

In the shadow of **CAPE HORN**

Cruising in the vicinity of the infamous Cape might seem like sporting with danger, but John and Lana Campbell found exploring the canals and glaciers of southern Chile a fascinating experience

Our first landfall in Chile was Cape Horn itself. It had been an easy passage from the Falkland Islands. An area of high pressure to the north-east was giving us light northerly winds and more or less clear skies — hardly Cape Horn weather.

We had expected the bleak, barren, windswept landscape ashore, and we already knew that Cape Horn itself was a fairly non-descript island, but what did surprise us was the inconspicuous little lighthouse at the south-eastern tip of the island. Instead of the powerful light we had expected, we found this rather rusty looking tiny metal tower, with a light that could just barely manage 13 miles.

We closed within a couple of hundred yards of the shore and spoke to the navy lookout on the VHF. He invited us ashore for a visit, and indeed it would have been calm enough to land in the lee of the island, but it was already late afternoon and I wanted to find an anchorage and get settled for the night. These islands were definitely not the place to go poking around in after dark.

The bay on the eastern side of Hermite Island, some ten miles to the west-north-west of Cape Horn Island, offered good shelter, both from the existing northerly and the prevailing westerlies. As we anchored, the wind was still in the north and the barometer still high, but we put down two anchors just in case. It felt rather as if we were living on borrowed time, anchoring for the night just ten miles from Cape Horn, which was all too visible to the east.

We kept a nervous anchor watch that night and, although by morning the wind was still light, it had gone back into the west, and the barometer was on the slippery slope.

Thalassí is an 83ft (25.3m) Ron Holland ketch, which was built by Bellure in Spain a couple of years ago. There were seven of us on board. We left Hermite Island at first light. With the grey skies and low clouds coming in from the west, Cape Horn looked more like it is supposed to, dark and forbidding, with the swell already building from the west. We rounded it again, and headed north for the eastern end of the Beagle Channel.

The wind went light again as we motored down the Beagle Channel towards Puerto Williams, the southernmost town in the world. The north side of the channel is bounded by Tierra del Fuego, the eastern half of which is owned by Argentina.

Puerto Williams is on the island of Navarino, which forms the southern side of the channel, and at the moment is part of Chile. This claim, though, is being strongly contested by Argentina. Both countries had patrol boats going up and down the channel, seemingly glowering at each other as they passed.

We were flying the British flag and, as Argentina was technically still at war with Britain over the Falklands, even though the fighting had stopped five years previously, we had been denied permission for the boat to enter Argentinian waters. We kept well to the south side of the channel and anchored off Puerto Williams just

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Main picture, *Thalassí* motors down the Beagle Channel towards the huge glaciers that pour down from the heights of Tierra del Fuego



Cape Horn in lowering mood on the second rounding eastwards



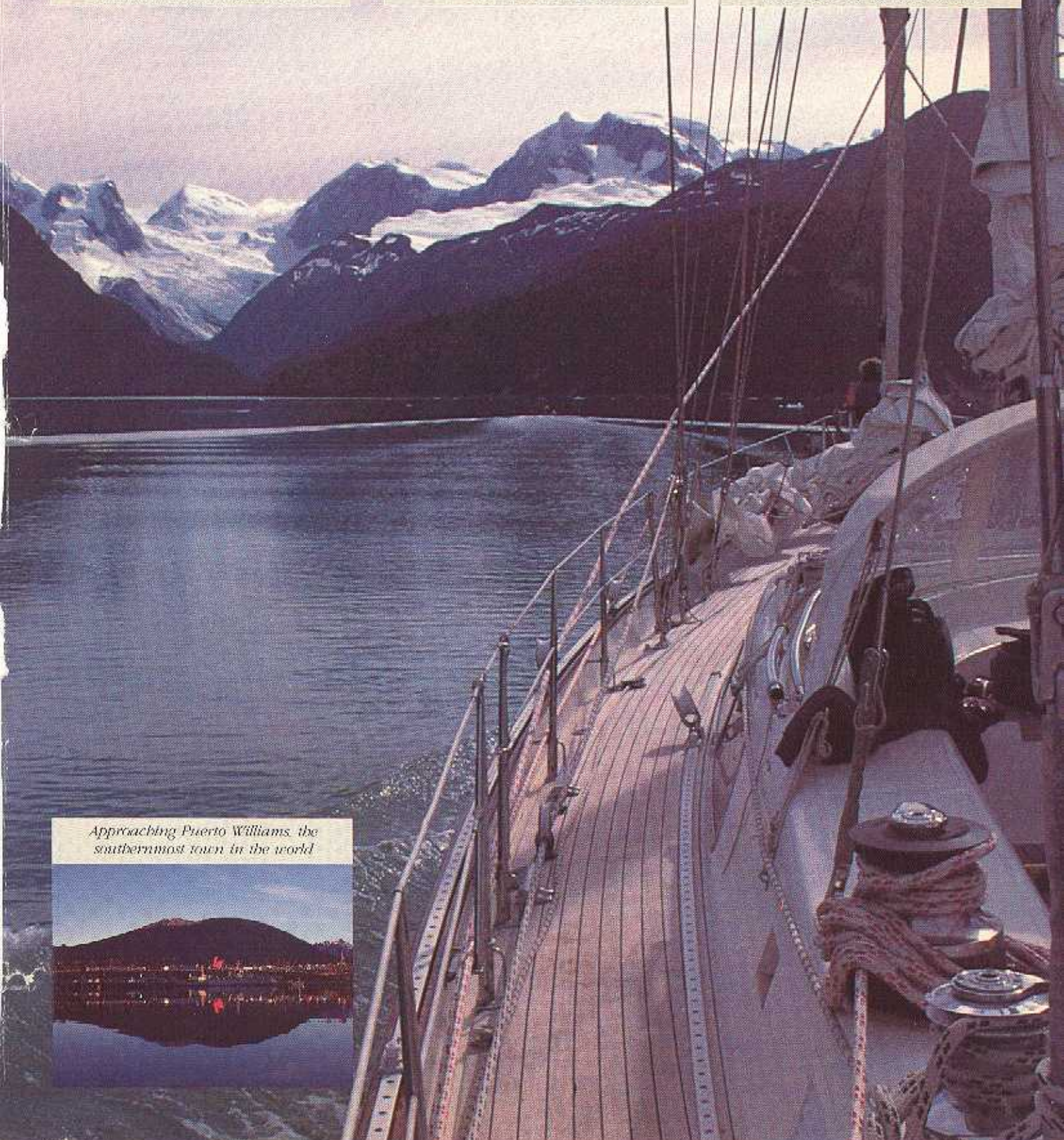
Anchored in the protection of Bahía Wodsworth in the Magellan Strait



In front of the Romanche Glacier at the western end of the Beagle Channel



Lana in command of an iceberg blocking a bay off Estero Calvo



Approaching Puerto Williams, the southernmost town in the world





before dark, without sparking any international incidents.

The threatened gale did not materialise. Next morning the water was like glass and the snow-covered mountains were crisply silhouetted against a clear blue sky. Although we were to get our fair share of wet and windy weather, we also got some spectacularly nice days.

We found that Puerto Williams was mostly a naval establishment, with people living there only to substantiate Chile's territorial claims. The paperwork was completed and, after a bit of negotiating, we were able to buy some fuel from the navy. We expected to do quite a lot of motoring to get the boat's owner to Punta Arenas in the Magellan Strait, where he was due to fly out in a few days' time.

Towards the western end of the Beagle Channel we passed several big glaciers bringing ice down from the heights of Tierra del Fuego. Since this western part of the island belongs to Chile, we were able to sail up to them, and anchor off its shores for the night.

There was no shortage of anchorages, as there are so many little islands to hide behind and bays to creep into. We were able to find good anchorages every night, and one day, when a westerly gale brought our progress to a standstill, we found good shelter in the lee of a small island, where we could wait for the gale to pass.

We had been advised always to anchor with low land to the west, otherwise in a gale the squalls or Williwaws come roaring down from the high ground at several times the speed of the mean wind. In such a mountainous place, low land often just did not exist, but we found that by anchoring close to the land, and

picking the smallest bay that we could get the boat into, the squalls would mostly pass over the top of us.

Amongst all these rocky islands, we did have some problems getting the anchors to hold. Many of the bays had no depths shown on the charts, so before anchoring, we would usually sound the bay looking for the best spot. Initially, we made the mistake of looking for a shallow area to drop the anchor. Most of the bays were very deep, and 'shallow' was anything under 65ft (20m). Time after time we would hear the rumble coming up the chain of the anchor dragging over bare rock.

Eventually we discovered that it was better to pick the deepest point of the bay, even if it was 160ft (50m) or more, and drop the anchor there. Any silt that had found its way into the bay tended to be washed down to this point, and we nearly always found good holding there, even if our main anchor chain was too short for us to let out a proper scope.

If we were anchored in very deep water, if the anchorage was very small, or if the wind was strong, we took one or more lines ashore.

Although we did have one or two nervous anchor watches at night, we never did have a problem while anchored. Fortunately we had lots of rope on board, but next time, I will make sure that the chain on the main anchor is at least 500ft (150m) long.

We got to Punta Arenas in time for the Boss to fly out, just as yet another gale was building up from the west. Although Punta Arenas is the capital of southern Chile and a very important port for the area, it is not much of a harbour, with very little shelter.

A couple of miles to the north, we

found perfect shelter in a bay, right on the edge of town. How curious that the port was not built here, taking advantage of the natural shelter. It was a bit of a trek into town, but when we saw a small Japanese yacht that had been dismantled while crashing about in the lee of the pier, we knew we had made the right decision.

We did not have too much time to explore the town. There were the inevitable repairs to make and provisions to buy, then we had to go to Puerto Natales, some 300 miles to the north, where the owner had arranged for us to pick up two guests in a few days' time. We had rented a small truck to do the shopping, and it was strange driving in the town, where every road was one way. We found that this was not unique to Punta Arenas, but that Chile is a country almost entirely of one way streets.

For the passage up to Puerto Natales, we had 30 to 40 knots of wind, right on the nose, for almost the whole trip. Luckily we were mostly in sheltered water, and *Thalussi* has a big engine, so we were able to motor into the wind without too many problems.

Hanging over us was the anticipated passage of Canal Kirk. Although many of the passages between the islands are termed *canals*, they are not in any way artificially improved. There are very few navigation aids and, outside the main routes, there are few, if any, soundings on the chart. What was special about Canal Kirk was the current. It flows through the narrow part at speeds of up to 20 knots.

SQUALLS

The obvious thing was to try to go through at slack water. The problem was the tide tables and the pilot book disagreed with each other as to what time this might be. We got on the radio and confused things further by getting a third time from the Port Captain. I decided we would aim for the earliest time. If the current was still roaring through we would anchor and wait for slack water.

As we got close to Canal Kirk, squalls were coming down out of the mountains and picking up the surface of the water like a series of tornados. With one eye constantly on the depth sounder, we hugged the uncharted western shore, trying to miss the worst of the gusts.

These were not ideal conditions for our encounter with Canal Kirk, but fortunately, as we turned into the

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entrance of the canal, the wind eased. As we progressed along the canal, towards the narrow part, the current steadily increased. It became more and more obvious that slack water was still some time off.

We spotted a fishing boat and hailed them. They told us it was a couple of hours to slack water, but they offered to show us a place to anchor, close to the narrows, where we could wait.

We followed them past a small island, where the current was swirling by at around nine or ten knots, and rounded up in the lee to try to anchor. We were out of the current, but the bottom had not a vestige of sand or mud. The anchor showed not the slightest inclination to hold.

However, the fishermen assured us it was now safe for us to continue. We stowed the anchor, waved goodbye to the fishermen and headed for the narrows. As we got closer we realised that the current was still flowing strongly, but it was too late to stop now. We aimed for the middle of the gap, and raced through at something over five knots.

UNCHARTED

As we headed north, we were again able to find anchorages for each night with no problem. It seemed that each anchorage was more spectacular than the previous one. Almost without exception, the little bays were uncharted, so we would send the dinghy in ahead, with its echo sounder running. They would advise me over the radio what to expect, as we eased the boat in behind them.

In one bay, with a particularly narrow entrance, the crew were zig-zagging to and fro in the dinghy, taking soundings up the long narrow channel. They were so preoccupied with the depths, that they forgot to look up. As we came round the bend in the channel, I was horrified to see a big tree branch sticking out well into the channel, at about the same height as our lower spreaders. Right on the end of the branch was a gigantic bird's nest. Luckily the rigging just cleared the branch, but for us that anchorage, unnamed on the chart, will always be Bird's Nest Bay.

Although we could have spent months exploring this area, we were eager to get a couple of hundred miles north to see the big glaciers, coming down from the Andes, which reached heights well over 9,000ft (3,000m).

As soon as we left the main canals and started to make our way up the

fjords into the area called Torres del Paine, we started to see ice, little fragments at first, but soon bigger and bigger pieces that we had to steer round. We wanted to get to Peel Glacier, which looked to be the biggest, but the ice was getting thicker and thicker.

We saw a small fishing boat, close to the shore, so made our way through the ice to ask them about conditions nearer the glacier. They told us that normally it was possible to get to the glacier by staying close to the western shore, since the prevailing westerlies blow the ice across to the other side.

However, we had had two days with no wind at all and now the ice was completely blocking the way. *Thalassi's* bow is strengthened with Kevlar for just such adventures and, while she seemed quite happy with the brash ice, I felt the big lumps could probably do some damage.

The fishermen suggested that we anchor in a small cove for the night, which was well protected from the ice, and then, if the wind got up, the way would be clear in the morning.

Getting into the recommended cove involved squeezing the boat in between two gigantic boulders. However, once inside, we were in perfect shelter, where neither the wind nor the ice could touch us — perfectly safe, or so we thought.

It was Lana who first spotted the iceberg. It was one of the biggest we had seen, and it had decided to park itself right in the narrow bit of the entrance to our bay. I was worried that a few more might wedge themselves around it and, as it was getting to be late summer, the weather could suddenly turn cold and we might find ourselves frozen into our sheltered little bay until spring.

We got the dinghy over the side, and went out to try to move the iceberg. To our great relief, despite it weighing hundreds of tons, we found that we were able to move it. It took perhaps five minutes of constant pushing from the dinghy to make any impression at all, but then it did start moving, albeit very slowly. With Lana perched on top giving directions, we managed to steer it out into the main channel again, where its enormous momentum carried it for at least another mile.

The next day was as calm, clear and beautiful as the previous one had been, which was nice, but it meant that the ice still blocked the 16 miles between us and Peel Glacier. We wriggled out between the rocks, and

decided to try to get to Glacier Asia instead, which was much closer to the main channel, so hopefully would involve going through less ice.

There was again a lot of ice in the approaches to Glacier Asia, but since the fjord was less than ten miles long, we decided to try pushing through it, breaking the thinner ice and steering around the bigger lumps. Eventually we got to the glacier.

The ice, thousands of years old and greatly compressed, was a deep blue colour. The glacier, as it crept down towards us, was making noise almost continuously. There was an underlying rumble, like distant thunder, interspersed by a sharper crack and a roar, as ice, some pieces as big as a house, fell off the face into the water.

GLACIER

The brash ice around us, although it was about a foot thick, was too broken to let us walk on it. But when we launched the small dinghy, we found it was too thick to penetrate with the oars. After an abortive attempt at rowing, we fitted the six horse outboard, and although it sounded like a blender full of ice cubes, it was able to push the dinghy slowly through the broken ice.

We managed to land on a rocky outcrop, right at the face of the glacier. In winter, the glacier must flow right over this rock, because it was polished completely smooth. We sat there, mesmerised by the sheer size and power of the glacier, as it crept infinitesimally towards us.

As we got further north, even though the climate got softer, it was many hundreds of miles before we lost sight of the snow in the mountains. North of Golfo de Penas, we found some thermal springs, where we could lounge in the hot water, while looking across at the snow-capped peaks.

Although we enjoyed the rest of Chile, it was the glaciers and the canals of the south that left the strongest memories. It must be one of the few remaining areas in the world where you can sail for literally hundreds of miles among the islands without seeing a house, another boat or even any sign of a person. It gives a whole new meaning to the term unspoilt. Long may it stay so. ■

John and Louis Campbell have been sailing together for 13 years since meeting in the Caribbean. They built their own 33-footer and cruised extensively, occasionally stopping others. This cruise is part of a circumnavigation of South America.