



TRAVEL



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Way down in the icy south

At the tip of South America, a ship's passengers see penguins, seals, and melting glaciers and wonder what the future holds.

By Anne Z. Cook For The Inquirer

TUCKER ISLETS, Tierra del Fuego, Chile - With the wind in our favor, the sudden whiff of fish and a rumble of snorts announced that the quarry was within range. A few steps later, the mound of mottled boulders at the high-tide line rolled and heaved, and a half-dozen giant elephant seals came alive.

"Keep back, amigos," warned our guide, elephant seal researcher Mauricio Alvarez, 43, as the shutterbugs in our group opened their tripods and, ignoring his advice, pushed ahead. "These guys are pretty calm, muy calma, while they're molting, but they can move fast when they have to," he said. Reluctantly retreating to a safe distance, we sat down to wait and watch the animals grunt, stretch, and jostle.

Like the migrating elephant seals, Alvarez heads south in summer (winter in North America), joining the 210-passenger cruise ship Stella Australis to prowls the narrow channels and deep fjords of Chile's Alberto de Agostini National Park, in the Tierra del Fuego archipelago.

Sailing three- and four-night itineraries between Punta Arenas, Chile, and Ushuaia, Argentina, the Stella is the newest of Cruceros Australis' three expedition-style ships, all based in southern Patagonia, at South America's southern tip. Here, in the shadow of ice-clad peaks, they sail a circuitous route from the Strait of Magellan to the hidden coves of Ainsworth Bay, and through Glacier Alley on the Beagle Channel.

For most of us onboard, the subtext of the voyage was the imperceptible climate changes threatening this still-wild region: melting glaciers, warmer winters, and vanishing marine life. Horrors of the kind that could keep you up in the dark of night. But it was the chance to catch the action in person and with a trained naturalist that had us bounding out of our very comfortable beds each morning and hustling into our rain-proof gear.

On a small ship such as the Stella, the decor is casual and the appointments simple. The cabins have large outside windows and full-size twin beds (not cots). More important, invisible logistics keep every detail running seamlessly. The lounge, big enough to seat us all, is the place to mix and mingle over cocktails. Appetizing meals appear effortlessly, and interpretive talks evolve into dialogues. Twice-a-day excursions get underway in 15 minutes, the time it takes for the passengers to file down to the stern deck and climb into their assigned Zodiacs. Better yet, the biologist guides know where to look for wildlife.

Sure enough, on our first outing we encountered the elephant seals right away. The next day we went farther, motoring to the Tucker Islets to see some of the thousands of winsomely waddling Magellanic penguins that nest there in summer. The Zodiacs don't land - "never would we disturb



Steve Haggerty Photography/Colorworld

The Stella Australis anchored at Pia Glacier, Beagle Channel, Alberto de Augustini National Park. Steve Haggerty

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them, not for any reason," said Alvarez - so we kept our seats and bobbed a few feet offshore in a gentle surf, taking turns in the prow for a closer look.

The Tucker Islets aren't the penguins' only nesting grounds, but they are surely the loveliest. Fairy rock gardens, they are boxy sedimentary formations created by erosion, then isolated when the seas rose around them. Terraced over time, they're a wonderland of green grasses, native flowers, and lacy tree branches. The migrating penguins swim here in pairs, clamber ashore, find a spot on the summit or in a cliff, and hollow out a burrow. Here, safe and out of sight, they incubate their eggs, raise the chicks, teach them to swim, and march about together like so many windup toys.

The penguins and seals occupy center stage here in the wilderness. But it's the mountain setting, the "wallpaper," if you will, that creates the drama. The Darwin Cordillera, at the tip of the Andes, rises 6,500 feet straight up out of the ocean, ice-clad and ghostlike. But even this is changing.

"You see the Marinelli Glacier, two miles away in that valley?" asked Alvarez as we watched elephant seals sneeze and snort. "This island is a terminal moraine from that glacier, the pile of dirt and rocks left behind when it started to shrink back."

Later we cruised through Glacier Alley with a detour to the face of the massive Pia Glacier. Navigating between clumps of broken ice, we went ashore to watch the glacier calve, and to ponder its giant mass and ancient lineage. As clouds floated overhead, the ice shifted and groaned, now rifle-shot cracks, now deep rumbles.

For some passengers, the highlight of the cruise was sailing around Cape Horn, the stony island marking the continent's end. A frequent widow-maker, the voyage around the Horn is something to dine out on, even if you've only done it on a cruise. For me, a Californian, it echoed the 1849 Gold Rush, when thousands of fortune hunters went west by ship around Cape Horn.

Historians estimate that between the years 1600 and 2000, 800 ships sank or vanished near the Horn, 100 of them after 1850. On a tranquil day the trip looks easy. But even modern ships take care, studying weather reports measuring wind speed before approaching the island. The sun shone on the morning we went ashore to climb to the Albatross Monument, but fierce gusts made the mandatory climb to the summit a real chore.

Though most cruise lines don't market their cruises to mixed nationalities, the Cruceros Australis does. Spanish is the first language, but the officers, naturalists, guides, and most crew are bi- or trilingual, as are many of the passengers. What matters most is that they share similar backgrounds and concerns.

I speak with tongue in cheek when I boast that we were a self-selected group of intelligent and serious world citizens, humble but handsome voyagers brimming with curiosity and good humor. But some of that was true, and it made for a friendly, give-and-take atmosphere.

For this year, and the next and the next, the Stella Australis will sail these waters, patrolling the beaches and inlets as we did. But for most of us, imagining a time without the glaciers or the streams and waterfalls they replenish was a sobering thought. Will the penguins, the elephant seals, and the ice be here in 10 years? For the first time, no one is sure.

Information

Just the Facts, Ma'am

For readers who noticed that I didn't recount the exploits of Ferdinand Magellan, the first to sail westward from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean, in 1521; or those of Charles Darwin, sailing in 1833 on the HMS Beagle, limited column inches are the cause. For an introduction to the two men and their presence in Tierra del Fuego, read the Moon guidebook *Chile, Including Easter Island*, by Wayne Bernhardson.

The Cruise

The Stella Australis and two sister ships, the Mare Australis and Via Australis, sail three- and four-night itineraries between Punta Arenas, Chile, and Ushuaia, Argentina, from October through early April. Per-person rates this year start at \$1,124 for the three-night trip, and \$1,498 for the four-night trip.

All excursions, guides, lectures, meals, alcoholic and soft drinks and some transfers are included in the cruise fare. There are no Internet connections or cell phone service on board.

Meals are served at a single seating by waiters, with white tablecloth service. Groups get assigned tables; independent travelers can change seats. The menu is primarily continental cuisine with some Chilean specialties. Lavish buffets offer a wide variety of fresh fruit, salads, and fresh fish. Chilean beef, famous for taste and tenderness, is offered at nearly every meal.

Cabins are spacious, with big windows, full-size twin beds, and down quilts. We could have used more hooks, hangers and racks to dry wet socks and rain gear. For more, go to www.australis.com.

Getting There

LAN Chile Airlines is the first choice of carrier, since the airline flies daily to Buenos Aires, Santiago, and Lima and to regional airports in Punta Arenas and Ushuaia. International flights from U.S. cities use Boeing 767s. Go to www.lan.com.

American Airlines and Delta Airlines also fly direct to Buenos Aires and Santiago. For more, go to www.aa.com, and to www.delta.com.

Staying There

Most passengers schedule extra days in Buenos Aires, Argentina's capital city. The Sheraton Libertador, a mid-priced hotel, offers brand-label service, warm hospitality, redecorated rooms, and free WiFi connections. The central location is one block from the bustling pedestrian street, Florida Avenue, and eight blocks from the Plaza de Mayo. The hotel has a terraced café/dining room/bar, 24-hour room service and a rooftop swimming pool. See www.sheraton.com/libertador.

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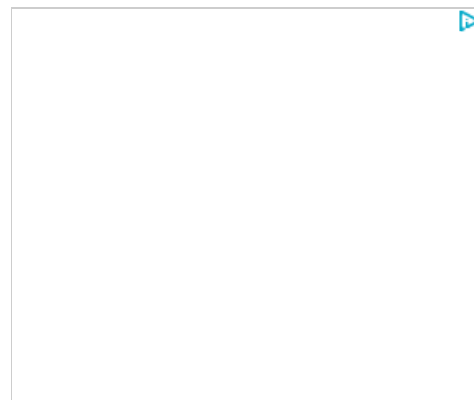
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