

SNOW GLOBE

The cruise sails through a Patagonian panorama of turquoise water, Jurassic forest and snow-capped peaks

It's a walk on the wild side for adventurers with a taste for luxury cruising, eco-tourism and giant trout.

Patagonia EXCESS

BY CLAIRE SCOBIE

The helicopter appears through the driving rain like a red blur, landing among ancient trees bent double from the force of the downdraft. We scramble in and the pilot lifts off. Below is lush virgin forest and through low-lying cloud a vast minty-blue glacier and a dozen waterfalls. As far as the eye can see, trackless wilderness.

This is Patagonia, almost the last pit-stop before Antarctica, at the *finis terrae* - the ends of the earth. Even its name has a ring of mystery, a place of ancient mariners and frost-bitten travellers and where Darwin developed his theory of natural selection. A place synonymous with deprivation, exploration and needing the luxury of time to discover.



A helicopter lands on the Atmosphere, moored off the Patagonian coast

Indeed, luxury is not a word usually associated with Patagonia. But as the Bell 407 chopper banks to the left, a ship emerges like a phantom in the fog. On approach, I make out the heli-pad and four open-air jacuzzis on the top deck. The crew of the Atmosphere are waiting with piping hot chocolate and welcoming smiles.

While Darwin's descriptions of wildlife are as relevant today as they were in 1833 on HMS Beagle, this is a very different voyage of discovery. This is exploring Patagonia in a style to which the world's wealthiest are accustomed: with Nomads of the Seas - offering the ultimate marriage between adventure eco-tourism and unashamed luxury.

The week before *The Bulletin* joins the cruise, Carlos Slim, who tops Bill Gates in the fortune stakes, chartered the entire ship. Slim, a Mexican telecommunications tycoon, was on board with umpteen minders and Gustavo Cisneros, a multi-billionaire media mogul described by *The New York Times* as "one of Latin America's most powerful figures". Their host was Andrés Ergas, scion of a Chilean banking family and the Nomads' president.

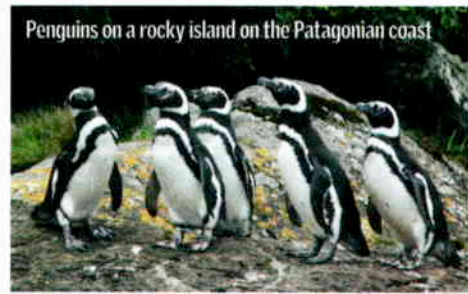
The casually dressed Ergas, with piercing green eyes and two-day

GETTY IMAGES

stubble, is on hand for the arrival of our (more modest) group from Australia at his reception office in Puerto Montt, 915 kilometres south of Santiago, the Chilean capital. A passionate angler and pilot, Ergas has travelled extensively through Chilean Patagonia since the 1990s, seeking out the most secluded places to fish. After making his own fortune at Fuji Bank, then General Electric, he quit the finance world to venture into high-end tourism. Six years ago Ergas commissioned a state-of-the-art vessel "for people who have done everything and are not easily impressed by anything. My ship is less luxurious than elite and with more specialised equipment - water toys."

And, oh boy, what toys. Aside from the chopper, which will be joined by a second one in 2008, there's a Zodiac Hurricane 920 RIB - a sonar-equipped high-speed rubber craft used by the United States Navy; a fleet of jet boats and portable "mission Zodiacs", two SOLAS rescue boats and various rafts. The \$23m ship, 45.7m long and with a 10m beam, can carry 28 passengers and is engineered with the latest marine radar technology and rigorous safety measures. It is captained by a former Chilean navy officer and a squad of burly marines, and the crew of 32 also includes a biologist, eight fishing guides and a masseur.

Ergas is now embarking on two more projects - Nomads of the Andes, an exclusive heli-ski resort, and Nomads of the Atacama Desert - which means he waves us goodbye as his staff and captain in full uniform welcome us at the docks.



Penguins on a rocky island on the Patagonian coast



Sailing in an Atmosphere of luxury



“ Sanino approaches slowly and the penguins, unperturbed, meet our gaze. From there it's a bleached rocky island colonised by hundreds of sea lions, cormorants and pelicans ”

After a tour of the ship, including the spotless engine room, I'm shown to my cabin. Like all of the 12 cabins, it faces seawards. In November, when we travel, it's not uncommon to wake to a sea lion frolicking in the waves. By midsummer, in January and February, it could be a blue whale. The cruise passes through their feeding grounds and up to 20 of the majestic giants, which can grow to 25m, have been seen in one day.

As the ship glides out of Puerto Montt, the snow-capped Andes are visible and Patagonia proper begins. Patagonia covers around 780,000sq km and is shared by Argentina and Chile. While the Argentinean slice is known for its windswept steppes, its neighbour's share is a mosaic of fjords and islands clothed in Valdivian temperate rainforest, the land crumpled by tectonic movement and glaciers, many still visible today. Rapidly the mobile signal disappears, as do towns and, except for the odd fishing village and some salmon farms, any sign of human settlement.

Less than 5% of the nation's population live in Patagonia. It's extreme. The sun, the rain - up to 2.7m a year - even the fishing. Nomads specialises in "extreme-fly fishing" which translates as fishing in unchartered waters in all weathers. Since its inception in 2006, its clients and crew have fished for rainbow or brown trout in more than 100 lakes and rivers, some of them still unnamed.

Aside from fishing, there's a variety of "soft" outdoor activities - kayaking, horse-riding, trekking, whale-watching - and a wildlife eco-adventures team headed by biologist Gian Paolo Sanino. On a typical week-long cruise the Atmosphere will sail from Puerto Montt to the Taitao Peninsula with four anchorages. Because it sails only at night, by the first morning we are 300 nautical miles (550km) further south in the Pitipalena Estuary.

It's a grey blustery day when we don lifejackets and board the

Zodiac RIB. Sanino is dressed in an orange Mustang Survival suit and as the temperature drops to 5°C it's not hard to see why. The 20 suits ordered for our trip have not yet arrived so we make do with waterproofs and thermals.

Intense and passionate, Sanino's role is to collect scientific data and educate guests on conservation. He has recorded three new species of cetacean in Chilean waters - the pygmy sperm whale, long-beaked dolphin and lesser beaked whale - and collected more than 350 recordings of dolphin sounds. Guests are invited to help expand his "whale and dolphin song" library. "This area is very unknown," he says. "To be hired by a private company is something I want to support. I'm not just a guide. I'm a researcher helping to implement a program of whale watching."

THERE IS A BIGGER point to all of this: in Chile the concept of protecting wildlife is relatively new and the laws frequently not enforced. By attracting the wealthy, Nomads hopes it will make them care about this pristine wilderness - and that they will have the resources to make a difference. "My goal is to get people in touch with animals, so they protect them," says Sanino, who campaigned for more than a decade to change Chilean law to ensure greater protection for whales and dolphins.

Even if the South American magnates on board the week before were more interested in striking business deals than looking at a pod of orcas (killer whales), it's almost impossible not to care about the wildlife when someone as enthusiastic as Sanino is guiding. From the krill-loving habits of the blue whale to the sex life of a Peale's dolphin, he is what makes Nomads eco - rather than pure indulgence. To spend a day with him is like being in the company of David Attenborough.



ZODIAC SIGNS
Thermal-clad tourists are ferried
ashore on the RIB for a wildlife wander

GETTING THERE

Air travel

LAN Airlines currently operates a daily service between Sydney and Santiago via Auckland. Contact LAN Airlines on 1800 221 572 or visit www.lan.com.

Embarking

Abercrombie & Kent offers seven-night expeditions departing each Saturday from Puerto Montt, Chile.

The season begins in October and ends April. Per person prices for anglers from \$US14,875 (\$17,057) and non-anglers from \$US10,115 (\$11,599) including all meals, drinks, services of English-speaking guides, airport transfers in Puerto Montt and daily expeditions. For more information contact A&K on 1300 851 800 or (03) 9536 1800 or visit www.abercrombiekent.com.au.

Soon the most reluctant birdwatcher is straining to spot a pair of Caranca (Kelp) geese and the Flightless Steamer duck whizzing across the water like a wind-up toy. Any discomfort at sitting astride the shock-absorbing seats on this James Bond-style craft is forgotten at the glimpse of a sea otter and a gaggle of Magellan penguins. Cutting the engine to a purr, Sanino approaches slowly and the penguins, unperturbed, meet our gaze. From there it's a bleached rocky island colonised by hundreds of sea lions, cormorants and pelicans, their cries and high-pitched yelps filling the air.

Back on board the Atmosphere, the chill wind seems like a distant memory inside the elegant ivory-coloured dining room, a fusion of Nordic and Parisian chic, with a circular bar. This is the heart of the ship and where the day's adventures are swapped over cocktails and aperitifs - oysters with black caviar, abalone empanadas and morsels of krill (like shrimp) in shellfish foam. There are panoramic windows on all sides, the view is an ever-changing tableau of Jurassic "cold jungle" forest and the shadowy peaks of snow-capped volcanoes.

Every night is a feast of local specialities, prepared by one of Santiago's finest chefs, Guillermo Rodriguez, and washed down with some of the country's best wines. An entree could be grilled calamari and scallops in truffle jus with Patagonian mushrooms, then grouper fillet seared in cinnamon butter or Patagonian lamb chops and asparagus. A triptych of deserts follows: a favourite is the Chilean myrtle with rosehip ice cream. Wine and culinary tasting events are also arranged and one night is a *Patache* - "abundant meal" - with Magellan king crab served.

The following day's activities are arranged over the dinner. When Carlos Adriazola, the fishing guide, learns that none of our group of eight has fished, his face falls. The 28-year-old pro can cast a line up to 30m. His biggest catch is a 30kg king salmon in the Salmon River, Idaho. We are told to report at 8.45am in the wet room the following day to don waders and waterproofs.

It's an extraordinary notion that the lake where we are to learn how to fish has rarely, if ever, been fished before. We reach it by helicopter and the sense of isolation is eerie. The inky black water is ringed by primitive ferns and lichen-coated evergreen beeches more than 450 years old. Except for the occasional shrill call of the native chucao bird, the silence is thick. Our guides, Carlos and Rodrigo Valdivieso, teach our group of four how to attach a fly as delicate as a feathered earring. Two drift boats, which had been flown in the week before, await. Despite Rodrigo's patient commands to cast the line "explosive but short", I'm hopeless at it and start to trawl. It's not long before

there's a tug at the line and I have my first trophy catch - a rainbow trout. Introduced to Chile by the Europeans, wild rainbow and brown trout have flourished in the region, growing to huge sizes, together with brook, silver and king trout and the odd Atlantic salmon. After a quick photo, the guide gently returns the fish to the water.

By lunch, rain is falling steadily but the thrill of being in this place that time forgot remains undiminished. A shelter is erected and, when weather allows, a fire lit. A white tablecloth is laid, an excellent Chilean Carmenera red poured and we dine on gourmet prawn pasta. Afternoon passes with more catches - bringing my total to five, including a couple of beautiful spotted 1.5kg brown trout - and then our heli-carriage returns to take us back to the mothership.

I'm torn between another day in search of the rare Chilean dolphin or more heli-fishing. It's Sanino's account of how one guest heard an unusual "click click" when listening through the hydrophone (underwater microphone) that persuades me. The "click" turned out to be a sperm whale, the first recorded in these waters. The day dawns sunny and clear and on the RIB it's not long before we spot a pair of Chilean dolphins.

"184 GPS," says Sanino, recording their location. "They're hunting, they're patrolling." He sets up the hydrophone in the water and his eyes close as he tunes into their sounds over the static. We hear one vocalisation and two eco-locations - the sound dolphins make to estimate distances - before the shy creatures disappear into the depths.

After lunch on an isolated beach with banks of giant rhubarb and misted with fuchsia blossom, it's a final scout for a pod of orcas before we return to the ship. Suddenly a pair of Peale's dolphins start bow-riding and then leaping behind us in the wake. "They're males," says Sanino as all on board whoop with delight. "You can tell because they are turning to show themselves to us. Dolphins are very sexual and these ones are horny."

Later, as I lie back in the thalassotherapy (seawater) spa on the top deck, I wonder whether suffering is required for true discovery. Would Darwin have swapped the Beagle for the Atmosphere, weevil-infested flour for gourmet nouvelle cuisine? I doubt it. But even if he might not have taken up a "chocolate massage", I'm sure he'd have relished gunning at high speed on the RIB with kindred soul Gian Paolo Sanino. ●

Claire Scobie travelled with Abercrombie & Kent and LAN Airlines.

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► Explore more of mysterious Patagonia in an online photo gallery.

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