

MICHAEL WEBSTER



**THE
CONDOR'S
FEATHER**

**TRAVELLING WILD
IN SOUTH AMERICA**

An extract from September Publishing

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PROLOGUE

There is one week of my life that I remember extremely vividly, but it's one that I strive daily to forget. Every important thing that followed was triggered in those few days – endings as well as beginnings.

On the Monday I was on business in Johannesburg, the richest and poorest city in Africa with the highest concentration of guard dogs per head of population in the world. The threatening sun beat down, a day hotter than molten gold in which a long sultry afternoon sagged into an eye-popping thunderstorm. Returning to my hotel bungalow the outside door was ajar. I entered, facing a wrecked room and two armed robbers. With a gun pointing at me, I was waved over to sit on the bed and keep quiet. They left quickly, each with a bag, inside which were my camera, computer, some clothes, cash and, far more dear to me than anything else, my passport.

A shock, yes, but consular officials respond automatically and efficiently to such 'mundane' situations, while the personnel director of the multinational food company I worked for was sympathetic.

On the Thursday night of that week I flew to Cape Town. I'd been there many times, I knew the score, the places to avoid, so I hugged my new passport close – no way was I going to lose that again. The taxi dropped me off unexpectedly on a quiet, dark street and pulled away too quickly for my liking. A man grabbed me; I struggled to get free. The savage mugging was over in what seemed like moments, but I had felt a final, vicious stab.

When my eyes opened it was quite dark. 'Electricity cut again,' I heard someone say. People shuffled around, attending to one part of my body or another. The hospital resembled a scrap yard. Someone held up a bloodied syringe for me to see. 'They stuck this in you. There's little we can do for you here.' This was the time that HIV rates were at crisis point, out of control in a country where the disease was thought by most to be a curse from God.

The first incident had been traumatic enough; the second had much longer consequences.

My company flew my wife, Paula, over and she took me back to the UK, where immediate hospital treatment fought the virus. Weekly visits to a specialist HIV ward became an unremitting nightmare. How many blood samples did they want? I would sit in a queue of mostly young people, all with vacant, ill-looking faces – yellow, pinched and furrowed. Some were walking skeletons, others handcuffed between police. Treatment with a battery of antiretroviral drugs crushed my energy. A nurse told me, 'This place is a zoo. The only way to prevent you coming here forever is with these,' and handed me a week's supply of drugs. 'Most people can't put up with the regime. Come back next week.'

Every week I returned without fail.

Severe panic attacks meant cities, towns and shops became places of intense distress. Cars would aim to run me down. I conjured the faces of everyone who walked by into feared people from the past. Strangers became spectres. Crowds sent me cold then hot as I floated in detached fear. I became a ship without a rudder, lost, storm-tossed and careering on an unknown ocean. Night-times were worse, the solace of sleep rent by hideous dreams of all the sadness I was inflicting on those around me. I was locked in a box of past memories. No one could do anything to help; I needed a new brain, a new head. I lost four stones in four months.

In the mornings Paula would reluctantly leave for work –

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running a busy maths department in an inner-city school. I would sit at home and tear up bits of paper, hour after hour, or I would wander the valley meadows around my home. Fearful of others, I would climb trees or seek out hedgerows suitable to hide in if anyone came along. I lay hidden in the long grass looking up at buzzards overhead. I watched the antics of a pair of blue tits busily feeding their young. But, twice a day, I had to return home and force drugs down my throat, knowing that they would make me retch for hours, sending me dizzy and scared.

This regime lasted six months, but it was worth it. The same nurse seemed happy: ‘No need to come back here, your blood counts are back to normal.’

But I didn’t feel normal: the toll had been high. A trust in science and drugs had repaired the systems of my body, but I still felt an irrational mess. The incident had dug deeper into my soul than I realised. Slowly I realised that my career was finished, and a life that I had loved had disappeared.

A further year of cognitive behavioural therapy and a library of self-help books did help, but quick fixes are easily undone. Far more sustaining was the uplifting song of blackbirds and the joyful sight of skylarks parachuting through the air. The arrival of swallows swooping low over the garden reminded me that a new beginning was possible.

The birds had started to pull aside the hazy curtains from my mind.

All my life nature had been at my side, now I realised it was being my saviour. There was going to be a debt to repay.

Cats have nine lives; people normally have one. I was lucky – I had been given two, and a chance to learn from the previous one and try not to make the same mistakes. I decided I would now take it slower, make life more meaningful, make the most of every day. I would follow my heart, do something I’d never before thought possible. Now could be the time to become deeply immersed in the wild, to fully embrace the natural world, no longer be a mere bystander.

Could I communicate my love of nature to others? The skills Paula and I possessed as lifelong and near-professional photographers and film-makers could be put to good use. It was a dream, but still, would I grab the opportunity, take the risk?

It was over a year since I had walked out of the hospital doors for the last time. Now I felt able to step out of the contained and protected world I had built around myself. As for Paula, would she step into the unknown with me?

Paula gave the answer a few months later: early retirement from her demanding job.

Spending more time together was key to our new life plan. We went to Spain, wanting to find the heaviest flying bird in Europe – the great bustard – and make a film about the declining cork oak forests. I had been a photographer since a teenager and had made a number of films for the international company I had worked for. With the natural world flowing through our veins, we knew the warm Andalucian breeze on our cheeks and the smell of bougainvillea would be enough, even if we never found the birds we sought.

But we did find them. At a metre tall and with red neck feathers reminiscent of a Viking's beard, they were magnificent.

Hiring a car, we stayed in rustic hostels, but therein lay a difficulty. We needed to be out early in the morning, sometimes very early, when birds were singing and shadowy light illuminated every crevice on the bark of the trees – the perfect light for filming.

Early starts meant we liked to be asleep well before midnight, the time many tavernas were still taking diners in.

'Can we eat early this evening?' we would ask.

'*Si, si*. What time?'

'Eight?'

'Oh. Maybe a little later,' the owner would suggest.

'How about nine, then?'

'Umm, you come, we will try,' and they would disappear into the kitchen.

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We would go out for the day and, returning to the dining room at nine in the evening, would find the lights out and no one yet in the kitchen. Around nine-thirty we would hear shuffling. Dinner was served at ten, often later. This is the norm in Spain but to us, who had never dreamt of taking a siesta, it seemed extraordinarily late. But there was nothing we could do.

In fact, this experience was helping shape our future, for we had plans germinating inside us, plans that would shape the direction of our new life. We wanted to fly, to live free as birds, close to nature, supporting bird conservation, but to do that we would need to be our own masters.

To be truly independent, we would need our own home on wheels.

For bird lovers, there is nowhere like South America. Nearly a third of all the bird species on the planet are to be found in this moderately sized continent. It has the largest remaining stands of primary forest, it has one of the smallest populations of people, and most of the countries speak the same language – Spanish. That's where our new life would take us. Friends told us it was crazy, but that's what dreams are.

We would travel the length of the Andes, a smouldering series of active volcanoes scattered between peaks and plains for 7,000 kilometres. We would seek out its exciting birdlife. The Andes split the continent in two. 'Divide and conquer' is the mantra of a destroyer, but for the Andes it's 'divide and create' – these mountains are givers of life and represent one of the significant reasons why South America is home to so many bird species. One of the main aims of our journey, too, was to support bird conservation organisations by making films for them, an undertaking far too expensive for small conservation NGOs on their own. We would travel wild, and savour every moment. We would make the most of every day.

Life was starting to look up. We had a purpose, as well as the time.

A year later we were ready to go back to Spain again, this time for a practice run. Now we were driving our own Toyota Hilux truck on top of which we had fitted a tiny camper, shipped over especially from California. We removed the back seat from the truck, giving us space to store essentials like five tripods, half a dozen cameras, lights, binoculars and laptops, and luxuries like clothes and food.

Having penetrated the icy Pyrenees, it took us a few weeks to explore them fully. Like a cork in a bottle, we successfully pulled ourselves through the narrowest alleys of medieval hilltop villages. Following ancient equine paths across Europe's only true desert, we eventually returned through France over rippling lavender hillsides. Travelling wild, we ate and slept when and where we wanted, watching the sun rise and set. Following animal trails and living at the behest of nature grounded us in reality, and brought freedom and joy to our souls.

The other reality was that we returned to England with two broken leaf springs, leaking shock absorbers and a list of engineering tasks urgently needed to make us 'Andes ready'.

Our son Richard, who lived in Canada, now realised we were deadly serious about leaving for South America and, in a parent-child role reversal, told us: 'I want to know where you are, who you're with, and if you're all right. I insist you get a Yellowbrick.'

'A what?'

'It's a global satellite tracking system. If you can see the sky it'll send my computer a message with your exact location. It's even got an emergency button which sends out a distress signal.'

We were ready.

We tried to see as many friends and family before we left, knowing it would be a couple of years before we saw them again. Paula's brother was to collect our post and look after the house. A myriad of jobs bombarded us in the final few weeks. We had never realised how difficult it would be to separate ourselves from the hi-tech world in which we lived. Freeing ourselves to travel

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wild sometimes seemed unattainable; the reality of achieving it was almost impossible.

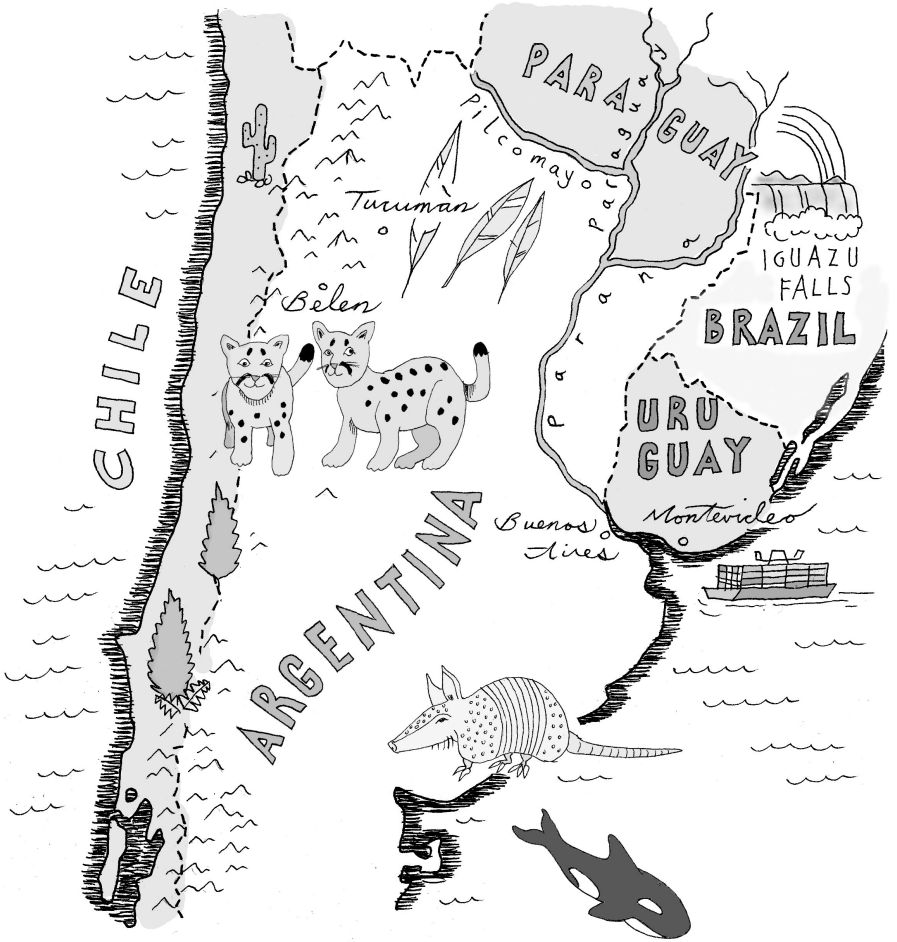
It was another reminder to us of our disconnect from the natural world.

One spring morning in 2014, as the cuckoos were arriving in England, we were departing. At Tilbury docks we slowly edged our Toyota camper into a shipping container, chains and straps securing and locking it down. Like a heron scooping a frog from a marsh, our container was hoisted high over the dockside. Inside was everything we needed, our new life bound for Montevideo, Uruguay.

As for us, we put out of the safe harbour at last, and set sail to follow a dream.

PART ONE

A NEW LIFE



CHAPTER 1

NOMADS IN A NEW LAND

It was June, winter in Argentina, when the great adventure started. Our new life was a blank sheet ready for writing on. We had little knowledge of what we would find or when it might end. If we found somewhere we liked we'd stay for days, even weeks; in forests, on beaches and mountaintops, on the outskirts of villages among cultures new to us; perhaps with people but, we thought, more likely with birds.

Time and governance had not been kind to what was once called the Paris of South America, Buenos Aires. Peeling stucco, rusting balconies and graffiti scarred the graceful neo-Classical buildings. Concrete pillars thrust urban motorways high in the air between apartment blocks – residents' washing waving on balconies alongside speeding trucks.

All of my life I have lived in the shade of an oak wood. I don't really enjoy city life, so we gave ourselves two weeks to clear the truck through Customs, change our money and make the necessary contacts. After all, we had the greatest mountain chain in the world to traverse.

We rented a small apartment above the Café Manolo in San Telmo. Its stone balustrade was brushed by jacaranda trees. Each day the *menú del día* was written on a chalkboard which stood on the cobbled street. The local policeman visited throughout the day, eating, sipping coffee and shuffling his papers. I never saw him pay for anything. The restaurant closed at half past two every afternoon, and the streets became quiet. It was siesta time.

At five in the afternoon the shops, cafés and restaurants reopened. At ten in the evening, a side door below our balcony opened and a hallway led people down stone steps into a dim cellar under the restaurant. There was a bar and a stage for musicians: a double bass, a piano, three violinists and three others sitting down, each with a small concertina called a *bandoneón*. The resident band of young musicians was the well-known Orquesta Típica Andariega. This was a *milonga*, intense, musical and magnetic, where locals came for one thing: to dance the tango, as traditional in Buenos Aires as a folk session in a wave-lashed pub on the coast of Donegal.

We timed our early morning walks to be after the city streets had been washed but before the demonstrations in the main square started. Scattered between the spreading buttress roots of rubber trees was a group of disgruntled veterans from the Falklands War of the 1980s, their banners and placards leaning against trees. We didn't want them to catch sight of a lone English couple chatting away. Decades after the end of the war, it remained a very sore point in some sections of Argentinian society.

On quieter streets I made my first friends. A brown, thrush-sized bird, the rufous hornero, Argentina's national bird. The bird goose-stepped along the edges of the flowing gutters like a fascist general and made its ostentatious nest, looking like an oven of mud, on the elaborate buildings, cocking a snoot at passers-by. In complete contrast was the monk parakeet, a small, bright green rascal of a parrot, groups of which squawked loudly at the ragged families who collected the mountains of city rubbish for recycling, stuffing it into great white plastic bags piled onto rickety handcarts. Later in the day, the monk parakeets would hang out with gangs of street pigeons, raiding picnickers on park benches.

BirdLife International is the global agency that partners with passionate yet often underfunded national bird conservation organisations. In Argentina, the partner organisation is Aves

Argentinas, and on our third day we had a meeting with its director, Hernan Casañas.

‘How can we help you?’ asked Hernan, a tall, laconic figure with an engaging smile, who fortunately spoke English well, as my Spanish was limited.

‘Thank you, but really it’s how can we help you.’ We explained that we had always worked as volunteers for wildlife conservation back home and wanted to do the same in South America. We were birdwatchers, photographers and film-makers and could help them if they needed these skills.

Hernan seemed a little lost for words, understandably perhaps. Strangers don’t often turn up on your doorstep from the other end of the world with ambitious offers of assistance. He cleared his throat, thought for a moment and finally smiled. We could come back to the office the next week, he said, and give a talk to members of their local Buenos Aires group.

In fact, the talk was videoed and the event transmitted live to all the other eighty clubs that the organisation had throughout Argentina. In doing so, we were introduced to the thousands of nature conservationists and birdwatchers spread throughout the eighth biggest country in the world. By the time we were back at our hotel, our Facebook page was filling with messages of welcome, offers of help and people to meet. Now it wasn’t just the two of us against the mighty Andes. We had a nationwide support team.

As we had left the talk, Hernan had come to say goodbye. ‘Where will you start?’ he asked.

‘We have a family friend who lives in Tucumán. That’s where we’re heading tomorrow.’

‘Then travel safe, and I will remember your kind offer.’



We ought to have noticed the flashing lights earlier. Instead, we drove along the earth road until the thought of turning around

occurred to us too late. With a barricade in front of us and a dark figure waving at us to slow down, there was no going back.

As we were used to living in a country where people never encounter road blocks, this was more than a little unsettling and my thoughts immediately filled with the endless, dire warnings that had been pressed on us when we told people we were planning to travel the length of the Andes, northwards to the Caribbean.

'Are you crazy?'

'Of all places, why South America?'

'Beware of the people, they're all crooks.'

'After all you've been through?'

'Colombia is full of drug smugglers.'

'Don't trust the police.'

'Never stop for people waving you down at the side of the road.'

'South America? The spiders are as big as footballs.'

'Dream on, you'll never go.'

After a while we had begun to wonder if anyone had travelled to South America and returned alive. Was Gandalf correct when he warned Frodo that going outside his front door and stepping into the road was a dangerous idea; one that could lead to all sorts of unwanted adventures?

We were fast approaching the man.

Paula whispered, 'It might be the police.'

I slowed down.

'He's got a machine gun.' We'd never seen a traffic cop with a gun, ever.

'Quickly,' I said, my heart racing. 'Hide the binoculars on the floor. Where's that emergency distress gadget that we bought?'

With the truck slowing to a halt a camouflage-wearing, machine-gun-toting man walked towards us. I gulped, my throat dry.

The man moved the gun off his shoulder. A shiver ran down my neck, sweat on my forehead feeling cold. Deeply hidden and

unwanted memories flooded back, and my fingers trembled. Years of planning, and we were at gunpoint before we'd even started.

Of course, we had discussed and planned for situations such as this, as much as you can ever plan for an armed robbery. Cut into the floor of the truck, under the carpet behind the driving seat, we had fitted a small safe the size of a robin's nest. This metal box held our most important papers: passports, vehicle ownership documents, vaccination certificates, a list of our camera equipment with serial numbers, insurance documents, credit cards and thick wads of cash. Lastly, in a waterproof envelope was a list of next of kin and emergency phone numbers. And we had a plan B. Underneath the front passenger seat, readily available, was a cash box containing \$500, old passports, a watch, two phones, a selection of Paula's less desirable but very glittery jewellery, and photos of our nearest and dearest. We were ever ready to hand this over at a robbery without quibbling, hoping it would satisfy the average bandit.

Was this the time to do it, just six hours into our journey?

Our British vehicle was right-hand drive, a rare and bizarre sight in South America, so as the man approached us, he did so from our left, where Paula sat as the passenger. I realised this would leave me, as the driver, free to drive off in an emergency.

The last element of our plan was to speak in English, though Paula's Spanish was good.

The man, camo-peaked cap low over his eyes and gun levelled from the waist, stepped nearer, his knee-length black boots scraping the gravel. He walked slowly up to our white truck camper, not quite sure what to make of it. Across the side doors were decals of mountains and flying Andean condors.

'*Abran, abran!* Open, open,' the man commanded, tapping on the window.

I nudged Paula. 'He needs a shave.'

She hissed at me to be quiet and lowered the window. He looked surprised at there being no steering wheel.

My foot hovered over the accelerator.

'Documentación!'

Taking our papers, he disappeared to a large unmarked truck parked under a tree. We waited.

Some minutes later a tall, confident-looking man in a dark green uniform with medals and pips all over the place approached us. He held our papers in one hand, a baton tucked under the other arm. 'Good morning, my name is Major Xavier Hernandez,' he said in BBC English. He looked at us keenly, his eyes flicking from us to our equipment stacked high in the back.

Only then did I turn off the ignition and relax a little. This was no robbery: it was our first brush with the military.

'I see you are British. Why are you here?' he asked.

A little affronted by the directness of the question, I leaned over to Paula's window. 'We're visitors.'

'What are you doing here?'

'We're going to Tucumán, we have a friend there. We took this back road to watch for birds.'

The officer paused for a moment, glancing at the papers again. 'My father fought in the Falklands war.'

My heart sank. There was nothing we could say in reply to that. We had seen plaques at every village we had passed through: '*The Malvinas are, were and always will be Argentinian.*' It seemed the 1982 war against the British had not been forgotten.

'He was captured by the British and held prisoner,' the officer continued slowly.

I feared the worst and wished I hadn't switched off the ignition.

'He was held by the Scots Guards. They treated him really well. He and his men hadn't had decent food in months.'

We sighed with relief.

'You're the first British visitors I've met. On behalf of my father, thank you very much. Please enjoy our country.'

'Thank you,' we both said, quickly.

The major continued, 'We have a situation ahead, so you will have to turn back. In a few kilometres there is a right-hand track,

take that, it will be safer.' He saluted us, passed the papers back to Paula and turned away.

I started the truck and started to drive off, slowly.

'Well!' Paula said. 'Perhaps we might return home alive after all.'

We both laughed, nervously.