



DIEGO'S RUN

A 6,000-KILOMETER
ROAD TRIP WITH
ARGENTINA'S WILD MAN.

I'd waited my whole life for such a chance. Now it looked like my wildest-fantasy stag hunt was about to end just 30 minutes into it. We had barely hiked into the high Andean forest, and my guide, Fegundo, and I found ourselves pinned in an old shepherds' trail on our knees. I'd followed Fegundo into the trees and spotted a doe to my left. He shoved me down and ordered me to freeze. When he peeked over a dirt berm, I saw him stiffen with a shiver and his binoculars trembled. I knew what that meant. I was still, unmoving, and he hissed, "No move, *silencio!*"

"Certainly. When you hear a big one, your butt squeezes up," tight-clenching a fist to emphasize.

He was absolutely right. Some things you dream about, but they don't live up. Others are much greater than you even imagined. This was a real-deal tent-camping, wild hunt for free-range stag, high in the Andes, not a ranch hunt with fences. I cradled a borrowed Sako Finnbear bolt action in .300 Win. Mag. that Fegundo had received from his father, Raymond, in '82. It bore an old

Arroooooarrgh. Again from high up the mountain, the monster roared. Then, shattering the quiet and almost on top of us, an answering challenge, *Whooaaarragh-aghh-agghh.*

I swore the trees shook from the noise, so loud it was frightening. The hairs on the back of my neck tingled. Hearing a great red stag in open country was one thing. Hearing one at 60 yards deep in the silence of a black timber forest was something else entirely. It was so loud, so deep, if you didn't know what it was, you would expect a Tyrannosaurus to emerge from the foliage, hunting for you.

I had asked Diego Muñoz, the suave madman who led me on this wild journey, if one could tell a big stag from a smaller one by their roar. "Yes," he said.

fixed-six Leupold scope, worn and beautiful. A special gun.

"Five womans [females] and one monster," Fegundo whispered, indicating massive antler beams of baseball diameter. They would feed past us at 40 yards. Across the valley, the monster cut loose another prehistoric roar. The one just behind us answered, bellowing like a dragon. So close and still coming. This is really going to happen ...

And then they wined us. Just like that, they drifted off like smoke through the trees.

Diego laughed at my tragic story back at the camp, where we chewed on fire-roasted lamb. "You'll get another chance, Munch," he said. Muñoz is an intensely intelligent 30-something, a charming international man of mystery who speaks four languages and has lived everywhere from Paris to the Caribbean to Los Angeles. For five years he'd followed his father's footsteps to become a doctor before answering the call of the wild, dropping out and becoming one of the best hunting outfitters in the country. He specializes in waterfowl hunts, which is how I'd met him nine months earlier. We'd bonded over a few fantastic shoots and much malbec, plotting a grand return

adventure: fly-fishing Patagonia; chasing Russian boar and giant foxes; wild waterfowl hunts; possibly even lion hunting ... and, incredibly, big red stag.

Doing the right thing by the farmers on a depredation hunt. Diego has done it all. He loves smacking waterfowl with a semi-auto, especially the delicious Rosey-billed Pochard, more than just about anything.

BY **SKIP KNOWLES**

Laying on a pool table in one of his lodges was a giant seven-by-seven rack off a stag. I obsessed. “Come back, join your Argentine brother, and we will do it all,” he said. “All you have to do is show up.”

During most trips, if you are the likable sort, there comes that time when you bond with the guide and scheme to return for an adventure of a grander scale. And it never happens. You never even stay in touch, knowing it would all be too difficult and expensive, but oh, what a lovely daydream.

Diego, it turns out, meant what he said. He called me Munch all the time: short for “ass-munch,” a charming bit of slander he picked up from a Californian he’d liked. And here we were, camping at 7,000 feet on the Chilean border, giant stags screaming at us, just like he’d said. I have been obsessed with red stag my whole life, their old-world cave-painting appearance, that marvelous deep chest and sweeping antlers disproportionate to their bodies. Somewhere, I’d let the dream fade. Now it was more intense.

DUCK ME

The safari kicked off with blazing guns on a duck marsh in the Entres Rio province north of Buenos Aires, where depredation seasons are held for the prolific Rosey-billed Pochards, one of the coolest good-eating, crop-wrecking ducks on the planet. With a humped pink bill and gorgeous black body, they are an Argentine icon. Black clouds of ducks roared off the fields our first morning. Stunning White-cheeked Pintails, big Red Shovelers and Cinnamon Teal buzzed us, but only Roseys are legal. And when they came, they poured in, the big, black, bad-ass ducks of dreams. We picked our shots and killed limits. It was Jurassic Park for birds. Giant swans and crane-size storks joined “screamers,” an eagle-like scavenger, one freaky huge bird. We would later see giant condors in Patagonia, coming to our predator distressed-rabbit calls right along with the huge culpeo red foxes.

The ski town of Caviahue, Patagonia, where the author first fished. Diego said the author would fish under a volcano, but he never envisioned one still spewing into the atmosphere.



“Nice shot, Munch!” Diego would yell across the flooded field every time I killed a duck, and especially when I missed one.

From Entre Rios we bombed south 20 hours to Nuequén, a Patagonian valley town with a microclimate where fruits grow. We drank with oil workers, then drove six hours to the base of a volcano high on the border of Chile to a town called Caviahue, a picturesque spot linked with streams and small lakes, paying \$85 to access a 30,000-acre ranch called Trolope. The fishing was mind-blowing. At times in just 10 inches of water, ferocious huge browns and rainbows would make a bulge in the water and charge your fly from 15 feet away, forming a wide “V” in the water as they closed in. My arm hurt from fighting fish. Mapuche Indians were everywhere, pushing their sheep around on horseback as the huge, steaming volcano Copahue kept watch. Ancient trees called araucaria twisted skyward from sheer stone, and we gorged on their two-inch pine nuts.

We were all alone. Almost. Two men with guns pulled up on dirt bikes. I prayed they weren’t bandits, as our guns were locked up. It was the *La Guarda Fauna*: game cops. They checked our licenses and wished us well.

Diego has been coming to Trolope for 20 years, and the fishing only gets



better — unlike Diego’s driving, which was driving me mad. He averaged 80 mph everywhere, where speed limits were mostly 80 kph. His ability to nearly kiss bumpers with cars at high speed is unnerving. “This is tailgating country, my friend. Nothing like Argentina for tailgating.”

To make it worse, the ’97 custom turbo diesel Suburban only started half the time. Using a large Allen wrench, I would crawl deep in the right front wheel well and place it across the contacts points of the starter. Sparks flew, hissed and popped, and it sputtered to life. We dodged road kill and saw a “Patagonian hare,” a rodent-deer critter out of a Dr. Seuss book (called a “mara”). Diego drove like a demon all night, his face glowing in the blue light of his heads-up display, a high-tech digital screen that is a marvel of navigation and music, blasting AC/DC as we screamed across Patagonia.

Nearing Esquel, we saw a giant stag with huge crowns illuminated by the road at night, my first big stag, a ghost from my dreams. We met Raymond and Fegundo, and the stag chase began. We four-wheeled it up the steep, brutal, dusty roads to beautiful meadows and lakes and forever-far vistas amid waving, gorgeous Lenga trees.



A strange country, Patagonia. On one hand, bamboo thickets and palm trees and big, green parrots all over, yet alpine glaciers and icy streams and ski towns and trout and even ibex on the high peaks. Bizarre biological juxtapositions. Cool old-style Ford Falcons everywhere. They built them here until 1986.

Diego loved my amazement for it all. “We have *everything*, Munch!” Laughing and smiling is the Argentine way. The warmth of the people is evident all over. Even well-dressed strangers you are about to bury in road dust still wave hello as you pass. At camp, warm and friendly old Raymond put us at ease. His huge mustache bounced up and down comically each time he chewed his food, and he fussed to make sure everyone was comfortable. The high mountains have the biggest stags, and the dense trees are why these high-country Andean bulls are special and get so big. In the open, low-country ranches of Junin there are far more deer and higher success. Up here in the timbered steeps, I’d had a giant at 80 yards and it wasn’t close enough.

Night fell cold with frost, and we stalked the hills at dawn. I had expected to hear stag roaring at night, but there’d been none. Despair. Nothing. Then right at 8 a.m. the monster roared from the far hill, and Fegundo smiled. Other stags, closer, responded. We took off in pursuit of a nearer giant, getting within 300 yards, and started a murderous ascent, the heavy gun in my hands, thighs burning, adrenaline building with each roar booming down through the trees. As we approached the crest, a sudden loud cough so deep it reminded me of hippo grunts blasted from the timber, and the rifle came up on red fur moving, but no horns. A cow, fully spooked.

Fegundo suddenly dropped to his knees. Hot and sweaty, I fought to control my breathing, and there I saw him. A huge, reddish-blond body with massive back-swept ant-

lers melted through the trees from the right. I hissed at Fegundo and knew he couldn’t see him. With one arm I grabbed his collar and snatched him to his feet. As the bull zig-zagged, Fegundo finally spotted him with binos.

“Yes, big, yes!” He had seen the massive five-point crown clusters of a monster. He stuck his fingers in his ears, and I knew what that meant. No time for a rest. The crosshairs settled, and I felt nothing at the shot and neither did the bull. He fell stiff-legged right where he stood.

Fegundo hugged me violently. He was stammering, “Ah big-big! Oh, look at that, big-big!” as we approached. Then I could see the huge crown clusters of my dreams. Not a true monster, but a damned-good one with heavy horns, great width and freakishly large crown points, which is what fooled Fegundo. Typically, only giants have the kind of 12-inch-wide crowns mine wore. A breathtaking beast. I was awed, so grateful, disbelieving.

Fegundo went for the camera. Just over the ridge a monster roared, the one we’d heard. Curious, I lay down my gun and hiked closer. What the hell? I let loose with the loudest throat-tearing roar I could, and

This monster red stag was brought down by a Sako Finnbear in .300 Win., a fave gun in a fave caliber, borrowed from a killer father-son team who have hunted for 30 years with it.

it worked! He cut me off with a response. I was actually mouth-calling a giant. I saw him dimly under a bunch of dead limbs. Then, he turned his head and all the limbs moved with him. They were attached to his head.

Oh, my God! Tines over a foot long, and the beams stretched back to his rear. Then I noticed he had only one antler. But what a rush.

I swam in that odd mix of a dream realized yet somehow a sadness that it was over.

LION IN THE ROAD

We awoke and drove to Lake Cholila, a high mountain lake where the mountains, sky and waters jumble together in a shocking display, all drained by a glacial clear-blue river. That evening we gunned it to Los Colorades near Junin to fish Lake Troman, chase another stag and hunt fox. As we flew across the desert, Diego slammed the brakes as he almost hit a puma that leapt in front of the truck. We jumped out to try to call it with a dying-rabbit call, just for kicks, and a huge red fox came rushing to the light with such fluid speed that I was a little freaked out about being unarmed. Talk turned to my stag. “He was a tough guy to be hanging around with a cow between those monsters,” Diego said. We’d found he had broken ribs, gore holes in his neck and two snapped-off antler tips from battles.

HOOK THERAPY

I awoke with what every traveler to a developing nation fears most: a horrible toothache, a random infection behind my right rear molar. So I went fishing.



Field lunches run from great to spectacular. It is a country of camp chefs.

We launched an aluminum-frame raft below Lanin volcano, one of the highest in the Andes at 3,640 meters, where it soars above Lake Troman. Casting huge dry flies to shore, we started hooking brookies and rainbows to 24 inches, the kind of whoppers that make fly-fishers crazy about Patagonia.

Industrial-strength over-the-counter drugs solved my tooth problem. Beaten by wind, I could not keep my eyes open on the trip home.

RABBIT HAZARDS

Diego, who needs no sleep, dragged me out to a golf course that was being destroyed by a bunny infestation. Four hours and 400 rounds of .17 HMR later, I have no idea how many rabbits we executed, but we piled them up to be harvested by staff the next day. I slept til noon, ate a huge steak, then went out with Diego looking for fox and puma.

The next afternoon, I was nestling in the brush as Diego hit the predator call when a searing pain shot through my elbow. I was sure it was a poisonous snake bite. I could not move or breathe, it hurt so, but I looked down to see three thick cactus clusters with 30 spines jammed in the hard cartilage and tendons of my elbow. A very special pain. Called “blood suckers,” they are nontoxic but the pain was so bad I was sure they were venomous. They left my elbow a bloody mess, and I could not straighten my arm for 24 hours. It even led to other phantom pains, bizarre needle jabs down my torso days later, as if acupuncture had gone awry.

We’d gained permission to hunt from some friendly gauchos, the ultra-stoic Argentine cowboys. As we sat in their kitchen sipping *maté* (“mah-tay,” a bitter traditional green tea) from a bong-like mug, they told us they had seen a huge fox and set baited traps, only to have the beast drag a trap off 10 days ago. They had also killed a small lion in the same area seven days past. In this country, predator hunting is a way of life that never ends.

These are tough, tough men. Some of the gunless gauchos tree mountain lions with their cattle dogs, get off their horse and strap their long, wicked knives to a stick using a belt and stab the lion until it’s dead. We met the patriarch and played with the babies and shy, smiley children. The old man hunted with us, and five foxes came to the calls. We killed two with Diego’s wicked little .17 HMR, which I’d nicknamed “*La Muerte Negra*,” the black death.

MISHAPS AND MAYHEM

Miles from anywhere, flying down a dirt road on our way back to town late at night, we saw blue lights flashing far behind us. This was weird. What the hell were the police doing way out here? We slowed to let them pass. Instead, they rushed up and leaped out of the car, pulling out 12 gauges and pointing them at us. Screaming in Spanish, they yammered, “*Manos-manos-manos!*” Diego yelled at me to get out and put my hands on the vehicle and not to move.

In the middle of a frigid night deep in Patagonia, I could feel the yawning mouth of the shotgun muzzle on my spine, my cactus-torn arm straining to reach for the cold steel side of the Suburban, the freezing wind lashing. All I could think about was our truck loaded with guns and ammo the cops were about to find — if they were even real cops.

If only the author were tough enough to be a gaucho. Instead, he only learned to shoot and drink like one.



Well, shit, I remember thinking. *So this is how it happens. We have just stepped into a Cormac McCarthy novel.* Turns out there’s no country for young men either, I guess.

But they had the wrong guys. They were scared, looking for armed poachers, and that is why they were so aggressive, Diego explained. Diego had all the gun permits and was showing them my magazines, pointing to the “*Norté Americano*.” The cops were not corrupt, no bribes, and soon offered to call us with info on problem lions so we could chase them.

A pair of cold Quilmes beers cured my nerves back at the hotel. A cold storm struck the next day, winds making the fox hunting tough. Nearly overpopulated, the big red foxes are considered a menace and laws penalize ranchers who don’t kill them off. They are beautiful and smart, and we found them tough to call. As we drove back, I could not get warm despite five layers of clothes.

The truck broke down far out in the countryside around midnight. The heater didn’t work either, and I knew we were in big trouble with everyone underdressed. I had been starting the truck with the wrench for 10 days now amid sparks and was sure we had finally cooked the starter. Diego crawled under the truck on the hard, cold ground with wrenches and started pounding it, me above him trying with the Allen wrench for more sparks. That engine finally turning over was the sweetest sound I’ve ever heard.

ZOMBIES

It was time to chase stag again. We headed to El Porvenir, an *estancia* en Los Colorados near the town of Junin de Los Andes, the high mountains where we’d camped for my first stag now white in the distance from a snowstorm. With more than 30,000 red deer in the Junin area, this was a different situation. With guide Gustavo Aurto, we saw more deer in the first five minutes than I’d seen the whole trip.

We awoke the next morning with wild anticipation. But we did not account for the zombies. At 4 a.m., the first appeared as a black hole in the headlights of a car pointed our way, a human form staggering around the bridge as we approached. The headlights of the car behind the human lurching toward us were pointing off the highway in a wrong direction. Soon I could see blood splatters all over the man’s clothes and was pretty sure we were among the Argentine undead. Then we could see a victim in the smashed-up car, flopping around in the passenger seat, covered in blood, trying to get out. His legs were pinned in the wreckage, and another man was sitting on the bridge rail as we passed, holding an arm bent the wrong way with a deep furrow where his scalp used to be, a pizza wedge of bloody tissue piled far back on his head. Three gauchos, asleep at the wheel, had driven straight into a bridge rail coming back from a party.



“My God, we are going to have to stabilize these people, and I am not sure I can handle this,” I thought. Miraculously, blue and red lights flashed and an ambulance pulled up. Thankfully, real help had arrived. Later we would be told that they all survived.

AN UNLIKELY STAG

Soon after on the ranch, we stood sweaty and out of breath on a small ridge in the morning sun, where American Ryan Gunnick, a Diego client, made a 250-yard cross-canyon shot with a borrowed Zastava Mannlicher .30-'06 after a long chase. As we approached his stag, a big gray Russian boar burst from the brush 200 yards up a steep face of rim-rock above us. I was just racking the bolt on the .308 Ruger I held when he made the corner. Dammit! He was a massive, fat boar with a long, pointy nose, and I'd wanted to crack him badly.

Hours later, we spotted a big stag up on a bench across a stream with his cows, resting, and formed a plan. We hiked down a cliff and wormed our way through nasty tight holes in the brush of a narrow riverbed, trying to twist my six-foot frame on all fours through the same holes the tiny gauchos in front of me slipped through. It was a half-mile and took a half-hour.

A lion-killed red deer lay rotting in the rocks along shore, and the gauchos danced like pixies across stones where the river was deep. I didn't even try it with the gun. A loud splash or bashed rifle would be a double-fail, so I just waded in up to my crotch and silently slogged uphill to the edge of the bluff. We were below where the deer were and had the wind, but we were closer than I wanted to be, just 50 yards from some of them.

Gustavo scrawled a map in the dirt showing which stag was “*el macho*,” the big male. There are three *machos*, he showed me, and “many womens.” The bottom one. Kill the bottom one. Got it. Expose myself to all the cows and smaller bulls in order to get a shot at a bedded animal in grass with only the top of his shoulder exposed. And somehow not get busted. A thornbush for a rest, and I stretched up on my toes over the ledge in my waterfilled boots and stuck first the Mannlicher ought-six, then the top

of my head up slowly to sort out the critters. We had the wind, and there he was. I snicked off the safety and pushed the crosshairs as far down his shoulder as possible, where it entered the grass, and started squeezing the trigger. *Hurry now, before you're spotted*, I thought. My heart pulsed in my ears as I fought to control my breathing, and my footing.

Having to use a thornbush as a rest is a small price to pay to kill your dream animal.

The stag leapt at the shot, ran 25 feet, paused, and I hammered him again. He buckled, heart-shot twice. Cheers arose behind me, and I plucked itchy thorns from my forearms for an hour. Adrenaline remained. Holding that animal's rack in the sunshine with Diego is one of my finest moments.

We spent the next day watching stags fight across the open countryside. We saw stags with entire antler beams snapped off. Instead of impotent, these bulls are incredibly dangerous, with a new sword to stab other bulls. Gauchos will shoot these *assasininos* — killers — to protect a prize breeder.

The fox hunt resumed. I let loose with a Knight & Hale hand call in cottontail with a Mojo motion de-

coy, and Diego slammed a big red fox that came running in. A real predator hunter joined us next, an old gaucho named Adonai Hara, a lion killer. He explained how gauchos respect the lions, though they kill some of them to protect livestock. Cougars are good eating, but Argentines do not mess with that.

“The old belief is that if you eat a mountain lion, you will not die when it's your time,” Adonai explained. “You will linger and suffer.”

He chases them when he finds fresh tracks, but there are so many he could get on one every day in winter when they come down. “Pumas have put many sheep ranches completely out of business. There are many, many lions and always will be,” he said.

Back at the ranch, Diego was happy. “You are the only hunter I know who got to experience the high-mountain hunt for the giant stag and the ranch hunt where you see many more animals but is a completely different experience,” he said.

THE LAST SUICIDE RUN
On to the sea. Flashcards of memories from sheer exhaustion. In a surreal travel moment, I blinked awake to see Diego doing 155 kph as we passed an ancient indigenous wom-



Perfect performance from the Zastava Mannlicher on the second stag. Nothing kills like the dirty .30s.

an on a bicycle with facial tattoos. We blistered a line all night clear from Junin to a big coastal town called Mar del Plata, 15 hours, for a crack at ocean fishing. Gin — for me, not the driver — cheese puffs, coffee and, of course, AC/DC fueled the final leg.

I awoke, as usual, to Diego slamming on the brakes. He ordered me to jump out and call with my hand call because a fox had just shot across the road. It was 4 a.m. I started howling, and eight different sets of fox eyes descended on us in the dark. Amazing.

We arrived at the dock as the morning sun started to streak the sky and climbed aboard. By 10 a.m., seas were so rough, only I and one other Greek were not puking, fighting huge bottom fish they called salmon that weighed up to 45 pounds. By noon, we limited out and chugged back to port.

I assumed Diego and I would be at each others' necks after a two-week, 6,000-kilometer trip through Argentina. Quite the contrary. We were both depressed and tried to figure out how to cheat a few more days.

ALL GOOD THINGS

The hypnotic beauty of the biggest-ever brook trout in hand, sunrise over a spewing volcano, the smiles of gaucho children, the foxes running to our calls, the strange ocean fish materializing from the depths, the noisy clouds of ducks and, most of all, the outrageous roar of giant

wild stag in the black timber of the high Andes. What are these things worth? I owe Diego a life debt. He spent so much time and effort, I was distraught.

"Look, money is for spending," he says. "I told you just show up. I'm not going to die the richest man in the cemetery, Munch." ◊



For more info on Argentina duck hunting, Argentina red stag hunting, fishing or a great combo trip, contact Diego's U.S. representative:

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