

# A Corner of Argentina



## EXPLORING THE PENINSULA VALDÉS

*When explorers from the Eastern shores of the Atlantic first arrived in the New World, the courts of kings and queens across Europe marvelled at the stories they brought home. What's less well-known is that the travellers' most fantastical tales originated in Patagonia, and in particular in a chunk of scrubby steppe protruding into the ocean, now known as the Peninsula Valdés. The earliest European visitors here told of birds that flew underwater and encounters with giant men and monsters of the sea.*

The amphibious birds were named after one of the mariners; these days we call them Magellanic penguins. The giants were the Tehuelche Indians, clad in the skins of the guanaco, the llama's wild cousin. And the sea monsters were the magnificent Southern Right Whales, returning from Antarctica in search of more temperate waters in which to give birth.

One of the tragic consequences of the bloody conquest of the Americas was the extinction of the Tehuelche. However, the whales and the penguins are still there alongside an astonishing array of other animals. Sealions, elephant seals and killer whales can be seen on or around the Peninsula's beaches. On land the variety of animal life is equally astonishing; there are the aforementioned guanaco, armadillos, silver foxes, skunks, hares and countless species of birdlife.

Following his travels in the Argentine in the late fifties, the English naturalist and adventurer Gerald Durrell wrote the highly-recommended travelogue *The Whispering Land*. In it he describes succinctly the abundance of life on the Peninsula: "It was almost as if the Peninsula and its narrow isthmus was a cul-de-sac into which all the wildlife of Chubut had drained and from which it could not escape."

Though the Peninsula Valdés is privately owned it has long since been designated a nature reserve. As such it remains remarkably unspoilt, with its animal inhabitants seemingly untroubled by human contact. The most popular way to visit the Peninsula is on a guided tour, either individually or in a group. The majority of visitors base themselves in Puerto Madryn on the

Argentinian mainland, from where day trips are easily organised.

However, nothing can quite compare with the experience of staying on the Peninsula itself. Among the few places where this is possible, one place in particular distinguishes itself from the rest.

The Estancia Rincon Chico, which roughly translates as 'little nook', is a working sheep farm. It was opened as a hotel a few years ago by four young sisters, following the death of their father. Today the estancia is run by one of these sisters, Maria, and her partner, Agustin. Part of what makes Rincon Chico so unique is the fact that here, tourism and agriculture dovetail seamlessly. There is never a sense that the life of the farm is kept separate from the hotel, nor does it feel like local rural traditions are part of a show for visitors. Add to this the breathtaking natural phenomena on your doorstep, and it's guaranteed that a stay at the estancia will be an unforgettable experience.



Rincon Chico has eight double rooms, each with a private bathroom. There's a cosy sitting room, and a dining room in which exquisite home-made meals are served. Maria has recently begun offering gastronomic holidays to accompany the natural attractions of the Peninsula, and an indulgent three days can be spent cooking and eating Patagonian cuisine. The estancia's beautiful gardens are a testament to many years of hard work in an arid landscape, and nearby there are 10 miles of private beaches on which thousands of elephant seals breed.

There are a number of different ways to organise excursions. Car hire is an excellent option, as the peninsula has a circumference of roughly 250 miles and setting off down its wide gravel roads is an adventure in itself. For those who prefer to explore at a more leisurely pace, bicycles are available, and guided walks from the estancia allow guests to enjoy the best of their hosts' local knowledge.

In a vast country where Nature is frequently at her most dazzling and dramatic, the Peninsula Valdés occupies a special place. Argentinians will happily tell you all about their mountains, their deserts and their waterfalls. It is only when you mention the Peninsula, however, that you feel the full extent of their passionate national pride. Offering you the opportunity of seeing the Peninsula up close, while providing incomparably warm hospitality, Maria and Agustin at the Estancia Rincon Chico will give you a true taste of Argentina.

**Malachy O'Neill**  
Argentina specialist



- 1 Sealions
- 2 Penguin colony
- 3 Southern Right Whale
- 4 Estancia Rincon Chico
- 5 Guanaco
- 6 Elephant seal

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## FACT FILE

Time spent in the Peninsula Valdés falls naturally into a tour of the country, however, accommodation is very limited and fills early. A 14-night tour of the country, including three nights at the Rincon Chico, costs from £2,400 per person based on two people travelling and inclusive of flights. For further details please call our Argentina specialists, Malachy or Carolyn, on 01869 276 210.

