

Patagonia

Diving at the end of the World



The rugged coast of Patagonia

Text and photos by Marcelo Mammano

Consider a windy place— I mean, very windy—so windy you must ask the wind about what you can do today. Consider the wind as “mobile” as the “Donna” of the opera. He changes his mood at any time with no warning. Mood, in terms of wind, is direction, force, temperature, humidity and all the weather changes that come with them. Now, put yourself in a flat place, a plateau, with no mountains or trees to protect you and where the wind surrounds you all the time. Stay there and wait. Take your time to look around. You begin to notice that the soil upon which you are standing is covered with marine fossils and guess rightly that this was the sea floor some millions of years ago.

You walk a few steps to the end of the cliff and watch the sea and the sandy coast 100 meters below you. Depending on what part of the region you are right now, you can see some different animals. Big animals, small animals. Say, some fifty or more right whales and calves, hundreds of elephant seals basking in the sun, or thousands of Magellanic penguins toddling everywhere—some of them walking right beside you. Perhaps you are lucky enough to see a killer whale grounding on the beach and catching a sea lion pup. Then you realize that you are in a very special place—wild, almost untouched. That is Patagonia.

Patagonia is a region so vast that it would take more than one article to describe it. So, that is what we are going to do. First of all, and from our point of view (scuba divers and underwater photographers), there is a marine coastal region and there is a river and lakes region. The first faces the Atlantic Ocean and is dry and—you guessed it—very windy. The most attractive places for diving are the Valdés Peninsula in the north and the Beagle Channel at the end

Female Southern elephant seal, *Mirounga leonina*, showing us that we are too close





A dazzling Patagonia coast



LEFT: A curious sea lion bathed in sunrays peers into the camera lens



CENTER: The barnacle encrusted hide of a Southern Right Whale



BOTTOM: Large male elephant seal snoozes under a warm sun on the dark rocks along the shore

of the world. The other place lies at the foot of the Andes, which you can imagine are like the Alps, but much more extensive, with beautiful lakes surrounded by mountains and green everywhere. You can dive in both places, which both share one similar condition: cold waters. But they are very different in other ways.

The country

A few words about the country will serve you to understand its diving attraction.

A friend of mine used to classify countries as those that "are" diving places and those that "have" diving places. Argentina is in the second group. It is not a dive destination, but has some pretty, interesting and seldom dived spots that are worth a visit.

Today, it is not the expensive country it used to be—economic crisis and the devaluation of the local currency are to blame—so expect to see lot of tourist activity.

Buenos Aires is considered by many as the least "Latin American" of Latin American cities. This is due to European influence and immigration. Cultural offerings in this city are incredible, people are kind and helpful with tourists, coffee shops are open until very late in the night (some never close), tango is everywhere and although Spanish is our language, you will find that most people can help you in English.

Patagonia

Patagonia is in the southern half of the country. Life there is more expensive due to the distanc-

es. You better travel by plane to reach your destination. Once there, no matter where it is, try to rent a car if you have some time to spare. This will give you time and freedom. Many places like the Valdés Peninsula offer so much in such a big expanse that it would take some days to really enjoy all the attractions.

The places we are about to describe are perfect for a family vacation and especially the kids will enjoy truly wild contact with nature. This is neither a zoo nor an African safari. There will be times where you will find yourself watching a colony of thousands of elephant seals with no human around you except your family members. Of course, if you choose to visit them in a tourist bus, you should adhere to their schedules and rules. Going by yourself will



LEFT: Strawberry anemone
RIGHT: Bright yellow sponge
CENTER: Delicate blue anemone attached to rock on the sea floor

the Valdés Peninsula, water temperature is around 10°C, so a 5-7 mm wetsuit is okay for a couple of dives, but in the Beagle channel, expect less than 3°C, so drysuits are mandatory. You can rent or buy diving equipment, but I would advise you to bring your own mask and fins just to avoid fitting problems. Photo or video equipment rentals are seldom available.



take more time, but will allow you to enjoy a more personal approach. Go to Punta Tombo, for example. There, millions of Maguellan penguins form the biggest colony in the continent. You will be literally surrounded by these funny little animals. This is definitely a place for the family. But diving is better left for advanced divers. Although you don't need to be an expert, it would be ideal that you feel comfortable in cold and sometimes not so clear waters. With the exception of a few deep wrecks, diving is done in places no deeper

than 20 meters, mostly in the range of 12-15 meters.

You must ask special permission (in advance) if you want to dive with some of the animals in this region, because this is a protected area. An officer goes with you (not underwater) explaining what you can and cannot do. You can learn a lot from these guys. Some rules are a bit... (look around first to see if there is one of them around, please) ridiculous. For example, a diver cannot appear in the photograph with the animal.

(What?!?!?) But others rules are simply logical and perfectly understandable.

In the gulfs that surround



Valdés Peninsula

After a few days in Puerto Madryn (Argentina's diving capital) where we have dived some nice shallow wrecks in not so clear waters, we decided to head to the peninsula.

Puerto Madryn is a big city that was the first place touched by the Welsh immigration to Patagonia. This is a very nice spot to use as a base and visit the different places of the region.

Welsh tradition can still be enjoyed by visiting a couple of small and beautiful towns not so far from Madryn: Dolavon and Gaiman. There, you can enjoy a typical Welsh tea. Believe me, you won't want to eat anything the night before, so you can reserve your belly for it. Just try it. I will not tell you anymore.

Near Puerto Madryn there are some small beaches where, during the whale season, you can see those giants swimming and playing a few yards from the coast. El Doradillo, just 15 km. north of Madryn, is the best spot. You can dive in Madryn, and it is there where you can find most of the dive shops.

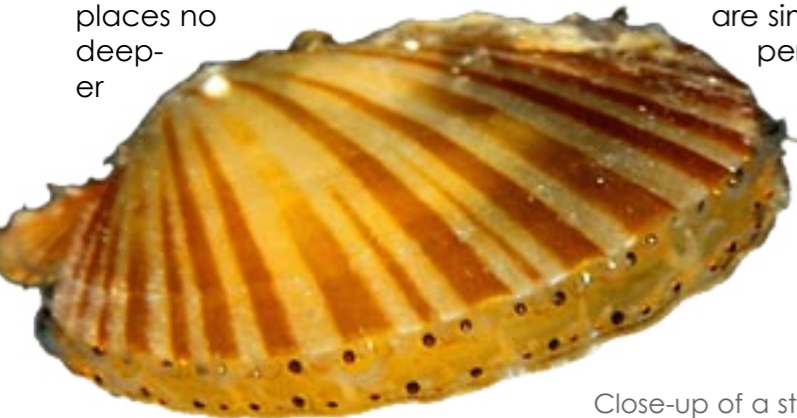
There are a couple of artifi-

Internet is everywhere today, but don't expect to find a good connection (or a connection at all) in some small villages. That's what you get when you want to

go to a wild place far from civilization.

We will leave the Beagle channel and the Andean region for future articles. Let's try first to

cover the Valdés Peninsula, as it is probably the most widely known place, and join me in a typical Patagonian diving adventure.



Close-up of a striated mollusc





Rugged coast of
Argentinian Patagonia

Patagonia

a main road and two short streets that connect it to the beach, a few houses and shops, some beach bars and that's it. It gets crowded during the summer months, but in winter, even with some tourist buses around, the place is still a paradise. There are a couple of nice small hotels in which to stay. You will enjoy the solitude, the silence, maybe some kids playing football in the streets, small houses with windows ornate with conchs and fossils, and very quiet and smiling people. A few dive shops can advise you about the better places for beach diving, which are not so far away.

In the afternoons, a walk in the surrounding cliffs will show you the vast expanse of the Patagonian

plateau. Marine fossils are everywhere. The air is clean, and you feel lucky enough to be able to enjoy such a place.

Let's go back to our diving.

Punta Pardelas

For a few days, the wind doesn't help our whale watching, so we do some beach diving instead. The most beautiful place is very near Piramides: Punta Pardelas. There, submerged in a rocky bottom, you can find colorful and delicate little creatures.

Be warned, however: Patagonia is not like the Caribbean where you can buy a card illustrated with fish and corals, which, once underwater, you can find and identify effortlessly. Here, you must look for them.

At first glance, all you see are just rocks. But then, you carefully begin to watch below the rocks and notice that the colors you have seen in warmer waters are also here. You simply cannot believe that such variety can exist in these rough conditions.

From time to time, small groupers, no longer than 15 cm, begin to bite you, trying to get you out of their territory. You let them try, and then go on your way. At no more than a meter behind you, you discover a sea lion that is watching you. It is big, bigger than you thought. Then, in a second, she (they are almost always females) disappears.

You spend more than an hour in waters no more than 12-15 meters deep. It is cold and you

cial reefs used mostly for diving "baptisms" no deeper than 12 m made with old cars and buses. Groupers, sea salmons, octopus and occasionally a sea lion will join you in most of the dives.

Wrecks were sunken on purpose here and are very interesting for black and white wide-angle photography. They are also in shallow waters, so when current is present, backscatter is a problem. The best wrecks are the *Emma*, the *Folías* and the *Albatros*.

With special permission (not difficult to get if you ask the dive operator), you can dive under some piers, which are covered with sponges, soft corals and anemones.

Best and less crowded places for diving are, however, in the peninsula. The waters are usually clearer and beach diving is pos-

sible with rock reefs very close to shore.

To cover the 90 km to the main village, Puerto Pirámides, we cross the Istmo Ameghino, a thin strip of land that, from time to time, lets you see the sea on both sides of the road: the San José Gulf at north and the New Gulf at south. Diving is currently not allowed in the northern gulf. This is to protect the fauna, especially the southern right whales. But don't worry. In the proper time of the year, you can see whales even from the balcony of your hotel room.

Puerto Pirámides

Puerto Pirámides is a small town (no more than 200 people living there) but is visited daily by thousands of tourists. Whale watching is a controlled and well-organized activity. That is why tourists

come here. But not us. Besides, I just get seasick even in a carousel. I prefer to see those beautiful beasts underwater.

Southern right whales come every May and stay here until late November. In these calm waters they mate, give birth and feed their calves. In summer, they depart to feed in colder and more plankton-rich waters, perhaps near Antarctica. These areas are still under study and not clearly identified.

During the whale season, boats depart from early in the morning until there is enough light to see the whales jump, rest on the surface, or play with their calves. A very nice experience indeed. Then, late in the afternoon, the last bus leaves the little town, and you find yourself almost alone.

Puerto Pirámides is very small—



Turquoise blue sea wraps around cliffs



TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: The impressive barnacle encrusted face of a Southern Right Whale; Dramatic view from under a whale; Giant silhouette of a whale enjoying a bubble bath expelled from a diver's air tank

BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT: Whale eye; Diving sea lion



feel the cold in your hands and lips. So, you decide that's it for the day.

Whales

On the next day, the wind calms. So, we go for whales. Rules are simple: you don't hunt them—just spot one, approach her very slowly and see her attitude towards the boat. If she is willing to stay, she will begin to make some passes below the boat, scratching her back against the boat bottom.

The officer says that we should look for young adults. Mothers with calves are a bit jealous and will not allow us to approach. Calves are also very curious, but still can't control their enormous bodies very well, which makes them a bit dangerous.

You can spend some days until you eventually find the whale that stays around long enough to be photographed. Maybe you are lucky and she is there the first time. But this is not the rule. On the days the whales decide not to "collaborate", there are other animals that would love to dive with you.

Sea lions

Sea lions are very common in these waters. From April to December, they can be found at Punta Alt, where a colony lives in the coast and little islets around. In the sum-

mer months, they migrate a few kilometers to the Punta Pirámides colony, where the shallower waters allow the puppies to swim safely.

We approach them slowly. We are still gearing up, but they have already jumped into the water. They are females. The males just stay at the top of the rocky islets, watching and monitoring us. It is better to dive a bit far from them, just in case.

Diving with sea lions is so magic that you can spend hours with them. They are fast, elegant, funny. You try to photograph them, but they move so fast, it is very difficult to compose an image. Worse yet. They bite you all the time. With their lips, they bite your hoses, snorkels, fins, everything. Yes, trying to photograph them is a nightmare. A wide-angle lens is a must. Since the dive is in very shallow waters, you must use strobes just for fill lighting, but most of the time (especially for black and white) you just use ambient light. With such movement, shallow waters and fine sandy bottom, backscatter is a problem, so you surely will end up leaving the strobes in the boat.

Elephant seals

Other animals we wanted but could not dive with were elephant

seals. They live in an enormous colony (population around 3000) in Punta Delgada. It's open sea, so water is neither clear nor calm, and these guys aren't as friendly as sea lions. So, we just visit them to photograph them on the beach. Males are big (5-6 meters long) and very, very heavy. But also, very fast if they think you are invading their territory. So, you better approach them slowly.

In a quiet afternoon, the big boss sleeps while some young males fight not far from him. He doesn't pay attention to them. They are still very young to compete with him.

All around, beautiful faces watch us. They are females. They are basking in the sun, blowing from time to time, to get rid of the sand that enters into their noses from the wind. We approach them as close as they allow us. Some ignore us, some show us their open mouth, and we slowly retreat.

In the afternoon, while the sun disappears on the horizon, we head back to Puerto Pirámides. We see some ñandúes (Patagonian ostriches, smaller than the Africans), maras (world biggest hares) and guanacos along the road. It's a long trip however, and we arrive late at night.

We left Punta Norte for another



LEFT TO RIGHT: Magnificent tail fin of a Southern Right Whale; Sunning elephant seal gives a territorial bark; Detail of a red starfish; Green sea anemones cling to a mussel; Curious penguins grin for the lens



opportunity. It is far in the north, and it is better to visit in autumn to witness nature in its wildest form: killer whales grounding on the sand trying to catch sea lions. Maybe this year...

Diving with whales

This is the day, I say to myself. The wind is calm, the sea is almost flat, and some whales can be seen from the coast. There we go.

To dive with a whale is different from anything you have ever done before. It's kind of magic. It's a privilege. Not from the government, but from Nature. A gift.

After looking for a "collaborating" whale for our photo session for more than a couple of hours, we spotted one that was in a typical position: head down, with the tail out of the water. Scientists still don't agree about why they do this. Some say they are just resting, others say they are "sailing", using their enormous tail as a sail, pushed by the wind. Others just admit they don't know.

Anyway, as we approach her, she adopts a more "normal" position, but doesn't go away. On the contrary, as the captain shuts off the engine and the boat slowly drifts to her, she begins to circle us. Usually, the photographer

goes first with a mask and snorkel to try to secure some photos, and then, if the whale remains around, the shooter goes back to the boat for scuba gear.

I am not the strong, athletic kind of diver. I am small, and diving with a drysuit and weights and snorkel is almost a torture for me. So, I decided to risk the opportunity, spend the time to gear up completely and go for her in scuba. My choice was correct. For the time, I begin my descent, she was still there, curious to see what was that black thing that was approaching her.

We are close to shore, in a place no

deeper than 12 meters. The water is green and visibility is scarce, no more than 5-6 meters. I will use my Nikonos V with a Nikonos 15 mm lens, an SB105, and TMax100 black and white film pushed to 400 ISO to increase the contrast.

I adjust my buoyancy and begin to swim. I can't see her. I am alone. A "safety" (!) diver, a boy who goes with us in the boat, snorkels on the surface. He signals

somewhere, but I can't see anything. Suddenly, a cloud covers the sunlight. A big, fast moving cloud. A cloud with an eye! There she was. With a delicate stroke of her tail, she passes beside me almost effortlessly, but fast enough to not giving me time to compose a first shot. I try to follow her, but it's impossible. She continues to play the same game, again and again. After ten minutes of swimming I am so tired, that I decided to rest on the sandy bottom.

Many have asked me if I was afraid of swimming with such giant animal. To tell you the truth, my biggest fear was

returning without a photograph. And after those initial minutes, I had almost breathed half of my tank and still had no photographs in my camera. You definitely need to learn to dive with these guys. That was what I was thinking about, when I saw the cloud again. Right over me, in the very place where my bubbles reach the surface. I begin to ascend with the air bubbles rising up. It seems that she enjoys the bubble bath, because she is completely turned upside down, with her belly to the sun and her back receiving the caresses of my bubbles.

As I approach her, she notices me and begins to turn very slowly. I get a shot of her eye at no more than a few centimeters. As she turns her enormous body, all the water moves around me and we emerge together in an explosion of foam and waves, like a submarine. I grab a shot of her respiratory operculi and the little parasitic cyamids that surround them. I turn to my right and notice her tail approaching me, so I begin to move my legs trying to get far from her. I think to myself, I am going to die. Well, maybe not die, but I'll definitely

end this dive with some broken bones. The four-meter wide tail gets closer and closer and I stay still waiting for the best (or the worse). But nothing really happens. Like the pilot of a big Boeing, she maneuvers her body so perfectly that the tail passes beside me at no more than a few centimeters, without touching me. Amazing!

I lost her for



Penguins pruning their feathers populate the stony beaches to rest under the sun



awhile. I have a few PSI in my tank and only one frame left in my camera. The “safety” guy keeps pointing at her doing some gestures I cannot understand. After swimming with no direction for a couple of minutes, I eventually see her. She is in the upright position again. With the tail outside, her head almost touches the bottom, so she must measure about 14-16 meters. I begin to meter the background as I approach her from behind. I don't want to fail. I reach her holding my breath and shoot a vertical photo just before she moves on and disappears into the green water.

I get back to the boat. I am really exhausted. But it was a great dive and I am really happy. We slowly go back to

Puerto Pirámides. I have decided I was too tired and sick—seasickness is my karma—to repeat the dive. It was the last friendly whale of that trip. The wind blew so hard the following days that the port was closed and we couldn't dive anymore.

I dedicated those bad days to getting some photos of the penguins at Punta Tombo Reserve, some 180 km south of Puerto Madryn. But the whale dive was the highlight of the trip and will remain with me forever. Fortunately, whales keep coming every year, so I plan to dive with them again. There is a cycle to their movements and the same whale is supposed to come to Valdés every three years. Maybe, I can find her again. She is the one that loves

bubbles. The guys in Pirámides (they know about whales) had never seen such behavior before, so if you ever dive with a whale that uses you as her personal “Jacuzzi”, please, just give her my regards. ■



TOP CENTER: Detail of sea anemone
TOP RIGHT: Poka-dotted nudibranch
LEFT: Sea lion swims under a gleaming sun
INSET: Smiling female elephant seal



fact file

Patagonia, Argentina



History Argentina gained its independence from Spain in 1816. The following period saw internal political conflicts between liberals and conservatives and between civilian and military groups. The end of World War II saw the establishment of Peronist authoritarian rule in Argentina, after which continued political turbulence led to a military junta taking power in 1976. Democracy made a comeback in 1983, and remains despite challenges including a severe economic crisis in 2001-02 that erupted into violent public protests forcing the resignation of several interim presidents. Government: republic. Capital: Buenos Aires

Geography Argentina is located in the southern end of South America. Patagonia (a region shared geographically with Chile) occupies most of the southern half of the country. The Valdés Peninsula is on the coast of Chubut, one of the five provinces that are located in the region. Coastline: 4,989 km. Terrain: to the north, rich plains of the Pampas; to the south, flat to rolling plateau of Patagonia; to the west, rugged Andes along the border. Lowest point: Laguna del Carbon 105 m. Highest point: Cerro Aconcagua 6,960 m. As mentioned in the article, Patagonia is a vast plateau with the Andes to the west. This plateau ends in pebble beaches or sandy coasts usually (but not always) enclosed by high cliffs. Millions of years ago, sea level was 100 m or higher, so the current soil was once the sea bottom. Marine fossils are everywhere. Natural hazards: heavy flooding, earthquakes in San Miguel de Tucuman and Mendoza areas in the Andes, *pamperos*, or violent windstorms, hit the Pampas and north-east. Environmental issues: deforestation, soil

degradation, desertification, air pollution and water pollution. Argentina is a world leader in making voluntary greenhouse gas targets

Climate The coastal area of the Patagonia is arid and dry, due mainly to scarce rainfall (no more than 200 mm/year) and strong western winds that blow almost continually. Their intensity increases in the warmer summer months. Temperature: 15-18°C in summer and 6-7°C in winter. Water temperature: about 16°C in February and 8°C in August. Tidal variations are among the world's greatest, so in some areas there are strong currents. This, associated to wind and the topographic characteristics of the terrain (with some places with strong "up wellings" or cold water ascending currents) produces a rich biological area (plankton)

Seasons in the Southern Hemisphere, summer goes from December to March, and winter, from June to September

Economy Advantages: rich natural resources, high literacy rate, export-oriented agricultural sector and a diversified industrial base. Disadvantages: inflation, external debt, capital flight, budget deficits. Negative growth in 2000 due to skepticism of the government debt repayment while maintaining peso-US dollar exchange rate, bond problems, massive bank withdrawals, sliding consumer and investor confidence despite the government efforts to rectify the situation with reforms. Following a stabilization at a low level, growth is making a comeback driven by domestic demand, solid exports, and positive external conditions strong revenue performance and a budget surplus



while inflation rose to 12.3 percent in 2005. Agriculture: sunflower seeds, lemons, soybeans, grapes, corn, tobacco, peanuts, tea, wheat, livestock. Industries: food processing, motor vehicles, consumer durables, textiles, chemicals and petrochemicals, printing, metallurgy, steel

Currency Argentine peso (ARS) Exchange rate: 1 peso = .32 USD, .25 EUR

Population 39,921,833 (July 2006 est.) Ethnic groups: white (mostly Spanish and Italian) 97%, mestizo (mixed Amerindian and white ancestry), Amerindian, or other non-white groups 3%. Religions: Roman Catholic 92% (about 20% practicing), Protestant 2%, Jewish 2%

Language Spanish (official); English is widely spoken in main cities and tourist areas; Italian, German, French

Travel How to get there: definitely, go by plane. It's a long trip to Madryn. Once there, you can rent a car to travel the area. The only airline that currently flies there is Aerolíneas Argentinas. Check before you go to see if they go to Puerto Madryn. They usually don't, and you must fly to Trelew (about 70 km south of Madryn) and then take a bus. Your travel agent can arrange it. Once there, take tours, or better yet, rent a car. Distances are large, and the whole round trip to the Peninsula (from Puerto Madryn) is about 400 km. The only paved road is the one that joins Puerto Madryn to Puerto Pirámides. Drive easy and beware of the stones that other cars can throw when they are passing you. They can break your windshield.

Security The usual recommendations for big cities: don't walk alone, ask before venturing in some places (especially at night), don't leave your values unattended, etc. Life is definitely more peaceful in Patagonia. Voltage: 220 v.

Food/water Don't miss Argentine "asados" (barbecues) and "dulce de leche". Water is Ok for drinking, although many would prefer to dilute it with a good Malbec (especially with the "asados")

Seasonal fauna Whales: from May to December. Penguins: from January to December, but best from September to March. Sea lions: All year round. Elephant seals: All year round. Killer whales: from February to April. Dolphins: from December to April

Dive Links
Scuba Duba, Puerto Madryn
www.scubaduba.com.ar
Golfo Azul, Puerto Madryn
www.pinosub.com
Patagonia Scuba, Puerto Pirámides
www.patagoniascuba.com
The Paradise, Puerto Pirámides
www.hosteriaparadise.com.ar



Marcelo Mammana is an Argentine underwater photographer (and physician). He was born and lives in Buenos Aires. He has dived since he was 13, and has done so in the Patagonia, Brazil and the Caribbean. He is a self-educated photographer (he actually first learned to photograph underwater before top-side), and although he uses color film for editorial work, he prefers to shoot in black and white. Visit his award-winning website www.light-underwater.com. He is currently working on a photographic project on Patagonia.

Marcelo's black and white images are taken with Kodak TMax100 (pushed 2 stops to increase contrast, in whale and sea lions images). He uses Fuji Provia for color shots. Underwater shots are taken with a Nikonos V, Nikonos SB105, Nikkor UW 15mm, Nikkor UW 35mm + extension tubes. Land shots are taken with a Nikon F601, Nikon AF 24 mm.

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Websites
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www.madryn.gov.ar
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www.chubutur.gov.ar
AR Tourism, LLC
Argentina & Patagonia Travel Specialists
www.artourism.com
SOURCES: M. MAMMANA & CIA.GOV WORLD FACT BOOK