

Housed in Benetton's estate in Argentina.

More than 15,000 archaeological finds narrate the history and culture of a mythical land, praised by Melville, Cendrars, Chatwin and Sepúlveda

THE MUSEUM OF PATAGONIA OPENS ITS DOORS

Ponzano, 12 May 2000. With precious archaeological finds, symbols of 13,000 years of native history, the fascinating ethnic, anthropological, cultural and social history of Patagonia is traced. A stone axe bearing symbolic religious inscriptions, documents somewhere between history and legend, such as a contract for the purchase of horses signed by a certain Santiago Ryan, the pseudonym used by none other than the famous outlaw Butch Cassidy (who, together with the Sundance Kid, tried to escape the Pinkerton Agency's investigators in South America) all bear witness to this captivating tale. These are the objectives and contents of the Leleque Museum dedicated to this extreme region of the world, inaugurated today in Leleque, in the province of Chubut, Argentina.

The new museum is the result of the will and passion of both Pablo Korchenewski, who has devoted an entire lifetime to collecting artefacts of Patagonian populations, and of Carlo Benetton. The wild beauty of this land fascinated Carlo Benetton, to the extent that, in 1991, he acquired Compañía de Tierras Sud Argentino which, with its tradition in sheep breeding for the production of high quality wool, has been part of Patagonia's history since the 19th century. Their common passion led to the involvement of companies, cultural associations and institutions in the project. Notably the Ameghino Foundation, directed by Rodolfo Casamiquela, and the Scientific Research Centre "El Hombre Patagónico y su Medio" directed by Maria Teresa Boschini, whose tasks are to develop the scientific research and maintain the collections alive and up-to-date.

From this rare example of cooperation between private and public organisations a museum was created. It also represents a meeting point in the heart of Patagonia, just as this land has been, for centuries, a place of encounter, conflict, trade and interaction between different populations. "From the very beginning - emphasises Mr. Carlo Benetton - we decided it would be a living, dynamic museum and not just a dusty collection of exhibits like so many found all over the world. We decided we would not only display but also tell a story because nowadays a modern museum is, above all, narration, with the aid of valuable archaeological finds but also with everyday objects, with graphics and accompanied by music, sounds and the voice of nature."

With this original idea in mind, the Leleque Museum, housed in the Compañía de Tierras estate, presents more than 15,000 exhibits, including archaeological finds, artefacts, documents and photographs, collected together in four rooms following a historical itinerary, divided into themes. In an annex, the ambience of an old general store has been recreated. Original materials of those who settled in the area between 1920 and 1930 have been used in the recreation and, with the aim of restoring its former role as a meeting place, a cafeteria has also been included. There is, in addition, a regional library, which will be open to the public.

The first room of the museum illustrates how indigenous populations lived, from their arrival in Patagonia about 13,000 years ago, to the period preceding the Spanish conquest. It describes the natives' ability as hunters, armed with bows and arrows, as craftsmen working stone and leather, and their inter-tribal relations and conflicts. One of the outstanding exhibits is a tent made of guanaco skin, a faithful, full-scale reproduction of a typical indigenous shelter of the pre-Spanish period, used during moves across the vast steppes.

The second room presents the "encounter" between the indigenous peoples and Europeans between the 16th and the 19th centuries. It describes both the peaceful times, with opening of the Nahuel Huapi Jesuit mission, evangelisation and trade relations with travellers and colonists, as well as times of conflict, through a description of the "Conquest of the Desert"

The third and fourth rooms address the problem of the native peoples' defeat and the phenomenon of immigration. The relations between Indians and immigrants, the arrival of the Welsh, Spanish, Lebanese, Italians, English, Americans and Chileans, their respective ways of life and the effects of the principal religions are narrated. Furthermore, the new methods of exploiting natural resources that were adopted when Patagonia became part of the national territory are illustrated, including agricultural and stock breeding activities, the introduction of barbed wire, the beginning of communications, the building of hostels and hotels and the use of arms for protection against thieves, bandits and adventurers. In particular, a varied and absorbing picture is painted of the day-to-day life of all the immigrant peoples, essential for getting to know and understanding the unique history of a land of "singular calm" such as Patagonia: a place that is part of the personal geography of every true traveller.

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