



# THE EDGE OF CIVILISATION

*Battered by the ocean and worn smooth by violent winds, Tierra del Fuego — the fjord-threaded archipelago hanging off the bottom of Patagonia — represents nature at its most raw and isolation in the extreme. A spectacular expedition cruise through its inky waters will bring you face to face with glaciers, penguins and dolphins: expect a bumpy ride*

**WORDS:** Ben Lerwill

IMAGE: AUSTRALIS





ext time you feel inclined to moan about your domestic arrangements, give a thought to Chilean naval officer Andres Valenzuela Yanez. When we shake hands in his small front room at the end of the earth, I don't know whether to offer him congratulations or sympathy. He's spending 365 days manning a gale-blown island lighthouse on Cape Horn, the

notorious headland that's claimed more than 800 ships over the centuries.

Where the South American map runs out of land and the Atlantic meets the Pacific in a fury of waves and wind, he lives with his wife, his 12-year-old son and their poodle. The nearest settlement of any note is 75 miles away. "We like it very much here," he tells me, as the ocean froths outside. "But the dog is the happiest."

Anchoring at Cape Horn isn't always possible, so it's a thrill to set foot here, but I'm not sure I'd want to stay for long. Andres, incidentally, is tasked with transmitting weather forecasts to the wider world every three hours — morning, noon and night, seven days a week. It's not exactly a glamorous role but every time the Chilean navy recruits for the year-long posting, applications flood in. "Yes," he smiles proudly. "More than 500 families wanted to live here."

It figures. The wild, elemental emptiness of Patagonia covers around 260,000sq miles at the continent's southern tip, incorporating the lower extremities of both Chile and Argentina. On both sides of the border you find raw Andean beauty, a crisp chill and wizened trees leaning permanently leeward. The scrub plateaus go on forever and the mountains are sharp, as if drawn by a child. When I walk through the blustery port town of Punta Arenas, Chile's Patagonian hub, the South America of street carnivals and football fever seems a long way away.

Traditionally, the town has attracted last-chance settlers and, more recently, hikers en route to Torres del Paine National Park. I'm here, however, to join a four-night expedition cruise through Tierra del Fuego, the tough, fjord-threaded archipelago hanging off the bottom of the mainland. It was the last portion of the New World to be colonised, and it's also where all three historic navigable routes between the Atlantic and the Pacific are found. For the map-obsessed boy in my head, it's some prospect.

**Previous spread:** A Zodiac sets course for the huge Pia Glacier  
**From top:** Disembarking at Cape Horn; returning to the ship with the Cordillera Darwin mountain range in the background

LAND OF FIRE

During the first evening on the ship, it transpires there are 20 nationalities represented among the 150 or so passengers. The travellers clinking

pisco sours at the bar have come from as far afield as New Zealand, South Africa, France and the US. It's an unconscious echo of the fact that for five centuries, and in somewhat less amenable onboard conditions, these same waters have drawn traders, fortune-seekers and sailors from all corners of the globe.

We're sailing on the *Stella Australis*, one of two vessels owned by local cruise company Australis, the sole operator licensed to navigate here. The Chilean flag flies from the bow mast. "Welcome to Tierra del Fuego," announces the captain on the first night. Outside a Patagonian sunset melts red behind a row of black peaks. "We'll try to get you through the next four days in one piece."

I wake early the next morning and step onto deck just before dawn. The ship is gloriously alone. We're sailing through the inky waters of Admiralty Sound, flanked by high, serrated hills; it's possible to make out snow gullies on the slopes. Ahead of us, I spy a large ship, and selfishly it shifts my whole perception of the scene for the worse — I'd thought we were unaccompanied. Then, as we approach, the intruder vessel reveals itself to be nothing more than a humped island, woolly with trees. Peace is restored, and our isolation magnified.

Tierra del Fuego translates as 'Land of Fire', a reference to the native campfires seen here by early explorers. With depressing inevitability, the various indigenous groups that once lived here — most prominently the Yaghan people — are no longer to be found. European settlers in the mid-1800s brought sheep, which, not unreasonably, the Yaghan began to hunt. The rest of the story can be guessed at.

By 9.30am, we've stopped at Ainsworth Bay for our first landing. Before us are the mighty, ice-mantled peaks of the Darwin Cordillera, named after Charles Darwin, a visitor to the area on research surveys aboard *HMS Beagle*. The ship was involved in a controversy of its own, when the crew kidnapped four indigenous youths and took them back to the UK as a 'social experiment'.

"We're walking right now on a lateral moraine," says our guide, Rudy, hurtling me back to school geography lessons. He's leading 10 of us on a shoreline nature walk. "This whole landscape was formed by glaciers. And look, some of these mosses and lichens grow only here and in Antarctica." Rudy encourages us to stop, stare and think a while, and for three minutes the only noise is the drip-drip of snowmelt on rock.

I hope, at this first landing, to see a colony of elephant seals. They don't emerge, but we do encounter several beaver-gnawed tree trunks. Beavers, I hear, are a menace in Patagonia. In the 1940s, 25 breeding pairs were introduced from North America in the misguided hope of establishing a fur trade on Tierra del Fuego. Without any predators, the beavers thrived, and today, astonishingly, more than 50,000 are on hand to clog and dam the ecosystem.

Also here in large numbers are Magellanic penguins. In the afternoon, we see numerous groups on the low-lying Tucker Islets — busy, ➤

IMAGES: AUSTRALIS; BEN LERWILL





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IMAGE: AUSTRALIS





IMAGES: AUSTRALIS

smelly little characters, moulting a confetti of feathers over the rocks. Above them, skuas (seabirds) circle for food. I read later that when Sir Francis Drake was here in 1578, he and his men culled 3,000 penguins for meat. Apparently, the birds had ‘not the best taste, but were perfectly eatable’.

Tierra del Fuego is full of stories of seafarers. Magellanic penguins take their name from Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan, who revolutionised world trade when he came here in 1520 and discovered a strait that led to the Pacific, bringing Asia’s spice islands closer to Europe. Almost a century later, two navigators from the Netherlands broke similar ground when they realised the continent ended in a wall of cliffs that could, with skill, be rounded. They named it after the Dutch city of Hoorn; hence, Cape Horn.

Together with the later discovery of a third ocean-to-ocean passage — the Beagle Channel, dedicated to Darwin’s vessel — these shipping routes took on vital importance until the Panama Canal opened in 1914. When we sail the northwest arm of the Beagle Channel the next morning, the only life astir is a fast-flying flock of king cormorants, necks outstretched. Then someone points out a pair of seals in the shallows, and five minutes later, away to starboard, a southern right whale flashes a massive tail. So the waters are still busy — just in a different way.

### TO THE CAPE

As the cruise continues, the untamed scenery ramps up. We reach the Pia Glacier, and are shuttled to shore in rigid inflatable boats. While we’re standing there feeling small, a church-sized wedge of ice is calved from its rough-hewn front wall, crashing into the milky-blue water with a noise like thunder. It’s a savage, rousing sight to witness. One of the crew hands me a hot chocolate with whisky — you have to stay warm in Tierra del Fuego, but it’s worthwhile.

We’re now at 55 degrees latitude, sailing among the last belchings of land before Antarctica. I retire to my cabin just in time to see a pod of Peale’s dolphins fizzing under my window, cresting the water’s surface. For a full minute, they keep pace with the ship. Later that evening, we sail past a succession of equally huge glaciers.

In the morning, we reach the natural amphitheatre of Wulaia Bay, and, like Darwin more than 185 years earlier, journey ashore. I climb to a lookout, from where the bay becomes a spread of snowy peaks and purple islands. Far below, the ship suddenly seems tiny, a slip of a thing in a watery wilderness. You enjoy the primal seclusion of a view like this in a different way when you know the little vessel in the foreground holds roast beef and Chilean Malbec, and that in an hour, it’s going to sail you away.

Having spent the entire voyage in Chilean waters, we’re due to disembark for good in Ushuaia, Argentina. Before then, we’ve business on Cape Horn. Around 30% of Australis’s sailings have to abort their landings, and an hour away the waves start churning. On deck, a black-browed albatross wheels overhead in the ferocious wind. As the cape becomes visible in the distance, I’m resigned to the thought that the dark, angular landmass may remain just that: a far-off sight.

Then, without warning, the wind drops to plain old gale-strength. The all-clear is given. When I climb the 160 steps to the lighthouse at the bottom of the world, drizzle-spattered and gust-battered, I’m struck by how small the island is. To the south, endless ranks of white-tipped waves charge in. Andres and his family seem delighted we’ve landed — mostly, I suspect, because it breaks their routine. On leaving, I wish him well and, out of curiosity, ask him how he keeps abreast of mainland news. “Television,” he answers matter-of-factly. I’m shocked. Really? “Yes, of course,” he says. Then he grins. “Even on Cape Horn, we need football.” ➤

**Previous spread:** The Pia Glacier

**Opposite:** Wulaia Bay

**Below, from left:** A shore landing; Tierra del Fuego waterfall





## SEVEN OF THE BEST...

## ADVENTURE/LUXURY CRUISES

**1 NORWEGIAN FJORDS**

Norway's fjords provide arguably Europe's most spectacular coastal landscapes, and Costa Cruises has a 12-night voyage along almost the full length of the country's coast, departing from Amsterdam. A standard cabin on an August 2014 sailing costs from £1,119 per person.

[costacruises.co.uk](http://costacruises.co.uk)

**2 BEST OF BRAZIL**

Azamara Club Cruises has a nine-night Best of Brazil voyage, taking in Rio de Janeiro, Buzios, Paraty and Ilhabela in Brazil, as well as Punta del Este in Uruguay and Buenos Aires in Argentina. Prices start from £1,734 per person for a December 2014 sailing.

[azamarclubcruises.com](http://azamarclubcruises.com)

**3 TRANSATLANTIC CROSSING**

If you've ever fancied making a full sailing across the Atlantic, Royal Caribbean has a 12-night ocean voyage from Southampton to Fort Lauderdale in Florida this October, currently priced from £882. The ship calls in at Vigo, Spain, before heading across to the US.

[royalcaribbean.co.uk](http://royalcaribbean.co.uk)

**4 GALAPAGOS ISLANDS**

Lava fields, giant tortoises and marine iguanas are among the highlights of Silversea's luxury seven-day Galapagos cruise. It departs at various times of the year, priced at £3,550 for a cruise leaving in December 2014. It includes the opportunity to swim with green sea turtles. [silversea.com](http://silversea.com)

**5 ALASKA & YOSEMITE**

Jetline has a 14-night fly-cruise package to Alaska and Yosemite National Park, including a stay in Seattle, two nights in Yosemite, three days' car hire and a voyage with Princess Cruises that includes Alaska's Inside Passage. It's priced from £2,499 per person based on an August 2014 departure.

[jetlinecruise.com](http://jetlinecruise.com)

**6 FAR EAST EXPLORER**

Celebrity Cruises has a 14-night Northeast Asia itinerary departing 28 September onboard *Celebrity Millennium*. It takes in Tokyo, Mt Fuji, Kyoto, Jeju Island and Seoul in South Korea, plus stops in Tianjin in China and Shanghai. The cruise costs from £2,657 per person, excluding international flights.

[celebritycruises.co.uk](http://celebritycruises.co.uk)

**7 PACIFIC ISLANDS, AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND**

Sailing from Valparaíso in Chile, this 25-night cruise passes Easter Island, the Pitcairn Islands and some Pacific Islands, before crossing the International Date Line, then heading to New Zealand and Melbourne. From £2,399 per person for a February 2015 trip.

[pocruises.com](http://pocruises.com) ►

## ESSENTIALS

*Patagonia*

## GETTING THERE

There are no direct international flights from the UK to Chile. Iberia, Tam, KLM and Air France are among the airlines offering services to and from Santiago, via their respective hubs. [iberia.com](http://iberia.com) [tam.com.br](http://tam.com.br) [klm.com](http://klm.com) [airfrance.co.uk](http://airfrance.co.uk)

British Airways flies direct from Heathrow to Buenos Aires. [ba.com](http://ba.com)

LAN Airlines, Aerovías DAP and Sky Airline serve Punta Arenas from within South America. [lan.com](http://lan.com) [aeroviasdap.cl](http://aeroviasdap.cl) [skyairline.cl](http://skyairline.cl)

Aerolíneas Argentinas, LAN Airlines and LADE serve Ushuaia. [aerolineas.com.ar](http://aerolineas.com.ar) [lan.com](http://lan.com) [lade.com.ar](http://lade.com.ar)

**Average flight time:** 20h.

## GETTING AROUND

It's possible to travel by road to and from both Punta Arenas and Ushuaia, but due to the distances, flying is the most sensible option. Punta Arenas is around 1,860 miles from Santiago; Ushuaia is around 1,470 miles from Buenos Aires.

## WHEN TO GO

Between September and April, during the warmest months of the year for the Southern Hemisphere, with temperatures around 20C.

## NEED TO KNOW

**Visas:** UK citizens don't require a visa for either Chile or Argentina.

**Currency:** Chilean peso (CLP); £1 = CLP920.

Argentine peso (ARS); £1 = ARS13.3.

**Health:** Your only real requirements on the cruise will be warm, waterproof clothing and a basic level of fitness.

**International dial code:** Chile: 00 56; Argentina: 00 54.

**Time difference:** Chile: GMT -4; Argentina: GMT -3.

## MORE INFO

*In Patagonia*, by Bruce Chatwin. RRP: £8.99. (Vintage Classics)

## HOW TO DO IT

The four-night Punta Arenas-Ushuaia cruise on the *Stella Australis* costs from \$1,440 (£864) and includes accommodation, sea transportation, all meals, an open bar on board, shore excursions and onboard entertainment. Departures are every Saturday from 20 September 2014 to 28 March 2015.

[australis.com](http://australis.com) 

