



# Patagonia

story + photography by Kevin Revolinski

a cruise at the end of the world

**It is scarcely possible to imagine anything more beautiful than the beryl-like blue of these glaciers, and especially as contrasted with the dead white of the upper expanse of snow.** —Charles Darwin

**F**rom a distance it had looked much smaller, almost quaint the way it lay along the land, nestled between mountains. But as we drew closer across the icy waters in our Zodiac, the Pia Glacier loomed up faster and larger than one might expect until we made landfall and now stand dwarfed by its massive wall of ice. The surface shows patterns of cracks and layered ice and sediment, varying colors—most notably the blues—and several spouts of meltwater cascading into the bay.

The Mare Australis, anchored in this fjord in the northwest arm of Beagle Channel, lies behind us, now a toy, a mere earthly thing that has stumbled into the hall of the gods. This is the second full day of our expeditionary cruise of the channels and islands at the End of the World, the southernmost reaches of the Americas. This is Patagonia. We set sail from Punta Arenas, Chile and are bound for Ushuaia on Argentina's Tierra del Fuego Island. In between lies a remote land of mountains and glaciers, of moody seas and scattered islands, and of creatures and plants tough enough to cling to it all.

What sound like shotgun shots echo off the surrounding rock as the glacier cracks and shifts, and seemingly small fragments tumble from time to time, revealing their hefty size when they plunge dramatically into the sea. I look back across the water, so still on a windless day, to observe the clutter of broken ice chunks. One of them will find its way in pieces into our cocktails tonight.

After a gourmet dinner back on board, we are treated to slideshows, videos and lectures about what we are seeing and are going to see the next day. Thanks to our naturalists, we are engaged with our surroundings and entertained by stories of Darwin and Captain Fitz Roy and other European ship captains and sailors who first braved these channels only to find that the Yámana aborigines were already living here.

As we navigate through the Avenue of the Glaciers the next day, I head to the upper deck to take photos of each of them, many named for nations—Germany, France, Italy, Holland glaciers—and to get a closer look at hidden waterfalls using the ship's mounted spotting scope. We sail from point to point and a variety of creatures make our acquaintance. Imperial cormorants, petrels, and albatrosses seem to hover as they match our speed and fly at eye level. A parcel of penguins pops above the surface for a moment to see us pass, and even a whale comes alongside for a spell.

Every day we are treated to a shore excursion. The first day in Admiralty Fjord we trekked along Ainsworth Bay with the Marinelli Glacier as our backdrop. Now in the distance, the ice sheet once covered the land we hike upon. A colony of elephant seals seemed to take little notice of us but the local birds came close to check us out along the trail among the unexpectedly bright colors of lichens and hardy plant life. An eagle-like caracara lighted in the upper branches of a nearby tree, and high up along the Darwin Peaks four condors rode the air currents. Our guide Eduardo kept a proper balance between lecture and the silence one requires to appreciate the great sweep of wind, chirping birds, babbling streams, and distant waterfalls. Several hikers claimed to have heard a fox bark.

The cruise offers a perfect balance between luxury and adventure, activity and relaxation. Patagonia's untouched splendor puts it in a must-see category and a small expedition-style excursion makes it all the more memorable. Our last shore excursion is truly the end of the world: Cape Horn. We climb to the lighthouse there and I imagine what sort of person might choose a solitary life out here as I look out over a sparkling sea. Invisible beyond the horizon is Antarctica.

There's no mistaking when the ship has left the relative shelter of the bays and channels. The sea starts to roll a bit and then really picks up steam when we round Cape Horn before becoming gentle again when we slip back among the islands for the final stretch north to Ushuaia. We disembark the next morning and I can't help but feel like the child who has left the most amazing carnival ride of his life: I want to get back in line and start all over again.

### Patagonian surf and turf?

While the cruise offers a few steps along terra firma, a land-based stay before or after is a great way to extend the Patagonian experience. On the Argentinian side is the port city of Ushuaia and the nearby Tierra del Fuego National Park. Hire a guide and trek through the mountains there, or take the End of the World Train to get to the park yourself. Send a postcard from the Post Office at the End of the World.

On the Chilean side lies the magnificent Torres del Paine National Park and its unique set of mountain peaks totally independent from the Andes. Check in for a few days at nearby La Remota Resort. Each evening guests sit down with their personal guides to discuss the next day's activities. Do you prefer to go hiking? Horseback riding? Climbing? Perhaps a boat tour of the inlet?

La Remota offers a blend of luxury comforts—fine meals, regional wines, hot tubs—along with the rugged adventure excursions. The hotel's design harmonizes with the terrain. Part of the structure resembles the sheep runs of the local farms, and the grass of the plains grows along the rooftops. Enjoy a view from the dining room of the sun setting behind the park's three rocky "towers." Watch documentaries and attend presentations about the land and its people. And most importantly, get out into the wild for some exploring. In the evening you can sip champagne and soak tired muscles in an outdoor hot tub with an impressive view. ●

