasonable, as the Indians in the area are subdued to the point of invisibility. It is likely that the young Charles Darwin, who met Rosas during his (Rosas's) onslaught, might also have trod Polvo's narrow gravelled street and, on the precipitous rockslides nearby, collected the specimens of black toads he painstakingly describes in his 'Journal of Researches' (often wrongly titled 'The Voyage of the Beagle').

Unprepossessing in appearance, little more than two acres of habitation, and hardly discernible above the tops of its own low thornbushes, Polvo, although part of the former Kingdom of Araucanía and Patagonia, has been called 'the hamlet without a prince.' And yet it is not devoid of the charm that characterizes many another sheep-raising town. The annual sheep-clip (May 10–17) draws a score of visitors. Polvanos refuse to be drawn, but their silence implies that it may be worth the tourist's while to endure the overcrowded conditions and generally stretched amenities to which the town is subject during such local fiestas. (Jan. 4, Druids' Day, and July 22, Feast of Martyrs, are others.) At sheep-clip, the Market Square (Plaza) is said to take on something of the atmosphere of Act IV, Scene 4, of 'The Winter's Tale,' with a Wool Queen in her ancient cardigan and a good-humored Shearer's Dance, which has proved fatal to many an unwary onlooker! Once every ten years there is an eisteddfod – Welsh poems being sung and shouted. The simultaneous translation in Tehuelche is perhaps a hangover from the days of colonization.

Visitors to Polvo cannot fail to notice the scarcity of water in the town, and the sensible wayfarer will carry enough to last him his stay. A visit of any length will necessitate the boring of a well, and the budget-minded traveler will want to allow for this additional expense. Years of privation have left their mark on the settlers, who tend to give the impression of truculence – an impression that is only confirmed by long acquaintance. Unaccustomed to strangers, and somewhat outside the mainstream of the tourist boom that has brought modernity to his distant neighbors, the Polvano is inclined to be brusque, except toward visitors who are thoroughly fluent in colloquial Welsh. More than usual care should be exercised in entering a farmhouse unannounced, and no one ought to expect a clear set of directions to the downtown area and hotel (Residencial Penrhyndeudraeth). Well stocked with some of the better

Fuegian vintages, the restaurant, sumptuous by Polvo's standards, is nearly always shut. There is limitless scope in the hills for the spelunker.

Once the haunt of Patagonian giants, who are said to have been numerous in the region and to account for early maps bearing the reference 'Regio Gigantum,' Polvo has seen these natives dwindle in number as well as in size over the years, until by mid-century there was but one. That he was hunted for sport is part of Polvo's rich folklore. What remains of his small earthen hut may still be seen, though not every traveler will wish to make the two-day journey, as it can only be accomplished on foot. (Stout shoes a must.) Those who do (and the jaunt is a welcome relief from the odor of sheep-dip and uncured hides, which casts a blight on the otherwise attractive town) will glimpse herds of roving guanacos and, smeared on rocks, odd fingerprint markings reputed to be 10,000 years old. The trip to the gravesites of the early settlers takes slightly longer, at just under a week, and is to be recommended for the hardy. Those who manage it are rewarded by the simple grandeur of three solitary markers, shaped not unlike hubcaps, carved from local stone and bearing indistinct inscriptions in the Welsh language. Round about this tiny necropolis an impressive desolation soothes the eye of the footsore traveler.

Municipal buildings in Polvo include the Central Jail, the Founders' Orphanage, the Carding House, and the Methodist Chapel. The chapel is, in the words of the French traveler Gaston, 'typical of its kind … notwithstanding its window, which is open to criticism.' A Christian Science Reading Room is in the planning stages, and this will be housed in a chamber now known as the Zona Rosa (open most weekdays), where in former times gauchos are supposed to have gathered during the sheep-clip. (Note hook and scarred doorjamb, where, according to legend, spurs were hung.)

The Mercado (market) is close by, and although Polvo's barter system is almost certain to divest the enthusiastic traveller of his wristwatch, a visit is well worth the risk. Apart from the root vegetables and the carcasses of sheep arranged sandbag-style around the dour venders, there are traditional Indian ornaments on sale, some thought to be of ancient manufacture, including penwipers, calendar holders, napkin rings, buckles, tie clasps, bookmarks, and plinths for digital clocks, all fashioned from dried cactus fiber, to which magical properties have been ascribed. Some distance from the market, but now derelict, are the shacks of quarrymen who worked the iron-ore deposit. There are few organized tours of this part of town.

Steeped in Patagonian history, Polvo nonetheless wears its antiquity lightly, and it has steadily diminished in population. The youths of the town are understandably siphoned off by the oil pipeline and the bright lights of Río Gallegos. Consequently, the average age in Polvo is seventy-three. The petrochemical plant, promised for the next decade, ought to go some way toward altering the scope of tourism. Bird life abounds, and the sky above Polvo is frequently black with the soaring Turkey Buzzard (Cathartes aura). Polecats and skunks (Zorrillos) must also be mentioned here. The flora is tenacious but

thin, and limited to scrub thorn and the cactus from which the local artifacts are made. Oblivious of the stranger’s taunt about the monotony of their unremarkable surroundings, Polvanos delight in their landscape’s occasional fits of natural crankishness and will walk any distance to hear the rumble of a glacier ‘calving.’

In another epoch, dinosaurs must have ranged this dusty plateau and laid eggs where sheep now graze, though all have vanished without a trace. The Museo de Polvo (Polvo Museum, open Mondays) contains a plaster model of a settler’s homestead, a sketch map of the Spanish advance, an authentic Welsh dresser, a collection of skins and hides, a stuffed albatross, a fusilier’s epaulets, and a canoe. Murals depict Rosas’s massacres (north wall) and the flood damage of 1899 (west wall). The attendant on duty wakes from time to time to remind the browser not to lean on the display cases.