

Patagonia by Tom McCaleb

Springtime in Patagonia

So I've always wanted to see Patagonia, "El Fin del Mundo", glaciers and penguins. Last fall, as part of a tour through Argentina and Chile, I did just that.

I thought Patagonia was part of Argentina, and technically much of southern Argentina, the four southernmost provinces encompassing a large swath of the pampas south of Buenos Aires, is officially classified as Patagonia.

But what I really envisioned as Patagonia is only the southernmost tip of the country. In fact, most of Patagonia as I had pictured it, including Cape Horn, is not in Argentina at all, but in Chile.

The Andes form the spine of South America, running from north to south through Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and form the boundary between Chile and Argentina. But at the very tip of South America, the Andes turn toward the east. It is the area southwest and south of the Andes that is the quintessential Patagonia. And the only part of it that is in Argentina is one-half of the island of Tierra del Fuego, including a former penal colony, which is now the city of Ushuaia. It was to Ushuaia that we flew from Buenos Aires and from Ushuaia that we set out on our three-day cruise through the Beagle Channel and the Straits of Magellan.

Because of the turn in the Andes, Tierra del Fuego actually lies on the Chilean side of the Andes, separated from the rest of Argentina by the mountains. It is the only place where one can get from Argentina to Chile without crossing the Andes. Indeed, to get from the rest of Argentina to Tierra del Fuego by land, you must cross the Andes and pass through Chile. Ushuaia claims to be the most southernly city in the world. It reminded me of a frontier town. But its economy is fascinating. In addition to tourism, as expected, the city is a base for consumer electronics and home appliance assembly. And the Argentine government pays bounties for people to move to Ushuaia, in part to staff the city's manufacturing facilities. Because it sits on the Beagle Channel, parts can be transported at sea from Asia, offloaded in Ushuaia, assembled, and re-loaded for transport by sea to Buenos Aires and other South American ports on both coasts.



From Ushuaia, our cruise ship took us first to Cape Horn, which, strictly speaking, is not a cape at all, but an island. From the landing point, one climbs a set of fairly steep steps to a windswept treeless plateau with a monument (supposed to represent an albatross) and a lighthouse. The whole thing is overseen by a Chilean naval officer and his family, assigned for one year to this remote outpost.

Leaving Cape Horn, we cruised through the Beagle Channel and briefly entered the Pacific Ocean before sailing into the Straits of Magellan, disembarking at Punta Arenas, Chile. Along the way, we stopped to visit a glacier and to see a colony of penguins on barren Magdalena Island. Penguins migrate from warmer waters further north to Magdalena Island for the summer where they breed. They apparently hook up before they leave on the journey, but the males travel first, and on arrival build burrows in the ground. Then, the females arrive and come ashore where each female has the task of finding among 40,000 or more males her mate. And somehow, most of them do. (And for our anniversary, two days after we returned home, I stumbled upon an anniversary card with penguins on the front that used this amazing fact to explain how Lynda and I, who were obviously made for each other, somehow found one another.)



It was spring in Patagonia. Spring in Patagonia means temperatures in the 30's and 40's (Fahrenheit), maybe rising into the 50s, and incessant tropical storm-force or gale-force winds.

I cannot understand why the southern hemisphere is so much colder and windier than the northern hemisphere. Is it the fact that the Antarctic is a landmass while the Arctic is an ocean? Is it the fact, as our tour director claimed, that southern South America is so much farther south than any other landmass in the southern hemisphere so there's nothing to block the wind from swirling around the globe? Or is it something about the shape of the earth? In any event, there are populated parts of Alaska, Canada, and Scandinavia that are closer to the North Pole than Patagonia is to the South Pole, and yet, Patagonia, it seems, is far colder, windier, wetter, and less hospitable than its northern hemisphere counterparts.

To protect against the springtime cold and wind, Lynda wore gloves, her long brown down-filled coat with the hood pulled over her head, and the fur trim around the hood tightened until her face was visible no more. With her waterproof Wellington boots (provided by the ship) and nursing a broken foot, she waddled more than walked and looked like a big brown penguin. I wore ski gloves, long johns, my windbreaker with cold-weather liner zipped in, and a waterproof shell over that with the hood pulled over my scarf-wrapped head. Oh yes, and I too had Wellingtons.

Punta Arenas was once very prosperous from sheep and gold and, prior to the opening of the Panama Canal, shipping. The economy is now centered on coal, oil, and gas, as well as sheep and ship maintenance. It is also the primary embarkation point for Antarctic cruises and there's skiing in the area. The Plaza de Armas is built around a statue honouring Magellan, one of the few such statues in the world, and the streets around the plaza are lined with wonderful old buildings and mansions dating from the city's heyday. Regrettably, we only had fifteen minutes to take in the sites. I could have used an hour or more, although the ferocity of the Patagonian winds was a deterrent to venturing much beyond the square, even had time permitted.

From Punta Arenas, we traveled north through the Chilean pampas to Torres del Paine National Park, a distance of some 250 miles. The Chilean pampas is flat around Punta Arenas, but becomes increasingly hilly as one travels further north into the Andes. The area is mostly given over to sheep ranches. The national park is on the Chilean-Argentine border. Besides

lakes and glaciers and waterfalls and snow-capped mountains (and wind), the most notable feature is the three sharp granite massifs for which the park is named. The wildlife included numerous herds of guanacos, one of four cameloids, a sort of non-domesticated version of a llama; condors; and guemals, a small deer unique to Patagonia.

After a long bus ride back to Punta Arenas, we left windy Patagonia behind for other, more hospitable but certainly not more interesting, sights in Chile.

