

HOMAGE TO PATAGONIA

True escape in the digital age means going further afield, where your phone can't follow you. Paul Rushton boards one of the only cruise ships permitted into the lonely, glacial waters of the region of Patagonia in South America

Relaxing on a hotel roof in Santiago, I'm reading Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, flanked by his mountains, bound tomorrow for Patagonia and a cruise through its glacial channels, the Strait of Magellan and the Beagle Channel to Cape Horn and Neruda's Southern Ocean 'of emaciated salt and imperilled throat'. I have passed the day hazily, shaking off a long flight and a visit to Cerro San Cristobal, the second-highest point in the city.

There's a man from Punta Arenas, at the southernmost point of the South American continent, who's lived for almost a year with his family at the end of the world in the only dwelling there. They operate the lighthouse. I'd like to feel

their solitude and that 'solitary region' of which Neruda writes. I wonder if it will be possible on a commercial cruise liner. I look forward to land and sea free from human influence and presence. When I expressed this to my wife, she gave me that half-smile she does when I talk about getting rid of the TV or paring down the front room clutter. I'm a Luddite; happy when elusive, elemental pleasures can be sensed over the fuss.

Between social media and our waves of clutter in the air, we're rarely without contact from 'friends' and loved ones. We lose the exquisite experience of missing somebody. Tomorrow I sail from the reach of these waves into those that don't hum with chat, and my phone will turn back into >>>

>>> a pumpkin. I'm glad. When travelling, I want to be transported

Thankfully, there are still some places that don't run on our timelines and Patagonia is one of them. The region's beauty is washed and protected by its defiance and unpredictability. It has largely defied human efforts to shape it and there are still vast areas unexplored, with only one commercial means by which to traverse its straits. We set sail on the *Stella Australis*, one of only two vessels that can bring passengers here.

Threatened beauty

Patagonia is as pristine as you could imagine. One of its national parks, Torres Del Paine, was recently declared to be the eighth wonder of the world. But the cost of human progress can be experienced here in a less abstract way than in our cities. It's experienced in sad, direct ways; in the disproportionate retreating of the glaciers, a quicker suntan under the man-shaped hole in the ozone layer, or in the last remaining Yamana Indian, a woman named Cristina, who lives in Puerto Williams.

It's gratifying to find that both *Australis* and the Chilean and Argentine governments are aware of this unique point in time at which we are able to see Patagonia. Yes, clearly this is tourism, but, happily, it is also education and conservation. The crew, expedition leaders and guides speak proudly and passionately about their land and history and are united in dedication to its preservation and exploration. I'm aware of how privileged I am to experience Patagonia as it is right now; still unspoiled but threatened.

The night before I leave for Cape Horn, half of its great albatross monument will be blown away in 120-knot winds. In the Darwin Lounge of our vessel, our Martinis are overlooked by a large map marked with shipwrecks.

The *Stella Australis* is comfortable and communal. Fresh, well-prepared

food and drink is included; seafood and steak, king crab and palm hearts, and a well-stocked bar. There is cruise-ship entertainment – karaoke, bingo – tongue-in-cheek and unabashed enough to add to the general spirit of generosity.

There are true luxuries as well: the large windows of our cabins and lounges, and the breath-rescinding landscapes they frame. My curtains stay open. There is nobody out there, only snows in the grikes of the Darwin Mountains and drowsy ice floes. There is no phone signal here, and no news. There are presentations on Tierra del Fuego and glaciology, eloquently rendered and enlightening. Then, we get to walk the land and flit the waters.

“The region's beauty is washed and protected by its defiance and unpredictability”

On my first morning, we disembark in Ainsworth Bay, Alberto de Agostini National Park. We take to the Zodiac inflatable boats, we take the freeze into our sinuses. We walk the rocky shores and beached glacial ice and hike the moraine hills. We spot elephant seals on a nearby islet and a grey fox under blue skies and sunshine. We take in the glimmering Marinelli Glacier, which has retreated 50km in the last century.

When we disembark in the afternoon for the Tucker Islets, we're met by driving, brittle rain and bottle-green water under the clouds. Our boats skit in the waves by colonies of Magellanic penguins, and rock and king cormorants, while skuas and petrels cycle above, and a pod of dolphins tails our boat.

During the night, we feel the ocean's might: rolling skies and waves reaching for the upper decks. There's something

newly pendulous about my cabin. It's fun; a reminder that a comfortable ship can still be thrown about a bit.

Soul retrieval

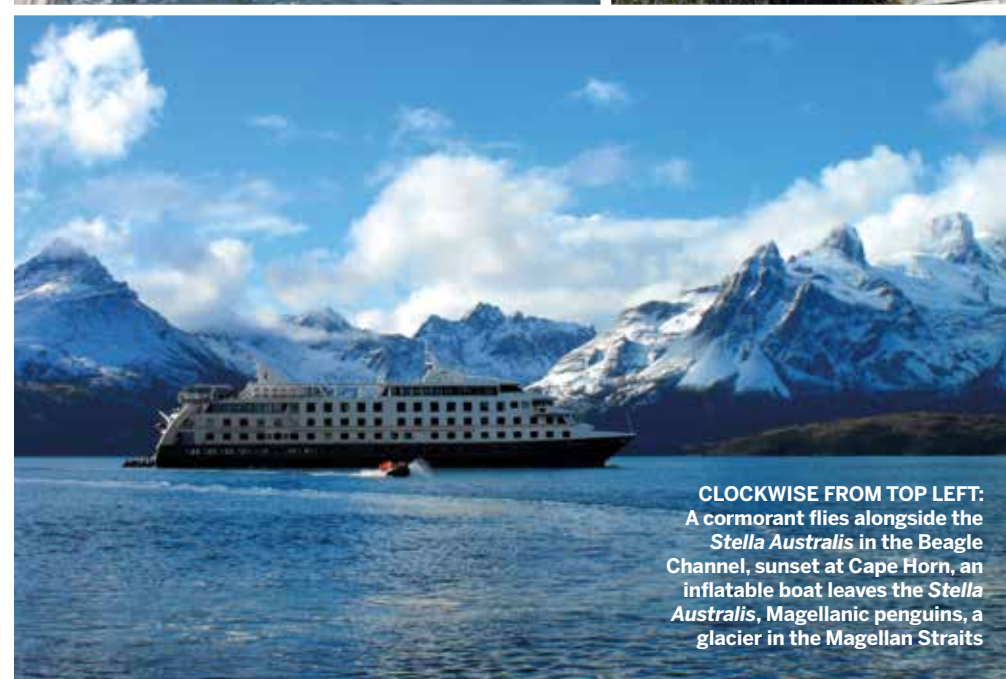
In the morning, I join fellow passengers for coffee before breakfast. We stand on the deck and hear a rumbling somewhere along the Ballerno Channel and see the shredding of ancient ice.

In the afternoon, we take to the boats again to experience Pia Glacier, its sheer ice cascade and fallen floes. We hike the moraine and turn about the spectacular panorama where the only visible human trace is our own anchored ship in the distance. Overnight, we approach the open ocean again. Wind and swell are yet to determine whether or not we will walk on Cape Horn; the southernmost inhabited place on Earth. The elements allow and we leave early. We witness the albatross sculpture whose wing was, last night, broken and blown away. We walk among the hardest grasses, stunted trees and flailing gulls and carancha. We visit the family in the only dwelling on the Cape. They have TV via satellite, but I don't hold it against them.

For our last excursion in Wulaia Bay, I hike through swatches of the world's most southerly forests, which reveal the devastation visited on them by Canadian beavers introduced for pelt. The seasons overlap; snow on rain on sun. Condors scan the beaches, while king crabs burn red through the clear shallows.

Tomorrow, we leave the ship at the Argentinian port of Ushuaia. Life will speed up again as we make for the airport in Buenos Aires, away from ancient landscape on a slow, unselfish timeline that we'd do well to understand: glacial pace with no time for momentary settlers. I feel lucky to glimpse it; to learn to tread lightly so as not to be the 'big feet' in the naming of this place that I've relished, where cruise operators conserve as they go and monuments are blown from the rocks by the sheer force of nature.

PHOTOGRAPHS: CHRISTIAN GOUPI/ALAMY; CORBIS; ROBERT HARDING



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: A cormorant flies alongside the *Stella Australis* in the Beagle Channel, sunset at Cape Horn, an inflatable boat leaves the *Stella Australis*, Magellanic penguins, a glacier in the Magellan Straits



GLACIAL GLORY

- The four-night Punta Arenas-Ushuaia trip on the *Stella Australis* costs from \$1,440 (£917) including accommodation, sea transportation, all meals, open bar on board, ship-to-shore excursions and on-board entertainment. Departures are from September to April each year. For more information and to book, see australis.com.
- Flights with LAN (lan.com) and TAM Airlines (tam.com.br), part of LATAM Airlines Group, start from £1,025 return, including all taxes. This includes outbound flights from London Heathrow to Santiago, returning from Buenos Aires to Heathrow, both via Sao Paulo with TAM Airlines, and internal flights from Santiago to Punta Arenas and Ushuaia to Buenos Aires with LAN Airlines.
- Overnight stays in a Park Deluxe King start from \$530 (£338) at the Palacio Duhau Park Hyatt, Buenos Aires. To book, see park.hyatt.com.
- Overnight stays in a king room at the W Hotel, Santiago, start from £204 per night. For bookings, see whotels.com.
- Horse rides, gaucho shows and overnight stays are available at Estancia La Bamba de Areco, near Buenos Aires. For more information, see labambadeareco.com.