

the end of



Flight over Cape Horn from Puerto Williams

Isla Navarino



the WORLD

Arriving in Puente Arenas I had begun a trip that I had wanted to do for years. It was late spring and this far south there was an icy chill in the air as we boarded our light-aircraft flight to Puerto Williams along with a handful of locals returning to this southern outpost of Chile.

We were met at the airport by Randall (Randy) Twyman, manager of Lakutaia Lodge. Randy's grandfather had emigrated from Kent decades ago for reasons unknown and had been a foreman on a vast estancia in Tierra del Fuego. Randy never met his grandfather. Whilst ill, he attempted a three day journey on horseback to seek treatment in Puente Arenas but never made it.

I love far flung corners of the world and I knew within an hour of landing that we had a fascinating few days ahead of us. After a bite to eat and a look around the stables we walked up to the snow-capped summit of Cerro La Bandera behind the town. From the top we enjoyed beautiful views over the Beagle Channel to the Darwin ranges of Argentine Tierra del Fuego beyond.

These islands around Cape Horn have a history that cannot fail to fascinate travellers. The next day we were to learn about the tragic story of the local Yagan people. When Magellan first sailed these treacherous seas in the early 1600s, the crew saw

the smoke rising from the fires of the local people and that is why Tierra del Fuego became known as the "Land of Fire". The Yagan and related indigenous groups have lived in this remote archipelago for at least 7,000 years. Contact with European sailors and missionaries introduced disease to which the Yagan had no resistance and today only one pure blooded Yagan woman survives, living just outside Puerto Williams.

We drove west for 30 miles on the island's only stretch of road to Puerto Navarino, stopping en-route in Bahía Mejillones. A small cemetery at the eastern end of the bay encapsulated the sad end of these people, snow falling gently on the graves and freshly laid flowers. The Yagan were nomadic but this bay had an important place in their culture. It was the site for Cheyjaus and Kyna ceremonies where Yagan youth passed into adulthood. There are small mounds of discarded mussel shells around the bay, piled up over the centuries to fend off the relentless, biting Patagonian winds.

We boarded the schooner Victory in Navarino bay and headed south into the narrow Murray Channel. The channel was discovered by Fitzroy and Darwin aboard the Beagle on the voyage that preceded their historic five year odyssey when they visited the Galapagos and Darwin formed the ideas that led to the Theory of Evolution. ▶

Craig Burkinshaw, Audley's Managing Director, recounts his recent travels to the southernmost parts of South America.



Yagan canoe



Horse riding near Lakutaia Lodge

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◀ Howling wind, fog and driving snow met us as we pushed south towards Wulaia, the narrow channel sheltering us from the raging seas and 120 knot gusting winds of Cape Horn just a few miles further south. The conditions made me really appreciate the bravery of sailors who chose to round the Horn rather than snaking through the more sheltered Beagle Channel and Magellan Straits en-route to the Pacific Ocean.

The sky cleared and we saw cormorants and upland geese as well as a pod of dolphins. The old WWII radio station has now been restored and is now an excellent little museum named after Martyn Gusynde, the anthropologist who comprehensively studied and documented Yagan life and culture in the years 1918 to 1924.

The Yagan were nomadic, moving constantly around the bays and channels in search of food. Alberto, a graduate of Universidad de Chile (one of the oldest in South America and where Pablo Neruda attended), had joined us for the day. I listened in disbelief as he explained how the Yagan lived naked in this frozen land, preferring to smear themselves in sea lion fat rather than wear clothing because it would get wet. Fire was central to their existence; it burned constantly even as they paddled from place to place in their canoes. The canoes were made from three pieces of evergreen birch bark and the fire was laid on a bed of stones to prevent the canoe from burning. As well as hunting sea lions, they speared fish and dived into the kelp forests in search of food, despite the water being just a few degrees above zero. Occasionally a beached whale would provide a bounty of food, the feast signalled to other family groups by means of smoke signals.

Returning north a fog bank prevented a visit to a stunning, isolated inlet before the weather again cleared and we hoisted sail for a couple of nautical miles. Minor engine problems left us lying at anchor for an hour or so, a magical period where I sat on deck and soaked up the beguiling atmosphere of this wild and austere wilderness, a wonderful inconvenience.

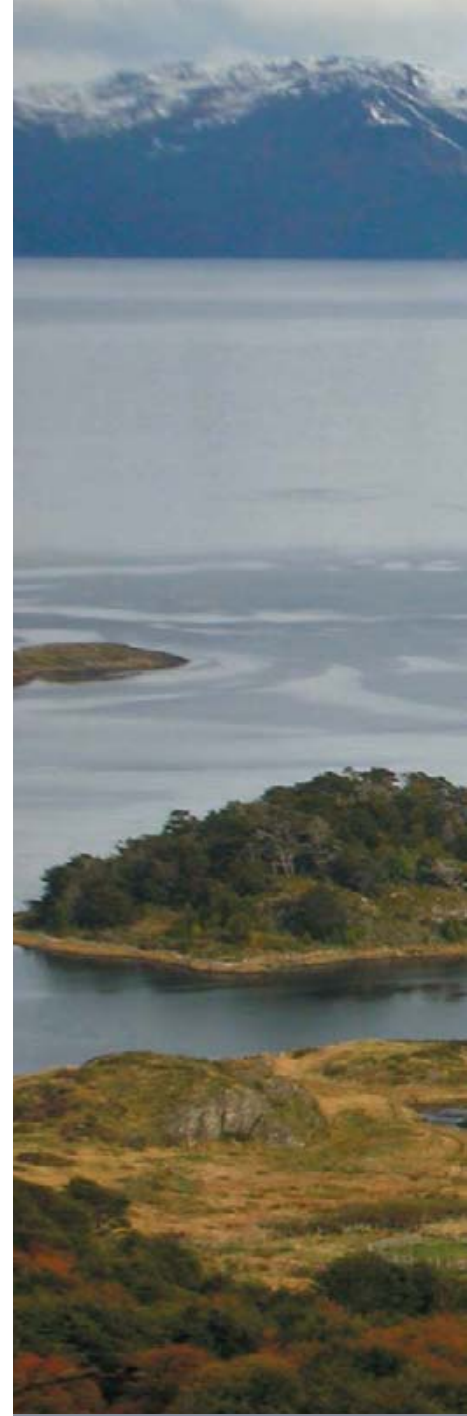
Back in town, I talked Randy into showing me the nightlife of Puerto Williams, the most southerly town on earth. With less than 2,000 inhabitants consisting of mainly fisherman and Chilean navy

families it is one of those communities where everybody has several roles. Carlos the barman at the Lakutaia Lodge also runs a small pizzeria with his father, Carlos senior, who also happens to be the local history teacher, boy-scout chief and coordinator for the environmental club at the local school. A delicious vegetable and king crab pizza was washed down with a bottle of fine Chilean red wine while Carlos senior regaled us with hilarious tales from his 30 years living at the end of the world. In the 1970s when both Argentina and Chile were ruled by right-wing military dictatorships these disputed islands were the scene of some tension. The Argentine navy was much more powerful and Carlos said they would awake to find an Argentine cruiser moored just offshore, its guns pointed at the town. As a member of the naval reserve he had to board the town's small ferry with a handful of other men and a few rifles. They then had to circle the cruiser, rifles cocked and demand through a loud hailer that the warship leave Chilean waters immediately or they would open fire. The Argentine crew roared with laughter at this spectacle, as did we three decades later safe in the knowledge that relations are now good and both countries are delightful and friendly places to discover.

Strolling down to the harbour in the late evening sunshine we passed a monument to the rescue of the Shackleton expedition. A small plaque sits below the bow of the *Yelcho*, the ship that rescued the men from Elephant Island after what is surely one of the most enduring tales of survival in modern history.

A few yachts are tied alongside the *Micalvi*, which is now permanently moored and converted to a bar, famous worldwide amongst sailors who risk these treacherous waters. Flags signed by the crews of numerous yachts who have stopped off here over the years cover the walls. Jacqueline van den Broek from a Dutch NGO, who are running small scale, sustainable projects to develop local infrastructure, and Brian who is working voluntarily as a guide for a season at the lodge, joined us for a few drinks while we listened to the barman's tales. The end of the world didn't seem a bad place to be.

Craig Burkinshaw
Managing Director



Schooner *Victory* at anchor in Wulaia cove



Schooner *Victory*



Trimming the sail on schooner Victory

FACT FILE

A two week trip to Chile taking in 'the end of the world' as visited by Craig starts from £3,395 per person based upon two people travelling. For details, please contact our Chile specialists on 01993 838 640.

