



[MAGAZINE](#)FEATURE

Cowboys on the Edge

In the wilds of Patagonia, cowboys called bagualeros pit themselves against the meanest livestock on the planet.



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THIS IS A **story** about blood, courage, and tradition, and like most stories of this nature, there are horses involved, and men of

unlikely skill and reticence, and yes, of course, lives and limbs are at risk. Also, like most stories of this nature, the landscape is mythically wild, partly because it is so remote and therefore almost impossible to reach by ordinary, convenient means. If you know where to look, you can see Sutherland on a topographical map, a finger of land pointing into Chile's Última Esperanza Sound, in southern Patagonia. But there are no roads near the place, and no settlements. To the north—but again, not accessible by ordinary means—there is Torres del Paine National Park, and beyond that the wild and impassable northern ice fields that cut off Chile's Patagonia from the rest of the country. To the west, scores of little islands make a puzzle of the southern Pacific. To the east, there is the sound—often thrown into a fury by the infamous wind here, and therefore not always safely navigable—and at last Puerto Natales, with its pleasant, touristic shops and restaurants.

Sebastián García Iglesias, a 26-year-old agricultural engineer by trade but cowboy at heart, is worn wise in the manner of one who has been raised around large animals. His legendary great-uncle, Arturo Iglesias—whom Sebastián is said to resemble to a haunting degree—was born in the town of Puerto Natales in 1919. The Iglesias family was one of the first to settle this area in 1908, setting up a general store for pioneers. Shortly after that the family established Estancia Mercedes on a piece of land nestled picturesquely against the sea, with its back to the mountains. Then, in 1960, Arturo acquired Estancia Ana María, a ranch that can be reached only by boat, or by a ten-hour horse ride if you are willing to cross a bog in which your mount will repeatedly sink up to its belly. And as if Ana María were not remote enough, Arturo created a settlement in Sutherland, a nearly unreachable area within Estancia Ana María. Once in its history, a ranch hand, his wife, and their two children lived in a little house in Sutherland, but the wife—perhaps driven mad by the isolation—ran off with a fisherman, and eventually the ranch hand and his two motherless children left and drove the cattle back to civilization.

Stragglers from Arturo's herd turned feral and bred, natural selection making them bigger and fiercer, and every summer

Arturo rounded them up, riding from Estancia Ana María with his cattle dogs and his most trusted horses. Sometimes he sent the wild cattle—*baguales*, they're called, which translates as "savage livestock" rather than merely "wild"—to market in Puerto Natales by boat, and sometimes he herded them by land along knife-edge cliffs, through bogs, and over slick rocks, riding with a packhorse and a wild bull in tow, a hand-rolled cigarette perpetually pasted to his lower lip.

But now the Iglesias family—which is to say all the extended family of aunts and uncles and cousins who had little or no emotional connection to the place—had decided to sell Ana María, including Sutherland, to a wealthy cattle rancher. The rancher had given Sebastián permission to retrieve *baguales* on the land one final time. Accordingly, Sebastián set about finding the finest *bagualeros* in Puerto Natales to assist him, and perhaps in part because he hopes one day to take tourists *bagualeando*, and so keep the tradition alive, he allowed us to tag along.

So it was clear from the outset: This expedition to Sutherland would be no ordinary cattle drive to market. For a start, the *baguales* of Sutherland were *baguales* that hadn't seen a rope in generations. And just to get to Sutherland, we would be riding with Sebastián and three other *bagualeros*, 20 horses, and 30 dogs for at least a couple of days through the kind of terrain that rewards a false step with whatever comes after life.

I phoned home for moral support. "I've been told to pack goggles," I told my father. There was a brief silence. "Goggles are for invading bloody Poland, not rounding up a couple of cows," Dad said. He's a British-born Zambian farmer in his 70s, and he thinks nothing of plunging into the Zambezi Valley darkness to chase elephants off his bananas or scare crocodiles out of Mum's fishponds. "What's the object of the exercise?"

"Fifty *baguales*, if they can get them," I said—so money, of course, but also something harder to define.

Mum got on the phone. She reminded me that she'd dragged me along on her cattle raids when I was a child, rustling cows on the Mozambique border during the Rhodesian bush war. "I remember," I said. "I was very brave."

"Rubbish," Mum said. "You were a wimp." I could hear Dad in the background interjecting that if I survived the bulls, there were a couple of crocodiles in the fishponds I could wrestle if I liked. The goggles might come in handy for that, he said. My parents dissolved in shrieks of laughter.

I didn't pack the goggles, but by the time I encountered a bagual in Sutherland, that turned out to be the least of my worries. The foliage in front of us crashed as if being felled by a bulldozer. "Find a tree," I'd been advised. But before I could move my horse, the bull pitched into view. Even with 30 dogs at its ears and heels, ripping at the soft flesh below its tail, the animal still seemed indestructible and bent on wreaking havoc. The bagualeros were nowhere in sight. The bull stood its ground, flanks heaving. It appeared to be taking stock. Anyone who thinks it's foolish to ascribe emotions to animals hasn't looked into the eyes of a baleful feral bull.

I turned my horse up a bank toward a stand of trees. As a child I'd spent hours in the branches of a muscular flamboyant, where I had felt both invisible and more powerful. But I had long ago lost that magical thinking, and this bull looked more than equal to any tree I could get into, even if I scrambled up from the advantage of my saddle. "The bulls will charge you," I had been warned. "So climb high."

The night before, Abelino Torres de Azócar, a 42-year-old bagualero of inhuman ability and unflappable dignity, had told us a story from a long-ago expedition. "I don't know if this bull was the devil, or what," Abelino had said. "We placed traps, we shot him, we stabbed him, but he would never die." One night the bull came into camp and attacked the bagualeros where they slept. "We heard branches breaking, but we didn't have time to escape.

The bull destroyed the whole tent with us inside it. We were covered in cuts and bruises.”

At the time I had recognized the story as the sort commonly told around southern African campfires to pass the hours between supper and sleeping bag. The appeal of these stories—a missionary’s brother trampled by an elephant, a professional hunter shot by his own client—lies partially in the assurance that the misadventure won’t happen to you.

But now this story did seem to be about to happen to me. Tough people had raised me to be uncomplaining and stoic, but unless tested, it’s hard to know the limits of your courage and endurance.

Sebastián had assured us a ferry would come to Sutherland to collect the baguales, the dogs, the horses, and us, but it had been a difficult ride in. Instead of a day or two, it had taken a week, the vegetation having grown back with seeming vengeance since Arturo’s day. “We’ll get to Sutherland tomorrow,” Sebastián said more than once. But the horses kept trying to turn around, slithering on the rain-slicked ground. Twice a packhorse fell off the trail, rolling helplessly until lodged by a tree or rock. It took hours to right it each time, the dogs nipping at its legs, the men pulling on ropes. “Everything’s going perfectly,” Sebastián told his girlfriend on the last thread of cell phone reception we’d have for some time. She begged him to consider turning back before it was too late. “No, no. It’s all great,” he said.

On the third night, with Sutherland still an uncertain number of days away, we ran out of food. Hunger on the trail wasn’t anything the bagualeros hadn’t encountered before. They habitually traveled light rather than overburden the already struggling horses. “Watch the dogs, though,” they warned from experience. “They’ll start eating our leather.” But the dogs, apparently equally experienced, were stealthy. As we dried sodden clothes and tried to warm ourselves around a fire, the dogs ate the straps off Sebastián’s spurs, the leather cover off a bottle, the girth off a

saddle. “We’ll find a bagual tomorrow, and then we’ll eat,” Sebastián said.

On the fourth morning the bagualeros breakfasted on cigarettes and yerba maté—an appetite-suppressing herbal tea that delivers the jolt of a strong cup of coffee—and left camp early to forge a trail forward. I stayed in camp, charged with keeping the fires going, the dogs from the leather, and the horses from returning home. In three days I’d already lost weight—a couple of imperceptible pounds at first, then an unwelcome few more, and now the incessant cold had taken permanent hold, first of extremities, and then of bones. There was no way to get warm. Even close to the fire, the wind drove freezing rain into the makeshift shelter.



When the bagualeros returned to camp several hours later, they too were frozen and drenched to the skin, their hands torn from thorns and from their machete handles. They took turns steaming their clothes over the fire. Abelino wordlessly covered my shoulders with his dry jacket. “An abiding, instinctive kindness,” I said afterward when someone asked what had most impressed me

about the bagualeros—which is surprising only when you consider the direct brutality of their work.

If there was an easy, gentle way to get feral cattle out of Sutherland and to market, all alternatives fled my mind when that bull emerged from the forest. In most of the rest of the world, feedlots, cattle trucks, and abattoirs muffle the violence between the consumer and the consumed. Here the field was tilted more fairly in favor of the animal.

“A bagualero is someone who goes hand to hand with wild cattle, using human skills,” Sebastián had explained. “With a gun you have too much advantage. But body to body you can lose; you’re risking your life.” In the mid-1960s Arturo was in his 40s when a bagual bull finally caught up with him in a peat bog we had crossed on the first day of our journey to Sutherland.

Arturo had dismounted from his horse, so he was forced to face the bull alone and unarmed—body to body, as Sebastián would have it. “Things didn’t go so well for my great-uncle,” Sebastián said. The bull smashed Arturo’s teeth to splinters and with sweeping horns tore through his testicles. After that some shots were fired in the air by Arturo’s compadres, and the bull retreated, leaving Arturo soaked in his own blood. Arturo asked to be helped back on his horse and rode to the Iglesias family’s estancia, there to await a boat that would ferry him to the nearest hospital.

When the professionals at the hospital in Punta Arenas saw Arturo, they offered to castrate him on the spot and thereby save the man from almost certain death by infection. Instead, Arturo begged the nurse to pack his wounded parts in salt. After that he insisted on having his smashed teeth replaced with dentures. He left the hospital fully intact as a man, with an unnaturally bright and even smile.

The question arose, “Is it worth it?” Of course, the answer to that question depended on what “it” was and by which set of values you balanced a life. In other words it depended on whether you

valued the grandeur of suffering or the banality of comfort. And it depended on whether you do your life for a living. “A person who has no connection to their ancestors and to their land is condemned to tumble,” Sebastián had said. “This is a way of life for us, not just a way to make money.”

Which was just as well because it was obvious there wouldn't be 50 baguales to load onto the ferry back to market in Puerto Natales. Bad weather had driven most of the baguales far west of Sutherland, beyond the endurance of the horses and dogs. Instead of five baguales a day, they'd be lucky to get one every two or three days.

And even that modest number seemed an imposingly difficult achievement. Once the bagualeros managed to catch up with a bull and lasso it in the dense brush, they still had to dehorn it and tie it to a tree for a few days until exhaustion wore the bull pliable enough to be roped to a horse and persuaded onto the ferry.

I was beginning to wonder—out of line with Sebastián's belief in the power of positive thinking—if I'd be in one piece to see the end of this trip. After all, the very first bull I encountered seemed to have fixed its attention on me, and I still hadn't found a suitable tree to climb.

But then the four bagualeros suddenly appeared, riding with unimaginable speed through the forest, one hand on the reins, the other ready on a coil of rope. Seeing them, the bull fled into the trees, toward the lake. I followed at an immoderately safe distance. By the time I got to the lake, the bull had accidentally strangled to death on one of the ropes. In an effort to revive it, someone had pulled the creature's tongue from its mouth. Someone else was bouncing on its belly, CPR on a grand scale and to no avail. Life seeped from its eyes, which turned from black to glacial green. Abelino took off his hat and wiped his brow. Alive, that bull represented a month's salary. Dead, it was just meat for us and the dogs.

Over the next two weeks the men caught about a half dozen cows, several bulls, and a calf. One bull drowned itself in the lake; a cow jumped from a cliff and hanged itself. Our campsite churned redolent with animals and meat. The men grew lonely for women, and jokes were traded that no one would translate for my benefit. I did learn, however, that the brothel in Puerto Natales, a favorite haunt of Arturo's, had burned to the ground some time ago. "Maybe someone set fire to it just to see the women running out," someone suggested wistfully.

The ferry could come to Sutherland only if the weather held. "It'll be fine," Sebastián said, against all evidence. But the ferry did come, and the bagualeros managed to load all the animals. Most of us made it out with scratches and bruises, a few with sore backs. The elderly packhorse was lame from its falls on the trail, but it limped willingly on board. One dog had been crushed against a tree by a bull and, disoriented by the trauma, had run home; another survived being swept away by a waterfall.

As the ferry turned toward Puerto Natales, I thought of what comes next for Estancia Ana María—the burgeoning tourism industry seems most likely to dominate the area's future. The baguales would no doubt be exterminated. The uncommon courage and swift brutality of the bagualeros would be a thing of campfire stories. The mystery and wildness of the place would be solved and tamed. Sebastián raised a beer and gave a toast to the land, to his ancestors, to us. "For this life!" he said. We all drank, then Sutherland was gone from view.



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