

[Mark Holbrook reports from Patagonia](#) (Monday, 26 May 2008) Written by [Mark Holbrook](#)

THE BIG five-oh struck last year, so to drive away the blue devils I headed south to find the Patagonia that all my OCC friends were enthusing about. I took a place on *Seal*, a Chuck Payne designed 56ft cutter, skippered by Hamish and Kate Laird. Both her owners have extensive high latitude experience and have worked several seasons on Skip Novak's *Pelagic*. They have injected this experience into every detail of the custom built (and part self-built) *Seal*. This was their first season with *Seal* in the south and I suppose I had expected to find some rough edges, but apart from the fact that Hamish dislikes coffee, the machines used to produce the drink and, it must be said, all who imbibe it if you catch him too early in the morning, I could not have wanted for better hosts.

We were quite a mixed crew. The Lairds live aboard with their two young children and we were joined by a family of three from the west coast of the USA who had not sailed before, a situation I found a little strange, because I would not have picked Cape Horn for my first sailing experience.

The charter fee included everything, so my arrival with clinking luggage containing alcoholic contributions to the stores was completely unnecessary. A much more welcome gift was the story of FitzRoy – *Evolution's Captain*, by Peter Nichols – as a gift for the ship's library.

Ushuaia proved an excellent place to store the boat with vegetables of a quality I hadn't expected to find down here. It appears customary to store the lamb outside on the rail, which to the novice appears as a rather pagan practice with a bloody crucified carcass on the stern of your yacht. I never did find out how you keep the gulls away – maybe they just don't like lamb.

From Ushuaia in Argentina to Puerto Williams in Chile where I managed to seduce the crew into exploring Pisco sours with me (you know, one is not enough, two is too many, three is not enough...) unfortunately the bar, Los Dientes de Navarino, ran out of eggs for the topping after our third round, but even more unfortunately we had ceased to notice or care! The rest of the night was spent prone in the cockpit working out where the Southern Cross was.

The forecast was bad and the Armada has a habit of closing the port on the smallest pretext, so armed with our Zarpe detailing our passage plan and detailing the dire consequences of not keeping to it or not reporting in twice a day on the radio, we left to take shelter behind Isla Lennox, the last stop before the strait north of the Cape Horn archipelago.

The weather fax revealed a situation most comparable to a Zebra's bottom, so the decision was taken to wait for the first system to pass and then make for the Cape and back before the next one arrived. The intervening time was spent visiting the delightful navy family living at this southernmost outpost and bartering with the fishing boats for Centollon crabs.

We passed Cape Horn from west to east. It was too rough to land, but then landing would have taken away much of the mystique of the place for me and, armed with the required photos, we returned to the Canal Beagle, the glaciers and scenery I had never thought to see.

I could have spent two years here and still wanted more rather than the two weeks available. Quite overwhelmed by this taster of Tierra del Fuego, we returned to Ushuaia where my hosts introduced me to the local lady who 'sorts out boat problems' – Mrs Roxanna Diaz – who, I'm delighted to say, has agreed to act as the OCC Port Officer for Ushuaia and to help members as they travel these wonderful waters.

Roxanna's email is Rox@xaxero.com.

[Of Snow White and Body Piercing](#) (Tuesday, 06 November 2007) Written by [Mark Holbrook](#)

To those likely to be concerned with the organisation of such events I have made it clear – I want my corpse to be carried into church, not wheeled in like some piece of offal. I want to be carried, if at all possible by six stout friends, but paid flunkeys will do. I just have a horror of that neat collapsible trolley thing that sits at the side ready to squeak out again if mother earth is to receive my bones or only used for the delivery trip if I am to make my own personal contribution to global warming. So, as an Englishman in Scotland, where on a July afternoon your car can still be stuck behind some drum-beating bigotry of the William III, Prince of Orange variety I had always classed myself as happier at the Catholic funerals than those of the John Knox variety. The RC ones were generally better attended, showed a greater out-pouring of grief and featured the all-important eight man lift whilst the latter tended to be rather lighter affairs featuring squeaking wheels and an all-together too fast a retreat to the sausage rolls.

Yes, high church of England, Catholic with a small 'c' who would probably have been described with a bigger first letter if it hadn't have been for the divorce arrangements of King Harry.

At least that was the situation until I started to look with interest at the churches on my trip down the atlantic coast of Spain and Portugal.

My school day RS still brought up memories of Moses, so seriously aggrieved with the idolatry of those left at the bottom of Mount Sinai that he ground down the images and made his country-men drink them. No doubt John Knox would have approved of the beverage, not so I thought of the people who built this place as I stood in the church at Viana do Castelo. There, in front of me, was the Mother of Christ. Not looking too happy it must be said, presumably because sticking out of her lower abdomen – highlighted by the concomitant leaking body fluids – were seven swords. To all the world the Queen of Heaven looked like a fakir who would not be doing an encore. 'Weird' the small 'c' in me thought whose primary immersion in the more orthodox faith was the opportunity (frowned upon but still available) to confess just once prior to confirmation.

Anyway, moving on to a niche which looked to all the world like Santa's Grotto in Hamleys complete with shooting stars and wee doors of the advent calendar variety behind which a pixie or a donkey would be hiding with a piece of chocolate. No wait! It's not Santa's Grotto at all, it must be Snow White because there is a glass coffin (I did look in vain for a half-eaten apple) surrounded by several unusually well built dwarves.

'OK', now I need help, why is Jesus in a glass coffin?

The last mystery visited me on the way out since a peep into the font revealed the largest stone snake I have ever seen, the water lapping around the sides of the curled-up serpent.

I walked out quite shocked and starting to think seriously about the advantages of caster-wheels. Of course, as C of E I had always been a bit worried about the deification of bit-part players in God's story but where on earth did the snake-in-the-font fit into the overall scheme of things?

It's good to see though that although the folks here clearly like their graven images there are people in the organising committee with a wider view. Those of you who have visited Santiago de Compostella will be familiar with the story of Santiago Matamoros. You know, St. James the Greater, brother of John and son of Zebedee (Boing!) gets martyred in Jerusalem and having left somewhat more complicated funeral instructions than your author gets conveyed to Ria de Arosa in Spain by stone (yes, submarine) boat with the announcement of his body's arrival being made by the Virgin standing on top of a pillar.

Subsequently St. James is buried with his two disciples in northern Spain where despite these comprehensive funeral arrangements the grave is lost. 800 years later however a star appears over the burial-field (as in Campo Stella) and a whole new tourist industry is born.



But not just tacky souvenirs and scallops-au-gratin for our James, oh no. In 844 AD he appears on horseback with a shiny new suit of armour to behead every Muslim he can find and set Spain free, hence 'Matamoros'. That is why on one side of the cathedral in Santiago there is a shrine with St. James complete with pilgrim felt hat, gourd and scallop shell but otherwise sheaved in bright armour wielding a wicked looking sword and with a whole pile of heads from the sons of Ishmael under his horse, complete with bony and stringy red bits.

Now in this day and age such images do not really rank in PC stakes so What to Do?¹ The faithful on one side will rebel if the image of Spain's patron saint is removed but the faithful on the other side will wreck the train timetables unless something is done. The answer, it seems, was to plant some flowers.

Lots and lots of them.

Now above the bank of flowers you can just see St. James' head, all below is obscured with petal and leaf and you need a machete to peek through to see bits of a follower of the prophet.

Pragmatism is still alive and well in the Church it seems, incorporation of pagan symbols into the ritual of baptism and obfuscation of images from another age when required.

Maybe I should just ask for WD40 to be squirted onto those casters.

(1) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/3680331.stm>

[Cape Horn Part 1](#) (Tuesday, 21 August 2007) Written by [Mark Holbrook](#)

Cape Horn Part 1

Deca-Plegic Blues

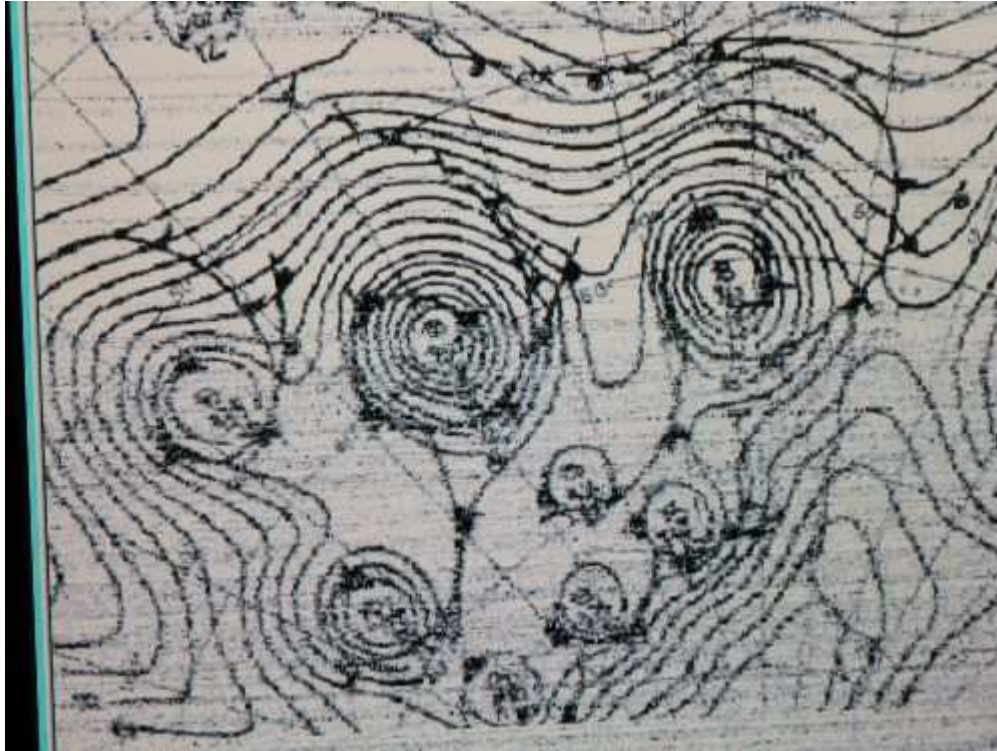
Patagonia can be paradise. There you are, somewhat south of the 55th parallel' and so far life has been good. Food is easy to come by in these cold waters, friends, mates and the resultant offspring from when I can tell the difference, come and go. Yes, prime of crustacean life has arrived. Funny how these Chilean Chaps think a crab pot is hard to access – you just crawl in, eat well and crawl out again. The trouble is that Crabs just don't appreciate the law of averages which states (well, as applicable to Crabs anyway) that sooner or later or anytime in-between the crab boat will turn up and haul up the pot with you inside it, even if you yourself have barely passed your hors d'oeuvre. Thus it was that I came to appreciate just how debilitating deca-plegia can be.

Up above Mark had arrived at a milestone. The big 'five oh' had come along and failing youth demanded some demonstration of continuing vitality and sailing round Cape Horn had been selected as a suitable exercise. Lacking motivation, resources, and a tank of a boat to do it in personally, a skippered charter of the 55 ft Aluminium Chuck Payne designed 'Seal' ran by Hamish and Kate Laird sounded perfect. Forward planning is for Mark to be a quite intolerable grumpy old man with disgusting personal habits by the time nursing home status has arrived and the photo on the wall will send its own powerful message out to the staff – that old grey shell receiving a bed-bath once sailed a wee boat round the Great Cape so careful with the soap!

The start of the programme for a photo shoot round Cape Horn goes like this:

- >Get yourself to Ushuaia in Argentina without losing luggage (failed)
- >Buy replacement stuff
- >Find 'Seal' at AFASYN dock in Ushuaia
- >Hold your negotiating position with other charters that as dreadful as weather may seem, and as attractive as glaciers/plants/hikes in Canal Beagle may appear, super hero photo at Cape Horn is essential (success!)
- >Check out of Argentina and into Chile which is just across the strait but requiring extraordinary quantities of paper. Discover Pisco Sours and get very drunk in Puerto Williams (more success!)
- >Nice Chileans give you a 'Zarpe' which appears to tell you where to be, when to be there and requires you to talk to them umpteen times a day. Zarpe says 'go to Bahia Nassau passing to the east of Isla Navarino' so not wanting to be sunk by the Armada that is what you do.
- >Get weather fax that looks like a Zebra's bottom

>Wait, and wait, and then wait again. The chosen waiting room was the anchorage on the East side of Isla Lennox.



Weather Fax like a Zebra's bottom



No doubt about the prevailing wind direction here



Armada outpost - Isla Lennox

Now bartering is alive and well at Isla Lennox, a Chilean naval outpost guards the island from those who would take it away from the regime of the disappeared and in the bay half a dozen fishing boats swung at their moorings full of crabs since the buying-boat had found it too rough to get to them for a couple of days. For the fishing crews currency meant relatively little anyway – there was nothing to spend it on and nowhere to carry out that pointless exercise so a deal proposing vegetables and wine in exchange for a dust-bin portion of Centollón crabs needed no protracted consideration.



Dust-bins of Centollón crabs

Squeamish readers may consider jumping the next bit and going straight to SV Seal's winning entry to the fraudulent crème brûlée competition a few paragraphs down.

In these enlightened PC days disability is regarded obliquely – from the side – with references to 'X' challenged where 'X' is replaced by the function of the afflicted part. Death of a Centollón is difficult to address in such enlightened terms. The pot not being dust-bin sized or even large enough to accommodate decimation of the dust-bin instead required that the individual elements of the contents had to be decimated instead. Edible legs had to be separated from none-too-tasty but nevertheless important for more basic life function carpace.

In crab terms, Deca Plegia sucks.

Washed down with Argentinian Malbec the spider crabs' appendages were superb.

Not to be out-done at this point Kate, our chef-du-galley swept out a large dish while skipper Hamish brandished a blowtorch which normally carried out stove lighting duties. The simple melting of brown sugar over Kate's plain vanilla pudding created a wonderful faux Crème Brulé the 'faux' shimmering into insignificance with increasing Malbec consumption. The Great Cape could wait until tomorrow.



Hamish sets fire to our dessert

[Sometimes Bent is Best](#) (Thursday, 09 August 2007) Written by [Mark Holbrook](#)

Now dear amigos, this tale cost me a lot of cerveza in a dark bar in Pontevedra so read with due respect!

'Rain Again' is anchored off the Isla Tambo in the Ria Pontevedra. The world seems to be made up of 'sticky' and 'not-so-sticky' places. This anchorage, just East of the island is one of the former and very hard to get away from. You know how they scored cites for 'liveability' in the USA and Pittsburgh came out top? Everybody asked 'Why?' well Pittsburgh didn't score very high marks in any category but it did score in all of them so it flanked all the other potential front-runners and scored the prize. Thus it is with Isla Tambo - Big paper mill across the Ria - sure, but it gives you something to look at at night. Big city nearby? sure but it has this really interesting pair of bridges and it is fun to watch the yachts go up there full of hope and then come back again half an hour later when they got scared that their wind-thingy would fall off when it hit the bridge. Tourist trap at Combarro? Yes again but if you anchor at Tambo then you can visit Combarro when all the tourists have gone and its unique sea-front grain-stores (look like tombs for drying out Granny) and twisting, rock hewn streets have the locals washing their smalls in

the communal basins. So, Isla Tambo rocks (well only a few rock actually and quite a lot of sand) and we have been 'stuck' here for a few days now.



Orillos fronting the beach, Combarro



Main Square, Combarro

Yesterday, at dawn though, we were not alone.

Tambo is a military island you see, guarded for the daylight hours by armada persons and then abandoned at night to whatever the dark hours will bring.

And yesterday the dark hours brought 70 little boats, each one armed with what looked like a 40 ft bamboo pole with a bit of super-mercado trolley stuck to the end of it and for the next four hours they prodded, pulled, wacked and waved long bits of stick both in and out of the water - but why? No amount of playing with the £75-from-Compass special bins produced an answer. We were all agog.

Today brought a trip up the Rio Tambo (by dingy) to view the bridges which had upset all those yachts. Ever since I read 'Heart of Darkness' trips up-river have brought portents of deep insights into the human condition, human thus far please note, not mollusk. Now Pontevedra old town we found to be a bit of a mess, nothing like the restored medieval streets we had seen in Muros, Combarro and Santiago, same sort of buildings of granite with cloisters, but run-down and abandoned except for one dark door near the old church. Smoke and alcohol fumes wafted out in generally equal proportions so we wafted in. The interior decor (term used very loosely here) was driftwood sort of stuck together with nails and bits of varnish with large numbers of the local witches (Megs) hanging from the rafters.

Having struggled through ordering two beers Mark proceeded to butcher replies as to 'We are from Scotland' and 'We are from a boat with a mast that is too high to get under the bridge' and 'We are anchored off Isla Tambo'. The last comment brought a flicker of interest from mein host and the need for more beers with him included on the imbibing list. 'But Tambo is a special island No?' 'Yes, it is a restricted military island'. 'But not just for that, it is special for the shell-fish'. 'Oh, what sort of shell-fish'. 'Well, that is where the giant razor fish grows.' 'But I thought that small razor clams tasted better than big razor clams'. 'Yes, normally that is true, but at Tambo the razor shells do not grow straight and then not taste good, instead they grow bent and taste wonderful - that is why the navy has the island restricted so that they have all the best 'Navajas' for them selves, only on one day a year is the town permitted to fish and for the rest of the year it is forbidden'.

Deep knowledge my friends, seek ye out the big bent razor clams and enjoy with relish!