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Cape Horn for the weekend sailor



Rob McCulloch decided that the time had come in his life to round Cape Horn under sail. He takes us through the process of arranging a skippered charter in the wild south.



Sergio, Rico and Richard keen to be the first to spot Cape Horn.

Watching Robin Knox Johnston's three-man trip to the Horn on the BBC, my wife asked: "Why don't you do that?" Now that's not a question you hear every day, so I immediately set about planning. Because it wouldn't be a true rounding in the purist's sense, I wanted to get a real feel for the area, but first I needed some crew and my advert sets the tone - "Cruise through the Dramatic Straights of Magellan, then attempt to sail round Cape Horn before climbing Los Dientes de Navarino in wild isolation".

I generally bareboat charter yachts off the West Coast of Scotland and fortunately Peter, one of my regular sailing companions signed up. With two of

us it was possible to confirm a booking.

THE PLAN

It quickly emerged that any weekend sailor would need overtime and a generous holiday allowance to take on a sailing expedition of this magnitude, but it really is a once in a lifetime trip so we resolved to shuffle diaries, placate loved ones and take the necessary steps to make it happen.

The best weather for the Horn is in summer, which is our winter. We chose January and my plan contained 'buffer days'. This was just as well because we had to make changes en route. Our trip finally worked out as follows:



- 2 days Fly to Punta Arenas, Chile
- 1 day Explore PA and confirm our ferry trip
- 2 days Ferry through Straits of Magellan and The Beagle Channel (2 nights)
- 1 day Explore Puerto Williams, Isla Navarino
- 7 days Sail Cape Horn on *Tan II*
- 1 day Visit Ushuaia, Argentina
- 4 days Trek Los Dientes, Isla Navarino, Chile
- 1 day Fly back to Punta Arenas, Chile
- 2 days Fly home

Getting there was the first hurdle, because one 'Mow cost' option had four hops and only 30 minutes for one airport transfer, which was too risky - I've since learned that many trips to South America are marred by flight delays, so do allow time for problems. We chose a slightly more costly single company, three-hop trip, reducing journey time and risk of bag loss.

PUNTA ARENAS

This is so different from European cities. Much of the housing seems ramshackle, interspersed with designer homes. Alsatian dogs roamed free and hobos propped up the wall neighbouring our basic, yet warm hostel, but we quickly grew to like the place. The dogs have a clear code of conduct, so we never felt at risk and people went out of their way to look after us everywhere we went.

The Naval Museum has a great video of a 1920s rounding of the Horn with excellent commentary by the original sailor/cameraman. Sheltering from the wind by the attractive central plaza we applauded a young lady catching her hat. She stopped to say just how windy it could get and pointed to slots in the ground. In winter, rope is strung between posts inserted into these slots to form terrestrial guard wires to stop locals from being blown away.

THE CRUISE

FitzRoy is my hero. Imagine taking command of a vessel in the 1830s, beyond the known world, tasked with returning ship and crew safely across uncharted waters, all at the age of 24. Seeing the Magellan Straits and the Beagle channel was a 'must' for us, but cruise ships and their prices don't appeal to me. I found a local cargo vessel that provides a weekly service of a 'rough and ready' sort.

Be warned, she has only two cabins, so prior booking is vital, yet tricky. The automated phone system is in Spanish, so we used their website instead. Those without cabins spent two nights in a tiny saloon, which even young trekkers found almost unbearable.

The Magellan Straits and the Beagle Channel feature complex archipelagos of islands »

Round the Horn Log Notes - Tarri II

Monday 25 January 2010
Depart Puerto Williams 1030.
Arrive Puerto Toro (Navarino) 16.15 - 25 M.

Tuesday 26
Stay in Puerto Toro. 60 Kn winds forecast gusting 90kn. Daytime light winds F3 increased during evening and became very strong overnight.

Wednesday 27
0745 Depart Puerto Toro, wind W-NW 7-8.
0945 Wind died, engine on.
1050 Engine off, main up. NW4-5, 6.5kri.
1300 Dolphins, approx 10-12 for 30 min, just N of Isla Wollaston.
1440 Enter channel NW of Isla Freychinet, motorsail into strong headwind.
1520 Bear W So pass North Isla Herschel. Huge patches of seaweed forcing course adjustments throughout channel,
1625 Turn S, W of Isla Hermite towards Cape Horn.
1720 Clear Isla Hall, course due S, engine off, Cape Horn in sight.
1900 Pass S of Cape Horn, wind SE 4-5, slight/moderate swell.
1950 Turn N up E side of Isla Hornos, take dinghy ashore and visit Armada.
2330 Anchor NE side of Isla Herschel.

Thursday 28
1015 Depart Anchorage under motor. Grey day, early rain, poor visibility.
1130 Engine off after passing Isla Freychinet, course 005"
1400 Wind S-SE 6-7 Heavy swell, hail
1650 Anchor Lennox.

Friday 29
0945 Weigh anchor, wind S probably F4-5.
1215 Wind SF5-6.
1230-1305 Making 8.9 kn with lots of weather helm.
1310 Off Puerto Toro.
1500 In channel W of Puerto Eugenio.
1730 Arrive Puerto William, Micalvi Yacht Club.

Saturday 30
0910 Depart PW, wind WF6-7, headwind. Tacking best to windward in narrow channel with very heavy breaking seas.
1100 Channel deepened, so sea state moderated.
1145 Clear of narrows, so making better progress.
1400 F3, wind moderating rapidly and closing Ushuaia
1600 Alongside jetty Ushuaia.

Recorded by: Peter Whittle

CRUISING - CHARTER



Puerto Williams Yacht Club.



Sources for Navigation

Pilot Book

Patagonia & Tierra del Fuego Nautical Guide,
www.capehorn-pilot.com
 Gives comprehensive passage plans and harbours for the region at £80.

Charts

Admiralty 1373 South Eastern part of Tierra del Fuego for an overview at £16
Armada de Chile chart No. 13200 (1:200,000) is essential, because it shows the full area. To navigate through the islands it would help to have chart **Nos, 13300**(1:80,000) *Beagle, Picton, Lennox, Nueva Islands* and **13600** (1:100,000) *Wollastons and Hermite islands.*

Tourist Charts for general information

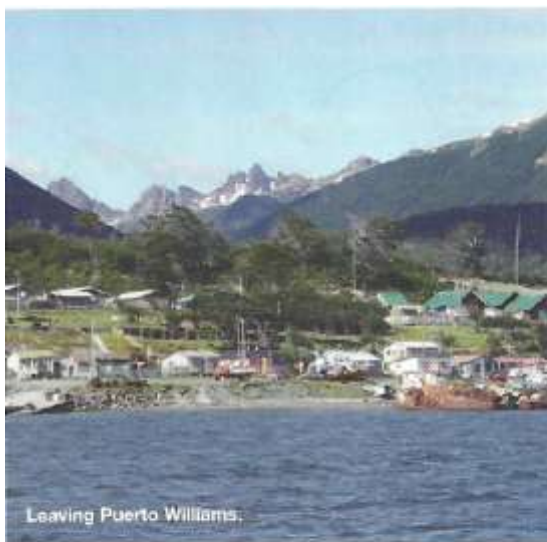
JLM Mapas Nos. 18 & 23.

Available locally for Chilean \$1200 or from omnimap.com

Trekking map - Tierra del Fuego & Isla Navarino.

PatagoniaShop.net £18

Prices vary considerably, so try sources such as Ebay and Amazon first.



Sailing past a penguin colony in the Beagle Channel.



Above -Yacht in Cape Horn
 : < Cramped ferry saloon.

dwarfed by high mountains and glaciers that crash down to the sea where they calve mini icebergs. FitzRoy first had to establish where the channel led before spending much time and effort charting it. The views are stunning and the ferry only manages 8kn, so there is plenty of time to watch the scenery unfold. The passengers were mainly young but experienced trekkers, so we were able to get lots of advice and enjoyed their company.

PUERTO WILLIAMS

Puerto Williams really is the end of the earth. Stray dogs were now joined by horses and cattle roaming the high street. Everyone was again very helpful, and while they clearly lacked access to resources (most things are a long drive, then ferry ride away) that was more than compensated for by their laid back, friendly approach. Nothing happens in a hurry and few spoke English, yet they were patient with non-Spanish speakers.

Virtually no made roads makes for a lot of dust on windy days and much litter or just cast off bric-a-brac was evident everywhere, but absolutely no sign of deliberate vandalism or graffiti. The houses were more ramshackle and most things looked bodedged or in a poor state of repair. Our booked accommodation was nothing like they described

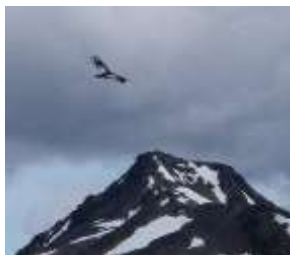
(two single rooms with sea view was more like one room with a view into the next bedroom whose occupant kept the light on late), so we moved elsewhere and got what we had wanted and more. at half the price.

The central shopping area surrounds an unmade car park and it was hard to discern which shops had ceased business and which were merely closed for lunch. A really tatty 'caff' turned out to offer excellent value food for those with basic Spanish -no menu or anything to point to.

Waiting for the yacht, we headed to the sailing club. What looked like a sunken vessel had been turned into an excellent club and bar. Lying alongside was not our charter boat but *Hollinsclough Oyster*, four years out from England. Skipper Carl and wife T invited us to afternoon tea of home made scones with jam and cream - a splendidly British start to our trip.

There are few boats available and I certainly wasn't looking for bareboat charter for this trip. *Tarri II* caught my eye as the skipper's first phew was of a heater dominating the saloon - here man I could do business with.

Tari is an Impala 43, a 1980s aluminium cruiser well suited to the region but without jackstays or the kind of safety equipment we're more used to



A condor circling the peaks of Ciera Bandera



Rob and Peter off watch in Tarri's cosy saloon.

The Boat

Tarri II, an Impala 43. Designed by Doug Peterson and built in aluminium by Cantieri Navali in the 1980s, she is cutter rigged with roller reefing headsails and has a rigid sprayhood with grabrails. Her maximum passage crew is 6 plus the skipper.

depending on in the UK. Safe crew practices were the order of the day and skipper Micki was ever watchful for his crew's safety.

The crew comprised Christian (Norwegian/French), Richard (French/Brazilian), Sergio (Argentinean), Rico (Swiss), Peter and me (Brits). All (except Sergio and ourselves) were multilingual, so the conversation flowed comfortably between Spanish and English with my Spanish contribution being *babord, estibord and agacha* (port, starboard and duck). Peter and I are in our early 60s and the rest were around their 40s.

Our first passage on the Monday was downwind and took us east, past penguin colonies to the most southerly habitation in the world, Puerto Torro, where a local provided fresh crab for dinner. *Tarri II* has no self-steering gear, so we quickly fell into an informal watch rota with our mil crew allowing short half hour stints at the helm, excusing the less experienced when the weather got rough. The forecast was F10 with gusts to 90kn, so we holed up in Puerto Torro all the next day. Given the bumpy night we had, alongside the jetty in a sheltered bay, I'm grateful that we did not press on. Instead we explored the densely wooded countryside, which exactly matched Darwin's description from all those years ago - particularly

the abundance of rotting and fallen timber, making some land virtually impenetrable.

Micki received regular satellite weather forecasts and it was only his local knowledge and constant vigilance that enabled us to complete the passage.

Wednesday brought strong but fair winds to allow passage across exposed waters to the complex archipelago that has Cabo de Hornos as its southerly tip. We needed a brief motorsail, but Micki was keen to sail and we were soon making good progress under reefed canvas. It really was a desolate, isolated, yet attractive place to sail as we navigated the channels between Wollaston, Freychnet and Hershel. These are mountainous islands and Wollaston, never more than a couple of miles wide, towered 2000ft above us. We had to take care not to be ensnared by the huge kelp strands that Fitz-Roy encountered, but once clear of Hall Island we were in the Southern Ocean with only Cape Horn to round. Running east, the albatross wheeled above on cue as the Horn loomed ahead. By mid evening we rounded the Horn itself and were impressed at the sheer size of the headland rearing up before us.

Micki popped some champagne and we cheered each other as the famous lighthouse glinted above. After many photographs, we continued east where »





Above top to bottom: Statue of Magellan. Cape Horn monument seen at sunset. Vice Admiral Robert FitzRoy

the land fell away to form a lower ridge and, as the sun started to set, we caught sight of the Cape Horn monument in weather none of us had dared hope for. Rounding further still, a bay opened up to the east, which afforded enough shelter from the wind to launch the dinghy and actually go ashore.

We had just a short while to explore the island, so as the light faded we walked to the monument, passing the plaque acknowledging FitzRoy's endeavours in the region. We found a tiny, rough wood chapel immaculately kept, to our amazement, for such a hostile setting. Despite the lateness of our arrival the representative of the Chilean Armada had been waiting to greet us and even stamped my chart with the official Cabo de Hornos stamp.

The Armada appears to be a blend of Navy and Customs officers and most remote lights and outposts are each 'manned' by a single family who will spend a year there before returning to normal duties. Borders are taken very seriously in these parts, so it is mandatory to contact the Armada when passing, and certainly before landing, anywhere (we only met up with *Holinsclough Oyster* because they were being held for overstaying their permit in Chilean waters). Speculating about activity on the island, we learned that it was undergoing 'de-mining' after being heavily mined to prevent invasion. I'm glad we stuck to the boardwalks as there had been no warning signs.

We sailed on to seek shelter east of Hershel and finally dropped anchor at 2330, whereupon Micki cooked another splendid meal to complete a very long day. Food and drink was plentiful throughout the trip.

FitzRoy

Vice Admiral Robert FitzRoy (1805-1865) achieved lasting fame as the captain of HMS *Beagle* during Charles Darwin's famous voyage through South America.

A memorial to him is constructed on top of the Bahía Wulaila Dome Middens on Isla Navarino in Tierra del Fuego. It was presented in his bicentenary year (2005) and commemorates his landing on Wulaila Cove, 23 January 1833, and his Cape Horn landing on 19 April 1830. He is further remembered for giving his name to the distinctive FitzRoy barometer and his meteorological work is now commemorated in one of the Shipping Forecast sea areas.

Magellan

The Strait of Magellan – also known as the Magellanic Strait – comprises a navigable sea route separating South America from Tierra del Fuego and other islands south of the continent. Discovered by Ferdinand Magellan in 1520, the strait is 330 miles (530km) long and varies between 2.5 and 15 miles (4-24km) in width. The unpredictable currents and winds, combined with the narrowness of the passage, have placed it in seafaring folklore as a difficult route to navigate.

Eventually the wind backed and we made 7kn overall to anchor for the evening on the east of Isla Lennox, so remote that even the Armada didn't respond to our calls.

The following day was great fun beating out to sea in strong winds before gaining shelter from Isla Picton where we touched 9kn in the flatter seas. Dramatic views of the Beagle Channel opened up as we headed towards Puerto Williams for the night to exit Chile formally.

The final day started with fierce squalls driving down the Beagle channel making it a very wet and bumpy sail as we tacked to make what westerly progress we could. By mid afternoon, nearing Ushuaia in Argentina, the wind fell light, so all enjoyed the mountainous splendour of the region in relative comfort.

Micki said he had never failed to round the Horn on these trips, but had taken up to three extra days on occasion. Our planned trek to Los Dientes was our buffer zone for any sailing over-run, so being on time left no excuse but to trek - a low cost way of really seeing the place. First though. Micki drove round town and found us a hotel and then paid for our taxi as we had yet to get Argentinean currency for our unplanned stay.

Ushuaia is a real city with all the facilities you could want - even an English speaking Office of Tourism. It feels like an alpine town with snow-capped mountains above. Good transport links mean most charters start here and it would make a much better base than Puerto Williams, although that remains an essential stop on any trip. After a brief stay to see the national park and glacier we took a small, RIB back to Puerto Williams.



GATHERING WINDS

Thursday brought strong winds from the south, so it was bitterly cold with hail showers. Running before F6-7 wasn't comfortable, because the boat rolled badly and any speed gained surfing down the waves was lost as she slammed into the troughs.

SPECTACULAR VIEWS

I'm no trekker, but travelling so far I wanted to explore the country and the mountains and Los Dientes turned out to be an ideal choice, because they rival the Torres de Paine National Park on the mainland for spectacular views, whilst remaining



Top to bottom –
Skipper with champagne
celebration, cooking in hail-
storm, ferry loading

Trekking home in snow >

Travel info

In all, the trip took 22 days and cost under £3,500 each. Itemised cost - per person unless stated:

Long-haul LAN airline £1,000 (Iberia via Madrid.)

The Yacht. US\$1,900 (min of 2 people ensures boat will sail)

Ferry. US \$220 (two bunk cabin).

Transfers to Ushuaia. US\$120 by plane or RIB - note plane is four-seater with severe baggage restriction.

Flight to Puerta Williams. US\$100.

Trekking. Guide with camping equipment. US\$80 Opp. We trekked alone with our own kit so only paid for food. **You must register your trek with the Police.**

Information Centre at Puerto Williams with camping gear sale/hire and maps. Excellent information from local websites, but then deal directly with the suppliers, such as Tan II website www.puertobeagle.com

Ferry (AstralBroom)

www.tabsa.cl

Local Flights (DAP)

www.aeroviasdap.cl

Beware - some places don't take Visa and we found one bank transfer cost a whopping \$52. Phoning Chile - 5 mins at standard rate £26 compared to 30mins through a specialist number for £1.50.

much more isolated. The prospect of days of backpacking was unavoidable when I found there were no roads in the region. You need warm, weatherproof and lightweight gear, but early planning offers the chance to borrow kit

The walk in was extremely tough with much climbing on rough terrain, so it was a relief to reach Los Dientes where we camped. We took an alcohol stove but cooking over an open fire saved our meagre supply of fuel. The scenery was all the more dramatic for being so isolated and next morning we left our base camp to 'travel light' up a high peak. While we had good views on the ascent, the clouds descended as we reached the summit, so got no views to the south, but we had already seen Cape Horn at first hand.

From the outset we were adopted by a huge white dog, which, despite best efforts, could not be shooed away. It kept its distance, didn't bark, withdrew a couple of feet to sleep whenever we stopped and never begged, although it was a mas-

was primitive. Waking next day to more strong winds and hail encouraged us to head back to town. By mid afternoon the weather brightened and this changeability is a key feature of the region.

Back at the Los Dientes 'caff' we enjoyed good



food and excellent international company as English is widely understood by fellow travellers, if not the locals. Later, in town, we met 'our' dog's owner. She had been very worried about Gerry, who was now clean and well fed.

Getting back to Punta Arenas by aircraft was great fun, but we expected problems because we exceeded the 10kg baggage allowance by a full 20kg each and the plane was tiny. The few passengers gathered, a chap went round ticking people off his list and our taxi driver took our bags to the plane. Noticing others boarding, we followed without any checks. Once aboard, the pilot turned round to say something in Spanish and then we were off- so unlike air travel at home. Our plane flew low over the mountainous landscape and we settled back for our panoramic view, delighted that we had been

able to see and do so much in our sailing trip of a lifetime.



ter of emotional blackmail. We grew to like it and fed it anything we had to spare, which it ate ravenously, even pot noodle, which was one of the few light 'convenience' foods available locally. When avoiding a very steep ice field by struggling up scree, the dog barked crazily. In the end we followed the dog off the loose rock onto the ice and found it so much easier and safer. Talking to another walker who had been 'adopted', he described how his dog showed him the way when he got lost - uncanny really.

On the summit it started to blow and hail heavily (and continued for the next 24 hours), so we got back to camp quickly. The tent was tiny. Stripping off muddy, wet outer gear and plunging headlong into the tent was all we could do. Once inside there was no room to sit up and cooking in the tiny porch



