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Exploring South America's southern tip by ship

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October 20, 2011 | By Anne Z. Cooke, McClatchy Newspapers

With the wind in our favor, the sudden whiff of fish and a rumble of cavernous snorts announced that the quarry was within range. A few steps later, the mound of mottled boulders at the high tide line rolled and heaved, and a half-dozen dozen giant elephant seals came alive.

"Keep back, amigos," warned our guide and elephant seal researcher Mauricio Alvarez, 43, as the shutterbugs in our group opened their tripods and, ignoring his advice, pushed ahead. "These guys are pretty calm, muy calma, while they're molting, but they can move fast when they have to," he said, drawing a line in the sand. Reluctantly retreating to a safe distance, we sat down to wait and watch the animals grunt, stretch and jostle.

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Like the elephant seals, which migrate to the Tierra del Fuego Archipelago to loll in the sun, Alvarez joins the cruise ship Stella Australis in summer as a naturalist and team leader, guiding the ship's passengers through the winding channels and deep fiords of Chile's Alberto de Agostini National Park, at South America's southern tip.

The 210-passenger Stella, sailing three and four-night itineraries between Punta Arenas, Chile, and Ushuaia, Argentina, is the newest of Cruceros Australis' three expedition-style ships, all based in Southern Patagonia. Prowling among gravelly islets and beneath towering ice-clad peaks, they follow a circuitous route from the Straits of Magellan to the hidden coves of Ainsworth Bay, and from Glacier Alley through the Beagle Channel.

For most of us onboard, the sub-text of the voyage was the imperceptible climate changes threatening this still-wild region: melting glaciers, warmer winters and vanishing marine life. Horrors of the kind that could keep you up in the dark of night. But it was the chance to catch the action up close, in person and with a trained naturalist, that had us bounding out of our very comfortable beds each morning and hustling into our rain-proof gear.

On a small luxury ship like the Stella, the ambience is casual, the decor is nautical simplicity and the appointments are state-of-the-art. Each cabin has a large outside window and twin beds. Just as important, invisible logistics keep every detail running seamlessly.

The lounge, big enough to seat us all, is the place to mix and mingle over cocktails. Appetizing meals appear effortlessly, and interpretive talks evolve into dialogues. Twice-a-day excursions get underway in 20 minutes, the time it takes for the passengers to climb into their assigned Zodiac and motor away from the ship. And the biologist-guides know where the animals are likely to be found.

Sure enough, on our first outing we encountered the elephant seals almost by accident. The next day we motored to the Tucker Islets to see some of the thousands of winsomely waddling Magellanic penguins that nest here in summer. The Zodiacs don't land — "never would we disturb them, not for any reason," said Alvarez — so we kept our seats and bobbed a few feet offshore in the surf, taking turns in

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the prow for a closer look.

The Tucker Islets aren't the penguins' only nesting grounds but they must be the loveliest. Fairy rock gardens, they are boxy sedimentary formations formed first by erosion then isolated when the seas rose around them. Terraced over time, they're a wonderland of green grasses, native flowers and lacy tree branches. The migrating penguins swim here in pairs, clump ashore, find a spot on the summit or in a cliff and hollow out a burrow. Here, safe and out of sight, they incubate their eggs, raise the chicks, teach them to swim and march about together like so many wind-up toys.

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The penguins and their kin, the whales and seals, occupy center stage here in the spiky peaks of Darwin Cordillera. But it's the mountainous setting, the "wallpaper" if you will, that creates the drama. At the tip-end of the Andes mountains, the range rises 6,500 feet straight up out of the ocean, ice clad, ghost-like and cerebral. But even this is changing.

"You see the Marinelli Glacier, two miles away in that valley?" asked Alvarez, as we stood on the beach watching the elephant seals sneeze and snort. "This island here is a terminal moraine from that glacier, the pile of dirt and rocks that it left behind when it stopped growing and started to shrink back. And it's still shrinking."

Later we cruised through the channel known as Glacier Alley to the constantly calving face of the massive Pia Glacier. Anchoring in deeper water, we went ashore to climb the adjacent rocky hill and to ponder the ice field's mass and ancient lineage. As the clouds moved away and the sun came out, we heard the voice of the ice: now rifle-shot cracks, now rumbling roars.

For some passengers, the highlight of the cruise was sailing around Cape Horn, the stony island marking the continent's end. A perilous passage and frequent widow-maker, the voyage around the Horn is something to dine out on, even if you've only done it on a cruise.

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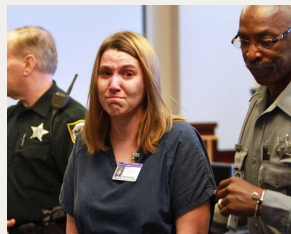
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