

DESTINATION PATAGONIA

Icy grandeur at every turn

by LEE MYLNE

A TINY yellow flower is a speck of brightness in a harsh and barren land. On a windswept point in southern Patagonia, it offers a tantalising prospect.

"The legend is that if you eat the berry of this plant, the calafate, you will come back to Patagonia," says our guide Eduardo.

But we are here at the wrong time of year. It is October, and the calafate will not bear fruit until December at the earliest. The best time to come for it is February.

There is a stab of disappointment because, superstitions aside, I know this is a place I will want to return to. Even on the first day, I am hooked.

Patagonia. Even the name is thrilling, conjuring up visions of explorers, sailing ships in wild seas, exotic landscapes – and it does not disappoint.

The calafate bush at my feet is in Chile's Alberto de Agostini National Park.

The cruise ship *Stella Australis* is anchored in Ainsworth Bay, and with my fellow passengers I have come ashore on the first of four days exploring the bays and channels of Tierra del Fuego.

Our voyage of discovery covers some of the same waters where the Spanish explorer Ferdinand Magellan sailed in 1520. We have set out from the port of Punta Arenas, on the coast of the Strait of Magellan and are bound for Cape Horn.

On day one, dawn breaks in monochrome. From the floor-to-ceiling picture window in my cabin, I gaze out on green-grey water, chopped with tiny whitecaps, and pewter mountains capped with snow. Charcoal hills and islands huddle under a heavy curtain of dense grey sky. It is unutterably beautiful and completely unexpected, but somehow in keeping with



a voyage "to the end of the Earth".

And it's cold out there. Rugged up in waterproof gear and thermals, hats and gloves, we are soon zipping across Ainsworth Bay in zodiacs as small icebergs float by. A family of elephant seals raises their heads as we pause to watch them, and soon we are walking through forests where lichens, mosses, tiny flowers and berries add spots of colour to the morning. Rufus-collared sparrows dart in the grasses, and across the bay is the outline of the Marinelli Glacier.

At the end of this – and all other shore excursions – the crew are on hand with hot chocolate or whiskey on ice to warm us up. Language barriers (there are 19 nationalities among the 200 passengers) are broken by wide smiles.

Later, we board the flotilla of zodiacs again to spend an hour navigating the Tuckers Islets, where a breeding colony of magellanic penguins is the main attrac-

tion. From the boats, we watch them go about their business on the shore. Equally fascinating are the other birds: blue-eyed cormorants, dolphin gulls, rock cormorants, and a small falcon called Chimango Caracara among them.

By day two, we have reached the southern coast of Tierra del Fuego and are heading for the Pia Glacier, on the Darwin Range Icefield, which covers 2400 square kilometres and is one of three Patagonian icefields.

We disembark near this majestic work of nature, hike up a short rocky trail for a better view, and are startled by the thunderous crack of the shifting, retreating glacier. Before our eyes, pieces fall into the icy water below.

As we cruise through the afternoon, barren windswept hills flank the Beagle Channel, named by the English explorer Robert Fitz Roy in 1830 in honour of his ship.

A fellow passenger declares the scenery "monotonously awesome". It's true there are stretches where everything looks the same, but the grandeur never falters, and the changing moods of the sea and the sky are enough for me.

Shipboard lectures and documentary screenings keep us interested; this is expedition cruising, where understanding where you are and what you are seeing is as important as being there. Pick the talks that will interest you from the daily program, or just be content to read, write, talk or drink in the vistas from any of the three stylish comfortable lounges on this brand new ship.

In the early evening we glide into Glacier Alley and all the action is on the port side as we cruise past five astounding – and very individual – glaciers. Cameras click furiously. Monotony is not a word that's heard again. Named for different nations, the glaciers are Romanche, Germany, France, Italy and Holland.

Overnight we pass Ushuaia, the southernmost city in the world, in Argentinian Patagonia. We've been warned already that at about 4am we'll hit winds and "shake a little bit", and that as we get nearer to Cape Horn "the weather we see today will have nothing to do with the weather we see tomorrow".

Cabo de Hornos (Cape Horn) is to be the highlight of the trip, and the clincher for many passengers in choosing this cruise. But going ashore – and later rounding the cape – is not guaranteed. The cape's notorious weather will determine if that's possible, and only at the last minute.

Cape Horn has claimed more than 800 shipwrecks and 10,000 lives. For sailors, rounding the Horn remains the greatest challenge of the high seas.

The excitement is palpable as we don

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