

Journey to the End of the Earth

by Tad Foringer, Hampdon, Virginia



Magellan Penguins on Magdalena Island.

Two years ago, I received the most exciting brochure from International Expeditions (IE) describing a 10-day trip to Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego. I had used IE on my first of six visits to Peru in 1994 and was very pleased with their professional and comprehensive service. I commented to my wife, Rita, that this was a real dream vacation and that we should do it "someday." Then in early June 2000, I received another brochure with the 2001 schedule and, about the same time, learned of the sudden death of Susan Bondelier, a friend and fellow aviculturist. The news of Sue's death at 53 not only shocked me but also brought my own mortality into sharp focus. Rather than say, "I could have, should have, or would have," I called International Expeditions (800-633-4734) and booked the tour for January to make the dream come true. So this article is dedicated to Sue – parrot breeder, wildlife rescue volunteer, and champion of aviculture.

The adventure began with a flight to Miami where we connected with Lan Chile's long (8-hour) flight

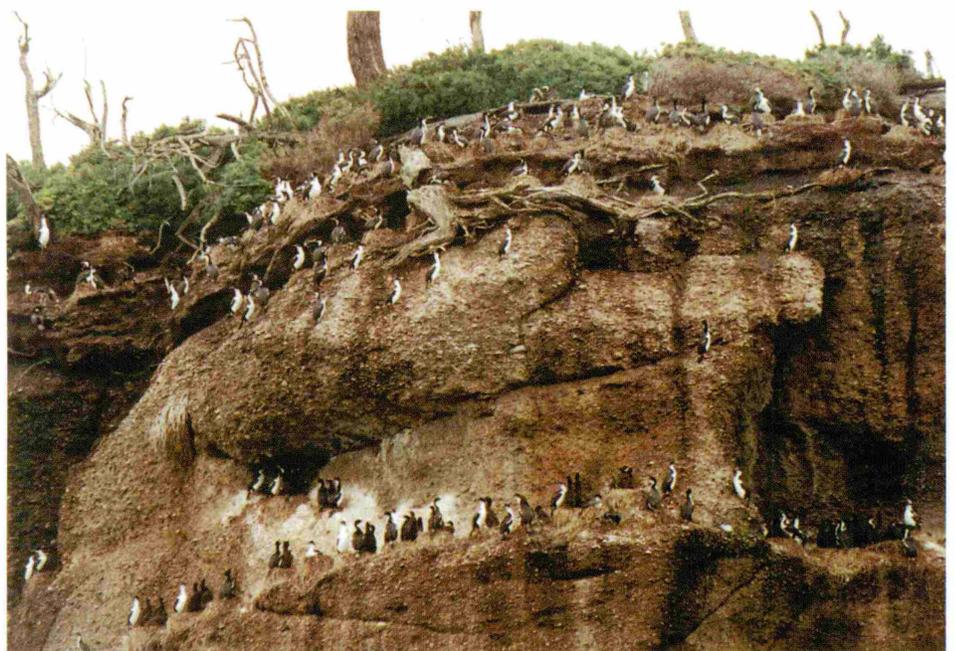
to Santiago, Chile. IE demonstrated their superiority by booking the group at the Santiago Sheraton where we could rest in style. The next day we flew to Punta Arenas where we were to board the *M/V Terras Australis*, a 100-passenger cruiser, for our weeklong voyage of discovery and exploration.

Geography. Patagonia is the southern 30% of South America located poleward of 40° south latitude. Most of the region is in Argentina between the Andes and the Atlantic. Patagonia means "big feet" because when Ferdinand Magellan first saw the early inhabitants in 1520, the Tehuelche Indians, they were wearing oversize boots. Early travelers, such as Darwin, characterized the area as wild, untamed, and inhabited by savages. Obviously, that is no longer true but the area continues to be rugged, windy, beautiful, and fascinating. Tierra del Fuego is an archipelago separated from the tip of the South American mainland by the Straits of Magellan. When Magellan discovered the area, he noticed smoke rising from a number of Indian campfires and called it Tierra del Fuego or "land of fire." In 1881, a boundary dispute was resolved by assigning the western two thirds of the archi-

pelago to Chile and the remainder to Argentina, but most of Patagonia is located in Argentina. The capital of Tierra del Fuego is Ushuaia, Argentina, which is considered to be the southernmost city in the world. Puerto Williams, south of the Beagle Channel in Chile, is the southernmost town in the world. Thus, based on permanent population, my journey was to the end of the earth!

Punta Arenas. This city (pop. 130,000), founded in 1848, is the southernmost in Chile. The houses and buildings are a colorful mixture of European and Latin American architecture. We toured the city and visited a magnificent cemetery with its beautiful landscaping and elegant crypts. We also visited a museum where we learned about the early inhabitants (Tehuelches, Onas, Yaganes, and Alacalufes) of Patagonia and were treated to a large room of taxidermy specimens. Most of the area's extensive wildlife was represented and we were able to see some birds (such as the austral parakeet and magellan woodpecker) that we had hoped to see, but didn't, in the wild.

Punta Arenas was the beginning and ending port for our ship, *Terra Australis*. The expedition team included not only certified guides but



Rock Cormorant rookery on Tucker Island.

Photos by Tad Foringer

also several of the leading ornithologists in Chile. We were broken down into four groups so that our learning experience could be maximized. The ship's accommodations were most satisfactory and life on board was great with excellent food, Chilean wines, and detailed briefings.

Ushuaia. The name of this city (pop. 44,000) means "Bay to the West," and it is a major port for ships exporting wood, furs, wool, and frozen meat and importing food, vehicles, and gasoline for the residents. It is also known as the "Gateway to the Antarctic." Again, the architecture is colorful and varied. We had a super time visiting the Tierra del Fuego National Park and rode on a narrow-gauge (20") train through a forest harvested by convicts in the early 1900s. The train is called "Train to the End of the World." It was surprising to see so many large trees so far south. They resembled oaks but are actually the southern beech and attract many birds such as the Magellan Woodpecker and Austral Parrot, the world's most southern parrot. After an exceptional barbecue lunch, we were turned loose for shopping, which was excellent.

Puerto Williams. This town (pop. 2,200) was very basic with more simple architecture. It is named after Commandant Juan Williams, chief of an 1843 expedition that claimed the Magellan Straits for Chile. The Chilean navy maintains a presence in this port that involves half of the population. We toured a remarkably comprehensive anthropology museum and learned more about the early Indians and saw another collection of stuffed critters. We also met the last surviving pure Yagan Indian. We then visited some of the ancient sites where the Yaganes lived and performed their rites.

Glaciers, Fjords, Channels and Bays. We used the ship's zodiacs to visit several glaciers (Marinelli, Serrano, Pia) which make Alaska's Glacier Bay look like a freshman course. We saw both advancing and receding glaciers and were in awe

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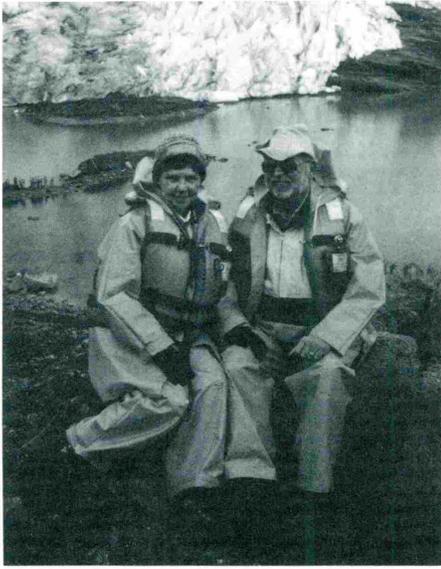
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Tad and Rita in front of the Marinelli Glacier.

when we stood close to a base while the glacier calved. We sailed up fiords (Admiralty, D'Agostini, Garibaldi and Serrano) and bays (Ainsworth, Brookes, Condor) and took short hikes to observe the wildlife. At Brookes, I approached a large, ugly rock and was startled to see an eye open. It was a 3-ton elephant seal, largest of the world's pinnipeds! With a grunt, he lumbered away. Nearby were his harem and several pups. Further on, we came across a beaver dam. The beavers were imported from Canada in the 1800s to develop a fur trade. However, the area is too warm to promote decent fur, so the beavers have become pests and their dams are having an adverse effect on the ecology. We cruised many channels (Gabriel, Magdalena, Cockburn, Brecknock, Beagle, O'cassion and O'Brien) as we explored Tierra del Fuego. This whole area is so remote and unspoiled that it is a haven for wildlife.

Wildlife, especially Birds. In addition to the Elephant Seals, we saw sea lions, dolphin, and guanacos (similar to llamas but with shorter legs). The birding was exceptional. A Pacific storm blew in the Wandering Albatross, with its 3-meter wingspan, which really excited our guides and crew. Southern Giant Petrels dove and soared about our ship and we also sighted the Magellanic Diving and Blue Petrels. Kelp Gulls abounded and we visited a 100,000-bird rookery on Magdalena Island. We had

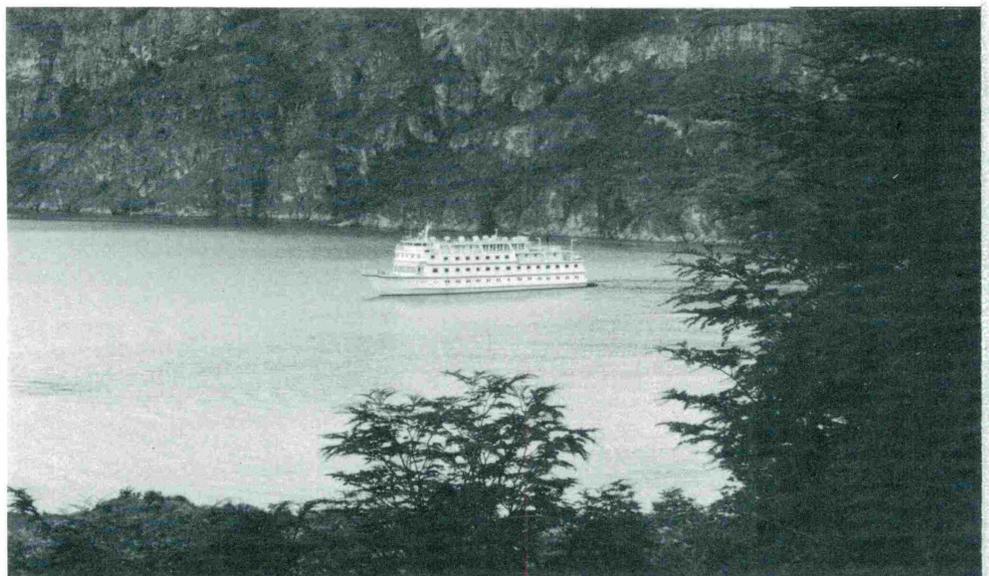
several relatively close sightings of the Andean Condor, including the first time that I have seen this magnificent creature at rest in the wild. Also seen were the Black-browed and Royal Albatross; flightless Steamer and Crested ducks; Ashy-headed, Upland and Kelp Geese; and Rock and King Cormorants. During our hike in the beautiful Torres del Paine National Park we saw the Crested Caracara as well as numerous small birds such as tyrants, wrens, sparrows, siskins, and finches. We observed trees where the Magellan Woodpeckers had worked and the holes were fist sized.

And we saw penguins! While King and Rockhopper Penguins are also endemic to the area, we saw only the Magellan Penguin. At Tucker Island we circled in the zodiacs to watch a small colony sharing their space with a large rookery of Rock Cormorants. Our guide was excited to spot a Striated Caracara, predator of eggs and chicks. However, the penguin highpoint for us was Magdalena Island. About 70,000 penguin pairs return to this island and their same nests each year to breed. Since we were there in January, a month after the chicks hatched, we were able to walk down pathways between and among 250,000 penguins. What an experience! Penguins are as cute and endearing as they look and we

spent hours being entertained by their curiosity and antics. In addition to the Kelp Gulls mentioned above, we saw Skuas and Shearwaters.

Other Stuff. We cruised through the breathtaking "Avenue of the Glaciers" that descend from the 8000-foot elevation of the Darwin Mountains. These six glaciers, each named after a European country, presented one awesome sight after another. We visited the oldest working Chilean cattle ranch on Tierra del Fuego, the Estancia Yendegaia. There some of us hiked while others rode horses to explore the ground and to observe the wildlife. An excursion to Puerto Porvenir, a small town founded by gold seekers, took us to a large lagoon where we observed the Black-necked and Coscoroba swans.

In addition to the fine briefings and lectures, life aboard the *Terra Australis* was enhanced by an engine room visit, culinary and cocktail demonstrations, and a sailor knot class. As parrot lovers, Rita and I particularly enjoyed the culinary demonstration when the chef carved exquisite parrot figures out of cucumbers! Our days were long (daylight from 5:30am to 10:30pm) and, although it was summer, temperatures stayed between 45 and 55 degrees. Yeah, it was a great expedition and it was over all too soon. 



M/V Terra Australis in Yendegaia Bay.