54 DAYS OF RAIN

A Cruise Through Southern Chile

This is what the sailing directions said for Cabo Tres Montes to Estrecho de Magallanes, Chile, including the Patagonian channels: "The prevailing wind is from the north and sometimes blows with great fury. … The principal feature in the weather here is not the strength of the wind, but the almost perpetual rain."

We thought about it. As Southern latitude sailors, we were used to bad weather, the cold, the wind, the ice. The one thing we were not much used to was rain. But the sun was shining as Chris and I left Puerto Williams and began our trip west and north toward Cabo Tres Montes, the everyday game of tying *Morgane*, a steel Triereme 35 sailboat, to the shoreside trees in the evenings and freeing her in the mornings. Maybe it would be OK. We took advantage of the long days of the southern Patagonian summer whenever we could sail.

After our first two days of sunshine, the rain never left us.

Luckily, even though the intricate coast of southern Chile is high and steep, it offers many refuges for a small boat. No matter how vicious the wind may be on the channels, when you enter one of these coves, you'll find a quiet oasis. Alas, they seem to come only in small sizes, so there is always some strategy involved in getting the boat safely moored. It's not straightforward, but with practice it gets easier. First you need to find your cove. This is not as simple as it sounds because some entrances are extremely narrow. Next you need to find out where the wind will most likely come rolling down the hills and choose a place accordingly to tie up and drop the anchor; third, you get the dinghy in the water and, with a shore line in hand (or better yet, clipped on to yourself), you row as fast as you can to shore and attach that line to a tree (a canelo if you find one; they are strong). While one of you does this, the other maneuvers the boat so that it doesn't bump against the sides of the cove. Then you go back and get another line for another strong tree and repeat the process several times. After this, you may still want to put more chain down and shorten the shore lines until you are snug to the mighty trees. And then you may still want to add just one more line.

We did this once in the dark. We arrived in a cove at dusk, tired and wet. It was raining, as it had been since two days after our departure, while we were still in Caleta Olla. But it was calm. I got into the dinghy with a headlamp. "Be careful," Chris said. He pointed the spotlight to a tree. When I got close, I had to climb a little way up the steep wall surrounding the cove to get the line around the trunk. Once it was tied and I was back on board our dinghy, I was no longer afraid. I have faith in our fine little dinghy, but what I never trust is the combination of slippery rocks and big rubber boots in the dark. We slept poorly that night, as the cove's calm didn't last and strong williwaws came rolling down its steep sides, wailing and moaning like a coven of witches. But our lines held tight.

The Beagle Channel anchorages we visited had spectacular views, and in most of them we enjoyed some hiking. Here the forest is open, and you can easily get close to glaciers and waterfalls. The landscape of the forest around the islands has been modified quite a bit by the engineering achievements of some successful Canadian immigrants: beavers. They were introduced to Tierra del Fuego in 1946 with the hope of starting a fur industry in the area. That pipe dream failed, but the beavers found the south Patagonian forest to be a predator-free paradise. In time, they crossed the Magellan Strait, and they have been seen in the Brunswick Peninsula. The damage to the forest has been monumental, not only the downing of trees that are hundreds of years old, but also because of the way deforestation modifies the watersheds. We had seen beaver dams before, near Ushuaia and Puerto Williams, but it was impressive to see them in the more remote Caleta Olla.

Minks from North America were also introduced for their fur, in 1934, and they also dispersed through most of the Andean Patagonia. Minks are a real threat to many native species of birds, whose eggs represent a significant part of the mustelid diet. (We had a mink visi-

***Morgane*'s typical mooring, here in Caleta Damien, required multiple lines to sturdy trees ashore.**

tor farther north on our trip — it jumped on board one night while we were tied up in a tiny marina on Isla Jechica, closer to Chiloé than to Tierra del Fuego. But that's a long story.)

Once we sailed north from the west end of Beagle Channel, the forest around the anchorages got thicker and hikes became less possible. The typical sailing day would be a fight against the wind, with cold rain beating on our dodger. We would end the sailing day tied and anchored in the calm of a cozy cove, with a hot, comforting meal inside our warm boat.

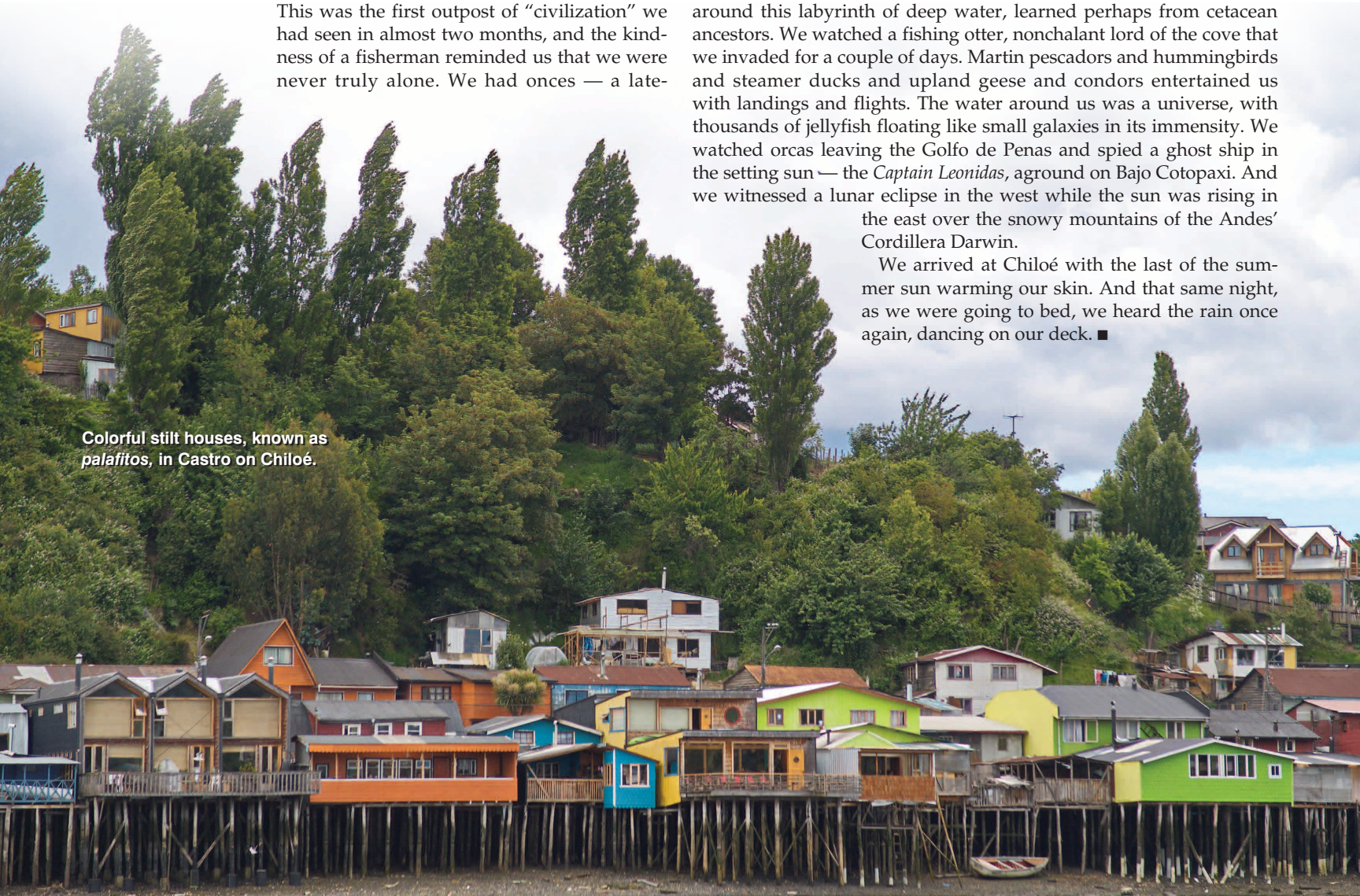
A heated boat is essential for cruising here, even during the summer, and the day we saw our chimney drop overboard into 2,600 feet of water, my heart sank with it. I don't remember where this happened, maybe along Canal Pitt, and we both saw it happen in slow motion, but we were not fast enough to rescue it. Soon after we tied up *Morgane* that night, Chris got to work on a new chimney. "Don't worry, I have an idea for a better one," he said. And so he did: We now have an improved chimney (made from a cooking pot!) that turns with the wind and doesn't let the gusts cause back drafts inside our Refleks stove.

We continued battling the elements on our way north, trying to forge ahead but often turning back, defeated by the will of the tides and the winds, which sometimes fight with each other. The first break in the rain found us in Puerto Eden, a fishing town with no roads. This was the first outpost of "civilization" we had seen in almost two months, and the kindness of a fisherman reminded us that we were never truly alone. We had onces — a late-afternoon tea with snacks, adapted from (and named for) the British elevenses — with the fisherman and his wife. He regaled us with stories about his years of harvesting shellfish in the surrounding glacial coves, and they traded us 22 pounds of flour for some small part he needed for his boat, a part we just happened to have in our magic box of spares. Then we sailed on to the Golfo de Penas.

"Did you hear any whales?" I asked Chris as he got ready for his three or four hours of sleep. You can't see the whales during your night watch unless there is a big moon, but you do hear them breathing alongside from time to time. Having them around always makes me feel less lonely and, maybe, safer. The Golfo de Penas (the "Gulf of Sorrows") was kind to us, and from there the weather and the water got warmer and nicer. Our spirits started to heal a bit after so much gray sky.

Sailing the Patagonian channels was emotionally intense, not so much for the difficult navigation but because of the continuous fight with the climate and the endless waiting for weather windows. But the channels also have a magic of sorts. We marveled at the setting moon in the red sky of sunset as we rowed back from a friend's boat in a calm night of soft rain. We saw dolphins every day, showing us the way in and out of the coves. We saw humpback and sei whales. Their enormity matched the scale of the landscape, and they knew their way around this labyrinth of deep water, learned perhaps from cetacean ancestors. We watched a fishing otter, nonchalant lord of the cove that we invaded for a couple of days. Martin pescadors and hummingbirds and steamer ducks and upland geese and condors entertained us with landings and flights. The water around us was a universe, with thousands of jellyfish floating like small galaxies in its immensity. We watched orcas leaving the Golfo de Penas and spied a ghost ship in the setting sun — the *Captain Leonidas*, aground on Bajo Cotopaxi. And we witnessed a lunar eclipse in the west while the sun was rising in the east over the snowy mountains of the Andes' Cordillera Darwin.

We arrived at Chiloé with the last of the summer sun warming our skin. And that same night, as we were going to bed, we heard the rain once again, dancing on our deck. ■



Colorful stilt houses, known as *palafitos*, in Castro on Chiloé.