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Cold Water Tourism: The Falkland Islands

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Abstract

After consideration of the islands' geography and history, particularly the 1982 conflict with Argentina, the aftermath of which still constrains island life, the chapter identifies different categories of visitors, from cruise ships, land-based tourists to military personnel taking rest and recreation away from their base. Issues of access are detailed, as are reasons why tourists visit. These are varied, but it is evident that the wildlife is key, especially the iconic penguin. Management and conservation issues are discussed and the chapter concludes with the opinions of locals that Falkland Islands tourism cannot be called 'extreme'; rather it is 'raw'.

Introduction

In Punta Arenas airport at the tip of mainland Latin America T-shirts on sale enable buyers to boast of having been to *Finisterre*, the world's end. East of this end of the world lie the Falkland Islands. From Punta Arenas every Saturday a flight from Santiago via Puerto Montt, until then a Chilean domestic service, is reincarnated as an international flight to the Falklands and passengers for the islands must disembark to clear customs and immigration. Once a month the flight includes a leg to Rio Gallegos in Argentina, 483 km off whose coast the islands lie. This service, operated by Lan Chile, is the Falklands' principal commercial access. Their other carrier is the British Royal Air Force (RAF), which accepts civilians on flights from England via Ascension Island about six times a month. This combination: remoteness; difficulty of access; military involvement and—with limited communications being indicative—poor relations with its nearest neighbour, constrain life in the Falkland Islands including, of course, tourism.

The Falkland Islands (Figure 1) comprise two substantial islands, West and East Falkland and over 700 smaller islands of largely sedimentary origin, mainly quartzite, sandstone and shale. The islands' 12,173 sq km, combined with a tiny civilian population of 2,491 (2001 census; 1,989 lived in the one town, Stanley) results in low population density. This, together with the absence of trees, gives the islands a spacious feel, especially West Falkland which is less rugged and more rounded than East Falkland, and which has less than 400 residents. The vegetation—principally whitegrass interspersed with ground hugging shrubs, such as diddle-dee and teaberry, with more substantial tussac grass clumps being confined to coastal areas and especially now, given pastoralism, offshore islets—has to cope with a troublesome climate. The Falklands are 52°S and, whilst temperatures are mild with a small annual range (mean daytime temperatures of 2°C in July to 9°C in December), there are persistent strong winds, usually westerlies, a mean 15 knots, a trial to any organism, vegetable or human, that seeks to elevate itself more than a few centimetres from the surface.

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The British probably sighted the islands first (1592), certainly landed first (1690) but the French settled first (1764 at Port Louis on East Falkland) and their resultant claim passed through a sale to Spain to what became Argentina. The British, who had temporarily settled Saunders Island off West Falkland in 1765, sent in a ship to take control of all islands in the archipelago in 1833 after a period of lawlessness ended in Britons being murdered. The British moved the capital from Port Louis to the new planned town of Stanley in 1845 and developed the archipelago for sheep ranching (see Royle 1985 for a brief overview of the early history). The Argentinean claim was never abandoned and in 1982 Argentina, largely for domestic political reasons, invaded, expelling the British authorities. The British, under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher who is still revered in the Falklands, countered by sending down a naval Task Force. After ships on both sides had been sunk, the British established a beachhead in the west of East Falkland and troops 'yomped' as the phrase had it (i.e. walked) towards Stanley with engagements at Goose Green and in the mountains to the west of the town amongst a series of clashes. The Argentineans surrendered rather than fight in a major battle for Stanley and the British resumed control (see, for example, Smith 1984; Middlebrook 1988).

The Falklands Conflict catapulted the islands onto the world stage and accelerated ongoing modernisation, as Britain had now to be seen to cherish this colonial outpost on which so much blood and treasure had been expended. One change was an extensive programme of land reform, which saw the breaking up of many of the huge estates, most owned by expatriate companies, into family farms owned and run by locals. There were 36 farming enterprises in 1979, now there are 90. This reform saw much non-familial labour have to leave the agricultural sector and migrate into Stanley, which as a result and with some immigration from overseas, has grown by about 50% since 1982. The Falklands' economy was based on wool production and not, as was popularly believed, on transfer payments from Britain (Shackleton 1976; 1982). It has now been transformed with fishing, especially for two squid species, *loligo* and the migratory *illex*, becoming dominant, foreign vessels paying for licences to fish within the Falklands Conservation Zone declared in 1986. The money raised from the licensing accounts for over half government revenue (£25.9m of an estimated £50.5m (51.3%) in 2003-2004 (Falkland Islands Government (FIG) 2003)) and has facilitated development and infrastructure projects. In Stanley, most prominent is the community school, which also serves as leisure centre and library whilst in Camp (everywhere outside Stanley) the expanding road network is notable. Previously overland journeys were without benefit of roads. The government's Falkland Islands Development Corporation (FIDC) has used some of the income, together with private sector involvement, to promote diversification. Thus an EU-standard abattoir now enables sheepmeat as well as wool to be exported and textile producers add value to some of the island product by making sweaters from local wool.

The Falkland Islands remain under British administration as an Overseas Territory, one of a series in the Atlantic stretching south from Bermuda, incorporating the Turks and Caicos Islands, St Helena and its two dependencies, Ascension Island and the Tristan da Cunha group, and, moving beyond the Falklands, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, which were separated administratively from the Falklands after the Conflict. Links within the British South Atlantic are functional not administrative. Ascension is a staging and refuelling post for Falklands traffic coming down the Atlantic and St Helena is the source of much of the Falklands' immigrant labour supply. The tiny population of the Falkland Islands precludes independence, nor would there be any wish for it (Summers 2003)—local suspicions of Argentina remain strong and the British

defensive shield is vital. The islands have a British Governor, but are self-ruling with Legislative and Executive Councils. The Governor is obliged to consult the latter in the exercise of his function under the 1985 constitution. The Falklands are self-supporting, the British pay only for defence, which, with foreign affairs, remains a reserved responsibility.

Tourism to the Falkland Islands

Another diversification product, part of the post-Conflict search for growth in which FIDC was much involved, is tourism. This now vies with agriculture to be the islands' second industry—passenger tax from cruise ships alone brought £300,000 to government coffers in 2003-04. It is of growing long term importance as a sustainable sector in an economy otherwise dependent on fickle uncertainties: the breeding and migration of squid and the world market price of wool (see *The Economist* 13 October 2004). The islands' tourism was studied by the author in September 2004. Interviews were held with legislators, tourism officials, managers in tourism companies and providers of tourism services on the ground. Site visits took place to Camp, both in West and East Falkland, as well as in Stanley

Tourism Categories

Cruise ship passengers comprise the vast majority of Falkland visitors, 34,000 in 2003-04 (Table 1), near 50,000 if crew visits are included. This business, dating from 1968, in 2004-2005 will see 39 ships make 85 voyages to the islands. Cruising is seasonal, from October until late March/early April, the summer providing somewhat warmer weather, calmer seas, longer hours of daylight and being the time when all the migratory species that breed on the islands are present, wildlife being an important factor in Falklands tourism.

There are different types of ships. The biggest are 'luxury' cruisers, as might be seen in the Caribbean, some with over 1000 passengers. Their voyages usually start in mainland Latin America, often incorporating Ushuaia in Argentina, cruise around Tierra del Fuego and come across to the Falkland Islands. Passengers tend to be American and elderly, usually 60-79. Other ships present 'soft adventure' cruises, catering for a bolder passenger and finally there are 'expedition' ships, usually under 200 passengers with a younger age profile, under 65 (Ingham and Summers 2002), engaged in adventure tours to and beyond the Falklands. One company operating in this market is called Expeditions Antarctica Journeys. An example of its wares is the two 19 day cruises of the 2004-05 season of M/V *Polar Star*, (1500 tons), an 'expedition cruise vessel' accommodating 98 passengers within its ice-hardened hull. Two days in the Falklands at Stanley and New Island are part of the trip:

We sail from Ushuaia, Argentina to the Falkland Islands—home to a collection of flora and fauna dependent on the surrounding sea, and scene of the 1982 Falkland Islands Conflict between Great Britain and Argentina. We then move on to South Georgia where we spend four days. During our unforgettable landings, we experience its unique concentration of wildlife (imagine penguins and reindeer side-by-side), marvel at the awe-inspiring landscape, and examine the remnants of the whaling industry from a bygone era. When we leave South Georgia, we head southwest to the Antarctic Peninsula where we spend another four days immersed in the "White Continent," before returning to South America through the Drake Passage.

(http://www.antarcticajourneys.com/antarctica/journey_types/expedition/polar_star/Falkland_Islands_SGeorgia_Antarctica/)

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The few hundred land-based tourists each year are less seasonal than those on ships; they stay longer—normally at least a week, given the infrequent flights—and spend more, needing accommodation and food, and spread tourism beyond the ten sites used by cruise ships (Ingham and Summers 2002). They often have niche interests in, say, wildlife or military history and tend to be reasonably wealthy, given the cost of reaching the islands. Mostly they are middle aged or above and come without young children.

The third major tourist sector is an unusual captive market—the military posted to the islands. In 1985 the British established an airbase at Mount Pleasant (MPA) about 63 km from Stanley to secure the defence of the Falklands. Perhaps 1500 service personnel are stationed there, each entitled to R&R (rest and relaxation, military speak for holidays), which they may choose to spend away from the base. A guesthouse business at Port Howard attributed their motivation to being able to have a bath not a shower, to enjoy home cooked food, to have their own bedroom and to be able to set their own agenda. Whether this is to go trekking or fishing, or see wildlife is less important than the fact that the choice of activity is theirs. They might also play golf—the Port Howard course has the unique hazard of a minefield within it, giving a whole new interpretation to ‘out of bounds’. The military sector has no connection with the generalities of cold water or small island tourism. Little more will be written about it, except to emphasize its importance, in that it is not as seasonal as other sectors, focuses on Camp rather than Stanley, and serves as a base, ‘home’, market which bulks up tourism and helps to support suppliers.

Tourism motivation

Elderly Americans, sated with Caribbean cruises and moving on to take one in Latin America, arrive in the Falklands without necessarily having consciously chosen to do so, the islands might just be a small part of an extensive cruise. Thus will passengers of the 59,652 tonne *Rotterdam* with its 658 cabins and four restaurants sailing in November 2005 from Rio de Janeiro via Montevideo, Buenos Aires, Stanley, Usuahia, Punta Arenas and Puerto Montt to Santiago’s port of Valparaiso (<http://cruises.hotwire.com/b/c/sc.asp?d=10/1/2004&d2=3/31/2006&i=847980&c=24&v=113>) choose to take ship because a nine hour visit to Stanley is included? Anecdotal evidence suggests that passengers from some of the luxury cruises are not well prepared: ‘Does the sea go all the way round the islands?’; ‘How do you cut the grass on the minefields?’ and ‘Do penguins fly?’ were all genuine questions repeated to the author. Further, material given to passengers on some large cruisers is flawed: warnings not to leave main roads for fear of crime may be necessary for Latin American cities but not for Stanley where there has never been a mugging or pickpocketing (Penguin News 2004). One set of passengers was told that they ‘may’ find people who speak English, a nonsense regarding this thoroughly anglophone destination. Some nervous passengers just cluster around the jetty and the visitors’ centre adjacent, not even stepping further into Stanley for fear of the unknown. Others ask to be whisked to the nearest penguin to complete their Falklands experience. These people gain nothing and contribute little. The FITB and tourism providers are keen to get accurate information on board ships, to reassure passengers, encouraging them to be more adventurous, but not raising their expectations unrealistically. One business, which includes off-road driving as part of the tourist experience, wants the realities of that made known before passengers innocently board their Land Rovers.

Others, particularly those on expedition cruises and land-based tourists, are more ‘inquisitive’ about their destination as one tourism official stated and have chosen the

Falklands. Why? Not for their sophistication. Food artfully arranged in a tower, that benchmark of contemporary cuisine, can be bought in Stanley restaurants but menus are limited. There is no professional entertainment, just a lively local music scene, also amateur dramatics and sports events to which visitors are welcome. One tourism company wanted to see accommodation standards rise 'to another level', for hotel accommodation in Stanley is not of the highest quality, whilst some Camp lodges are basic. 'Cold-water tourism is coping without a hair dryer' said a guesthouse operator, explaining the constraints of managing without mains electricity.

Choices may be made because of the islands' difference. They are a curiosity, off Latin America, but an English-speaking British Overseas Territory where people drive on the left and celebrate the Queen's birthday with 21 gun salutes. (Further north, Bermuda also profits from these, to mainlanders, 'quaint' characteristics.) Some like to add the Falklands to their list of countries seen; some are attracted to the historic ships condemned and abandoned here (Smith 1985); some come because the islands are quiet and safe. There are the famous stone runs, notable periglacial formations prominent especially on East Falkland, which look like rivers of stone and are spectacular when seen from the air (Stone and Aldiss 2000). There is no pollution, the light's clarity giving the landscape deep, vibrant colours, attracting photographers. Some cherish the traditional sheep ranching economy: tourism providers might arrange shearing demonstrations; all will be able to show shearing sheds, their distinct odour the olfactory symbol of Camp for islanders apparently. One farm on East Falkland draws bus loads of cruise ship passengers from Stanley to demonstrations of horse and sheepdog management, peat cutting and sheep shearing and brings guests into the traditional farmhouse to see the peat stove and have 'smoko' (the local term for a break, usually with a snack) with bread, butter and cream all being home made. Follow-up questionnaires with clients of one company picked up on these themes: 'unspoilt', 'hospitable', 'friendly' and 'authentic' were terms used. Further, there is excellent angling, especially for sea trout, in little fished, uncrowded rivers, where the angler will probably not see another fisher—some will come round the world for such experiences.

Others come because of the 1982 Conflict. Tour companies arrange focused visits to battlefields, plane crash sites (souvenir hunting is discouraged), cemeteries and memorials. Falklanders can be sensitive about the Conflict, attitudes remain hard, but those involved in tourism at least are aware that this is an important part of the island story and it can be marketed, although the Falkland Islands Tourist Board (FITB) is keen to promote other attractions. One operator in particular specialises in battlefield work, often for film companies, although he will also arrange other tours (www.discoveryfalklands.com).

Overwhelmingly, however, people choose to visit the Falklands for the wildlife (Strange 1992). Here, at last, is commonality with other cold water islands: remote, relatively little disturbed, sparsely populated, such places still display nature writ large, red here not in tooth and claw, given the absence of terrestrial mammalian carnivores, but red in beak and talon. The star of Falklands' postcards and T-shirts is the penguin. The islands are breeding grounds for Gentoos, Kings, Magellanics and Rockhoppers, of global importance for Gentoos and Rockhoppers. Dolphins, whales, sea lions, fur and elephant seals can be seen: one popular offshore destination is Sea Lion Island. Everywhere there are surprisingly sizeable birds: upland geese (Stanley's major hotel is the Upland Goose, on the grass outside pairs of which always graze), the Falklands flightless steamer duck, grebes, shearwaters, petrels. The Cobb's wren is an important endemic; few will see another, the splendidly-named Dark-faced Ground-Tyrant. Turkey vultures scavenge; falcons, hawks and caracaras, both striated and crested, are birds of prey. Avian life is spectacular, abundant and relatively tame. One tourism firm reported

that the icon of the luxury cruise tourist, the penguin, was replaced for the expedition ship traveller by the black-browed albatross, the Falklands accommodating 70% of the world's population, c. 380,000 pairs, of this near threatened species (see Huin 2001).

Access

Access is an important issue for Falklands tourism, particularly given the continuing dispute with Argentina. In 2003 Argentina imposed restrictions on air space clearance. Except the RAF link through Ascension, all flights, including those from Chile, have to traverse Argentinean airspace. The restriction could not affect the established weekly flight from Punta Arenas, but made it more difficult, virtually impossible, for shipping companies to organise charter flights for passenger exchanges in the Falklands. There were 16 such turnarounds in 2002-2003, only one, organised through the Lan Chile link, the following year after the restriction. Cruisers, which once might have remained in the South Atlantic, now have to return to South America to board new passengers, with less time available for island visits. Almost every respondent in the fieldwork interviews brought up this issue, and it is discussed at inter-government level with British involvement, this involving foreign affairs.

The other access choke point is the Lan Chile flight being only weekly. Thus most land-based tourists have to come for units of whole weeks. This precludes the islands from the growing short break market. With the need for all but Chileans to get first to Santiago or Punta Arenas, another couple of days might be required on top, so a visit to the Falklands is of the duration of an annual holiday for those in work, limiting the islands' market. There is a demand to have a second flight weekly, which would ease matters; however, given the current position of Argentina, this seems to be unlikely and without better access one legislator thought tourism could only 'tick over'.

The RAF flights are slightly more frequent but are tedious: two long legs from RAF Brize Norton in southern England to Ascension and on to MPA, often taken in noisy, slow, Tristar aircraft without modern facilities—the RAF is not part of the hospitality industry. Only to some civilians does the cachet of flying in an RAF Tristar outweigh the rigours of the experience. There are possibilities with the opening up of Ascension Island for civilian use to develop two-centre holidays on both British possessions, but as Ascension's infrastructure presently is limited, such schemes are for the future. So there is little chance of considerably increasing land-based tourism, even were there the demand. For cruise ships there is no such problem and passenger numbers have increased markedly in recent years, despite the ending of passenger exchanges (Table 1).

Cold Water Tourism and its Management

Falkland Island tourism is unusual in that it is cold water based, free from the paradise island tag—these are *Darwin's desolate islands* (Armstrong 1992, commemorating the fact that Charles Darwin spent longer here than he did in the Galapagos Islands). There are splendid beaches, but the islands are not suitable for beach holidays: it is not warm enough, it is too windy and the sea is unwelcoming. A sixth-generation islander reported that she and her friends when young had swum in the sea on hot summer afternoons but this was not undertaken with relish, more as a dare, and the immersion was brief. Sadly, too, many beaches near Stanley will be forever off limits after being mined in 1982. In any event, the tiny scale of society and the resultant limited infrastructure, together with the remoteness and consequently expensive travel, preclude the Falklands' catering for mass tourism, whatever the water temperature. The islands get some backpackers, often through last minute bookings with Lan Chile, but they can find the Falklands difficult, there is little cheap accommodation, especially outside Stanley and hitchhiking is problematic with a skeletal road network and few vehicles.

At one time there was a notional cap of 200 on land-based tourists as a conservation measure (Royle 1997). Now government policy is to increase long-stay tourist visits (FIG 2002), but the self-regulation of remoteness, restricted access and limited infrastructure makes this difficult. For example, Stanley has only about 50 hotel beds and about the same number in guesthouses. A former Chief Executive thinks that the finite limit to the numbers that can be transported and accommodated ... is probably less than 500 per year (Gurr 2001: 223).

Cruise ships have fewer infrastructural constraints. Only the smallest of them berth alongside, so there is no competition for wharf space. Most remain in the ample anchorages where more than one ship at a time can be accommodated. When this happens—'clash days' they are termed in the trade—considerable overcrowding is caused on land. Usually ships make two stops in the islands, one at Stanley where tourists who will venture beyond the visitor's centre drift as though they were inhabitants of another dimension, like giants observing a model village ... [without] concept that the roads carry traffic and real people are doing real work in real offices while they shamle around (Gurr 2001: 221).

There is not yet full information available, but it seems that mean passenger spend is rather low, and if it could be raised more money would be made from tourism without increasing pressures. One development is more substantial souvenir outlets, the most prominent being the new Capstan Gift Shop, which, like the Upland Goose Hotel belongs to the Falkland Islands Company, a long established firm which still owns much land used for sheep ranching as well as being dominant in the islands' commerce, including retailing (www.the-falkland-islands-co.com).

It is necessary to manage a delicate environment when the tourist gaze is towards iconic wildlife whose very presence might be affected by these tourists. There is one site easily accessible by road from Stanley, Gypsy Cove, a penguin rookery. This Falklands Conservation regards as having been 'ruined'. Tourist pressures including quick trips of passengers from cruise ships anchored off Stanley, up to 1000 people per day in high season, led to trampling, damaging the burrows of Magellanic penguins and reducing their numbers, although others claim that excess predation by an elephant seal was the reason for their decline. The site is now protected with marked and roped pathways and there are still some penguins to be observed, though not the numbers of other sites. Gypsy Cove provided a valuable lesson that care has to be taken to manage tourists.

Elsewhere site visits require a certain amount of endurance, for they can only be reached after travelling in off-road vehicles and walking. This difficulty of access helps reduce environmental pressures reported several respondents, although there remain worries about visits to offshore islands especially where rats and other introduced vermin could cause problems: the endemic Cobb's wren cannot survive where there are rats, for example, and a rat-eradication programme has been put into operation on several offshore islands. A carelessly-managed barbecue from a private yacht party irretrievably destroyed much of the habitat of Green Island when not only tussac grass but the peat soil caught fire, reported an environmentalist. Tourist visits are usually better handled. Consider cruise ship passengers' visits to Kidney Cove on East Falkland. These see them taken from the liner by ships' boats or tourist company's launch to a small jetty, collected by Land Rover and driven to penguin sites. Some find the off-road 'safari' challenging; to others it is part of the attraction. The principal site has two 'bucket and chuck it' toilets, benches and a hut selling souvenirs, otherwise the area is natural, except for ropes keeping tourists a few metres away from the disturbingly malodorous mass of penguins to minimize the problems caused by disturbance (see Regel and Pütz 1997). Such visits do not see tourists left unsupervised. Further, many tourist operators have completed a Tour Guide course organised by the FITB which includes substantial input from

Falklands Conservation, which has taught them how to 'assist visitors to view wildlife and habitats while protecting against damage or disturbance, i.e. sustainable tourism' according to the powerpoint they use, which the author was allowed to see. Firms such as Kidney Cove Safari Tours mention their Registered Tour Guides in their marketing (<http://www.tourism.org.fk/pages/kidney-cove-tours.htm>).

A positive feature affecting conservation is the major significance tourism has on the economy of some farm enterprises, leading farmers to cherish their wildlife, their 'golden geese'. Farmers on some of the subdivided estates whose 4-8,000 ha (10-20,000 acres) have proved to be rather too small (Gurr 2001: 108) reported that tourism now accounted for around half their income. Some islands including Sea Lion and Weddell, are now almost completely reliant on wildlife tourism. Some people, especially in Camp, also earn tourism cash by making crafts, though there are also stuffed toy penguins made in China in some Stanley outlets.

Conclusion

Tourism is now an essential, integral part of the Falkland Islands economy. Its operation and management consequently has to be and indeed is professional, thus the FITB is efficiently run, a stand-alone agency working closely with government, operators, Falklands Conservation and local people to develop an effective, sustainable strategy and policy. On the ground there is the Tour Guide course, internationally there is attendance at tourism events in Latin America and Europe, although the absolute spend on marketing can only be tiny. Falklands Conservation studies the islands' flora and fauna (e.g. 2003; Jones 2004) but also keeps a watching brief on the impact of tourism (Ingham and Summers 2002) and has produced a visitor's guide advising on behaviour as well as detailing wildlife sites (Summers 2001). It has a seat on the FIG Environment Committee, has helped designate protected land, including Ramsar (wetland) sites, and is involved in bodies such as the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators which establishes good practice for Antarctic tourism. The British government, through the Governor and his staff, regards tourism development as a local responsibility, encourage it as a necessary economic diversification, but would not like to see the islands become a 'theme park'. Local government, less focused on agriculture than it used to be, requires one of eight councillors to take the tourism portfolio and it is to him that FITB reports. Local companies involved in arranging tours for the military, land based tourists and cruise ship passengers liaise with each other and with partners in Stanley and Camp, custodians of the tourism product. Most Falkland Islanders now see tourists, even those crowding Stanley on cruise ship days, as worthwhile although societal norms do not see locals defer to people just because they are 'from away'. Another issue is that there is no unemployment here, more a labour shortage given that Saint Helenians are increasingly going to the UK rather than the Falklands for work. This colours some local attitudes to tourists: 'who needs them?' Some landowners with important historic or wildlife sites on their property will not allow tourist access, even though this would be profitable—Falklanders are often individualists. However, at least Stanley shops are likely to open now for ship visits, a flexibility not always seen in the past.

Would the Falklands be an example of extreme tourism? Many respondents begged to differ, they did not recognise their tourism product as belonging to such a category. 'Extreme' to them implied hardship, endurance and privation, characteristics not integral to the Falkland Islands tourism experience. One legislator and a tour company owner independently both proposed instead the word 'raw', in the sense of being unprocessed or unrefined, rather than crude or unfinished. The title of one FITB leaflet (n. d.) serves as an apt summary: *Falkland Islands ... naturally*.

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