

# A cheery corner of Patagonia is an intriguing Welsh outpost

by Laura Holt

**O**N THE surface, the tiny town of Gaiman is much like any Patagonian pueblo. Brightly painted buses rattle down the main street of Avenida de Eugenio Tello, past vintage Ford trucks whose battered bumpers bear the signs of a long journey.

From the colourful shops, South American music plays.

But look closer and you will notice something curious. Above the primary school, Welsh flags flutter. On the high street, bilingual road signs issue orders in two languages and all around the main square, boards brandishing the red dragon point the way to various 'Casa de Té Gales' (Welsh tearooms).

The story of how these incongruous emblems came to exist in Argentina's remote Chubut province is intriguing.

Nearly 150 years ago, on July 28, 1865, a group of 153 weatherbeaten Welsh people made it to the shores of South America, having set sail from Liverpool two months earlier on a former tea-clipper known as the Mimosa. Some had perished along the way.

Their dream was to set up 'Y Wladfa', a Welsh colony, where they could speak their language and preach their religion, free from English repression.

Making landfall on the bay of Golfo Nuevo, they named their first stop Porth Madryn, after one of their leader's estates in Wales. Unable to find a fresh water supply, they continued the long and arduous journey inland, following the River Chubut on foot, through the uncharted Patagonian steppe (desert).

**A**LONG the way they established a string of settlements; first the regional capital Rawson, then later such Celtic-sounding places as Trelew and Trevelin, which today make up the Welsh community in Argentina.

Though not the first to be established, Gaiman is the centre of Patagonia's 'little Wales beyond Wales', as Congregationalist minister and settlement leader Michael D. Jones called it.

Leaving my base at the lovely Posada Los Mimbres, a century-old farm on the outskirts of town, I follow the Welsh trail, beginning where most tourists do — in one of the tearooms.

Off the main square, the appropriately named Plas y Coed (Place of Trees) is the oldest, tucked away on Avenida de Michael D. Jones, while neighbouring Ty Nain, with its enticing ivy-clad exterior, is also popular.

I pick Ty Te Caerdydd, on the south bank of the Chubut, whose chintzy interiors proudly remember the day when Princess Diana dropped in for tea in 1995. Sand-

wiches, pastries and cakes follow, including the torta Galesa; a dense Welsh fruitcake.

Walking off the indulgence, I head for the 'Primera Casa'; the so-called First House, established in 1874 by David Roberts and his wife Jemima Jones.

Under a tin roof that would originally have been made from mud stands his travelling trunk, and in the pantry are machines used to churn butter.

I meander along the banks of the Chubut to two more Welsh attractions: the twin chapels of Bethel and New Bethel, the oldest of which was built in 1884 to

house the growing Welsh congregation.

In the early years, when the community struggled to establish crops and suffered from floods, these buildings provided welcome sanctuary; a place to speak Welsh, sing hymns and seek guidance.

Though the Welsh found it near impossible to grow anything in this desert-like climate for the first ten years, they eventually learned to harness the power of the river and created the first irrigation system in Argentina.

This allowed them to produce the prize-winning wheat which

became their salvation. This unusually green, luscious landscape leads many to liken Gaiman's scenery to the valleys of Wales.

My last stop is the Museo Histórico Regional, where I meet Fabio González. His name may not sound very Welsh but his mother, Luned González (maiden name Roberts), is a descendant of the first Welsh settlers.

Luned is in Anglesey giving a speech, so Fabio shows me around the museum, housed in the town's old railway station, which from the 1880s onwards, connected Gaiman with other towns along the Chubut valley.



Pictures: 4CORNERS/ALAMY

## Argentina's wonderful Welsh side!

Welcome in the valleys: Chubut's wild coastline and one of Gaiman's Welsh tearooms

'When I went to chapel as a boy, we would read the Bible in Spanish, not Welsh, but recently, there is a new awareness of the Welsh heritage in Chubut,' he says. 'Young people today feel part of a culture to be celebrated.'

I admire artefacts from the Mimosa, including black-and-white photos of the first settlers, standing in their Victorian clobber amid the vast, empty plains.

It is clear the people of Gaiman have come a long way. Today, there is an estimated 50,000-strong Welsh community living in Patagonia. Though only 5,000 or so speak the language, it is still 'a little Wales beyond Wales'.

### TRAVEL FACTS

BA (0844 493 0787; [ba.com](http://ba.com)) offers flights to Buenos Aires from £778 pp. From Buenos Aires, Aerolíneas Argentinas (0800 0969 747; [aerolineas.com.ar](http://aerolineas.com.ar)) connects to Trelew for both Porth Madryn and Gaiman, or to Esquel for the Welsh towns of western Chubut, including Trevelin. Tailormade tour operator Swoop Patagonia (0117 369 0196; [swoop-patagonia.co.uk](http://swoop-patagonia.co.uk)) offers week-long, Welsh-themed itineraries around Chubut province from £1,150 pp; flights extra. Visit [patagonia150.org](http://patagonia150.org) and [project-hiraeth.com](http://project-hiraeth.com).

## Celebrate inimitable Stan Laurel in the Lakes

by Ellie Ross

SINCE appearing in their first film together in 1921, the slapstick duo Laurel and Hardy, have been making the world chuckle.

Some will remember them as door-to-door Christmas tree salesmen in Big Business, others for their side-splitting dance sequence in Way Out West.

And who can forget Hardy's catchphrase: 'Well, here's another nice mess you've gotten me into.'

This year marks 125 years since the birth of Stan Laurel and 50 since his death and I have come to Ulverston, best known as a jumping-off point en route to the western Lake District, and also where the comedian was born and grew up.

The Laurel and Hardy Museum in Ulverston has a vast collection of memorabilia, figurines, letters and photos of the



Uplifting: Laurel and Hardy. Right: The views Stan left behind for Hollywood

duo. Stan Laurel was born Arthur Stanley Jefferson in his grandparents' cottage on June 16, 1890. He lived here as a tot while his parents were away working in the theatre; his father was a manager, his mother an actress. As a young adult, he often returned to Ulverston for holidays. It is still a popular spot, with its footpaths

along the canal and a lighthouse monument dedicated to the 18th-century naval explorer Sir John Barrow.

On June 20, Another Fine Fest, a festival of music, comedy and street theatre, will celebrate the town and the anniversary of Stan's birth. The scene, like Market Street, where Laurel used to go shopping with his



Pictures: GETTY

grandmother, has changed little. Overlooked by an 1845 clock tower, the cobbled avenue is lined with independent shops. One of these is the family-run grocer and tearoom Gillam's, where a young Laurel bought Beer's Treacle Toffee, made two streets away.

Doug Gillam runs the store, set up by his great-great-grandfather in 1892, and still uses the original brass scales to weigh out coffee and loose-leaf tea.

An old delivery bike is parked outside. 'Some of my customers who are now in their 70s used to be delivery boys,' says Doug.

My pockets full of toffees, I leave Ulverston, pondering the merits of a very fine laugh.

### TRAVEL FACTS

Standard rooms at the Swan Hotel and Spa, 015395 31681, [swanhotel.com](http://swanhotel.com), from £99 pp B&B. See [golakes.co.uk](http://golakes.co.uk). The Laurel and Hardy Museum, [laurel-and-hardy.co.uk](http://laurel-and-hardy.co.uk), £5 for adults, £2.50 for children.