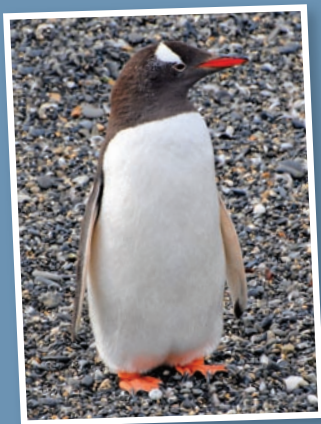


GOING PLACES

SUE MCILROY



AROUND CAPE HORN



Life works in strange ways. Sometimes the things we most look forward to can be disappointing. But then, out of the blue, something that we're *not* expecting can provide us with one of our most rewarding experiences. It happened recently when I was invited to join friends on a cruise to the Chilean Fjords ...

Having seen New Zealand's Fiordland – plus the spectacular Norwegian Fjords and Alaska – I really didn't expect too much from the fjords of South America.

How wrong I was!

The worst part was packing. However, the suitcase finally squeezed shut, and we eventually touched down in Buenos Aires. Our tour the next day covered all the important highlights, finishing with a visit to the amazing La Recoleta Cemetery – resting place of Evita Peron.

Buenos Aires comes alive at night, with a multitude of restaurants and Latin nightclubs. And you must try the Argentinean beef – it's out of this world. Just make sure you order the 'mini beef': all other cuts are gigantic! (This is not a city for vegetarians ...)

The first hint of what awaited us came the following morning on a three-hour flight from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia. I was

lucky enough to have a window seat, and as we traced the coastline down towards the southern tip of South America, the scenery started in earnest: snow-capped peaks towering above the clouds, and incredible vistas opening below us.

On our final approach into the small alpine town, the plane turned and swept low up the Beagle Channel. Then we caught a glimpse of our waiting ship, moored in this idyllic setting, surrounded by the mountains of Tierra del Fuego.

I've watched some of those around-the-world ocean races on TV, where seemingly insignificant yachts battle through towering seas around Cape Horn. And I have to admit to more than a little trepidation as we set sail. However, the reality was quite different. Our ship only cruises this far south during January and February – and, whilst there are no guarantees, this is the most settled time possible to undertake the journey.

PHOTOS: WWW.DREAMSTIME.COM



I'VE GOTTA STOP BEATING AROUND THE BUSH. I'M GONNA MOVE ON TO ORNAMENTAL SHRUBS.



Punta Arenas



Ushuaia – southernmost city in the world



Valparaíso

The sun was shining, there wasn't a whitecap in sight, and it was still warm enough to be out on deck enjoying life at sea!

The Chilean Fjords have to be one of the world's best kept secrets! Of course, everything is subject to weather, but on this occasion Mother Nature performed to her very best. That first afternoon we passed five glaciers, tumbling from mountain tops straight into the sea. It was now very cold (we even had snow on the ship – wow), but the scenery was stunning, the best I've ever seen.

We went ashore in the larger town of Punta Arenas, which competes with Ushuaia for the "southernmost city in the world" status on the bottom tip of Chile. At a nearby penguin colony we were

surrounded by thousands of Magellan Penguins. These little birds are curious, and in this untouched environment they've not learnt fear of humans. They often come right up to investigate, even running across your feet, or pecking into your camera – so cute!

But be warned: should a leopard seal head in your direction, I suggest you depart – quickly. You might be on the menu for lunch!

We spent the next couple of days cruising through narrow fjords with snow-capped mountains flanking us on either side – I found it hard to tear myself away from the windows. At one point the water was so clear and smooth it perfectly reflected the sky – little white puffs of

cloud seemed to float on the water, and our ship didn't even make a ripple.

At 7am one morning the captain advised everyone to be on deck – *in pyjamas if necessary!* We found ourselves at the face of a huge glacier – glistening pink and steaming in the warmth of the rising sun. A light fog shrouded the water and we were totally captivated.

As we cruised further north the snow retreated and was replaced by lush bush. Lunches were again served on deck, and parkas were shed, as our ship weaved her way through seemingly impossible channels. And as we approached Puerto Montt – Chile's famous Lake District – the occasional volcano crept into view.

We drove to the village of Frutillar, past little wooden farmhouses and picturesque gardens, and sampled the local *kuchen* (coffee-cake) at a German delicatessen.

Next stop was Valparaiso – the end, regrettably, of our cruise – and, after disembarking, we drove two hours to Santiago for a late lunch and some more sightseeing. Modern architecture blends with a strong Spanish influence in this beautiful city, and the panoramic views from San Cristobal Hill of the encircling Andes were awesome.

Are you thinking of visiting the Chilean Fjords? GO! And believe the unbelievable ...



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