

Nick and Jenny Coghlan recount a winter adventure hiding from the storms in Tierra del Fuego

Winter in the land of fire

There was good reason to procrastinate as we sat in Mar del Plata, steeling ourselves to drop south towards the Horn, through the Roaring Forties and well into the Fifties. Mainly, there was the weather to think about. We'd wait, we said to ourselves and to anyone who cared to listen, for a forecast of at least three days of favourable winds below thirty knots: that should put us well on our way.

The days passed with no such forecast. Then came Christmas. There was probably a touch of hysteria to the partying on the ten or so southbound yachts at the Yacht Club Argentino. All anyone could talk about was Windguru and the latest synoptic charts, which invariably showed massive depressions rolling through the

Drake Passage. We realised that if we kept asking everyone else's opinion and scouring the internet for reassurance, we would never leave; the New Year's party was already being planned. So one morning when the barometer was steady and the wind was light offshore, we set off unannounced.

Several weeks later and a thousand miles on, following an unintended but prolonged engine-induced stop in the remote Patagonian port of Puerto Deseado, there was a sense of vertigo aboard *Bosun Bird* as we approached the Strait of Lemaire, the fifteen-mile wide channel that separates the eastern tip of Tierra del Fuego from rugged *Isla de los Estados*. It was vital that we enter the Strait with favourable current and no adverse winds. Otherwise, the Admiralty Pilot gloomily warned,

ABOVE
The Beagle Channel,

BELOW LEFT
Preparing for heavy weather at the Yacht Club Argentino

BELOW
Beating to windward as *Bosun Bird* exits the Strait of Le Maire; Tierra del Fuego off the starboard bow

BELOW RIGHT
Approaching Puerto Williams, with the Dientes del Navarino in the background;

such a sea would be kicked up as to render *Le Maire* "impassable by boats and even dangerous for vessels of considerable size".

More colourfully than the *Pilot*, writing in *Uttermost Part of the Earth*, Lucas Bridges tells of one passage under sail in the nineteenth century, when the missionary vessel *Allen Gardiner* was twice beaten back by adverse conditions:

"It is difficult to describe the mountainous waves made steeper by the world-famous tide-rip in those Straits, or the nights hove to and battened down, when water pounds on the deck or swills about in the bilge, and the creaking of timbers and spars is accompanied by the roar of the gale in the rigging, and the occasional machine-gun rattle of the storm sails..."

We shot through in the middle of





the night with four knots of favourable current and twenty knots of wind astern. It was snowing lightly. In the faint light projected from our masthead tricolour, I could see the black surface of the ocean roiling. Jenny passed me up half a Mars bar from the galley. As we made a hard right into the Beagle Channel, out of the Strait, she zipped the companionway cover closed and announced that she was now going to bed.

With most of the summer gone, we decided to winter over in the far South, choosing Puerto Williams as our haven. This is a small community that was established in the 1950's as a naval base, on the southern (Chilean) shore of the Beagle Channel. Its backdrop is a range of saw-tooth mountains known as Los Dientes del Navarino (The Teeth of Navarino Island).



The Yacht Club at Williams is the most southerly in the world. The locals repeatedly and emphatically remind you of how many “southernmost” claims they are entitled to make. Woe betide if you whisper anything about similar affirmations regarding Ushuaia,

BELOW LEFT
Tucked up inside the Micalvi for the winter

BELOW RIGHT
On the foredeck of the Micalvi (the Yacht Club)

which is in Argentina and on the other side of the Channel: it is twenty miles to the west “but at least three miles north,” they will say. The club is also distinguished in that it is a retired auxiliary vessel of the Chilean Navy, the Micalvi, still painted grey and beached in such a way that smaller vessels can tuck snugly inshore and tie to her side.

The clubhouse – the main saloon, listing permanently like everything else at an angle of about five degrees – closes once the brief southern summer is over. Inconveniently, the incline is such that if you make the mistake of taking a shower on board at the height of a spring tide, your bare feet will be in very cold seawater. It also means that when you climb on to the main deck from your own boat, the steel ladder is overhanging. One especially dark →





and cold night, when the surface of the bay was frozen over, I was returning from a shower and slipped on an iced-up rung with spectacular and disastrous effect. I can still remember the crackle as I went into the water.

It seemed like we soon knew the whole town. Every morning, we'd chat with Mario the baker when we went to pick up fresh bread and at Simon & Simon, the only shop, Jenny quickly made friends with the ginger cat who liked to sleep in the window. At the sole restaurant – Los Dientes – Doña Carmen the proprietor told us, over many instalments, her life story. This included her interesting impressions of 1960's life on Tyneside, where she'd been stationed for two years while her husband was commissioning a submarine for the Chilean Navy. Julio the town mechanic laboured over our sickly diesel for weeks: he wanted to lift it out and move it to his snow-filled garden for ease of access. We

compromised by detaching the cylinder head and taking it as hand-luggage on the island's Twin Otter, for some re-boring in Punta Arenas. Mauricio, a young naval lieutenant, became a close friend. He wisely advised us to keep our dealings with Julio quiet: if the Navy were to realise we were immobilised, all sorts of inspections and bureaucracy would have to kick in before we could sail again.

There were only two other foreigners in town: Charlie and Ben, both American, and both the owners of boats moored at the Micalvi. They were not on speaking terms. Ben doubled as an evangelist, but Charlie liked nothing better than to stuff Ben's religious tracts down his rival's dorades. We soon learned not to speak of one to the other.

You also needed to be careful when discussing politics. As the prime benefactor of Chile's well-equipped and professional armed forces, the erstwhile dictator Augusto Pinochet

ABOVE LEFT
The abandoned radio station, Wulaia

ABOVE CENTRE
Wulaia Bay

BELOW LEFT
Mario, the village baker

BELOW CENTRE
Puerto Williams town centre

BELOW RIGHT
Julio the mechanic

was held in very high regard. And former British PM Margaret Thatcher – for having taken on and beaten the old enemy, Argentina – was nothing less than a secular saint. We found ourselves participating carefully in many a late-night toast to La Dama de Hierro (the Iron Lady) at the Dientes, following which hilarious and ribald stories would be told of how the Williams-based Chilean radio technicians loved to jam the communications of passing Argentine ships.

Of the original inhabitants of this windy and remote archipelago – the hardy Yaghans – only one full-blooded individual remained: Abuela Cristina, born in 1928. We would see her around town, but she was now so tired of being “the last one” that she charged outsiders for interviews or photographs. Who could really blame her?

One week in August, when the days were lengthening again and the snow receding from the shoreline, we





packed up our camping gear and made a three-day trek to Wulaia, the closest thing the Yaghans – who were semi nomadic, living for extended periods in their canoes – had to a settlement. We camped en route at beaches backed by 10,000-year-old shell middens, just like those we knew from ancient aboriginal sites in British Columbia.

At Wulaia Bay rotting wooden pilings extended out from the shore and there was an old clinker-built longboat with grass growing through its floor. Up against the dark treeline was a haunted-looking two-storey house that had been abandoned for more than fifty years: it had once served as the closest radio station in the Americas to Antarctica. The house, its windows broken, was still used occasionally: we found a large pile of greasy sheep fleeces in an upstairs room. The rain set in so we stayed here for two full days, sleeping on the sheepskins.

Wulaia features prominently in

both *Uttermost Part of the Earth* and Darwin's *Voyage of the Beagle*, the two must-reads for anyone exploring these waters. This was the home of Jemmy Button, the young Yaghan whom Captain Robert Fitzroy kidnapped and took to London – where he met royalty and was the talk of the town – in 1830. Darwin was on board the *Beagle* when Fitzroy guiltily returned Jemmy to Wulaia the following year. The boy retained his knowledge of English, but nearly thirty years later took part in a massacre of Christian missionaries at Wulaia.

The place is eerie, and we were in no way reassured when, walking out, we encountered two rough-looking men on a beach, armed with shotguns. They were evasive, gesturing angrily at us to move on. Later we deduced they were poaching cows, waiting for a clandestine pick-up.

The night before we left Williams to move west along the *Beagle*,

ABOVE
Puerto Williams

BELOW LEFT
The main square, Puerto Williams

BELOW CENTRE
Snowfall in the marina

BELOW RIGHT
Sunrise over the Dientes del Navarino, view from Bosun Bird's cockpit



ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Nick and Jenny Coghlan are a pair of adventurous cruisers based in Victoria, BC, Canada. They have covered many miles in their trusty Vancouver 27, *Bosun Bird*. Nick's book *Winter in Fireland* is available at bosunbird.com

Mauricio and his wife came for a farewell dinner with their little boy Beto. Small children on sailboats can be a liability. Beto wanted to press every button in sight, flip every switch, even try the head. It was with mixed feelings when we bade the three of them farewell late that night, to tidy up the post-dinner havoc and get ready for departure at sunrise.

Of course, it was not to be. When I came to switch on the engine in the morning there was a click. Nothing else. I was inclined to blame Beto. But I had eventually to admit to Jenny that I had not seen him worm his way into the engine compartment, where we had found a stray cable hanging loose. "Julio", said Jenny decisively.

I kept my counsel. Jenny is the designated electrician on board. But I had learned the hard way that it is best not to cast off with Captain and Crew at odds. We waited until the next day's tide. ✦

