



Homage to
PATAGONIA

A charter with a difference aboard the explorer yacht
Atmosphere off the stunning Chilean coastline
Frances & Michael Howorth



The EXCITEMENT of being on board a discovery yacht as she EXPLORES unfamiliar waters is EXHILARATING



Superyacht owner Andres Ergas has a passion even greater than that for his explorer yacht *Atmosphere*: a desire to discover the world's top fishing destinations. His energy, when it comes to seeking out new and exciting fishing spots, knows no bounds. He has cruised, flown and hiked thousands of miles to this end, only to conclude that nowhere beats his own backyard. He describes the Patagonian coast of Chile as the most wonderful place on the planet, not just for fishing but for hiking, cruising and exploring.

He likes nothing more than to gather his friends together and set sail from Puerto Montt in Chile, 650 miles south of the capital Santiago, towards Patagonia. Once there, he flies sorties using one of the two bright red Bell 407 helicopters he keeps aboard *Atmosphere* to some of the world's most remote spots to explore and, of course, to fish. But he's an entrepreneur as well as an adventurer, so when not using her himself, Ergas charts his yacht through broker Robert Shepherd, director of Edmiston's New York office and head of the company's special discovery yacht charter division.

This is how we found ourselves in Chile, aboard one of the yacht's helicopters at the start of our exciting adventure. There aren't many charters on which you can visit glaciers, explore volcano calderas, discover barely used trails, kayak in streams, drink *yerba maté* with local fishermen, and play tag with killer whales.

Wherever *Atmosphere* cruises, an unexplored wilderness is not far away. On our first day aboard, we took a helicopter to an isolated trail originally created centuries ago by Jesuit priests. The path led through thick woodland and along fast-running rivers to a point beside Laguna Cayutúe. As we walked, our guides Pablo

and Ignacio pointed out colourful parrots, tubby little chucao birds, wild fuchsia, orange-trunked Chilean bell flowers, ulmo trees covered in white blossom, and busy bees making delicious *miel de ulmo*. Despite the fact that we had been dropped in to this seemingly remote landscape, we suddenly crossed paths with a local family on horseback, working their way down the track from their home in the hills to the nearest town. They make this long journey every week so their son can catch a boat to school.

After an exhilarating three-hour hike we came to a clearing by the lake, and with perfect timing our pilot swooped down from the sky. He plucked us out of the wilderness and transported us swiftly back to the home comforts aboard *Atmosphere*.

As darkness fell, the yacht weighed anchor and began to motor noiselessly along the Reloncaví estuary on a 12-hour voyage, covering some 140 miles, to Auchemo, where we anchored in the shadow of the active volcano. With a high mountain backdrop, the waters here are often sheltered and we had little need for the yacht's zero-speed stabilisers. Smooth seas and roll-free anchorages each night certainly added to the delights of this exciting voyage. The Chaitén volcano last erupted in 2008, enveloping the nearby town in ash and forcing some 2,000 people to flee when the river began to flood. Thankfully, she seemed very quiet on our visit.

Volcanoes dominated our activities on the second day. We were whisked by helicopter across the wild and bleak terrain to the crater of the volcano at Corcovado. We skimmed snow-capped peaks, flying so close that the rotor blades appeared to be inches from the mountain rock. Reaching the top of the Corcovado volcano high above the clouds, the chopper dropped



down to land on the plateau at 1,000 metres above sea level – the starting point for our trek down to the lake that had formed in an old crater below us.

Left alone on the mountain with the helicopter gone, we were enveloped in an eerie silence. It was sobering to think that we were among the handful of people ever to have set foot on these rocks.

Back to the task in hand, and all we had to do was make our way down to the pick-up point on the shore of the lake, a mere 250 metres below us. However, just as we were about to begin our descent we heard – and then saw – heavy rocks cascading down our intended route. Ignacio and Pablo quickly decided to split up to find a safer route down. Ignacio set off alone, along a shorter, steeper route, and we left with Pablo on a more accessible track heading off around the hillside. We agreed to meet on the other side. But the hill turned out to be a ridge, with no chance of circumnavigation – we would have to wait to meet up with Ignacio.

We followed a dried riverbed, but the roughly strewn boulders made progress difficult, so we tried a different route through the forest, and in minutes were soaked by the wet trees and undergrowth. Slowly making our way through nature's obstacle course, we came across a solidified river of lava left by a volcanic eruption 200 years ago. This relatively smooth path stretched down to the lake and we completed the last half mile in no time. Ignacio had already arrived and was waiting for us in what was once a forest but was now just tree tops poking above the lava rock. All too soon a red speck appeared in the sky, ready to take us back to our temporary floating home.

Atmosphere carries a 12-metre adventure RIB, originally designed to transport marines into war zones. With twin 250hp Yamaha outboards and equipped with enough navigation equipment to rival the average superyacht, she offers a fast, exciting and safe ride. She

was to take us to the Gulf of Corcovado on a whale-spotting excursion. This wide stretch of Pacific lies between mainland Chile and Chiloé, one of the country's largest islands, famous for the 15 different types of exotic potato it exports. These waters are a breeding ground for many whale species including the humpback, killer, sperm and blue pigmy. The area is also home to white shark, sealions and Peale's dolphin, a white-bellied smaller cousin of the bottlenose and native to this part of the coast.

Within minutes of leaving the security of our mothership, we were surrounded by a pod of Peale's dolphin. They swooped in and out of our bow wave, leaping into the air and smacking down onto the water with a loud splash. As Pablo pushed the throttle forward and our speed increased to over 40 knots, we lost them – we had whales to find. Clear of the shore, he cut the engines, deployed the RIB's on-board hydrophones, and we sat in wait for the arrival of the whales.

Our eyes scanned the water for any sign of them, and we were not disappointed – soon we saw the plumes of a whale's venting some three miles away. We approached with caution, wary of scaring them off. Then suddenly a whale jumped clear of the water, rolling to reveal a white belly. The nine killer whales showed little fear as they came closer to us to work out if the dark grey and black RIB could in fact be a distant cousin. They performed their routines for us, blowing plumes of air and sea water from their blowholes each time they surfaced.

On a number of occasions they came so close to the boat that it felt as if we could reach out and touch them. They ploughed through the water, heading straight for the side of our boat, only to dive underneath us at the last second and surface safely on the other side – an exhilarating spectacle, and one that from a vantage point on the RIB certainly put hearts in mouths.

Charter facts

Length 45.40m (149ft)

Beam 10m (33ft)

Cruising speed 11 knots

Guests 28

Crew 32

Charter rates

€147,000pw

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Facing page, main photo: *Atmosphere* is perfectly at home in the sheltered waters under the shadow of the mountains at Piti Palena.

Facing page, top left: A helicopter is a key tool for getting about in the wilderness of Patagonia where there are no roads. **Facing page, left:** After a long day's hike, a gourmet king crab dinner with fine Chilean wines are the perfect restorative.

Above left: Corcovado lagoon, a glacier-fed lake high in the mountains.

Above, from the top: Nature's wonders – a blue dragonfly; a Peale's dolphin plays beside *Atmosphere's* RIB; a rare Patagonian frog.

Below: A sealion colony near Auchemo.





*We felt as if we were pioneers
DISCOVERING locations
UNTOUCHED by humankind*

Above: Splendid isolation in Corcovado lake, which is only accessible by helicopter.

Below: Hiking down to the icy pool below the glacier at Melimoyu.



The convoy of boat and whales moved westwards towards a small outcrop of rocks awash in the Pacific swell. Studying the rocks, we realised what was attracting the whales. There, clinging perilously to the rocks, was a female sealion and her two young – potential dinner for an orca or two. The sea swept the pups from their rocky perch and mum panicked as her babies scrambled back onto safe ground. They may be adept and agile in the water when seeking their own prey, but on this occasion these sealions clearly felt that safety was dry and rock-shaped.

The next day our pilot flew us over the low-lying Palena river, where we had earlier dropped anchor. We skirted across the muddy estuary and into the hills where we came face-to-face with the Melimoyu volcano and its snow-capped peak. He dropped us off on a natural landing pad of flat ground at the foot of a glacier 700 metres above sea level. This is only the fourth time a helicopter from *Atmosphere* has landed here and it is an area so remote, far from any track or road, that once again we felt as if we were pioneers discovering locations untouched by humankind. The scenery was spectacular – a deep ravine to one side, gouged out of the earth by centuries of ice erosion, a heavily forested high cliff to the other, and cutting them in half the formidable glacier.

The icy face of the glacier is blue with age and riddled with caves caused by erosion at the point where it meets the lagoon. The ice cracks occasionally, with a sound like thunder, and chunks of compacted snow fall into the lagoon making mini icebergs. Despite the clearly freezing water temperature, the beauty of it all was too much for Ignacio, and he was overcome by the urge to whip off his shirt and take an icy dip in the virgin lake. As the sun rose, bathing the valley in light, we filled our empty bottles with naturally pure water from a crystal-clear stream and toasted our valiant swimmer.

The silence was broken only by the arrival of our helicopter returning to take us back to our yacht in Piti Palena. As soon as we touched down, we were greeted, as always, by stewardesses offering glasses of freshly squeezed fruit juice.

In a quiet, sheltered part of the Palena River is a stretch of water littered with numerous tiny islands, and kayaks (carried aboard *Atmosphere*) are the very best way to explore them. We paddled from island to island, watching the rock cormorants fishing or standing around in the sun, drying off their outstretched wings. We beached our craft on a sandy island or two but the dense undergrowth made any inland exploration impossible.

Inside one pretty cove we met Jaimie, a local fisherman who cultivates mussels to sell at market. He made us welcome and invited us into the summer home he had built entirely with his own hands from local wood. He had made the hanging shingles with tiles he'd hacked one by one with his large machete. Inside, a wood-burning stove supplied the heat and means of cooking his meals.

The kettle was on and he invited us to take *yerba maté* with him, which, given the protocols involved, is rather like being invited to take part in a Japanese tea ceremony. Boiling water is poured into a gourd over a coarse powder of green leaves and stems, a special metal straw is inserted and, taking care not to stir the mixture, it is passed from person to person.

It is important to drink most of the maté and then hand the vessel back to the server, who refills it with more hot water and hands it to the next person. But beware – saying "thank you" signifies you do not want any more and can suggest you don't like the way the maker has prepared the brew. When everyone has taken *maté*, the server drinks his own portion and the ceremony is complete.





The ice CRACKS occasionally, with a sound like THUNDER, and CHUNKS of compacted snow fall into the lagoon

That night *Atmosphere* sailed 22 miles from Piti Palena to the Bay of Tictoc. Here we anchored off Punto Escondido deep inside Bahía de Pescadores. We drank our morning coffees and watched seabirds feeding from fish-rich waters, while sealions swam lazily around the yacht.

We left the sealions playing and flew off to the volcano at Paramo for a day-long hike across a brand-new, never-been-trekking part of the mountain, far from any human dwelling. We alighted on a plateau at 850 metres, stepping onto a soft carpet of moss that felt like walking across a fine, deep-pile rug. These high places are often subject to fierce winds that sweep across the exposed mountainside, ripping away anything large in their way. It is for this reason that trees and plants here have evolved the appearance of well-cultivated Bonsai. Gnarled trunks, substantial root systems and tiny leaves on perfectly formed miniature branches are everywhere, and with so many trees fighting for such a small space, the area is reminiscent of a Lilliputian forest.

We stopped off between two pristine lakes at 760 metres above sea level and ate our picnic lunch of delicious Wagyu beef steak sandwiches washed down with clear, pure mountain water. The sun was warm and the air so clean we couldn't help but take a customary South American siesta!

Later we trekked across a ridge or three, determined to work off our lunch and found a smaller lake inhabited by dragonflies in the throes of courtship rituals. The males flitted from bank to bank, deftly landing and taking off in front of the watching females, each male trying to outperform the others. As we were watching the show we noticed a tadpole in the water and caught our first glimpse of the rare Patagonian frog – a small ochre and burned-umber amphibian. After a wonderful day, we waited at 600 metres for our pick-up, and

reflected that there are two ways to trek across land untouched by humans. The hard way: on foot, all the way up and all the way down. Or the *Atmosphere* way: hitching a ride on a helicopter – it really is the only way to travel in Patagonia. And keen fishermen can be flown to secret mountain locations, far from human settlement or road, where Andres Ergas has taken small boats by helicopter and left them for the fishing season.

The waters the yacht moves in and the style in which she does so is at odds with the three-decked white superyachts that lurk off St Tropez during the summer and St Barts during the winter. She may not have what purists would call a 'superyacht finish' but that, if anything, adds to her character – besides, she offers so much more to the discerning charter guest.

Guest cabins offer a choice of twin or king-size beds, all with a compact ensuite bathroom. The main saloon, dining room and bar area are housed in one large open-plan space on the main deck. Sensible amenities include a wet room where boots and outdoor wear can be stored, while luxury facilities include on-deck spa pools and a sauna room. The captain and his crew keep a tight ship that is clean and tidy, but as is so often the case aboard charter yachts, it is the crew who make everyday life so pleasing. And the chefs aboard *Atmosphere* are no exception, preparing a series of gourmet masterpieces. Service is, of course, thoroughly professional.

The excitement of being on board a discovery yacht as she explores unfamiliar waters is a unique experience. Chile's coastline fits this bill precisely – it is a catalogue of nature's wonders and perfect for releasing one's inner explorer. With a superyacht to host our cruise, a splendid crew who made our stay on board a seamlessly comfortable one, and the extraordinary sights of Patagonia, this is a luxury adventure holiday not to be forgotten. **SYW**



Above: Ice age – the glacier at Melimoyu.
Left: Every ride in the Bell 407 is another photo opportunity.
Below left: Ignacio, one of the guides, goes for a swim in the almost-frozen lake.
Bottom: The authors explore the Melimoyu glacier that glistens in the midday sun.