

January 2002

Cheryll and I have just returned from our latest South American odyssey.

Our first destination was Easter Island, which is located 2000 miles west of mainland Chile. It is probably the most remote place on earth with regularly scheduled air service. The Chileans call it Isla de Pascua and the Polynesian natives call it Rapa Nui. It's in the same time zone as the eastern US, but it required four flights and 35 hours from when we left home until we checked into our hotel. We found a nice hotel with a pool and our own personal gecko. Still delirious from all the travel, Cheryll demanded that the reptile be killed immediately. I refused, and instead, I named him Larry. Larry the lizard. Larry spent the week stuck to the wall in a corner near the ceiling. He never moved more than a foot from the same spot during our stay and kept the area completely spider-free. He was a fine pet. We spent the week touring the island ringed by hundreds of 1000 year-old statues called maori. We visited the quarry from which the maori were cut and were amazed that primitive man could erect these huge stone statues over ten miles from the quarry. The temperature got into the 80's each day and we hiked to an ancient village where the Birdman Cult once thrived, had a picnic on a high cliff overlooking the sea, and enjoyed beautiful sunsets. One day we rented a four-wheel drive jeep and, at the suggestion of the agent, drove off-road to the highest point on the island. It was the first time I ever went four wheeling in a rental car. There were only around 100 tourists on the 20-mile-long island and the solitude was a real treat compared to most tourist destinations.

We flew back to Santiago and it shocked our systems as the pace of life jumped from slow island time to the hustle-bustle of a big city as shoppers scurried to make their final purchases before the Navidad. We stopped at a few museums and climbed a hill to an old fort for a 360-degree view of the high desert valley which contains Santiago. The next day it was a two-hour bus ride to the port city of Valparaiso where the Norwegian Dream, our home for the next two weeks, was docked. We checked into our cabin and strolled around the city. It has several ascensores which are rickety trams which climb the cliffs that surround the central city and offer scenic views of the city and the bay.

We docked on Christmas day in Puerto Montt and took the local bus to the small resort town of Frutillar. With the seasons reversed, Chileans are fond of spending Christmas day at the beach. The views of the Osorno Volcano appearing to rise out of the lake were surreal. Our next day was spent cruising the Patagonic Channel. It's a lot like Alaska's Inside Passage. There were huge glaciers, high waterfalls and steep-walled fjords. We stopped in Puerto Chacabuco and hired a cab to take us to the city of Coihaique, high in the Andes. The wind that gives these latitudes the nickname of the "roaring forties" was certainly present and the next day at sea got pretty rough. The next cruising grounds were in the sheltered waters of the Straits of Magellan, or for those who prefer the uncorrupted Spanish version, estrecho de Magallanes. This area is more barren than Alaska. There were a few short trees bent over in the constant westerly wind and the snow on the mountains was reaching even lower altitudes even though it was the middle of summer.

Punta Arenas is Chile's southernmost city. We docked next to an Antarctic research vessel fitting out for its journey south. The area is beautiful and we hope to return someday for a trip to Torres del Paine National Park a few hundred miles north of Punta Arenas. It's ranked as one of the top ten hikes in the world. The 50 mph winds kept us pinned to the pier and delayed our departure for several hours.

Did I mention that I brought along another woman for the journey? I was very good last year and Madge was a present from Santa. She's a handheld GPS receiver and has a built-in database which includes a basic world map with all cities, towns, paved roads, and lighted aids to navigation. She's very accurate, but some of the Chilean lighthouses are mispositioned by as much as a mile. As we approached the border between Chile and Argentina in the Beagle Channel, Madge showed that the captain made an abrupt 180-degree turn just before entering Argentinean waters. The captain headed up a fjord and pretended to be sightseeing. Rich got him to admit that the real reason was that the Argentinean pilot was late in arriving. Madge is wonderful.

Our next stop was in Ushuaia, Argentina. We had spent the last week watching the Argentinean economy melt down on CNN. There had been riots in Buenos Aires and they went through four presidents in two weeks. We were a little nervous, and some people were quoted as blaming this problem on the world's favorite scapegoat, the good old USA. Despite our fears, the people we talked to were all very polite. They seemed concerned and worried about the future, but nevertheless pleasant. The problem is centered on the fact that the Argentinean Peso's value has been pegged by the government for the past ten years to be equal to that of the dollar, but the underlying market doesn't support that valuation.

Ushuaia is on the island of Tierra del Fuego, and we hiked up to a glacier at 2500 feet in the nearby National Park. Ushuaia also is the site of a former remote Argentinean Prison called the Presidio. It houses an interesting museum. Cruise ships to Antarctica leave from here and we hope to return someday for a trip even further south to the seventh continent.

The next day we rounded Cape Horn. Madge said that Cape Horn is at 56 degrees south latitude. The surrounding waters have a reputation for being the windiest, roughest place with the toughest sailing on the face of the planet. Not for us. It was relatively calm, and the Captain said that it was the quietest he'd ever seen it. He brought the ship in close and we were able to see the monument on shore to all of the sailors lost in these waters over the years. A secret ceremony was conducted for those of us luxury cruise ship passengers rounding "The Horn" for the first time who found the experience to be a little too comfortable. I'm not at liberty to discuss the details, but it involved the Norwegian captain in a plastic horned Viking hat, a trash can full of icy cold genuine Cape Horn water, and some condiments.

Our next scheduled stop was Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands. The winds were high and we were unable to get into the harbor which the Captain later admitted is the case 60% of the time.

The next few days were spent at sea and we got to meet the stars of the ship's Argentinean gaucho (cowboy) review. One of the gauchos is a seamstress from Buenos Aires and the other works in a seat belt manufacturing plant. They taught us the fine South American art of drinking "mate". It's a rancid warm tea which is sucked through a special straw. I'm sure that

it's an acquired taste. You'll be greatly relieved to hear that we didn't want to take a chance with Customs and we didn't bring any home to share with our friends. In the most surprising accomplishment of her life, Cheryl won the ship's "Name That Tune" competition. All the singing I've done for her over the years is really starting to pay off.

Our next stop was in Puerto Madryn. We arrived to news that Argentina now had it's fifth president in two weeks and that there was violence in Buenos Aires 600 miles to the north after the government announced its plan to devalue the peso by 40 percent. We joined a group and hired a driver to take us to the Peninsula Valdez National Park. We saw many penguins, sea lions, and elephant seals. Our driver/guide spoke little English and I was able to make good use of my broken Spanish. I didn't understand all of his answer when I asked him about the political/economic situation, but it was clear that he felt the rich countries of the world owed the poor countries more support. He dropped us off in the city center and we enjoyed a few beers at a beach bar.

Mar del Plata was added to the itinerary as a substitute for the Falkland Islands. It's an Argentinean beach resort not accustomed to cruise ships. There were thousands of little cabanas set up to rent a small portion of the windy beach. The people were very friendly, and many of the locals came out to take pictures of the ship. There were over a thousand lining the pier to wave goodbye when we pulled out. We were disappointed to miss the Falklands, but Mar del Plata was a nice alternate.

Our next stop was in Montevideo, Uruguay. It's a crumbling old colonial town with a more modern city which has grown up around it. We spent a rainy day wandering the streets and plazas. One day seemed to be plenty of time for Montevideo. The situation at the Uruguayan money exchanges was interesting. The previous day in Argentina, they insisted that the Argentinean peso and the US dollar were equivalent. That day in Uruguay it was worth 47 cents if you were selling and 95 cents if you were buying. There was clearly no consensus on the value, and the moneychangers were making it clear that they didn't want to deal in Argentinean pesos.

Our final day before our eleven-hour red-eye flight home was spent in Buenos Aires. The streets were calm on this Sunday morning, but the previous week's violence was still evident. The Casa Rosada (President's residence) and the Congressional building were surrounded by hundreds of police. The people on the street appeared resigned to the situation and were mostly studying the newspapers and analyzing the impact of the devaluation on their personal situation. Most will wake up tomorrow to find that they only have two-thirds of their previous wealth, but the banks will be required to convert debts up to \$100,000 from dollars to pesos. The banks will be reimbursed for their losses through some new tax on petroleum. As is the custom in South America, the banks have the biggest, grandest buildings with lots of columns and marble. All of the bank buildings we saw were either boarded up with steel panels or had their windows smashed. Some of the ATM machines had also been destroyed. It's clear that the Argentineans are quite frustrated. We saw one money exchange store with a sign offering 1.40 pesos for a dollar, but they weren't open. Today, the official exchange rate is one for one. Tomorrow it will be 1.40 pesos for 1.0 US dollars. It's probably good that we won't be there to witness the excitement. Argentina now joins Zanzibar and Ecuador as countries we've visited during political meltdown, not to mention the trouble in New York before our recent visit. I assure you that

we don't plan this. In the words of Evita Peron and Madonna; don't cry for me, Argentina?!?!

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