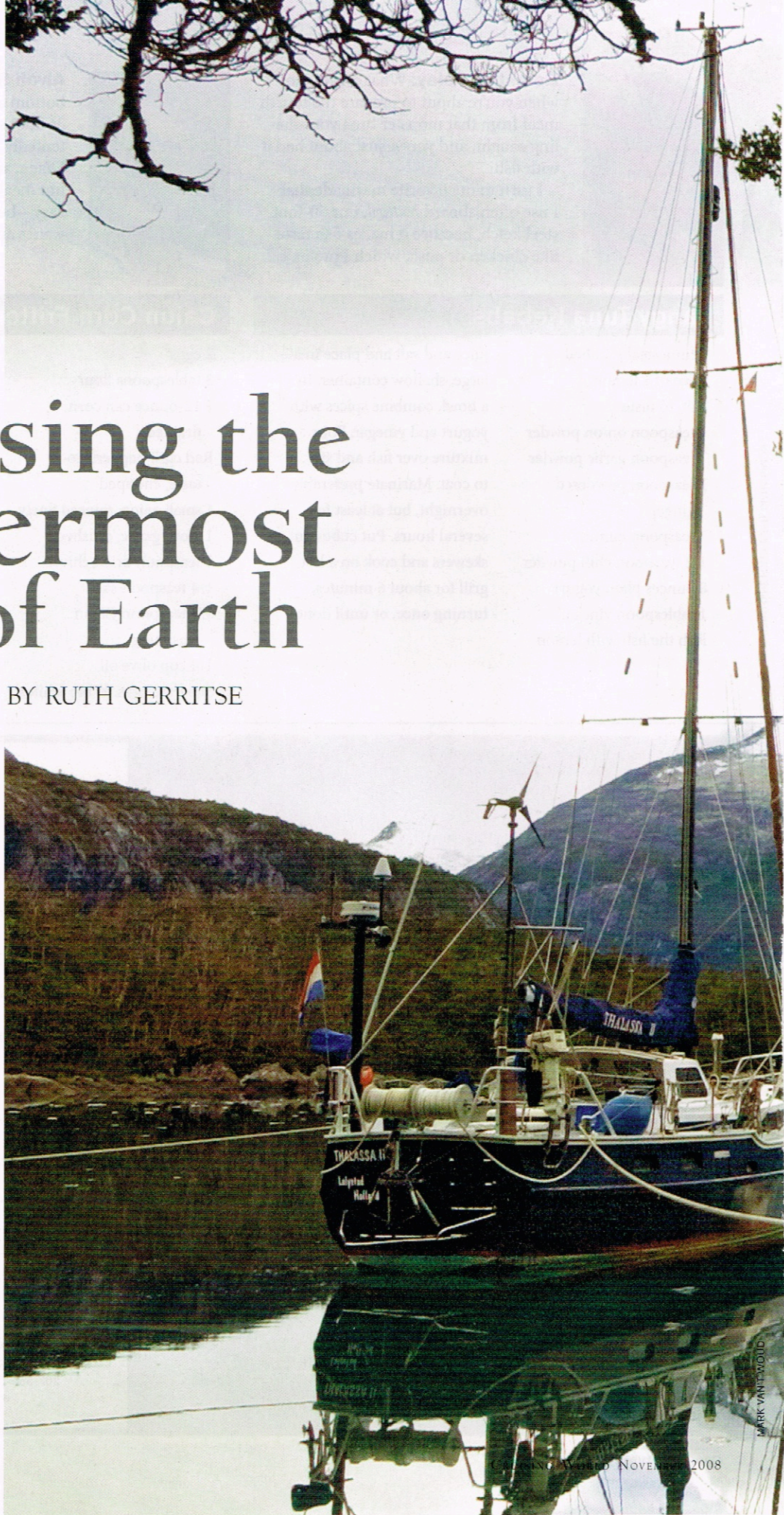


A Dutch couple find that the rewards of sailing at the bottom of the world are commensurate with the challenges.

Cruising the Uttermost Part of Earth

BY RUTH GERRITSE

My husband, Mark van't Woud, and I decided to sail our 48-foot Sun-coast cutter, *Thalassa*, around the world via Patagonia instead of following the Coconut Milk Run. While preparing the boat and ourselves in 1999, we read every syllable we could find on Tierra del Fuego and the Chilean fjords. Everything confirmed that in the extreme weather conditions of this region, sailing would be a challenge. But with every piece of information, we also became more certain that this was where we wanted to go. In his memoirs, E. Lucas Bridges, the son of an early settler, called Patagonia the "Uttermost Part of Earth," and that's exactly what it is: a place hardly accessible, except by boat. With that decision made, we also ranked Cape Horn high on our list.





VISTAS SUCH AS THIS
one, in Glacier Alley's Caleta
Beaulieu, reward sailors for
braving the region's sudden
weather changes and
gale-force winds.



This milestone of all milestones becomes like a beacon to us, and Cape Horn serves as a mental waypoint. Before leaving Holland, we acquire the chart that covers the area.

Now we treat it as if it holds the key to a valuable treasure.

On January 31, 2005, we reach Ushuaia, the capital of the Argentine province of Tierra del Fuego. Besides sailing around the Horn, we'd like to spend some time in the famous Glacier Alley, where the Andes meet the Canal Beagle and ancient glaciers find their way to the sea. Mariolina Rolfo and Giorgio Ardrizzi, the authors of *Patagonia & Tierra del Fuego Nautical Guide* (www.capehorn-pilot.com) told us, "First go to the glaciers. The Horn will always be there." It makes sense. The narrow sea arms will partially freeze in the coming months, leaving many of the glaciers inaccessible. The Horn will have to wait.

It's a beautiful day when we leave Ushuaia and sail east the 25 miles to Puerto Williams, our port of entry into Chile. In the westerly winds that rule in this area, it's good sailing. We've heard that the authorities in Chile love red tape and can make life hard with demands about cruising permits, insurance, and so on. But the Chilean officials who check us into the country are some of the kindest we've ever met, and they try their best to make things as easy as possible. As expected, we're asked to fill out an extensive questionnaire about our boat and her seaworthiness, but that seems only fair. In these waters, there's no lifeboat station around the corner, and things can get pretty rough. Once we've answered all their questions and provided a digital picture of *Thalassa*, we get our own folder in the national database, which makes her info available to every Chilean navy station in the country.

"Un circuito Ventisqueros, no?" We nod: Yes, a glacier circuit, please. To us it's one of the most exciting things we've ever done. To the man behind the counter, it's just another standard trip requiring a standard form. He hands us our permit, or *zarpe*, without any further delay.

Where the Canal Beagle divides into northwest and southwest arms and encircles Isla Gordon, there begins a landscape that's hard to compare to any other. Glacier Alley is the nickname of Brazo del Noroeste; in it, dozens of glaciers slide slowly down to the water. Some have names telling us about the explorers that



charted them: Holanda, Italia, España. Others remain anonymous. What they all share is grandeur and solitude. Even nowadays, this area is hardly visited. A handful of Ushuaia-based charter yachts make journeys to the glaciers; a small number of cruisers visit the region going to or coming from northern Chile. But all in all, Tierra del Fuego sees far fewer yachts in a whole year than San Francisco Bay does on a single spring afternoon. It's very easy to imagine that you have the world to yourself here.

The weather turns out exactly as we expected: inconsistent, to put it mildly. Rain, bright sun, and hail take their turns several times a day. The ever-present, often gale-force westerly wind chases the clouds. But it's all part of the deal. The area is so wild, that you wouldn't expect anything but rough weather.

When a heavy shower with hail and snow has passed and the sky changes to blue again, we steer onward. The deep bay splits at the end and divides into two long fingers. The anchorages recommended in Rolfo and Ardrizzi's guidebook are both close to the entrance. But the weather is excellent right now, and we decide to sail all the way to Caleta Morning, at the end

of the western arm. Meandering through shallows, we work our way to a beach that would look tropical if it weren't for the glacier sliding down the mountain behind it. "Looks good, doesn't it?" Mark says. We've just found today's anchorage. We drop the anchor and tie the boat to trees on the beach. We have plenty of daylight left; there's time enough for a walk.

"Watch out!" I cry. Mark slows the dinghy, and a dolphin pops up. It turns and swims toward us. When Mark speeds up again, so does the dolphin, swimming right in front of us. Within minutes, a whole group surrounds us. We go a bit faster; so do the dolphins. We slow down suddenly; the dolphins turn and wait for us. Full speed again; they change gears and go wild. After three years of cruising, we're used to seeing dolphins at *Thalassa's* bow. But dolphins under, next to, and nearly in the dinghy? Where else could you find anything like this?

A cloud moves in front of the sun, and hail the size of marbles chases us back to the boat. "Go untie those lines! Hurry!"

THE PIA GLACIER (left) stuns us with its age and beauty. Cape Horn (above) was the climax of our voyage, and Mark and I are pretty happy to have a relatively calm day to see it. The channels of Patagonia (see map) provide endless opportunities for exploration.

Mark says. While I climb into the dinghy, he starts the engine and steers toward the middle of the bay. The stern of the boat is pointing to the northwest and is tied stern into the wind, exactly as dictated by the golden rules of anchoring in Patagonia. But strong *rachas*, or williwaws, that rush straight down the cliffs in gale-force gusts now hit us forward of the beam, pushing us closer to the rocky shore.

A williwaw usually lasts only five to 10 seconds. But it can blow more than 50 knots. As Mark uses the engine to keep the boat off the rocks and starts taking in the anchor, I quickly row ashore to untie the lines. At a safe distance from the rocks, we get the dinghy on deck and watch gusts that make the water smoke. "Phew! Steep learning curve," Mark says. We take Caleta Morning off our list of favorites.

Caleta Beaulieu—*beaulieu* is French for "beautiful place"—lives up to its name. Sheltered by the forest that covers the hill, we enjoy the view of the eastern arm of the gigantic Pia Glacier. It's a warm day, and the temperature causes huge chunks of ice to fall down the glacier with a deafening thunder. When they hit the surface of the water, they break up, and the bits float around like ice cubes in an oversized cocktail. In the early morning calm the next day, we slowly zigzag our way through the numerous bergy bits to approach the wall of ice. The water is more than 25 fathoms deep until right in front of the glacier wall. There, a ridge with ancient glacial debris shows where the



ice once ended and the shallows begin. Around us we hear cracking, growling, rustling, and thundering: the unique sound of ice being pulled and pushed about by gravity. Moving in water thickly covered with slush, the waves caused by newborn icebergs are slow, as if made of molasses. All of a sudden the wind picks up; it's time to go. We carefully maneuver *Thalassa* away from the ice and return to open water.

After four magnificent weeks, we exchange the Ice Age for modern times again and sail back to Ushuaia. While we provision and fuel up, we keep a sharp eye for a weather window; Cape Horn is waiting. As soon as an opportunity appears, we cross the Canal Beagle once again and sail to Puerto Williams, where we meet two friends who'll join us for this leg of our journey. Now open on the table is a chart we've been cherishing for many years: the one that shows Paso Goree, the Islas Wollaston, and Isla Hornos. How many times have we studied it on the dining table at home!

CAPE HORN'S famous albatross monument (left) is dedicated to all the sailors who've lost their lives there. We found that having four long lines on reels (opposite) was essential to successful mooring in the deep anchorages of Patagonia.

The weather is ideal, and with a beautiful wind we sail across the infamous Bahía Nassau. "The long fetch and the violence of the wind can rapidly develop extremely violent conditions, so that navigation in the bay might become impossible and even dangerous" reports the cruising guide, but on this day, we're lucky. Looking at the names on the charts makes us feel as if we're sailing through Dutch history. In addition to Nassau—the name of the Dutch royal family—we note Lago Windhond, the islands of Evout, Hermite and Barnevelt, Paso Goree, Isla Terhalten, and Cabo de Hornos. All these locations owe their names to great Dutch seafarers of the 17th century. Willem Cornelis Schouten was the first to round the tip of South America. He named the famous cape at the end of the world after the little town of Hoorn—his home port on the Zuiderzee, now called the IJsselmeer.

The landscape in the Islas Wollaston is covered with grass and moss. On the parts that are exposed to the often fierce westerly winds, no vegetation reaches higher than knee level. Trees grow only in sheltered bays and inlets. During a

walk on Isla Hermite, we can see Isla Hornos looming on the horizon.

When the GRIB files predict 24 hours of settled weather, we pick up our anchor in Puerto Maxwell and sail the 25 miles that separate us from Isla Hornos. With cameras ready to shoot, all four of us are quiet, engrossed in our own thoughts. Cape Horn, here we are. Geologically, it's just a rock. Yet at the same time, it's utterly unique. Cape Terror, the Cape of all Capes, or simply The Horn. All over the world, sailors know this rock when it's mentioned. We keep our southerly course until we reach the 56th parallel. Then we turn to port and watch Cape Horn slowly slide by. We spy the monument with the albatross; it's dedicated to all the sailors over the past centuries who've lost their battles against the elements and remained here. Thanks to all our modern equipment, our journey is unlike theirs. We've been able to pick a day with favorable conditions, and while sailing with our friends on *Thalassa*, we fulfill a dream.

We spend an hour and a half on the island. We meet the two young Chilean navy men who run this desolate station, we visit the small wooden chapel, and we climb up into the lighthouse. We're impressed with the monument. And we're a little bit stunned with the fact that we're actually here: Six years after we decided to follow this route, almost three years after we left Holland, and now we're here on Isla Hornos, next to the albatross sculpture, with a magnificent view of the cape. We stand at our milestone and try to absorb the experience as much as we can. It will settle in our memories and never leave us.

When we get back to Puerto Williams, we do what's been a tradition among sailors for decades. We leave our burgee on the wall of the bar on the half-sunken navy ship *Micalvi* and sign the guestbook: "Puerto Williams, / End of the world, / Just came back from the Horn, / Have an interesting problem to face now. / What's going to be the next milestone?"

Now we go on toward new destinations. The Chilean channels are waiting, and then a whole Pacific full of new adventures. The chart of Cape Horn is decorated with a small track showing our journey. To us, it's still a treasure map—maybe even more than before.

Ruth Gerritse and Mark van't Woud have traded the glaciers of Chile for South Pacific islands as they continue their voyage.



PRACTICAL PATAGONIA: ANCHORING

Anchoring in Tierra del Fuego usually involves a lot more than just dropping the hook. The narrow, very deep channels were carved by glacial ice. Often the depth sounder measures 50 fathoms only 50 yards from the shore.

Given the unstable weather here, trusting a single piece of ground tackle is inadvisable. There are few *caletas*, or coves, for anchoring with room to swing on the anchor. On top of that, the infamous *rachas*, or williwaws, can reach hurricane force as they thunder down the steep mountain slopes.

To meet the challenges of the conditions in Patagonia, we use four reels on *Thalassa*, our 48-foot Suncoast cutter, each one holding 300 feet of one-inch-diameter floating polypropylene line. We chose floating line so it will keep clear of the propeller and the huge underwater kelp forests. We specifically looked for white line because it's easily visible. Two of the reels are attached in the lifeline gates on each side of the boat, and two are in the stern pulpit. We think it's important to make sure that the reels run smoothly and can be used by one person standing in the dinghy.

For our trip through Brazo del Noroeste, or Glacier Alley, we put a lot of effort into determining the best and fastest way to handle lines. When *rachas* shriek down the mountains, a few minutes may make a crucial difference. When we enter a sheltered *caleta*, we look for a few sturdy trees. We launch the dinghy, then motor to where we want to set the anchor; it's usually about 30 yards from shore. I drop the anchor as Mark backs the boat. With

the chain still slipping, I climb into the dinghy and get the end of the first line from one of the reels on the stern and take it to a big tree as fast as I can. As soon as possible, I repeat the process with the second line. In the meantime, Mark stops and secures the an-



chor chain and uses the sheet winches to tighten the shore lines. We now have one anchor and two shore lines holding us with the stern of the boat pointing into the prevailing wind. Depending on the situation and the weather forecast, we take one or two more lines from the bow of the boat to the shore. Once we've developed a rhythm that suits us, the spinning of our web usually takes us 10 to 20 minutes.

R.G.