



Cruising in Patagonia

Genevieve Leaper indulges in a South American 'trip of a lifetime', taking in dolphins, hummingbirds and glaciers en route

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Genevieve Leaper has been sailing all her life in a variety of boats, from racing dinghies and small cruising yachts to square riggers. She lives on the east coast of Scotland and goes day-sailing in a 17ft plywood trimaran, but also borrows her brother's Dufour Arpège for cruising on the west coast.

My trip of a lifetime began with an unexpected phone call from Chile last October. My friends Colin and Ana had returned to Puerto Montt, where they had left their boat for a few months, and were heading south. Would I like to join them in Patagonia? I was so excited I hardly slept for a week. Six weeks later, I arrived in Puerto Natales on the bus from Punta Arenas, the last leg of a three-day journey from Scotland.

There are few coastal towns in Patagonia, so it is unfortunate that Puerto

Natales lacks a harbour and the only safe anchorage is a mile away across the channel. When I met up with Colin and Ana in the morning they had moved to a temporary anchorage off the fishing pier, but Colin was keen to leave as soon as possible. After a hurried provisioning trip to the last supermarket for 500 miles, our last call was at the Capitania de Puerto to get our 'zarpe' (sailing permission) for Puerto Williams from the Armada. All maritime traffic is controlled by the Chilean Navy, and boats are required to report their position daily. Luckily, the Chileans are very friendly people, and we had no problems with officialdom despite our lack of Spanish.

By the time we got on board the wind was already picking up so it was time to go: no time to unpack more than sailing gear and camera as we motored out. For the first day I wasn't much more than a



Nicholson 32 *Beduin* sailing east down Brazo Noroeste from Seno Pia, Patagonia, Chile

passenger while I got to know the boat. *Ithaka* is an OVNI 435, built in 2003. When Colin retired and started looking for a boat for serious cruising he considered various popular blue water boats, before eventually settling on the French OVNI. *Ithaka* needed some work when they bought her in Panama, but has proved herself well over four years of cruising the Pacific.

Puerto Natales is more than 80 miles from the open sea and it took us two days to rejoin Canal Smyth, the main route south. At first I was hopelessly disorientated, confused by the southern hemisphere sun and frequent changes in direction as we followed winding channels with mountains all round. We passed through the narrows of Angostura White, half a cable wide, where tidal currents run up to 10 knots, and stopped the first night in Caleta Mousse. With its wooded shores and snow-capped peaks above, I thought this snug little cove quite the most perfect anchorage I'd ever seen.

When I woke in the morning it was so still I wouldn't have known I was on a boat – no hum of wind in the rigging, no waves lapping the hull, no rumbling of the anchor chain. All I could hear were birds calling in the trees and a waterfall tumbling down the hillside. To my amazement, this was quite a typical anchorage; despite the strong winds and



violent gusts in the channels, the numerous delightful caletas are generally far more peaceful and secure than many a Scottish anchorage. Some are so well hidden they would be difficult to find without the indispensable *Patagonia & Tierra del Fuego Nautical Guide*, which must be one of the best pilot books anywhere.

Because of the depths it is usually necessary to anchor very close to the shore and take lines ashore – but this is also best for shelter. We soon learned to regard trees as a sailor's best friends,

providing stout trunks for mooring to (we are all tree-huggers!) and a natural windbreak. Most of the Patagonian coast is thickly forested from the snow-line down to the shore. An unexpected bonus was excellent bird-watching from the boat: we saw kingfishers, woodpeckers and even hummingbirds in the trees, as well as waterbirds like the flightless steamer ducks. Many caletas were home to a pair of the pretty upland geese with their goslings, and even dolphins came into the anchorages. The Peale's dolphins were enthusiastic bow-riders, while the smaller Chilean dolphins were much more shy.

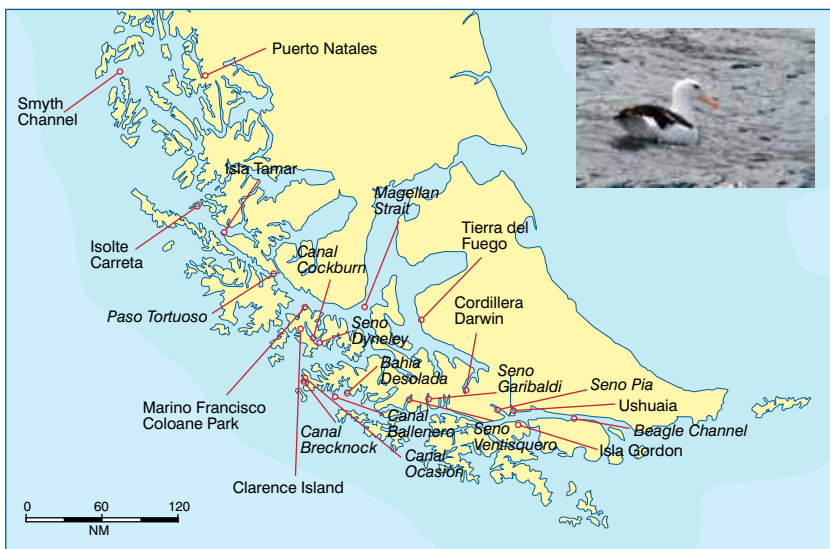
The Magellan Strait

Canal Smyth runs south between the mainland and islands. It was strange to meet a tanker negotiating the maze of small islands in the channel, but this is the main route for coastal traffic to or from the Magellan Strait. It is well buoyed now, but more than one ship has come to grief in the past. The rusting wreck of the SS *Santa Leonor* (formerly USS *Riverside*, a Second World War troop carrier) sits impossibly high on the rocks of Islotes Adelaide.

It's not just ships that pass through the channel: on one day we saw several sei whales. In Caleta Dardé, Colin and Ana recognised an orange flag tied to a tree as a message from their friend Aleko who had stayed here five days earlier. Until diverting to Puerto Natales they had been sailing together with Aleko and



Colin and Ana Ladd on *Ithaka*, Patagonia, Chile



A humpback whale in the Magellan Strait



his Nicholson 32 *Beduin* since leaving Puerto Montt.

After five days we came to the southern end of Canal Smyth. We were lucky to wait only one day in Caleta Teokita before tackling the Magellan Strait: others have waited far longer. Joshua Slocum tried to leave Puerto Angosto six times before finally getting away into the Pacific. We left with a forecast of NW backing SW 20-25 knots, gusting to 35 knots later; fairly average conditions.

After 15 miles close-hauled with double-reefed main we were out into the strait, where it was much rougher with the open ocean to the west. Once clear of Isla Tamar we could free off a little and, later, as the wind increased, we lowered the main. Taking the wheel as *Ithaka* surged along at 6-7 knots under staysail alone, I couldn't quite believe I was sailing the Magellan Strait. It would have been almost disappointing if it had been calm, though I wouldn't have wished to be beating west into the rising wind and heavy showers.

It was on almost exactly the same date nearly 500 years ago (28 November 1520) that Magellan's fleet departed to the west. Magellan apparently 'wept for joy' at having discovered the way through to the Pacific. Three hundred years later Captain Pringle Stokes, sent to survey these waters in HMS *Beagle*, became so depressed he shot himself. Earlier he had written in his diary 'nothing could be more

dreary than the scene around us', and others have commented on the 'incessant rains'. For us it was our longest day, logging 57 miles.

After a short run to Caleta Campamento, we finally caught up with *Beduin* and stayed together all the way to Puerto Williams. It was a lot of fun cruising in company, and if it sometimes felt more like match racing I shouldn't have been surprised – I first met Colin and Ana racing Fireball dinghies. More than once *Ithaka* arrived ahead, only for *Beduin* to slip past

in a tacking duel up a narrow inlet. We didn't mind; when Aleko anchored first he would be ready on his paddleboard to take our shore lines.

He had long since dispensed with a dinghy in favour of an inflatable paddleboard. When mooring with shore lines, it is essential to be able to launch the dinghy quickly – no problem on *Ithaka* with the dinghy on davits, but on a smaller boat the paddleboard is easier to stow on deck ready to go. Between us we became very efficient at mooring the two boats.



Patagonian match-racing: *Beduin* attempts to get past *Ithaka* to windward, off Isla Clarence



Beduin experiencing heavy weather in Canal Cockburn



OVNI 435 *Ithaka* under spinnaker with *Beduin* ahead in the Beagle Channel



Ithaka in Canal O'Brien

Sometimes we anchored separately but space was often very tight, so it was better to raft together. Floating rope is best for the mooring lines, stowed in tubs on deck. As the hardest part is often getting to the chosen tree through the undergrowth, tying a very long bowline makes it much easier to release in the morning.

Coming through the Paso Tortuoso, we spotted a large flock of birds and then a blow. To my delight, the skipper needed little persuasion to alter course for closer look. This part of the strait (Parque Marino Francisco Coloane) is a protected area for humpback whales and here they were, feeding along with albatrosses, giant petrels, penguins and skuas.

A far worse time

After the Magellan Strait, the only channel directly exposed to the ocean was Canal Cockburn, and we had a far worse time here. Leaving Seno Dyneley, we had to head south-west for 15 miles before turning into Canal Ocasión on the south side. Making an early start, we hoped to take advantage of the north-west wind before it backed south-westerly. However, as we rounded the southern tip of Isla Clarence, the breeze that was filling in was already more westerly and soon rather fresher than we would have liked. The AIS beeped, showing a tug towing a small tanker coming into the channel ahead. We tried to keep to the windward

side, but were being headed more and more and the squalls got worse. Here too, for the first time, we felt the swells rolling in from the Pacific.

As the ships approached we put the engine on to hold our course, but as we furled the yankee the flogging sheet shattered the sprayhood window which was brittle from the cold. *Beduin* fared worse with a ripped mainsail. To our surprise, the next target on the AIS was a sailing vessel, only the second yacht we'd seen. *Podorange*, a French charter boat, was heading west out of the channel, but we were relieved to set the staysail and bear away into the shelter of Canal Ocasión.

This south-west corner of Tierra del Fuego was startlingly different to the wooded shores we were used to – a bleak, grey landscape of bare rock, almost devoid of trees. The hills became steeper and even more forbidding as we turned into Seno Ocasión. Sailing towards a sheer rock wall with the wind funnelling through the narrows, it seemed impossible there could be anywhere to anchor. But the tiny cove revealed at the last minute even had trees, to which we attached a record seven shore lines.


Two wet and windy days in Caleta Brecknock was time for repairs and maintenance. The sewing machine came out to repair the sprayhood, while Aleko was also busy stitching a mainsail seam.

We were glad of the cabin heaters as everything was damp from condensation despite insulation and DIY double glazing on the windows.

Snow showers

The weather was still cold and wet as we headed east along Canal Brecknock and across Bahía Desolada, then even colder in Canal Ballenero, with a biting Antarctic wind bringing snow showers. This channel was named by the *Beagle*'s second, more famous captain, Robert Fitzroy, after the theft of a whaling boat by the natives. We could only speculate on the origin of other names such as Isla Leadline and Bahía Fiasco.

But while so many place names on the chart are reminders of intrepid exploration by Europeans, there is little to record the sad decline of the Yamana and other Fuegian tribes, destroyed by direct persecution and European diseases. Joshua Slocum in 1896 had a few skirmishes with the natives and scattered carpet tacks on deck to deter them from boarding the *Spray*. Just 60 years later, HW Tilman didn't see a single canoe during *Mischief*'s three months in the channels.

The weather improved as we entered the Brazo Noroeste (north-west arm) of the Beagle Channel. Here, at the last tip of the Andes, the ice spills into the sea. The magnificent Cordillera Darwin is cut by 



Ithaka and *Beduin* shelter together in Caleta Brecknock, Tierra del Fuego, Chile



The yacht club (Club de Yates Micalvi) in Puerto Williams, Isla Navarino, Chile



A pair of upland (or Magellan) geese – *Chloephaga picta* – in Caleta Campamento, Magellan Strait



Colin and Ana Ladd on *Ithaka* in Canal O'Brien

deep fjords ending in tidewater glaciers – irresistible! There was an air of expectancy on board as we motored up the Seno Ventisquero (Glacier Sound). The first bergy bit came by just a few miles in: soon there was more ice, and then suddenly it was all around us.

Finally we rounded a rocky headland and the glacier came into view. As the ice got thicker and thicker, with *Beduin* wisely tucked in behind ice-breaker *Ithaka*, it became obvious we wouldn't get to the glacier, even in an aluminium boat. It didn't matter, we were well and truly in the ice. We tied the boats together, switched the engines off and drifted with the ice. I climbed the mast to take photos and Aleko went paddle-boarding while Colin hammered glacial ice for the pisco sours that Ana was preparing. By the time we'd had cocktails and lunch the boats had turned themselves round in the gentle swirl of the currents and were moving sedately back down the sound.

Our second attempt at a glacier was less successful. Just a few miles into a hard beat up Seno Garibaldi, the wind instruments suddenly stopped working. A quick glance up the mast showed the anemometer hanging by its wires, so we furled the headsail and started the engine. Too late; the wind whipped it away before Colin could get up the mast.

Meanwhile, *Beduin* was not making much progress under sail or power, so the

decision to turn back was unanimous. It was much more pleasant running back under staysail, and back out in the channel the wind dropped enough to hoist the main and yankee.

When the sky turned dark and ominous to the west we were expecting a squall and started furling the headsail, but none of us anticipated the ferocity – from a gentle breeze to 40 knots in a few minutes. Luckily we were just about to round up into Bahía Tres Brazos, where we could head into wind and drop the main. After a tough day we were glad to reach the perfect shelter of Caleta Cinco Estrellas, a small hidden lagoon which the pilot book describes as 'one of the nicest, safest coves of all the channels'.

The following day was a total contrast; a chance to air clothes and bedding and relax in warm sunshine. In most places, the forest of evergreen beeches festooned with mosses and lichens was beautiful but almost impenetrable: here, for once, it was possible to climb up through the trees onto the open ridge above. As we stopped to admire the stunning views over Isla Gordon and across the channel to the Cordillera Darwin, four condors came soaring by. Next day we saw them again – feasting on a dead whale on the shore.

Ice cliff

Not put off by our experience in Seno Garibaldi, we went to explore Seno Pia,

which boasts no less than three glaciers. Heading up the eastern arm first, with the wind astern, we found the route to the glacier fairly free of ice as the wind was holding the ice at the head. However, the water was very shallow over the moraine and *Beduin* had to anchor half a mile off. *Ithaka*, as much at home in the ice as among the coral reefs of the Pacific, smugly lifted her keel and rudder to continue to the face of the glacier.

The ice cliff towering above the mast was sculpted into fantastic pinnacles at the top, but it was rather dirty. Ventisquero Guilcher, which we visited the next day, was the most beautiful; dazzling white with mysterious blue caves. We were lucky again: the rain of the morning cleared as we approached the glacier, giving us spells of sunshine and glimpses of the mountains above.

That evening, anchored in Caleta del Norte, we watched the ice cruising down the sound like a flock of white birds. As a stray piece drifted in and caught on our stern line we understood the pilot book's advice to keep the shore lines high. On the way out of Seno Pia we would have missed the sea lions hauled out at the base of a small cliff had it not been for the roaring of the bull, lordling it over his harem.

Seno Pia was a highlight, but not quite the last of the glaciers. I couldn't imagine a more glorious sail than the brisk run



Beduin at Ventisquero Guilcher, Seno Pia

down the Channel, passing Ventisqueros Romanche, Alemania, Francia and Italia. Ventisquero Romanche was clearly retreating, the glacier ending in a waterfall down ice-scoured rock. We had just put the third reef in when we arrived at Caleta Olla, a more open bay than many of the caletas, but still very sheltered. This lovely bay is frequented by charter boats and fishermen, and sadly its popularity was evident in the amount of rubbish along the beach.

The warm sunshine tempted me to go for a swim – but with the water temperature at 7°C, once round the boat was quite enough. More fun was borrowing Aleko's spare paddleboard to explore the bay and up the river.

Leaving Caleta Olla, we sailed past Punta Divide and out into the main Beagle Channel. Soon after the Argentinian border on the north shore, we began to see signs of habitation – a few buildings, a road – and soon the city of Ushuaia came into view. Staying on the Chilean side, our last anchorage, Caleta Victor Jara, was remarkably like western Scotland.

Leaving Chile

On the last day we even set the spinnaker, not a sail I expected to see. I was in no hurry to get to Puerto Williams and civilisation, but I came to like the most southerly town in the world. The yacht club is the old steamship *Micalvi*, which

has been half sunk to form a pontoon. There is no longer a bar but there are showers and Wi-Fi.

Most of the other yachts were charter boats, between trips. Of the private yachts, a majority seemed to be OVNIs, but *Ithaka* was the only British boat. We all enjoyed a very international Christmas party at the sailing school, organised by some of the charter crews. Puerto Williams has a thriving sailing school with lots of enthusiastic young sailors. Even when it was far

too windy for any of the ocean-going cruising yachts to set sail, the local kids were out sailing their Optimists round the harbour.

Leaving Chile was an anticlimax. Instead of heading east for the Atlantic, we first had to return 28 miles up the Beagle Channel to Ushuaia, the only port of entry into Argentina. There was so little wind we motored all the way. In the new year we would be heading east for Staten Island and then the Falklands – but that's another story.

Essentials for cruising in Patagonia

- Plenty of anchor chain and a good windlass
- Shore lines – minimum 2 x 100m floating rope (*Ithaka* had 4 x 110m 22mm polypropylene)
- Storage for shore lines (eg a plastic barrel cut in half, laundry baskets)
- The dinghy must be quick to launch
- Kelp cutter – machete/pruning saw on pole
- Cabin heater and good ventilation
- Insulation – double glazing for windows and hatches can be made from 1mm-thick clear plastic (as sprayhood windows) attached by Velcro or 1mm rigid polycarbonate, more permanently attached with Sikaflex
- Spares for everything – you'll need to be self-sufficient
- *Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego Nautical Guide* by Mariolina Rolfo and Giorgio Ardrizzi. (www.capehorn-pilot.com)
- Plenty of time...