



HMS Beagle.

As we descend the trail, a primordial groan, followed by an ear-shattering boom sounding like heavy artillery, signals that a massive chunk of ice has broken off into the fjord, where other chunks are drifting. The weather is unusually warm, almost balmy. But by the time we reach the beach, a cold wind has whipped up, reminding us that the weather in Patagonia can change by the minute. No matter. A crew member offers up a cup of hot chocolate fortified with a shot of scotch—a much welcomed hot toddy before our

SOUTHERN PATAGONIA'S BEST ADVENTURES

Australis is the only cruise company that offers weekly cruises in southern Patagonia from September to April. You'll visit remote islands and fjords nearly impossible to reach otherwise. Go to australis.com, call toll free 877-678-3772 or email sales@australis.com.

Explora Patagonia is the only luxury lodge in the heart of Torres del Paine National Park (a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve) with close-up views of the Paine Range. The Explora company has been recognized as South America's Leading Expedition Company by the World Travel Awards and offers both lodge-based and nomadic adventures. *Tip:* Consider traveling in the high season or the shoulder seasons when the weather is only slightly colder and landscape colors are vibrant. Go to explora.com, call toll free 866-750-6699 or email reserve@explora.com.

GETTING THERE

Delta offers a 9-hour flight from Atlanta to Santiago, Chile. From there, LAN Airlines has a 3-hour connecting flight to Punta Arenas.



AT THE END OF THE WORLD

TWO GREAT ADVENTURES, BY LAND AND SEA, START AT THE TIP OF SOUTH AMERICA

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHARLES AND MARY LOVE

Our beginning starts at the end. The end of the world to be exact. Terra Incognita. Finis Mundi ... Patagonia.

If you want to get away from it all and find your inner poet, Patagonia is the place to go. About one and a quarter times the size of Texas, this region at the tip of South America is one of the least populated places in the world. Straddling Chile and Argentina, it's a mecca for outdoor enthusiasts and a "bucket list" destination for trav-

elers drawn to the epic scenery: rugged mountains, glaciers, turquoise lakes and vast plains.

But Patagonia doesn't stop where the mainland ends. It continues south and comprises an archipelago of islands called Tierra del Fuego, ("land of fire" in Spanish, referring to the indigenous people's campfires the first Europeans saw from their ships). The archipelago ends at Cape Horn, the last stop before the ocean passage to Antarctica, nearly 600 miles away.

Our journey to the end of the world begins in Punta Arenas, a small, windy city on Chile's southern coast. There, we board the comfortable *Stella Australis* for a cruise to places we hadn't thought about since school days—the Straits of Magellan, the Beagle Channel, Cape Horn. Afterward, we drive north to Patagonia's Torres del Paine National Park for a four-night stay at the Explora Patagonia, a luxury lodge that, without question, is the top place to stay.

Australis Cruise

It's the third day of our cruise, and we've hiked up a rocky trail for a bird's eye view of the Pia Glacier. It flows from the snowcapped mountains of the Darwin Range, the last reach of the Andes Mountains before they plunge into the sea. Not far away is Tierra del Fuego's tallest peak (over 7,000 feet), Mount Darwin. The landscape hasn't changed much since naturalist Charles Darwin arrived here in the early 19th century on the

1. A Zodiac excursion from the *Stella Australis*.
2. View of Paine Range near Explora Patagonia.
3. Hiking in Torres del Paine National Park.
4. Family of guanacos, Torres del Paine National Park.
5. Gaucho, Torres Del Paine National Park.
6. A guided hike to Lake Sarmiento, Torres del Paine National Park.
7. Águila Glacier, Tierra del Fuego.



Kellie Jacobs

PASTEL ARTIST



short Zodiac ride back to the ship.

Australis is the only company that has, for some 25 years, offered weekly, expedition-style cruises in these waters from April to September. In fact, it isn't possible to visit some of the remote islands and fjords on this cruise line's itinerary with other companies. Because the focus of these journeys is the outdoors, it's no surprise that the *Stella's* lounges have expansive windows. Even our own state-room has 6-foot windows

offering IMAX views of the changing scenery.

Back on board, we gather in the topmost lounge as Glacier Alley comes into view. In this narrow waterway, a succession of glaciers, each named for a different European country, descend to the Beagle Channel. With 180 guests from 17 countries aboard, things get lively as the crew rolls out music, drinks and hors d'oeuvres to celebrate each nation. There's beer and oompah music for Germany; red wine and an aria from *Gianni*

Schicchi for Italy; champagne and festive concertina music for France. It's the perfect prelude to a dinner of Patagonian crab-meat and grilled lamb.

Each day, the ship's guides take us on excursions to historical sights and to learn about Patagonia's unique flora and fauna. We see everything from elephant seals, penguins and sea lions to condors and albatrosses. In the fjords, hump-back whale, dolphin and orca sightings are not uncommon. A variety of hikes, ranging from

8. A coastal forest, Tierra del Fuego.

9. Magellanic penguins, Tierra del Fuego.

10. The Towers at sunrise, Torres del Paine National Park.

11. Explora Patagonia Lodge, Torres del Paine National Park.



Piccolo Spoleto Juried Outdoor Art Exhibition ~ Marion Square, May 22 - June 6, 2015

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easy to challenging, allow those of different ages and fitness levels to participate.

A hike at Wulaia Bay takes us through fields of wild flowers and forests of tall, native beech trees. Patricio, our guide, makes a point: "Darwin was in the Galapagos Islands for four and a half weeks, but he was here two and a half years!" He explains how everything—from lichens to barely clothed indigenous people—adapted to the cold Patagonian winters.

Everyone who comes to Patagonia wants to visit Cape Horn. But, due to the fickle weather, it's not always possible. Researchers have estimated that, between the 16th and 20th centuries, more than 800 ships and some 10,000 men of diverse nationalities were lost in

rough seas here. A monument at the top of the Cape—a metal sculpture in the shape of an albatross—honors all the seamen who died. On our cruise,

Darwin was in the Galapagos Islands for four and a half weeks, but he was in Patagonia two and a half years.

the weather is calm, so we go ashore and walk to the top of the Cape to see the monument and a tiny lighthouse, manned by a dapper Chilean naval officer and his family.

At tiny Magdalena Island, our last stop, over 100,000 Magellanic penguins greet us. Incessant chatter fills the air as they court, mate, preen,

prepare nests and take care of their young. These 2-foot-tall flightless birds walk about with a distinctive swagger and occasionally stop in front of us to stare—a signal, we are told, to step aside and let them pass.

Explora Patagonia Lodge

After disembarking in Punta Arenas, we head north with a car and driver on the scenic, five-hour trip to Torres del Paine National Park.

Just inside the Park's north entrance, the Paine Range looms. The iconic towers for which the Park is named, Torres del Paine (translated "towers of blue" from the indigenous Tehuelche language), thrust upward into a clear sky.

The short drive from here to the lodge takes us by

extraordinary wildlife. Within minutes, we pass herds of guanacos (members of the camel family), rheas (large, flightless birds resembling ostriches) and flamingoes wading at the edge of a brilliant turquoise lake. In the sky, Andean condors—birds with wingspans that exceed nine feet—circle lazily.

But at our 49-room lodge overlooking Lake Pehoé, we find the most dramatic scenery of all: close-up views of the Paine Range and the Cuernos (two dramatic, horn-shaped peaks). To the left, snow-powdered Paine Grande, the tallest of the peaks (9,460 feet), is mirrored in the lake. By day and night, the mountains are in sight, even from our bedroom, as the light and shadows work their magic. During our visit, a full moon

adds to the drama.

The Explora Patagonia is special indeed. It's the only luxury lodge in the heart of the park that offers close-up views of the Paine Range, the kind of location that photographers—and anyone inspired by nature—dream about.

The interior, accented with soft-colored upholstery, has walls and floors made from the region's native beech. It's a restful place to relax after a day of exploring the surrounding area on foot or by horseback. Meals are gourmet, healthy and served with style. We can sit in the dining room with a direct view of the mountains or on the other side of a spacious dining room, which overlooks the Salto Chico waterfall.

Every afternoon, just before

cocktail hour, guests gather in the lounge to discuss the next day's activities with the lodge's experienced guides. All depends on individual preferences, skill levels and, of course, the weather. An effort is made to meet everyone's expectations—whether it's a strenuous trek to the base of the Paine Towers, a slower-paced hike to take in the views over turquoise, wind-whipped Lake Sarmiento or a horseback ride across the pampas.

On a hike to Mirador Toro, a lookout with a view of expansive Lake Toro, we discover an ottoman-shaped shrub with small, tightly woven branches and leaves. Our guide laughs and warns us not to get too close. "That's a 'mother-in-law bush,'" he says. "It's full of thorns."

The joke becomes less funny when we face winds gusting to 40 mph and risk being blown into one of these spiky monsters. His advice: Sit down on

The Explora Patagonia is the only luxury lodge in the heart of the park that offers close-up views of the Paine Range.

the trail until the wind passes!

On our last day, we join Explora's weekly barbecue at a nearby estancia (ranch). Here, a rugged looking gaucho roasts an entire lamb over an open fire. He serves us the most tender lamb we've ever tasted, accompanied by fresh vegetables and some of Chile's finest wines.

The company that owns the

lodge offers other lodge-based and nomadic journeys in South America. Pedro Ibáñez, Explora's founder, says he didn't want to replicate traditional travel experiences, but, rather, to offer ways to combine in-depth exploration of remote, magical places with luxury comforts and pleasures. Without a doubt, he succeeded.

Southern Patagonia, at the end of the world, does not disappoint those who make the journey. Over 1,400 miles farther south than the Cape of Good Hope, Africa, and even 700 miles south of Stewart Island, New Zealand, it evokes mystery and wonder. As W.H. Hudson, Argentinian author and ornithologist, wrote in his book, *Idle Days in Patagonia*: "It has a look of antiquity, of desolation ... of eternal peace." ◀



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