IN 1520, FERDINAND Magellan took time out of his busy schedule of sailing around the world to stop in what is now Patagonia [South America], where he found a naked giant dancing and singing on the shore. Magellan ordered one of his men to make contact, and to be sure to [try to imitate] the dancing and singing to demonstrate friendship.

It worked. The crewman was able to lead the giant to a small island offshore, where the great captain waited.

Describing the scene was a man who was traveling for the purpose of gaining new knowledge. This man, Antonio Pigafetta, ...kept a diary of the journey that was later turned into the book Magellan’s Voyage: A Narrative Account of the First Circumnavigation:

“When he was before us, he began to [be amazed] and to be afraid, and he raised one finger upward, believing that we came from heaven. And he was so tall that the tallest of us only came up to his waist,” and had a big, booming voice.

The illustration [at left] proves it—Patagonia was once inhabited by giants that positively dwarfed the heavenly Europeans that would come to conquer them.

Alright, maybe that isn’t airtight evidence. [It’s not evidence at all!] But it could well be that the people Magellan encountered, the Tehuelche, were indeed enormous, and that therefore this myth has some grounding in reality. And our trusty explorer [was] going to try to bring back evidence in pretty much the most [annoying] way you could imagine.

On that small island, Magellan had his men give the giant food and drink, then made the mistake of showing him a mirror. “Wherein the giant seeing himself was greatly terrified,” wrote Pigafetta, “leaping back so that he threw four of our men to the ground.” But once things had calmed down, the explorers proceeded to make contact
with the rest of the tribe, hunting with them and even building a house to store their provisions while onshore.

After several weeks with the tribe, Magellan hit upon a scheme [a crafty plan]: He would kidnap two of them and take them back to Spain to prove he had discovered giants.

“But this was by a cunning trick, for otherwise [the giants] would have troubled some of our men.”

Magellan gave them all manner of metal goods to fool around with—mirrors, scissors, bells—so they wouldn’t mind at all when he slapped cuffs and chains on their legs.

“Whereat these giants took great pleasure in seeing these fetters, and did not know where they had to be put, and they were grieved [upset, bothered] that they could not take them in their hands...”

because their [hands] already were full of other trinkets.

Magellan, though, lost his evidence during the long haul back to Spain. The giants didn’t survive. But what Magellan and Pigafetta did bring back was the tale and the new name of the land of the giants, Patagonia [may mean] “Land of the Big Feet,” from “pata,” Spanish for foot. More likely, though, Magellan picked up the name from a popular novel at the time, Primaleon, which featured a race of wild people called the Patagonians.

But leave it to the British to throw cold water on the whole thing. Englishman Sir Francis Drake later made contact with the same Patagonians, as summarized by his nephew in The World Encompassed from 1628 (a smackdown worth quoting at length):

“Magellan was not altogether [wrong] in naming these [people] giants, for they generally differ from the common sort of man both in stature, bigness and strength of body, ... but they are nothing so monstrous and giant-like as they were represented, there being some English men as tall as the highest we could see, but peradventure [maybe] the Spaniards did not think that ever any English man would come hither [here] to reprove them [say they were wrong], and therefore might presume the more boldly to lie.”

[Scholars agree that Magellan’s and his crew’s stories were exaggerated.] While subsequent voyages after Magellan’s measured the Patagonians up to 10 feet tall, others put them more in the 6-foot range.

“Popular interest in Patagonian giants waned as scientific reports began to appear,” writes Sturtevant. “Some 19th century estimates or measurements of individuals were still high,” upwards of 7 feet. But better samples of Tehuelche men brought them down to around 6 feet tall, perfectly reasonable for a human being but entirely unimpressive for a giant. “If we accept the lowest (and least well documented) of these means based on modern measurements of males series,” he adds, “the Tehuelche are nevertheless among the tallest populations known anywhere in the world.” By contrast, male Europeans like Magellan in the 16th through 18th centuries would have measured in the low-5-foot range. Their imaginations, though, apparently outgrew their small stature.

Thus the giants of Patagonia remain nothing more than products of some sailors’ imaginations—and maybe a little bit of scurvy. Never hurts to blame scurvy.

References: