

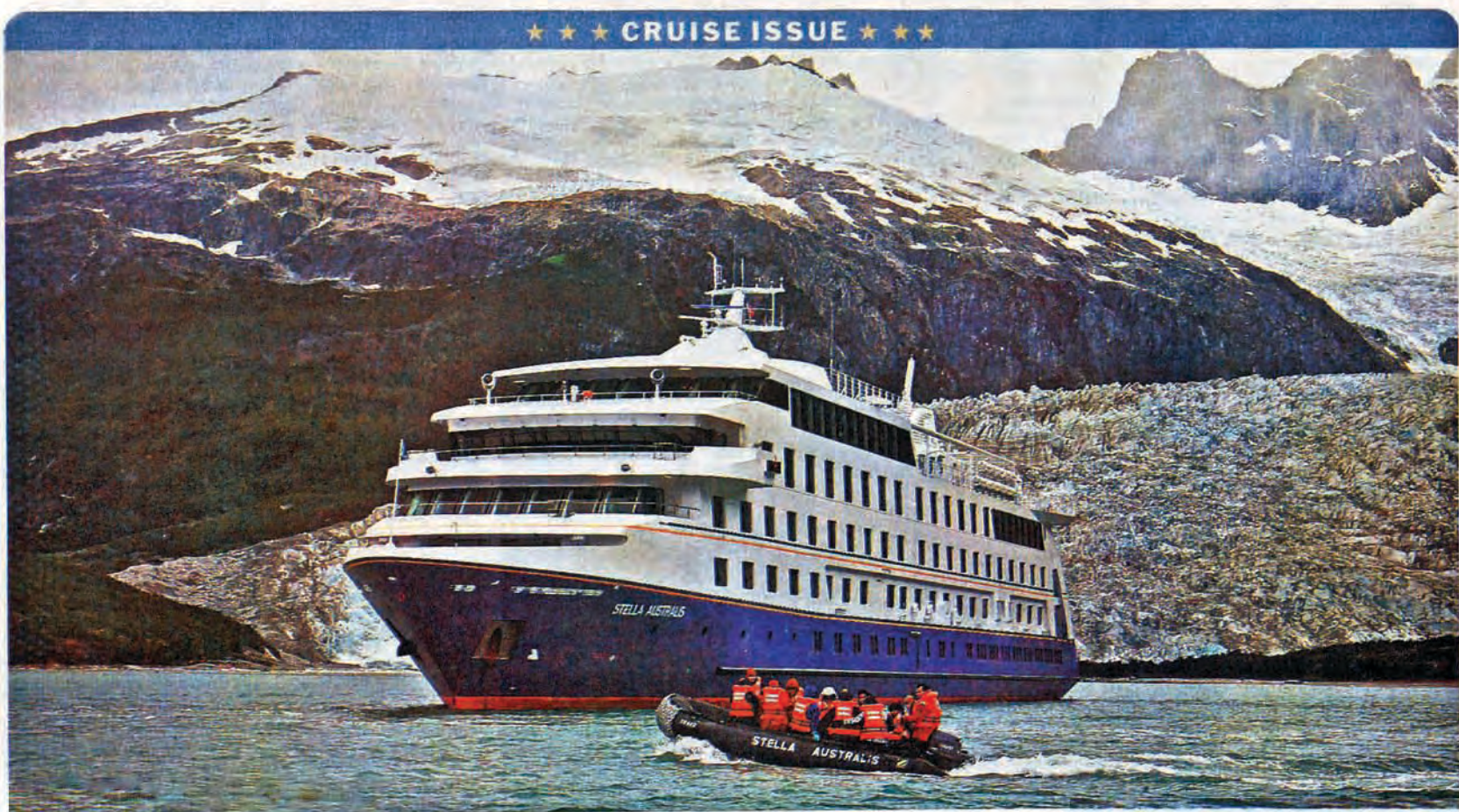
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★ ★ ★ CRUISE ISSUE ★ ★ ★

STEVE HAGGERTY | PHOTOS FOR THE DISPATCH

In **Tierra del Fuego**, elephant seals lure cruise passengers to the beach



ABOVE: The Stella Australis rests at anchor at Pia Glacier in the Beagle Channel.

LEFT: Elephant seals are ready for their close-up at Ainsworth Bay.

ADVENTURES IN ARCHIPELAGOES

By Anne Z. Cooke | FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

AINSWORTH BAY, Tierra del Fuego, Chile — With the wind in our favor, a sudden whiff of fish and a rumble of snorts announced that our quarry was within range. As our group of explorers advanced a few steps, a mound of mottled boulders at the high-tide line rolled and heaved, and a half-dozen giant elephant seals came alive. “Keep back, *amigos*,” warned team leader Mauricio Alvarez, a naturalist and guide with the cruise ship *Stella Australis*. Small and fast, the expedition-style vessel sails the choppy waters of Chile’s Alberto de Agostini National Park, in the heart of the Tierra del Fuego archipelago at the southernmost tip of South America.

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Magellanic penguins strut their stuff at Tuckers Islets.



TOM BAKER | DISPATCH



PROMECH AIR INC.

A viewing platform provides visitors a safe place to see bears grab a meal from Neets Creek.

SEALS

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"These guys are pretty calm while they're molting," Alvarez warned as he herded the most adventurous of us. "But they can move when they want to."

The 210-passenger *Stella*, launched in December and making three- and four-night journeys between Punta Arenas, Chile, and Ushuaia, Argentina, is the newest of *Cruceros Australis*' three ships, all based in southern Patagonia.

Cruising at 14 knots, the *Stella* can cover a lot of ground, sailing from the Straits of Magellan and south to the hidden coves of Ainsworth Bay, and from Glacier Alley to the Beagle Channel.

These are the fjords and islands of the soaring Cordillera Darwin, 6,500-foot peaks rising straight from sea level, their spiky summits shrouded in glacial ice and festooned with waterfalls. Majestic forests, green and moist, grow on the lower slopes, where summer temperatures (January through April) hover between 50 and 60 degrees.

For some of the *Stella*'s passengers, the highlight of the cruise was the 360-degree turnaround at Cape Horn, the stony island marking the end of the continent. The world's most perilous passage and a proven widow maker, Cape Horn lends a certain cachet to those who survive (even if only by cruise ship).

During the 1849 gold rush in California, tens of thousands of fortune hunters came west by way of the Horn. For many, though, the Horn was their last adventure. Historians estimate that at least 100 ships were wrecked and sunk near Cape Horn between 1850 and 1900, and that 800 were lost or disappeared between the 17th and 20th centuries.

Even vessels such as the *Stella* read the weather forecast before deciding whether to anchor offshore and ferry passengers onto the beach. On the day we were there, the sun shone and the winds abated; even so, frequent gusts made the 160-step climb to the top of the Albatross Monument a chore.

But the meat of these cruises consists of the expeditions, shore tours and the exploration of the region's maze of isolated islands, fjords and narrows.

Of the 5,600 square miles in the national park, most are inaccessible except by ship, Alvarez said.

"There's really nobody here except us and the few biologists that come to count the animals. Not a single ranger patrols the park," he said. "We, we are the ones who are caring for it."

Experienced sailors can



STEVE HAGGERTY | FOR THE DISPATCH

A boardwalk leads passengers to a panoramic view of Cape Horn.

If you go

CRUISING TO CAPE HORN

Cruceros Australis cruises start at \$1,400 a person for the lowest-fare cabins in less popular seasons.

All excursions, naturalist guides, meals, drinks and some transfers are included.

Meals are served by waiters in the dining room. Groups get assigned tables; independent travelers can change seats.

Food includes specialties such as Chilean beef, famous for its taste and tenderness.

Cabins are spacious, with big windows, two beds (not cots) and down quilts.

STAYING ON

Many people stay a few extra days in Buenos Aires, Argentina, before or after the cruise.

For hospitality, brand-label service and midlevel rates, stay at the Sheraton Libertador, one block from the bustling pedestrian-only street, Florida Avenue. Amenities include free Wi-Fi and a rooftop swimming pool. Visit www.sheraton.com/libertador.

For five-star elegance, luxuriate at the Alvear Palace in the trendy

Recoleta neighborhood. High ceilings, mirrored doors, oil paintings, crystal chandeliers, Louis XVI furniture and superior cuisine in the top-rated Burgoyne Dining Room make this hotel a royal treat. Visit www.alvearpalace.com.

LEARNING MORE

► To learn more about the Patagonia cruises, call 1-877-678-3772 or visit www.australis.com. Or contact a travel agent.

► To learn more about Argentina, visit www.turismo.gov.ar/eng/menu.htm.

rent a sailboat in Ushuaia and chart their own course through the park. But most travelers opt for the *Stella* or one of its sister ships.

Ferdinand Magellan, who in 1520 discovered the strait later named for him, and Charles Darwin, who sailed there on the *Beagle* three centuries later, were the hardy type, unfazed by weevily biscuits, tinned sardines and damp hammocks. But those days are in the mists of history.

Today, you can expect plenty of comfort and safety and an attentive crew. On the *Stella Australis*, you will eat well, sleep soundly and — like the crew of the starship *Enterprise* — truly go where few have gone before.

With the itinerary slanted toward outdoor adventure, layering is the mantra. Despite a first frustrating experience struggling to arrange and rearrange my long underwear, jeans, shirt, jacket, waterproof pants and a parka, the process soon felt automatic.

Good thing, too, because *Tierra del Fuego* is always cool and usually windy. Sometimes it's cold even during the warm months of September through April.

So why is the climate so brisk?

"Look at the map," naturalist Paula Girauldi said, opening her laptop and clicking through a series of maps. "With no land to stop the winds or slow them down, it blows always."

Although a few older passengers were happy to stay on board and watch the scenery from the ship's three comfortable lounges, most of us geared up for the twice-daily outdoor expeditions. With our life jackets strapped on, we clambered into the ship's *Zodiacs*, 12 to a boat with a naturalist guide, and sped away toward a glacier, a hidden cove, a mountain trail or a bird rookery.

We found the elephant seal colony on a low-lying islet with plenty of open beach. Cormorants and their chicks perched on rocky outcrops near the waterline.

The Magellanic penguins nest in several places in this region, including the Tucker Islets, where we went to see them. These islets — small flat-topped rock formations with gentle rock beaches and covered with clumps of grass, thick mosses and delicate lacy trees — resemble a fairy rock garden.

The penguins hollow out deep burrows in the earth here and, safe from most

predators, incubate their eggs, raise the chicks, teach them to swim, and waddle about in comically organized groups.

Here, as elsewhere, the ice caps on Chile's southern peaks are melting fast. The 890-square-mile ice sheet above Glacier Alley in the national park is shrinking, its many fingers pulling back toward the summit.

The island where we found the elephant seals is a new feature in the valley: a terminal moraine, the pile of dirt and rubble left behind when the now-distant Marinelli Glacier shrank into the valley.

The Pia Glacier, where we went ashore to climb to a vista point and contemplate the exposed front face and blue ice, calves huge chunks into the water almost daily.

For this year, and the next and the next, the *Stella* will sail these waters, its passengers exploring the beaches and inlets as we did. But for all of us on board, like-minded citizens concerned for the future, imagining a time without glaciers was a sobering thought.

Will the ice, the penguins, the whales and elephant seals be here in another 10 years? For the first time, no one is sure.