

Our own contribution to the historic voyages of discovery was Caleta Thalassa II, a snug inlet not marked on the chart nor mentioned in the pilot



THE BIG CHILL

Midwinter in Patagonia – cold, snowy, unforgiving. Don't go there, warns the received cruisers' wisdom. Ruth Gerritse and Mark van 't Woud did and found themselves exploring an area whose supreme sense of isolation was as much of a reward as its stunning scenery and frequent fine weather



Above: snow and solitude in Brazo Nordoeste. After two weeks completely alone, we woke one dawn to see a small fishing boat (right) sailing out of the early morning mist – its crew were as surprised by the encounter as we were

It is June – midwinter – and we are in Ushuaia, at the bottom of South America in our 48ft steel cutter *Thalassa II*. We have fallen in love with this area and lingered as long as we could, but it is finally time to move on. We are heading for the *canales* of Chilean Patagonia and Puerto Montt, some 1,300 miles north. Only twice along our route will we meet civilisation. This is one of the last true wilderness areas on earth.

Temperatures have been below 0°C for weeks and in the mountains around Ushuaia the skiing season has started. The few cruising sailors that we share a pontoon with show a mix of surprise and concern when we tell them of our imminent departure.

“Way too cold,” they say.

“The winds will be ferocious.”

“No one does that in this season.”

The latter is especially hard to ignore. It is true that we know of only one yacht that made this trip in winter. The stories from those who travelled north in summertime are rough: never-ending rain, strong winds and hurricane-force gusts. It is likely that conditions will be worse during winter.

Yet months of studying the weather and all the information we could find have convinced us



Photos: Mark van 't Woud

otherwise. It will be colder, of course. But if things work out as we expect them to and the big Pacific high moves north, the low-pressure systems that move over Patagonia in wintertime will be far less aggressive and much slower than their summertime cousins. There's also a fair chance of a temporary high settling over the mainland.

By mid-June we manage to tear ourselves away from Ushuaia. Saying goodbye is a part of the cruising life I will never get used to. The first leg of our journey only takes a few hours. It brings us across the



Above: Ruth soaks up some winter sun on the doghouse; the climate was not as brutal as predicted. Below: a dump of snow overnight was cause for a snowball fight on leaving Ushuaia



Beagle Channel to Puerto Williams, where we clear ourselves into Chile. We wake up the next morning to find the world covered by a thick blanket of fresh snow. Below several inches of fluffy white, the decks are now extremely slippery. All our shorelines are frozen solid. It takes us more than two hours to get the boat in sailing condition again.

As soon as we have cracked our way through an inch of ice, the worst of the day is behind us. The antifouling has suffered a bit, but we feel great. The sun is shining and we are on our way.

Within a few days we find a rhythm. The weather stays perfect, with crispy cold temperatures, blue skies and sun for most of each day. We usually leave our anchorage around 0600 to use as many hours of calm conditions as we can, though daylight doesn't come until 0830, so for the first part of the morning the radar becomes our most valued crewmember.

With daylight comes fantastic scenery. We have the world to ourselves. Surrounded by the southernmost peaks of the Andean Mountains, we make our way across flat waters towards what seems to be solid land. As soon as we get closer, several openings appear; a process that repeats itself over and over again.



At the end of our eighth day we anchor in Caleta Brecknock. It is a stunning place, but grim. High granite walls enclose us. The low winter sun never makes it over the top of the canyon, so the water in the bay stays frozen. To take our lines ashore I have to bash through the ice using one of the oars as an axe.

Midwinter's day comes around, the official start of winter in the Southern Hemisphere. We can only wait and see what that will mean for us. The anchorage we have chosen for the night is not nearly as sheltered as it appeared to be on paper. We decide to move on and after snooping around in one of the many arms of the channel we find a tiny unnamed inlet that isn't mentioned in either the cruising guide or on the navigational charts. It is exactly what we need.

We call it Caleta Thalassa II, at 54°03'00 S/71°43'46 W for the record. We feel like pioneers, like explorers from the old days. And we feel truly privileged. ▶▶



Beth Leonard

A shoreline makes a convenient perch for a kingfisher hunting for fish

We find a tiny unnamed inlet not mentioned on the chart and call it Caleta Thalassa II. We feel like pioneers, like explorers of the old days



Photos: Mark van 't Woud

Top left: Ruth hacks through ice to go ashore at Caleta Brecknock (opposite). Top right: pink flamingos? In a sub-Antarctic climate?! The Chilean variety seemed immune to the chill in Puerto Natales (above), our first taste of civilisation in three weeks

For two full weeks we have not seen a soul. Then one morning the first rays of sunlight reveal a small fishing boat coming out of the fog. We wave at each other, both crews clearly surprised and cheerful about this unexpected encounter. It is only minutes before we lose track of them again as they continue their trail through the maze of curves and canyons.

As we enter Magellan Strait, we find a stiff breeze blowing, something we hadn't noticed in the narrower and more protected waterways. Thankfully the wind is from the east, so is with us. We run downwind through the strait and can imagine that this area hasn't changed since the day sailors first entered it in 1520. Patagonia must look exactly as it did 500 years ago, or 1,000 – or 10,000. We are sailing through history – prehistory even.

At the western end of Magellan we have a chat with the Naval officer stationed at one of the few manned lighthouses in this immense area. He is glad of the company – we are the first yacht to pass his post in nearly three months. "We only see sailors here in summertime," Miguel says, "but I don't understand why that is. The weather is a lot better here during winter – cold, sure, but calm and dry."

For two full weeks we have not seen a soul. Then one morning the first rays of sunlight reveal a fishing boat coming out of the fog

The sky is blue again when we sail the last miles to Puerto Natales, the first bit of civilisation in more than three weeks. We aren't eager to enter it and are homesick for Patagonian solitude from the minute we arrive. But we will spend several days in Natales to buy diesel and fresh produce and fill our water tank.

In the shallow water near the quay we notice pink spots. For a second they look like flamingos. Can't be. Flamingos in Patagonia would be as ridiculous as polar bears in the desert. The *Patagonia & Antarctica Field Guide* ends our confusion: 'Phoenicopterus chilensis', it states. 'Chilean flamingo. 70 cm.'

We take in our four shorelines, get the anchor up and leave Caleta Dixon at first light. At the end of the afternoon we have a large pod of dolphins guiding us all the way into Caleta Moonlight Shadow. It is nearly seven weeks now since we left Puerto Williams and for the first time the GRIB files show some very rough weather approaching. We prepare for the worst.

Bombproof

The tiny inlet we decide on qualifies as bombproof and has plenty of trees on which to spin our web. Suddenly we seem to have left the high mountains behind us. Moonlight Shadow bay is surrounded by hills covered with shrubs, ferns and mosses. Behind those hills is the Pacific Ocean. We have never been so close to it before. When the bad spell starts we know the forecasts were right. A strong gale blows and the torrential rain goes on for three days.

When it blows itself out, we make for Puerto Eden. This is the first settlement after Puerto Natales, a fishing village with less than 200 inhabitants. Among them is a handful of native Indians; the last survivors of the nomadic tribe that populated this area until the beginning of the 20th Century. We follow the boardwalk around town and climb up to the lookout.

Eden is charming and photogenic. The isolation of this tiny town named after Paradise is beyond imagination. The one and only connection to the outside world is a ferry that comes twice a week to bring in supplies: fresh vegetables, flour and some fruit – if available. But no meat, apart from some frozen chicken. The people of Eden don't seem to eat meat. If you are born here, you either become a fisherman or leave for the mainland.

Although the position of the vessel in Canal Messier matches the wreck indicated in the charts, it takes us a while to believe the oncoming ship hasn't sailed in decades. The steamer *Capitan Leonidas* hit an uncharted rock in the Seventies and has been waiting ever since for weather and wind to take it apart. The carcass looks frightening. In a single second it tells a long story about the roughness of this area and the unforgiving conditions that rule here most of the year.

We settle ourselves in Caleta Lamenta del Indio, on the southern edge of the Golfo de Peñas. We will wait for favourable conditions to cross that infamous stretch of water. It looks as if the waiting might be long. The sea is building up, the barometer is falling and the sky looks threatening again.

There is welcome entertainment on the VHF. A small Chilean fishing boat is in urgent need of

PREPARING FOR THE COLD

Sailing in cold climates requires a different approach from tropical cruising. Insulation and preparation are the watchwords. The cold is one reason why you go there, but the low temperatures can just as easily become your worst enemy.

Make sure you have top-quality foulweather gear on board and plenty of thermal underwear to go with it. All clothing should be breathable. Waterproof boots, the Gore-Tex type, and waterproof gloves are a must. If anything gets wet, take it off as soon as possible.

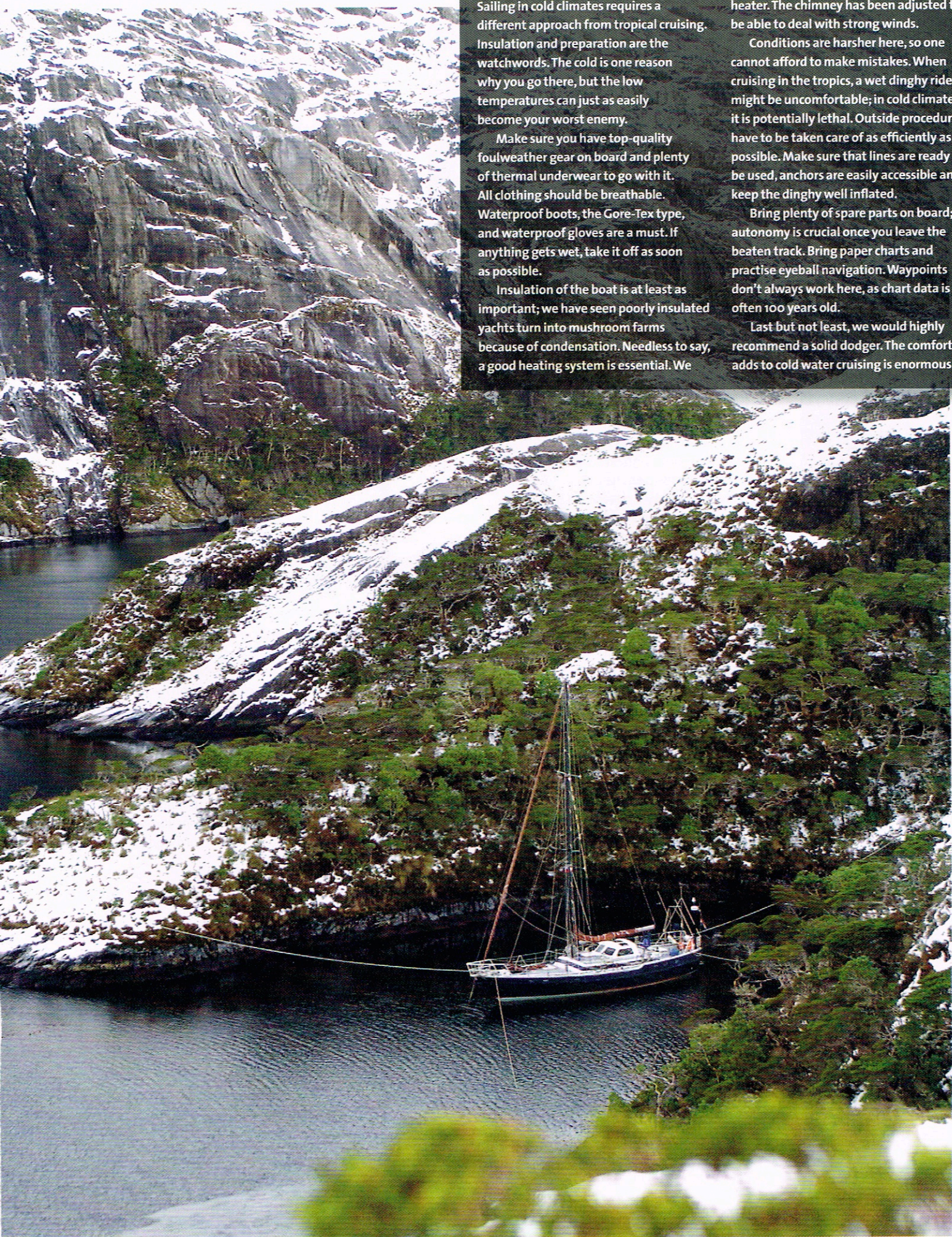
Insulation of the boat is at least as important; we have seen poorly insulated yachts turn into mushroom farms because of condensation. Needless to say, a good heating system is essential. We

are very pleased with our Heatpol diesel heater. The chimney has been adjusted to be able to deal with strong winds.

Conditions are harsher here, so one cannot afford to make mistakes. When cruising in the tropics, a wet dinghy ride might be uncomfortable; in cold climates it is potentially lethal. Outside procedures have to be taken care of as efficiently as possible. Make sure that lines are ready to be used, anchors are easily accessible and keep the dinghy well inflated.

Bring plenty of spare parts on board; autonomy is crucial once you leave the beaten track. Bring paper charts and practise eyeball navigation. Waypoints don't always work here, as chart data is often 100 years old.

Last but not least, we would highly recommend a solid dodger. The comfort it adds to cold water cruising is enormous.





Mark van 't Woud



Beth Leonard

Top: Ruth shows off the catch of the day – and that night's supper aboard *Thalassa II*. Above: though flightless, steamer ducks are so nifty across the water the marooned crew of the *Wager* nicknamed them racehorses

a few litres of petrol. The crew has heard of our whereabouts from a nearby lighthouse and calls us on Channel 16. It isn't until they moor their shabby little boat alongside us that we understand the full urgency of their request. With sweaty faces they pour the fuel we give them into their bilge pump. *Carola Uno* is leaking like a sieve and they are out of fuel to keep the pump alive and the boat afloat.

While the pump sputters back into life we have a chat with the men, now visibly more relaxed. They show their gratitude by giving us fish to last us for the next week or so. After a cheerful goodbye we untie their lines. With full force they bump into the submerged rock we warned them about ten seconds ago. They roar with laughter. We can see why *Carola Uno* isn't exactly a dry boat.

After 12 long days our weather window appears. The GRIB files show west-south-westerly winds for the next 48 hours – far from perfect, but nothing better is expected for at least a week. It will have to do.

Peñas is Spanish for pain, hardship or punishment. It only took a few hours fully to understand why the Golfo de *Peñas* got its name. The swell that comes in from the Pacific Ocean is high and the waves are short and steep. Massive amounts of water flush the deck; rivers of foam fill the scuppers. For the first time in years I am seasick. After offering Neptune my breakfast I go to bed, only to come out again when the *peñas* is over. By then we are out on the Pacific Ocean. A peaceful night with a starry sky and a downwind sail take us to Peninsula Taito.

Back in the shelter of the *canales* we realise that by sailing to the other end of Golfo de *Peñas* we have crossed more than just a psychological barrier. Everything is different here. The scenery is still beautiful, but it is no longer wild. There are hills instead of mountains, we see many fishing boats, bays are filled with salmon farms and the bushes above the high water mark are littered with plastic. »

Peñas is Spanish for pain, hardship or punishment. It only took a few hours to see how the Golfo de Peñas got its name

The wreck of the *Wager*

As she cruises to the Straits of Magellan in her yacht *Hawk*, Beth Leonard recounts the tales of two crews that discovered how unforgiving an area this can be

The *Wager*, 599 tons and 24 guns, sailed from England on 18 September 1740 in company with seven other ships under the command of Commodore George Anson (pictured right). Great Britain and Spain had been at war for a year, and Anson was charged with harassing the Spaniards along the west coast of South America.

The *Wager* became separated from her companions in a storm during the Cape Horn rounding in which she sprung chainplates fore and aft, lost her mizzen mast and split most of her sails. Of the original crew of 198 men, 46 had died by the time the *Wager* reached the latitude of the Golfo de *Peñas*, and so many more were ill that only a dozen officers and seamen could be mustered for both watches.

Against the advice of his officers, Captain Cheap closed with the treacherous lee shore to rendezvous with the fleet. On 14 May, 1741, the *Wager* was wrecked more than 3° south of the rendezvous point, just off the island that lay over our bow, now framed by a double rainbow.

A pair of squawking steamer ducks scooted by in a flurry of whitewater, driven like wind-up toys by their paddle-wheeling wings. 'Among the birds we regularly shot, was... a bird much larger than a goose, which we called the racehorse from the velocity with which it moved upon the face of the water, in a sort of half-flying, half-running motion,' John Byron, a 19-year-old midshipman, wrote at the time of the wreck, describing these peculiar flightless birds.

They were among a handful of bird and mammal species that manage to carve out an existence in this unforgiving environment. The lack of game, even fish, forced the *Wager's* crew to supplement what they salvaged from the wreck with shellfish and kelp until both were exhausted on the surrounding islands.





On a coast that averages 300 days of rain each year, the lack of food was not the only hardship. 'We have been inhabitants of this island 16 weeks, and have not seen ten fair days,' the gunner, John Bulkeley, lamented.

After the crew recovered the longboat from the wreck, it took the carpenter four months to lengthen the vessel by 12ft and to make her seaworthy enough to handle an ocean voyage. At that time, a seaman's wages ceased when a ship was wrecked, which meant the men saw little reason to remain under naval discipline.

Officers, on the other hand, continued to be paid, and continued to obey orders. Captain Cheap's inability to maintain control by force of personality meant that this disparity split the men into two factions. The crew wanted to sail south and pass through the Straits of Magellan in order to reach the British settlement at Rio Grande, north of present day Uruguay. The captain and most of his officers were set on sailing north to rejoin the fleet.

Some 72 men seized the yawl and the long boat, now christened the *Speedwell*, and headed south along the coast, leaving the captain and a dozen loyal men stranded on Wager Island, along with seven deserters. Here the two narratives split, for Bulkeley was one of the leaders of the group that headed south, while Byron stayed with his captain and made the journey north.

Close to 60 men died on Wager Island, mostly of starvation. I felt their presence deeply because the island was so little changed, the area still so very remote, nature's indifference still so very obvious. If we were cast ashore with only a few provisions scrounged from our boat, we would never manage to survive for four months. I could think of very few other places where a shipwreck could go unnoticed, of very few other coasts where it would be possible simply to disappear as the *Wager* did 250 years ago.

Mischief in Patagonia

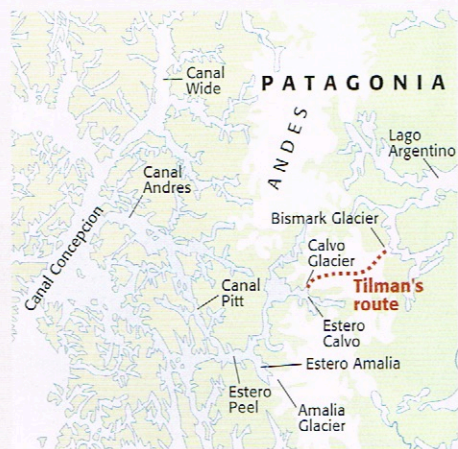
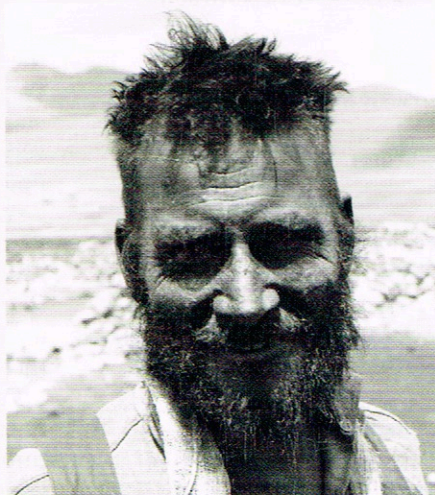
Two weeks and 150 miles south of Isla Wager, I sat in our dinghy surrounded by icebergs shining blue and green in the sunlight. The sea lapped under their edges. A dozen waterfalls purred and grumbled a mile or so away.

The sea suddenly breathed a series of sharp exhalations; a half-dozen Peale's dolphins, almost within touching distance. A half-mile away, the Amalia Glacier met the sea in a wall of ice rising above *Hawk's* mast; a pale blue and white curtain shot through with the cobalt and navy hues of the open ocean. It is just one of dozens of glaciers that reach the sea in the central Chilean channels, all flowing out of the southern Patagonian ice cap draped across the Andes from about 48°30'S to 51°30'S.

The Estero Peel glacier runs north-east for 20 miles before it divides into two arms that extend into the Andes. When HW Tilman (below) attempted to cross the Southern Patagonian ice cap he chose to do it from Estero Peel. He arrived aboard his pilot cutter *Mischief* just before Christmas 1955 with a crew to watch the boat and two other climbers. Like those of *Wager*, *Mischief's* men shot a few steamer ducks, but Tilman noted: 'That we could not stomach, much less relish them... seemed to me to betray our inadequacy as travellers; for proverbially a traveller must have the back of an ass to bear all and the mouth of a hog to eat what is set before him.'

Tilman had intended to make the crossing from the Amalia Glacier, but could not even reach Caleta Amalia owing to the thick ice. He was eventually put ashore in Estero Calvo, about 20 miles further up Estero Peel, with his two climbing partners, alpine clubmember Charles Marriott and Chilean climber Jorge Quinteros.

The three men worked their way up the Calvo Glacier, ascended to a pass in the Andes at 9,600ft (2,926m), descended to the Bismarck Glacier to reach the shores of Lago Argentino,



then returned along the same route. Bad weather plagued the return trip and the three men were down to a tin of biscuits when they finally found a cache of food that had been buried in a three-day blizzard. 'Had we met such conditions on the way up,' Tilman wrote, 'I doubt if we ever should have crossed the ice cap.' It took them 40 days to travel some 40 miles as the crow flies.

Mischief had not had an easier time of it. Tilman had expected the boat's crew to leave the ice-choked waters of Estero Peel and find a safe anchorage, returning to check the rendezvous point once a week. He had never 'imagined they would want to go swanning about on their own'.

Less than ten miles further up Estero Peel, they went aground on a shoal at a narrows now called Angostura *Mischief*. Over the course of three days, her crew of three removed all of the ballast to refloat the boat while fending off icebergs with each change of the tide. Once free, they discovered that the propeller had been damaged, leaving them engineless. When the climbing party rejoined the boat, the crew sailed close to 100 miles, most of it upwind, to exit at Canal Concepcion before heading offshore for the 1,400-mile run north to Valparaiso.

At around 150km², Amalia is one of the smallest glaciers in the area. While *Wager* Island has hardly changed in 250 years, the Amalia Glacier has been transformed since Tilman's visit. When *Mischief* sailed these waters, the wall of ice behind *Hawk* had extended miles beyond where I floated in the dinghy. Between 1946 and 1986, the glacier face retreated more than 7km, and the glacier's area reduced almost 18 per cent.

The southern Patagonian ice cap shrank by approximately 4 per cent or 500km² during that period. This change in the ice cap is attributed to a rise in temperature of 1°C and a decline in precipitation of 1m per year in the last century along this section of coast. The Amalia Glacier has retreated even more in the last 20 years; at least another 5km based on our charts and a friend's photos. Sometime in my lifetime it's all but certain it will no longer even meet the sea.



Top left: easy does it as we nose into Caleta Moonlight Shadow, a refuge in a gale – dusky dolphins rode shotgun as we entered (far left). Above: the lovely hamlet of Puerto Eden, home to a handful of native Indians. Left: Quellon was a shock of modernity afterwards

Arriving at the port of Quellon is like crashing back into the modern world: huge supermarkets; teenagers with mobile phones; internet cafes; traffic lights; and hundreds of fishing boats. It takes us a while to get used to it. We hoped and somehow expected a sort of transition phase, an in-between zone where we could slowly let go of the Patagonian solitude. We feel sad about leaving the wilderness behind us. The upside was a thoroughly enjoyable cold beer and a meal in the harbour restaurant.

So, 91 days after starting our expedition we cover the final miles of our journey through Patagonia. It seems appropriate that we sail them under a blue sky and a blazing sun. We find ourselves a berth at the

Club Nautico in Puerto Montt. It feels strange to be here, closing this chapter of our trip round the world. For years the focus of our circumnavigation was the journey we have now concluded. "First Patagonia," we said. "We'll just see what happens after that."

Now, suddenly, the 'after that' is upon us. Our dreams and longings have turned into a memory.

During our stay in Puerto Montt we meet several cruisers who are planning to travel south to Ushuaia and Puerto Williams. They are waiting for summer to arrive because, as they tell us, it's the right season to make this journey. We thought that ourselves for years. We now know better.

Weather is ever-changeable and our experience is no guarantee, but we are very glad we made the decision to go. We loved Chile in wintertime. Conditions were nearly always gentle, often bright and sunny. The few lows that did pass through were very slow moving, which allowed plenty of time to find a nice spot, snuggle up and sit tight.

We saw none of the infamous *rachas*, wind bullets that can reach hurricane force, and we experienced something rare for those making this passage from south to north: we were actually able to sail quite a few beautiful legs. Apart from the wonderful weather there is another reason that made this trip such an unforgettable experience: we were alone. For three full months we were the only yacht winding its way through the Chilean Patagonian waters. To us that was one of the most exciting things. It strengthened the feeling of desolation and wilderness that is the signature of Patagonia.

THE CRUISE IN NUMBERS

Distance from Ushuaia to Puerto Montt: 1,382 miles

Total number of days: 91

Number of anchorages visited: 43



Ruth Gerritse (pictured) is a TV director and Mark van 't Woud a cameraman and photographer. They started cruising in 2002, leaving the Netherlands and sailing *Thalassa II*, a 48ft steel cutter, to some of the most desolate parts of the world. Their love for remote places brought them to Patagonia, where they spent almost a year.



Beth Leonard (pictured) and Evans Starzinger are regular contributors to *Yachting World* and have sailed all over the world in their 47ft Van De Stadt cutter *Hawk*. This winter they sailed from Puerto Montt to Ushuaia. Beth is the author of *The Voyager's Handbook* (Adlard Coles, £30).