



Torres del Paine National Park, Chile

DODDREY MIKHAEL / SHUTTERSTOCK

A passion for PATAGONIA

If you're planning a cruise to Antarctica, this storied land is a must-see on your way to the white continent.

SUZANNE MORPHET

PATAGONIA is the southernmost region of South America, the closest continent to Antarctica and the launching pad for dozens of cruises every season. Guests either board their ships in Ushuaia, Argentina and sail the Drake Passage or they 'fly the Drake' from Punta Arenas, Chile. A combination fly-and-sail option, such as that offered by Aurora Expeditions, gives you the advantage of leaving from one place and returning to another.

That was our plan. We wanted to see a bit of both Chilean and Argentinian Patagonia so we added a few days at both ends of our cruise.

We began in Punta Arenas, Chile, just a few hours south of Torres del Paine National Park, one of the most spectacular places on the planet. The park's numerous trails are hugely appealing to hikers, but it's wonderfully accessible to anyone. We booked a three day/ two-night tour with Chile Nativo after reading reviews by other travellers. It's based in Puerto Natales, a town bustling with outfitters, small hotels and people coming and going to Torres del Paine.

Chile Nativo offers everything from hiking to horseback riding and kayaking to biking. Packages include

private transportation, guides, accommodation and meals. We chose the 'W Fast Track', a shorter and easier version of the park's famous W-shaped trek, but with all the highlights. Driving into the park on our first morning, we soon understood why the original inhabitants called the place 'paine' (PIE-nay), which means 'blue' in the Tehuelche language. We passed lakes in mesmerizing shades of teal and cobalt. The lake that we crossed by catamaran to reach our first trailhead in the French valley appeared cerulean under a bright blue sky. Along the trail we noticed what looked like blueberries, but Cem, our guide, told us they're calafate berries, which are enshrined in folk lore. "Local legend says that if you eat them, you'll come back to Patagonia," he smiled.

Then there's the colour of the ice. On our second day, we came face to face with the enormous Grey Glacier on a three-hour boat ride operated by the park on Lago Grey. After flowing out of the Andes for 28 km, the glacier abruptly ends as a jagged turquoise wall. The baby blue icebergs that it calves dazzled us with their luminosity while a crew member fished a chunk of ice out of the lake for Pisco sours which we cheerfully downed.



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This page: (Clockwise from top left) Luminous baby blue icebergs calved from Grey Glacier. Hikers at Laguna Torres with the granite towers that give Torres del Paine National Park its name. Hiking along the Beagle Channel.

On our third day we tackled Los Torres, the trail leading to the base of the granite towers that give the park its name. A blue-green lake shimmers beneath the spires, a fine reward for a challenging 11-km climb and the climax of our time in Chilean Patagonia.

Returning from Antarctica to South America by ship ten days later, we were excited to explore Ushuaia, Argentina, and the Land of Fire. When Ferdinand Magellan explored this windswept archipelago in 1520, he noticed fires burning on shore, hence

the name Tierra del Fuego. The indigenous people behind the fires – the Yámana – lived mostly naked in this inhospitable environment, where even summers are cool and rainy. Their fires were so important to their survival that when a Yámana family moved by canoe from one place to another, as they did every few days, they carried a small fire onboard with them.

We learned the fascinating – and sad – story of these nomadic canoeists at the Maritime Museum of Ushuaia. Exhibits show the Yámana thrived for 6,000 years but were driven to extinction within a few decades of the arrival of Europeans.

Wanting to experience their harsh but beautiful homeland for ourselves, we caught a bus to nearby Tierra del Fuego National Park for a half-day hike.

The Costera Trail runs for eight km and offers grand views over Beagle Channel, named for HMS Beagle, which charted these waters in 1831 with Charles Darwin on board as ship

naturalist. Interestingly, also onboard the Beagle with Darwin were three Yámana who were being returned to their homeland after being – get this – kidnapped the year before! Yes, four Yámana had been taken to England to be ‘civilized’ and one died there.

Back in Ushuaia, we mulled this strange story over while walking along the waterfront. Then, by complete coincidence, we passed Jeremy Button Gintoneria, a bar specializing in gin and named in honour of Jeremy Button, one of the four kidnapped Yámana!

Later, we meandered up a few of Ushuaia’s winding streets to get a birds’ eye view over the harbour. Finding Panaderia Tata, a bakery with a variety of delicious pastries only added to our sense of complete contentment.

That night we had dinner at La Cantina Fueguina De Freddy with Bombón de Calafate for dessert – of course! Made with calafate berries and dipped in dark chocolate, it tasted sublime. Better yet, it guaranteed our return to Patagonia! ■



PHOTOS COURTESY MAR DE JADE

Ushuaia, Argentina