



SOUTHERN EXPOSURE



PATAGONIA'S RUGGED, UNSPOILED
NATURE WILL BLOW YOU AWAY.

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LAST HOUSE ON EARTH: Cape Horn's lighthouse keeper and his family.
OPPOSITE: Piza Glacier meets the Beagle Channel.

AGALE THUNDERS DOWN FROM PATAGONIA'S high granite peaks, roars across the green pampas, and blasts the washed-out port town of Punta Arenas. The wind, like all of nature in this wild verge of Chile, is strapping and constant, and it strafes the pier as we lurch toward the *Stella Australis*' gangplank. I'm as whipped up as the whitecaps on the water below, but my guide, Julio, stands bolt upright and beatific as he helps with my bags. "In Patagonia we love the wind," he says. "When I go to Santiago, I feel strange and sad without it."

The Strait of Magellan, the most important natural passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans, is narrow, difficult to navigate, and beset by sudden gusts known as williwaw winds. Early attempts to settle the coastline ended in tragedy, including at nearby Port Famine, where some 300 souls have succumbed to starvation and exposure. Even Punta Arenas, today Chile's most important port on the strait, subsisted as a murderous, mutinous penal colony for decades.

It's no obvious tourist destination, and yet *Cruceros Australis*, the Chilean cruise operator with special permits for these waters and the shallow-draft ships required to explore most fjords, does a booming business. Having sailed two smaller cruise ships for more than 22 years, the company launched the 200-passenger *Stella Australis* in 2010. This fall it debuts an eight-day itinerary for passengers who want more than the current four- or five-day adventures between Punta Arenas, Chile, and Ushuaia, Argentina.

Part of the region's appeal lies in following in the tracks of some of history's most beloved explorers—Ferdinand Magellan, Sir Francis Drake, Charles Darwin, Captain Robert Fitz-Roy. Though as soon as we escape the blustery plank to the dark wood and polished brass of the ship's reception, it's clear that this trip is more about pleasure than expedition. A staff member in starched whites and nautical blues sees me to my cabin, a neat little space defined by a picture window. My berth, like all the others on board, is a roomy whitewashed affair



with a snug, firm double bed, a surprisingly spacious bathroom for a ship, and dramatic black-and-white panoramic photos of the region. Outside the wind howls, but from here the landscape appears a breathtaking watercolor: heavy sky, onyx peaks, slate water. We're about to plunge into one of the world's last great wildernesses—minus the explorers' commitment and discomfort.

THE WEATHER RATCHETS UP A NOTCH FOR THE FIRST morning's outing to Ainsworth Bay. At departure time, a gauzy gray cloud veil wraps the ship and rain chatters at the windows. Sensing the anxiety in the group convened in the Darwin Lounge, Mauricio Alvarez announces cheerily that it's on days like this he earns his title of expedition leader rather than cruise director, and then he ushers us into Zodiacs. Everyone hunkers down on the pontoons in faintly human-shaped smudges of bright-colored Gore-Tex, and the boats disappear in the gloom like puffs of confetti.

Suddenly, Patagonia springs its first surprise. The rain tapers off before we reach land, and by the time we unload, sunshine filters through the mist. Traipsing across spongy bogs bright with a crimson starburst ground cover called austral sundew, we reach a lenga beech forest draped in wispy old-man's beard lichen. Our guide pops calafate berries from a

TRAVELER CHECKLIST: 1. Essential expedition equipment. 2. Veteran captain Oscar Sheward. 3. Calafate berries (for happy returns). 4–5. Cape Horn and its memorial.





nearby shrub into her mouth and invites us to do the same. Legend has it that anyone who eats the calafate will return to Patagonia, she tells us. The warm light and pristine woodlands are far more appealing than the morning promised, but I'm still on the fence about the region, so I limit myself to one tart berry – just in case. Back at the beach, the scene grows even more hospitable as the boatmen serve up Chilean hot chocolate, which is more whiskey than cocoa.

This is the gentler, postcard Patagonia of our collective travel minds, where vast, immaculate forests flitter in surreal light and awkward elephant seals sunbathe on black-sand beaches. Perhaps one reason we're drawn here is to affirm it really exists.



From Almirantazgo Sound, the *Stella Australis* threads through passages to the Strait of Magellan, then ducks south on channels lined with forest canopies as thick as broccoli and a backdrop of the snowy Cordillera Darwin. We get a taste of just how savage these waters can be when, at 2 AM on our second night, we enter the open Pacific. It feels like the sea tosses our 290-foot ship like a catamaran. It groans and pitches, but in a few short hours we're back on the flat water of Desolation Bay.

THE LOCALS' TAKE: Magellanic penguins sunbathing on Tucker Island and (opposite) a day in the Darwin Range ice field.

At breakfast the next morning, half the passengers are buzzing about the rough passage; the other half are sleep deprived. The experience unites the group, and in the coming days we mix and socialize as if we're at summer camp. Unacquainted couples convene for cocktails after Mauricio's nightly briefings. Families invite other families to join them for meals.

The festive mood continues on day three when we anchor at Pia Glacier and boatmen finagle Zodiacs around ice slabs that bob like giant cocktail rocks in the water. We hike up a boggy hillside for the best view, reaching the top as a detonation crackles through the air. Below us, a convenience-store-size slab sheers off the glacier and explodes in the channel. For the next hour, we witness an artillery of exploding ice. It's like watching the earth disintegrate before your eyes.

"Many of the glaciers are receding," Mauricio tells us. "I've seen the landscape change in the last few years. It's important for people to experience this." Reason two for visiting now: to witness the spectacle before the inexorable change.

Mauricio lightens the mood a few moments later when he chips off some ancient ice floating in the sound and plunks it into tumblers of whiskey. We raise a glass to Patagonia.

MANY OF MY FELLOW PASSENGERS MADE THE JOURNEY FOR THE FINAL DAY'S VISIT TO CAPE HORN, the remotest inhabited point on the continent at 56-degrees south. It's an accomplishment of sorts to stand on and sail around the storied end of the earth. Named for the birthplace of Dutch sailor Willem Schouten, who navigated around it in 1666, Cape



Horn quickly earned a reputation for wicked weather and monstrous seas. Within a few decades, the run around the continent's tip became a notorious but necessary shipping passage for trade from Asia to Europe. Mauricio pulls out a map dotted with shipwrecks that looks like it caught a bad case of the pox. The Panama Canal cut out most commercial traffic when it was completed in 1914, and though recreational sailors still brave the voyage, Cruceros Australis is the simplest and safest way to reach the cape.

PATAGONIA, NAVIGATED: 1. The Zodiac loading zone. 2. Captain's tools on the bridge. 3. Exploring Ainsworth Bay.

Foul weather relegates some trips to offshore viewing of the cape, but our forecast looks good. At the tiny quay, we climb out of Zodiacs and stomp through 44-degree water to make landfall. The Chilean navy lighthouse keeper and his family greet every passenger with a handshake. Rather than queuing up on the boardwalk and visiting the lighthouse museum with the crowd, I find a secluded promontory and watch smoky clouds bulldoze the sea as squalls sweep eastward.

Our blue-and-white boat sparkles like a fishing bobber against the dark waters. With its high-tech navigation equipment, honey berths, three lounges, white-linen dining service, and gym, it's a far cry from the wood galleons and early twentieth-century cruise ships that plied these waters. Yet the land and seas are nearly as unspoiled as they were 400 years ago. The paradox of having a front-row, first-class seat in one of the world's wildest places is a strong lure to Tierra del Fuego. It's adventure for our age.

After half an hour of storms skirting Cape Horn, a stiff westerly blows over the island and the sky turns black. I hustle to the Zodiac and clamber back inside the *Stella Australis* just as rain begins staining the deck like ink drops. Julio can have the wind. I'll take a Chilean hot chocolate.

MAKINGS OF A GOOD TALE: A crabber displays a whale bone he found and (right) preparing to embark from Punta Arenas.



TIP SHEET

BEST BETS FOR ROUNDING THE HORN.



GETTING THERE LAN Airlines serves Argentina and Chile with daily flights from New York (JFK), Miami, L.A., and San Francisco. Travelers connect to Ushuaia and Punta Arenas through Buenos Aires, Santiago, or Lima.

GO Cruceros Australis offers four-, five-, and eight-day passages between Punta Arenas, Chile, and Ushuaia, Argentina. Except for four extra-spacious superior berths, *Stella Australis'* 100 cabins are the same size; for the best views, book a cabin on deck 4, all of which feature floor-to-ceiling windows. Standard excursions include boarding Zodiacs and hikes to spy Magellanic penguins and cormorants, explore glaciers, and visit remote Cape Horn. Departures: September 21, 2013, through April 9, 2014; from \$1,111, including all meals and beverages.

Buenos Aires and Santiago bookend **Ladatto Tours'** 18-day Patagonia adventure. The land-and-sea itinerary features four days in El Calafate, Argentina, to explore Parque Nacional Los Glaciares, a four-day cruise from Ushuaia to Punta Arenas aboard the *Stella Australis*, and five more days at Puerto Bories for guided adventures in Parque Nacional Torres del Paine. Departures: September 18, 2013, through April 2, 2014; from \$11,700. **VI**