

Nine of Cups – 45' Liberty Cutter – 7' draft – October 2006

Subject area: Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego, Cape Horn and a Side Trip to Antarctica

After four months negotiating the long Chilean coast from Arica to Puerto Montt, we left Puerto Montt for the Patagonian canals and points south on 10 January 2006. Our primary resources were Rolfo and Ardrizzi's "Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego Nautical Guide" (the Italian guide), RCC "Chile: Arica Desert to Tierra del Fuego", Sailing Directions for West Coast of South America, the Chilean Hydrographic chart set plus a combination of US and British paper charts. Our electronic charts were not adequate here. We also had "Aves de Patagonia, Tierra del Fuego y Peninsula Antártica" (English & Spanish bird identification book) and National Audubon Society "Guide to Marine Mammals of the World".

An unresolved problem with our SSB allowed us to send email, but not communicate with the daily Patagonian Net. The Canadian sailboat, "Breila", left Puerto Montt around the same time and though we never saw them again until they reached Ushuaia, we were in daily contact via e-mail and they relayed our daily positions to the net. Winlink was not easily accessible in southern Chile and we subscribed to Sailmail which had a station in Chile that was fairly reliable.

We had prepared in advance with several extra fuel jugs, four 100-meter 5/8" polypropylene lines (two on stern reels for easy deployment and retrieval), lots of provisions, and an extra propane tank. The "Italian" guide discusses preparation in detail and we found it to be extremely accurate and helpful. We also brought small denomination Chilean bills as well as cartons of wine for purchase of fish/crab and for trade with local fishermen.

Our original plan was to fast track to Puerto Williams and then return to Puerto Montt in the same season to head west for Polynesia and New Zealand. With that plan in mind, we made longer daily passages which averaged 53 miles a day including several lay days for weather. Our longest haul was from Caleta Mariuccia at first light, overnight across a very calm Golfo de Penas, arriving at Caleta Connor the following evening for a total of 219nm. We, of course, took the time to leave a carved boat sign on the "arbol notable" at Caleta Connor, wedged in midst dozens of others, many of whom we recognized. This whole area is gorgeous and had we not planned to return, we would have dawdled much longer.

We really didn't feel we were in "Patagonia" until we made the crossing of Golfo de Penas. Heading down the Canal Messier and negotiating the Angostura Inglesa in fog made us more cognizant than ever of how primeval the area was and how fortunate we were to be experiencing it. All of our senses were attuned to our surroundings. We anchored overnight in the tiny, picturesque town of Puerto Eden, framed with snow-capped mountains and alive with the hospitality of the Armada and local folk. A British sailboat, Toucan, was rafted to an Armada vessel and we met the captain and crew while scrounging up a bit more fuel...just in case.

Every large vessel met en route contacted us and according to Chilean Maritime Authority law requested our pertinent information and position. We were on a first name basis with the Navimag Ferry communications officer by the time we reached the Strait of Magellan. Also amazing to us was the fact that we were sighted no less than three times by people who knew us and were transiting on the Navimag Ferry while we were in the canals. Several sent us photos.

We swung at anchor in Caleta Dardé for three days of high contrary winds and heavy rains and finally a weather window opened up, allowing us to enter the Strait of Magellan. Leaving Canal Smyth and turning the corner into the Strait of Magellan seemed like a monumental waypoint. We had begun reading Joshua Slocum's "Sailing Alone Around the World" aloud to each other in the evenings. His description of the bays in which he had anchored seemed all the more real as we were transiting the same waters and anchoring in the same bays. We were never forced, however, to salt the deck with thumbtacks to ward off unwelcome guests.

Once in the Strait of Magellan, the winds increased to 40 knots westerly and we continued along under bare poles. A small disaster was averted when the traveler shackle on the boom broke leaving the boom to swing into the spreader. Fortunately, a preventer was in place and David quickly secured it to the rail while we assessed the problem and fixed it. The same night our worst "williwaws" were encountered in Caleta Playa Parda, an historical cove. Gusts to 60 knots burst forth out of nowhere, calmed to nothing then burst out again with renewed force all the night through. We swung at anchor with lots of scope and held fast through it all.

Our favorite anchorage off the Strait of Magellan was Bahia Mussel. The woodsy setting was serene, the little cove calm and picturesque, the water mirror smooth and there were lots of birds to watch including kelp geese. Despite our self-imposed haste, we opted to linger here an extra day to take it all in.

The circuitous route took us through Canal Magdalena on a foggy, foggy day rendering the alleged spectacular scenery to be mostly imagined rather than real. We had arrived in Tierra del Fuego. Through Canal Cockburn, we were heading for Caleta Brecknock, but rare northeast winds persuaded us to find an alternative in Puerto Niemann. Luckily, we found that Toucan had indeed stayed the night in Caleta Brecknock with another boat and space would have been at a premium had we arrived as well.

The motor-sail through Canal Brecknock was splendid. Whales sounded and dolphins played as we moved along. Magellanic penguins were abundant and every once in awhile we saw ice floe with sea terns hitching a ride aboard. We headed to Caletón Silva for the night and found Toucan already anchored there framed by golden hills and waterfalls. We anchored not far away and enjoyed our first social outing since leaving Puerto Montt.

An early departure on a glorious morning and we headed towards the final legs of the trip. Brazo Noroeste has to be one of the most beautiful areas of the entire canal system. Lined in blue glaciers which swirl from the heavens to the canal before you, this part of the "Ruta Ventisquero" is idyllic. We made our way past glacier after glacier in awe of their cold majesty. We had thought to stop at Caleta Olla, a well-known last anchorage before making for Puerto Williams the following day. We saw a mast or two as we approached from the west, but upon entering the caleta, there were eight boats snugly packed in for the night. Evidently this is the preferred charter boat anchorage and all were in attendance. We made a 180 and found a reasonable anchorage a few miles further east in Caleta Sonia, close to the Armada control post.

A scenic motor-sail the next day had us rafted before dark to the Micalvi, a Chilean decommissioned and intentionally grounded munitions carrier, in Puerto Williams. This little town makes up in charm and beauty what it lacks in amenities. We relaxed for several days in relatively warm weather, did laundry, socialized and enjoyed the local hikes and scenery.

When the weather was promising, we obtained our "zarpe" from the Capitania's office for Cape Horn. We realize this is not what the sailors of old experienced when they rounded the Horn. On the contrary, we were able to wait for a good weather window, approach the Horn with caution and make the decision to go around or not. Some boats waited days for the right time, but we were greeted by dolphins as we were making the decision and the dolphins led the way. On 12 February 2006, we rounded Cape Horn, west to east, in relatively calm winds which quickly changed to 45 knot winds before we anchored in Caleta Martial not far way. We had hoped to stop at the lighthouse at Cape Horn, but a crew of two (Jelly, the cat, has never been good at the helm) and high wind conditions made it imprudent. We holed up for three days in Caleta Martial waiting for 50-60 knot winds to abate and finally made it back to Puerto Williams.

A few more days in Puerto Williams and we checked out of Chile and headed back up the Beagle Channel to Ushuaia, Argentina...the southern most city on the planet! A lovely little city with a backdrop of mountains, Ushuaia was a welcome respite after our time in the canals. We

restocked the larder, ate Argentine beef and lamb at “tenedor libres” (literally “free fork”, but actually an all-you-can-eat restaurant), watched tango shows and drank Argentine wine.

We planned to head back up the canals after this visit, but, oh, the vagaries of cruising and having too many choices. We had heard from several other cruisers about last-minute discount fares on several vessels heading to Antarctica. We inquired and sure enough, the Explorer II (the Little Red Boat) was offering a significant discount on a 10 day cruise to Antarctica if booked within 10 days of departure. Sign us up! With “Cups” safely on a mooring and Jelly being watched by fellow-cruisers, we departed with high hopes and soaring spirits.

What can we say? It was mind-blowing, awesome, other-worldly. Talk about glaciers and icebergs...it was overwhelming. We made eleven shore landings during our time there including the Ukranian Vernadsky station and the British station Lockroy. We saw innumerable penguins (gentoo, macaroni, Adelie and chinstrap), Minke and humpback whales, giant petrels and albatross, leopard seals, elephant seals and fur seals. It was absolutely incredible and we highly recommend this adventure.

Back in Ushuaia, it was getting very, very cold. We had managed without a stove to this point, but it was becoming increasingly uncomfortable. Did we really want to go back to Puerto Montt and face two months of cold and short days in transit? Once again, a major change and the plans for heading back up the canals and heading across the Pacific were tossed in favor up heading up the east coast of South America to the “warm”, enjoying more of Argentina and Uruguay and then heading across the Atlantic to South Africa. That’s the plan du jour, firm as Jello.

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