

The Flag Of Chile



The Flag Of Argentina

Thursday January 13 – Day 1

-Today is the first day of our 20 day vacation to Argentina and Chile. The four of us, sisters Marcia and Marie, and husbands Jim and Kal, have traveled together on eight previous international trips. This journal is assembled from the daily e-mails Jim and Marcia (with Marie and Kal's help) sent out each day during this trip.

-Marcia and Jim depart Albany NY at 2:20 PM on a United Airlines commuter flight. Marie and Kal leave Dayton OH at about the same time. Both couples arrive at the Washington DC Dulles airport about 3:30 PM.

-Now, our United Airlines flight to Buenos Aires, Argentina is not scheduled to depart until 10:05 PM. We have purposely planned a long connection time to make sure that we don't miss the international flight and we are glad that we did not plan to depart yesterday, as I doubt we would have made it out of Albany with the 12 inches of snow that we received on Wednesday.

-We will be flying to South America on a Boeing 767. The flight is scheduled to take just under 11 hours. We will be arriving in Buenos Aires at about 11 AM Friday morning. Buenos Aires time is two hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. Argentina is quite a bit further east of the east coast of the USA. We will, of course, be in the Southern Hemisphere, where it will be summer. The forecast for Buenos Aires for Friday calls for clear weather with high temperatures around 90 degrees.

Kal, Marie and Jim at Washington Dulles Airport



Friday January 14 – Day 2

-Our scheduled departure from Washington DC, last night, was 10:05 PM, but United Airlines started moving our departure time later, in half hour increments.....an old UA trick! Our airplane finally arrives from Chicago at 11:15 PM, more than four hours late. I talk with a passenger getting off the Chicago flight who tells me their flight was delayed due to electrical system problems. We board the Boeing 767 and take off after midnight. Our eleven hour flight is now estimated to arrive in Buenos Aires at 1 PM (with the two hour time change). We see from the route map that we will be flying off the east coast of the USA, then over Haiti, Venezuela and the Amazon region of Brazil.

-Kal and I have acquired “Economy Plus” seats, so enjoy a little extra leg room, while the sisters are sitting five rows behind us in standard economy seating. The airplane is only about 3/4 full, so three of us have seats with no one next to us (sorry Marcia!), so this helps a little bit in trying to get some sleep on the overnight flight.

-We land at the Buenos Aires International Airport at 1 PM. It’s a sunny day with temperature at about 90 degrees. We first pay the Argentine “reciprocity fee” of \$140 per person. They charge USA citizens this amount, as that is the cost of a visa for an Argentine citizen to enter the USA. Next we gather our checked bags, clear customs and hire a small van (through a remiss service at the airport) to take the four of us to our suite in the Recoleta area. Buenos Aires is one of the largest cities in the southern hemisphere and one of the largest cities in the world. 12 million people, about 1/3 of Argentina’s population, live in Buenos Aires or in the immediate vicinity.

-The Recoleta district is the most exclusive in BA. We have a suite on the eleventh floor the Trianon Recoleta for the next two nights. The suite is great, with three bedrooms, two full baths, a full kitchen, dining and living room area, and a balcony running the length of the unit.

-We quickly unpack, clean up, and meet Isabel at 3 PM in the lobby.

-Now Isabel is a Buenos Aires Travel Agent (her agency is Buenos Aires Tours) that we contacted (via e-mail) after reading about her on the TripAdvisor Forums. We have worked with her to put together our 20 days of “independent travel”. Isabel next reviews all of our plans, gives us vouchers for internal flights, cruises, and excursions, and shares some local restaurant recommendations.

-By now we are exhausted from the long travel days and lack of sleep on the plane. We next take a short walk and then find a pizza restaurant for dinner. We have a great one and return to our suite to relax.

The View From our Balcony at the Trianon Recoleta



Argentina and Chile Vacation January 13 thru February 2 2011



Argentina

- International boundary
- Provincia boundary
- ★ National capital
- ⊙ Provincia capital
- +— Railroad
- Road

0 300 Kilometers
0 300 Miles

Saturday January 15 – Day 3

-We consider today the first “real” day of this vacation, as this is the first day we wake up “in country” ...and what a difference a good night’s sleep makes!

-Breakfast is included with our suite, but the hotel (which is mostly private apartments, but also has rooms to rent) does not have a breakfast room. Instead, we phone down to the front desk at 7 AM and twenty minutes later they deliver our breakfast of strong coffee, orange juice, fruit, and breads and rolls right to our suite.

-Next we all take off on a walk in the area near our hotel. First thru the many connected public parks in the Recoleta district...much fun watching the local residents enjoy their Saturday morning with their dogs, and jogging and cycling. Next we walk to the Floris Generica Monument. This is a huge “generic” flower made of stainless steel sitting on a reflecting pond. The “flower” actually opens at sunrise and closes at sunset. On to one of the parks where the Saturday Craft Market is up and running. Then, back to the area near our hotel, which sits parallel to the two most “fashionable” streets in the district, Alvear and Quintana, which we next walk the length of before finding a good restaurant and ordering sandwiches for lunch.

-Now, today is another beautiful summer day in Buenos Aires. Probably hits 90 degrees, a little humid, but not a cloud in the sky,

-Back to our rooms to refresh, then off to meet our guide and driver for a 3 hour+ tour of Buenos Aires. This is a good tour with a great tour guide (arranged by Isabel from BATours). We drive thru much of the city with fine commentary and enjoy walking tours of the Plaza de Mayo (a government and historic center), the La Boca district (the bohemian area and birthplace of the Tango dance), and the famous Recoleta Cemetery (graves and mausoleums from the 1800s to more modern times for the aristocracy of Argentina society plus Evita Peron). This was an enjoyable tour and we learned much about Buenos Aires and Argentina. The city is most beautiful...it is called “the most European City” in South America due to the style of the architecture...which in reality is very eclectic. Our guide tells us that we are lucky to be touring the city on a weekend and in January, as the traffic is very low due to the weekend and that the locals are now taking their vacations, out of town.

-Our tour ends at 5:30 PM and we stop for refreshments before returning to our suite.

-At 7 PM we walk to a local restaurant recommended by Isabel, El Sanjuanino. They specialize in “empanadas” a national delicacy similar to miniature calzones. We buy a bunch and return to our suite and enjoy them for dinner.

-Tomorrow we leave for El Calafate and Patagonia!

La Boca District



Recoleta Cemetery



Marcia at the Flower



The Tango



Sunday January 16 – Day 4

- We are up early this morning, ordering our breakfast at 7 AM and then heading out at 8 AM for a walk to an area of Buenos Aires that we have not yet been in....the dock area.
- We were surprised at how busy BA is on a Sunday morning, especially as we near the docks, where a large train terminal, bus terminal and a ferry terminal all converge. We walk past docked naval ships, the ferry terminal and the marina. The body of water that we see is the Rio Plate. We have been told that it is the widest river in the world. At this point it is 22 miles wide and we cannot see the other side, which is the coast of Uruguay. While there are some nice views of the sky scrapers of the financial district, the dock area itself is not the prettiest part of Buenos Aires. Also, as we had seen on yesterday morning's walk through some of the parks in the Recoleta district, many unfortunate homeless people are sleeping in doorways and under trees. Now, these do not appear to be the type of homeless that we have in the USA, which I am told are mostly the mentally disturbed and alcoholics. Here we see whole families. During yesterday's tour, our guide informed us that prior to the Argentinian recession of 2001 it was rare to see homeless in Buenos Aires, but now there are many. Argentina does not appear to have the type of social safety net to give homeless folks housing, and the police tolerate them, as they have nowhere to go. She told us that 30% of the population lives below the poverty line. We walk back to our hotel by a different route through a nice part of town. We enjoy the exercise and by now it's getting hot.....another day at about 90 degrees, sunny and humid.
- Back at our rooms, we pack up and check out of the Trianon Resident Hotel.....where we found our shared suite to be excellent accommodations in one of the best locations in BA. We leave our luggage with the folks at the front desk and walk to a local restaurant for a nice lunch.
- We return to the hotel a little before 1:30 PM and find the remise (taxi) that we had requested, yesterday, waiting for us. It is a short ride to the nearby "domestic" airport.
- We check in at the Aerolineas Argentinas counter for our flight to El Calafate in south-central Patagonia. Now, we knew that "some of us" had overweight luggage. The nice girl that checked us in (and weighed our luggage) reminded us that they have a 33 pound weight limit on the one checked bag allowed and impose a \$1.20 charge for each pound over. We all kept smiling (even Kal!) and she said she would not charge us any extra fees, today.
- We clear security and get to the large, modern boarding lounge with a little more than two hours to kill before our 4:25 PM flight. But now it has started raining, and we have thunder and lightning for the next hour. We get scant and conflicting information on the status of our flight. By now the large boarding lounge is packed with people from all the delayed flights, but everyone is tolerating the situation well. We finally board

our plane at 6:30 PM. We then sit in our grounded plane for another hour as they find missing passengers and bring a doctor on to treat a passenger for a medical condition. We take off, three hours late at 7:30 PM. We are on a full 737. The views are great as we fly by BA and down most of the length of Argentina.

-We land in El Calafate at 10:15 PM, but it is still light, as the sun sets here at 10 PM (vs. 8 PM in Buenos Aires) due to how much closer to the South Pole we are. We were picked up by our remise driver and driven to our hotel, the Kosten Aike, arriving at 11 PM. The very efficient hotel staff quickly checks us in and made sure that we were all set for our first outdoor adventures, tomorrow. Unfortunately, Aerolineas left our luggage out in the rain at the BA airport, and most of our packed clothes, especially Marie's, are soaked and have to be hung up in the room, overnight, to dry!

Paris-Dakar Road Rally Vehicles



Tall ship in harbor



Professional dog walker in BA



Monday January 17 – Day 5

- When we left Buenos Aires, yesterday, the high temperature was about 90 degrees. When we landed at El Calafate last night, in southern Patagonia, it was in the upper 40s. Even though it's also summer in Patagonia, it is so far south and close to the South Pole that we will be lucky to see any high temperatures that hit 60.
- So, when we get up early this morning we dress in several layers of warm clothing for today's activities.
- After our early breakfast, the transfer company picks us up at 7:30 AM and drives us for about one half hour to a small port on the south shore of the very large Argentino Lake. This drive takes us thru rolling hills with only low vegetation.....very few trees. We think this is due to the heavy winds that blow in from across the Pacific and consistently hit the region but it may also be partly due to low precipitation.....all the rain being dumped in the Andes Mountains to the west. We also see many pink flamingos in some of the small fresh water lakes.
- We soon enter Argentina's Los Glaciares National Park. This is a very large area of big lakes, snowcapped mountains and huge glaciers.
- At 8:30 AM we board a dedicated excursion ship owned by the Estancia Cristina company. The ship seats about 100 people in comfortable seats on two enclosed decks. Each deck has an open viewing area in the rear of the ship. For the next 2-1/2 hours we travel to the extreme northwest part of the lake, passing close by hundreds of icebergs that have broken off from the Upsala Glacier and are floating in the 36 degree lake water. Later we pass by the face of the glacier before landing and disembarking at the Estancia (ranch) Cristina at 11 AM. The majority of the folks on the boat are Italians on a group tour, but there are also Germans, Argentineans, Spaniards, and a few more Americans like us.
- Marcia and I (Jim) have signed up for their "Discovery" Tour. We board special crew cab 4WD Dodge Ram pickups equipped with bench seats along the payload bed sides and a canvas roof with roll up sides. Marcia and I sit on the bench seats in the back and we start up a six mile, one lane, incredibly rutted dirt road that rises 1500 feet up the side of a mountain. Half way up, we discover we have a flat rear tire (yes, there was a lot of weight in the rear). As we are the lead truck of three, our whole column is stopped. We watch as the three drivers quickly replace the bad tire with a spare in less than half an hour. Then back up the mountain. At the stopping point, we next hike 1000 yards (vertical gain of 150 yards) to a view point. Here we have a mountain top view of the Upsala Glacier feeding into Argentino Lake, only somewhat marred by the rain that has started to fall and the brisk wind and low temperatures. We learn that the glaciers of the South Patagonia Ice Field originate at the lowest altitudes of any glaciers in the non-artic world. This is due to the unimpeded wind blowing across the vast Pacific Ocean that drop huge amounts of rain on the Andes Mountains. The drive down the mountain was a bouncy affair. We literally "hit the roof"OK because it was canvas.....except for Marcia who hit the lightly padded roll bar! We ate our box lunch back at the Estancia then took a tour of their museum.
- Marie and Kal signed up for the "Trekking" Tour. Like us, they were trucked up to the lookout point above the glacier. They then hiked for 4-1/2 hours, over steep terrain, back to the Estancia. Only 12 people a day are allowed to do this hike so as to avoid damage to the ground. At one point, in an avalanche zone, the guide made them walk 70 yards apart so the whole group wouldn't be lost in an avalanche. The majority of their hike was in rain.
- We all re-boarded the ship at 5:30 PM to return to the port (stopping to view a condor that the captain spotted on a cliff). Back to our hotel after 8 PM, cleaned up, and then we had dinner in the excellent hotel dining room before retiring for the night.

Condor



Marcia in front of our ship at the Estancia Cristina



Convoy stalled due to a flat tire!



Jim in front of the Upsala Glacier



One of the hundreds of icebergs we saw



Tuesday January 18 – Day 6

-We wake up in El Calafate, Argentina on a clear, sunny and cool morning.....defying the last weather forecast that we have seen which called for morning showers.

-We were able to “sleep in” a bit this morning, as we would not be picked up until 9 AM for today’s excursion, which our TA, Isabel at Buenos Aires Tours had booked for us.....an excursion to the Perito Moreno Glacier.

-Shortly after 9 AM we board a full size tour bus, and there are only 15 of us on the motor coach, so we have plenty of room and great views. We have a tour guide on this all day excursion, Alejandra, who speaks several languages, which is good, as most of the folks are either Italian or Spanish speakers; we being the only English speakers. Throughout the day he does an excellent job as TG and makes sure to repeat all information and directions in all three languages,

-Alejandra explains that the town we are staying in, El Calafate, has grown from 4,000 people to 20,000 people in 10 years, driven by the tourism industry. He explains that Calafate is named after a bush that produces a very small blue berry. He has the driver pull the bus to the side of the road and we walk in to the prairie where he shows us the Calafate bush and says the myth is that those who eat the berry will one day return to El Calafate. If this is true, Marie, Marcia and Kal will be back.....maybe not Jim.

-We will soon be entering Los Glaciares National Park, and we have understood that the admission was not included in the price of our excursion ticket, and must be paid in Argentine Pesos. Both Isabel and our Tour Guide Books have told us the cost would be equivalent to 14 US\$, or about 56 Pesos each. Now, there is an issue in Argentina (in my opinion), an apparent shortage of money. The largest bill that they print is 100 Pesos (equal to \$25). It is said the government refuses to print larger denomination bills, as it would be admitting they have lost control of inflation (the official government inflation rate is about 10%, where as independent observers put it at 25%). The end result is that ATMs are quickly emptied of cash. I am also told that the Argentine currency is being printed in Brazil, and they are late with orders. This means that we have not been able to build up our Peso supply. We have just enough for our admission and lunch. Imagine our surprise when Alejandra tells us admission is 100 pesos per person, not 56! Then, imagine our relief when we beckon him and he tells us we can also pay in US\$ (which we still have lots of). We stop at the park gate, the park rangers come on and extract either 100 pesos or \$27 US\$ (more than equivalent to 100 pesos) from each of us. Oh well, at least we didn't have to walk back to El Calafate!

-Alejandro explains to us that the Perito Moreno Glacier starts in the Andes at a height of 6200 feet, and when we observe its face, it is at 630 feet above sea level. This glacier is not even the largest in the Los Glaciares Park, but is the most famous due to its "clean" vertical face. This glacier is not receding, but consistently moving forward at about 2 yards per day, but "calving off" at the rate of about 2 yards per day, so always stays in about the "same place" The face of the glacier is 3 miles wide. The height above the water is 250 feet, with another 470 feet of the "face" underwater.

-We spend our first 2-1/2 hours at the park walking part of the 5 miles of walkway that face the glacier, getting many great photos and seeing occasional large pieces of ice "calve" or fall into the water. After lunch, we take a great one hour boat ride to the face of the glacier.....this allows us to see how immense it really is. This has been a great tour on an excellent weather day.....sunny, not too breezy and highs in the mid-60s. We re-board our motor coach and are back in El Calafate before 5 PM.

-Now, I must tell you that starting one week before we left the USA on this trip, we have been concerned about a political/logistical issue that threatened to derail our vacation at this point, just six days in. We have not mentioned this to any of you, our family and friends, or mentioned the issue in these daily e-mails, as we did not want you to be overly concerned. Shortly after we get back to our hotel, today, we learn (at almost literally "the last minute") that our Travel Agent, Isabel (and perhaps some good luck) have successfully resolved the issue and our vacation will continue as planned. In tomorrow's e-mail, I will try to fill you in on what this "issue" was all about.

-Tomorrow, we cross the border into Chile and will have three nights at the Las Torres Patagonia in Chile's Torres del Pines National Park.

Part of the face of the glacier, taken from a walkway



All of us at the Perito Moreno Glacier



Photo during our boat ride – the glacier face



Ship in front of the glacier



Wednesday January 19 – Day 7

-We check out of our hotel in El Calafate Argentina, the Kosten Aike, after an excellent three night stay. The rooms were fine, a good dining room, a good location and a helpful and friendly staff, especially Pedro at the front desk.

-The four of us are picked up at 6:45 AM by the transfer service. The large van-like bus is quite comfortable. We pick up one other couple, Stephanie and Xavier from Dijon, France.

-For the next two hours we travel east on the main highway through rolling “scrub land”.....no trees due to the low precipitation. We spot Rheas (which look like small ostriches), many Guanacos (the Patagonia Llama), Pink Flamingos and many huge Estancias (ranches) with “low density” sheep, horse and cattle. After two hours we stop at the first town we have encountered for a rest break. In these two hours we have seen less than a dozen cars and maybe 10 structures. We turn now south and then west towards Chile. As we near Chile we could tell that the famous Patagonia winds were roaring down the eastern slopes of the Andes Mountains, as our van was starting to rock and our driver was using all of his skills to keep us going straight on the road.

-We turn off the main road onto a dirt/gravel road to approach the Argentina/Chile border crossing at 10:20 AM. Slightly over one hour later, with the good work of our driver, we clear Argentine immigrations and Chilean customs.

-We next transfer to a van from the Las Torres Patagonia hotel/resort/ranch.....which will be our home for the next three nights in an “all inclusive package”.....rooms, food, drinks, and guided adventure excursions. We now drive for 60 miles on packed gravel roads before entering Torres del Pines National Park (our hotel is one of the few inside the park), crossing an ancient wood suspension bridge, just wide enough for our van. We are greeted at the gates to the hotel/ranch by three “gauchos” on horseback, the middle one holding the flag of Chile, while the two other hold the Patagonia Flag. These are experienced horsemen, and they race ahead and around us as we drive to the front of the ranch.....quite a welcome.

-We quickly check in and then all six of us have lunch together in the restaurant.

-The four of us take a short two mile hike on a trail around the hotel and enjoy the setting.....we are surrounded by snow capped mountains and lakes. Later we attend the session where the guides describe the excursions offered tomorrow and we sign up and then have dinner. Tomorrow a long hike for Marie, Kal and Jim and a horseback excursion and a later sightseeing tour for Marcia.

-Today’s weather was typical Patagonia summer weather.....mostly sunny, some sprinkles and very breezy/windy. As Marcia and I finish this e-mail tonight at 10:30 PM, it’s still light outside. It does not get dark until 11 PM due to how close we are to the South Pole.

Remove external mirrors before crossing bridge!



Welcome to the Las Torres Patagonia Hotel



Guanaco



Rhea



Las Torres Patagonia Hotel



Info Break:

- In yesterday's e-mail, I mentioned some issues that almost derailed our vacation, and promised to explain today, so here it is:
- One week before we left for Argentina we discovered on the TripAdvisor Chile Forum (as this was not well covered in USA media) that the residents of Southern Chile were "in revolt" against their President's plan to reduce the subsidy that lowers the price of gasoline and home heating oil in only the southern part of Chile. The protestors were blocking roads, had surrounded and closed down the Punta Arenas airport and were apparently trying to disrupt the tourist industry in Patagonia Chile. We decided to proceed on our vacation, as we figured the issues would be settled before we traveled to Chile on the 7th day of our planned vacation.
- As the days passed, we checked the forum each day, where it was evident the situation was getting worse. No tourists were being allowed into southern Chile (and the ones that were already there could not get out). On the 5th day of our vacation (this past Monday) it appeared the negotiations had broken down. This would mean we could not make it to Torres de Pines for our three night stay at the Las Torres de Patagonia and we would not be able to then get to Punta Arenas to start our five day cruise of the Strait of Magellan...really the two most anticipated highlights of our trip and the two things we planned this trip around.
- We were scheduled to leave for Chile today, Wednesday, hence my mention, yesterday, of the great news we received from our travel agent, Isabel at Buenos Aires Tours, at 5 PM on Tuesday that the strike had just been settled and she had our arrangements all set for our transfer to Chile. While she was also working on alternative places to go, and our trip insurance would probably have reimbursed us for the TDP and cruise, we would have missed two of the main things we planned this trip around.

-We got lucky when the strike surprisingly ended just in time for us to keep our schedule. Stephanie and Xavier from France, whom I mentioned traveled with us today to Torres del Pines, were supposed to go to Torres del Pines in Chile last Monday, and wasted two days of their vacation in El Calafate waiting for the strike to end.

Thursday January 20th – Day 8

Jim: I wake early after our first of three nights at the “all inclusive” Las Torres Patagonia hotel/ranch inside the Torres del Pines National Park in Patagonia in Southern Chile. It is sunny but breezy and I go outside and get some good pictures of the sun rising and shining on the snow capped mountains surrounding this resort and of the horses grazing on grass right around the buildings.

After breakfast, we head out on our guided excursions. Marie, Kal and Jim have a grueling all day hike planned, while Marcia has two, half day excursions; one from 9:15 AM until about noon and one from 3 PM to 6 PM. Here is Marcia’s report:

Marcia: Today, I enjoyed my morning Lake Azure excursion. I was expecting a horseback ride. Jim told me that he didn't want me to be disappointed, but that he was pretty sure it was a van ride. I replied that I was sure that even if we started in a van, we would be switching to horses. Well, of course he was right. However, as we arrived near our final destination, there were wild horses waiting.



So I was going to tell Marie, Kal, and Jim that there were horses waiting for us. Of course, we would have had to catch them and ride them bareback. So, even though I didn't get to ride, it was a great trip.

I saw several gray foxes, herds of guanaco



Papa Rhea and chicks



Flamingos and ducks



a waterfall, and the towers of Torres del Paine. It was fabulous.



That was this morning. This afternoon I got my horseback ride. We went to a lake overview - about a 2.5 hour ride. Of course since it had started raining, the view was not the best. So I didn't take any pictures. But I enjoyed the ride anyway.



Jim: Marie, Kal and I participated in the guided hike to the base of the “Towers”, said to be the best viewing area of this unique granite tri-mountain. This is the first of the three legs of the famous (for hiking folks) “W Hike”. Several of the hotel guests had chosen to ride horses for the first half of the trip, then hike the rest of the way, reversing the process on the way back. The three of us chose to join the group hiking the whole route. All started at 9:30 AM.

Now, this proved to be a more grueling hike than anything we attempted on our vacation in the Canadian Rockies last September. The length of the hike “in” is 7 miles (and we were returning by the same route, so a total hike of 14 miles). The tough part was the elevation gain, 750 meters (about 2500 feet) with the last 500 feet in elevation gain coming at the very end, in a 1500 foot climb up a rock strewn moraine.

We started out in pleasant sunny weather. The trail was quite interesting, going over creeks on narrow bridges, on the sides of steep mountains, and through forests.....for the most part, heading up. About 4 hours into the hike most of the group arrived at the moraine for the final climb. Marie and Kal made it to the top and the viewing area (see the photo below, with the three “towers” in the background}. I only made it halfway up the moraine as I “hit the wall” and started getting some leg cramps. We ate our box lunches, rested, and headed back down to our hotel at about 2:45 PM. The walk down some steep slopes can also be tough on the legs, and by now a steady rain had started.

We arrived back the hotel after 6PM.....tired and soaked, but quickly revived by hot showers.



We had an enjoyable dinner, retelling tales of our days excursions, then retired to the bright, glassed-in hotel lounge (still bright as the sun does not set until 10PM and it does not get dark until 11PM) where we enjoyed listening to a duo, two of the hotel employees, singing Chilean and Argentinian songs.

Friday January 21 – Day 9

-This is our final day at the Las Torres Patagonia, and we've all chosen their "Full Paine" all day excursion.

-After breakfast (where we have great fun watching two Grey Foxes outside the large picture window), the four of us board a van, along with a young couple from Brazil and an older gentleman from South Africa (all of whom we have a great time chatting with during this excursion). We have an excellent guide, Tamara, who had also led us on the grueling hike, yesterday.

-On the road, she points out the highest mountain in the region (at about 9300 feet) and the effects of forest fires over the past 30 years.....all set by accident by campers.....impossible to put out (due to the wind) and the long time it takes to regrow trees.



-We see (and stop and photograph) Guanacos, Rheas, Grey Foxes, Upland Ducks, Condors, and Pink Flamingos. Next a two hour hike to an overlook of Lake Nordenskjold (where we see two avalanches occur in the glacier on the other side of the lake, and have a Guanacos family, with two 2 month old “babies” come right down to our trail and then charge past us at a distance of only ten feet).

-We stop at a campsite and have our lunch at a table in a nice lean-to, looking out at one of Las Torres most famous mountain formation, The Horns. Then on to the interpretative museum, the Hotel Gray Glacier (where we see a flock of Austral Parakeets) as well as the Gray Glacier and many icebergs. Back to the hotel a 6 PM, finishing a full day tour.



-We have really liked our hotel and it's "all inclusive" package. Two annoying things.....they give you a password for the internet service only good for 30 minutes (this is so they can charge the folks not on the package.....too short!). And while the drinks and meals are free, after you order you need to sign a receipt, print your name and room number and indicate a "tip"we don't mind the tip money, it's the time this takes!

Saturday January 22, 2011 – Day 10

-Today we leave the Las Torres Patagonia resort in Torres del Pines, Chile and travel to Punta Arenas, Chile to board the ship Stella Australis for a five day/four night cruise of the Strait of Magellan and Cape Horn.

-After breakfast, we quickly check out and the four of us board one of the hotel's full size Dodge Ram vans. Also joining us are Mike and his wife from South Africa. The Las Torres Patagonia supplies each of us with a box lunch. The weather is misty, with both occasional breaks of sun and drizzle...temperatures in the 50s. The van is very comfortable, but we travel on "washboard" packed gravel roads for the first hour before we get far enough out of the park to find a paved highway. Then, another hour until we arrive in Puerto Natales, where we drop off the couple from South Africa at their hotel. We continue driving south through lightly populated areas containing ranches raising sheep, cattle and horses. Again, no evidence of anyone trying to grow crops, most probably due to the dry climate (although Marie remarks "if it's so dry, why is it raining all of the time")! Our driver pulls over and we enjoy watching four gauchos and their dogs drive a herd of cattle from a field into a corral.

-We arrive in Punta Arenas at 2 PM at the headquarters of the Cruceros Australis cruise line and our driver helps us get our luggage into their offices...as it is now raining quite heavily. We check in, leaving our luggage for them to deliver to our staterooms, and walk to a local hotel lounge where the cruise line has given us tickets for discounts...we have some time to kill, as we cannot board our ship until 6 PM.



-Now, this Chilean owned cruise line has been operating two ships (one built in 2002, one in 2006) but has now just replaced the older ship with a brand new one, the Stella Australis...inaugural sail was 12/18/10. We are on a five day/four night cruise from Punta Arenas, Chile to Ushuaia, Argentina. The ship then picks up new passengers and returns to Punta Arenas on a four day/three night cruise, taking a slightly different route. This cruise is the 6th for this new ship.

-We board the Stella Australis, and so far, everything we have seen (ship's crew, the ship itself, staterooms, dinner presentation and service, introduction meeting, and the review of tomorrow's activities) indicates to us this will be a great cruise. They continue to point out that this will be an "Expedition Cruise", meaning that twice a day we will be leaving the ship via Zodiac inflatable boats to make landfalls at points of interest. They tell us there's no need to dress up for dinner...OK to wear your hiking clothes.....yea! It's apparent that most of this ship's crew worked on the old (de-commissioned) ship, so we have an experienced crew.

-Our rooms are on the second deck (slightly less expensive than the rooms on the third and fourth deck, although all the rooms are identical except for slightly larger picture windows as you go up). The staterooms are very large, larger than our last hotel room; comfortable beds, lots of storage space and a nice bathroom. Our picture window measures five feet wide by four feet high. Our rooms are right by the stairway that goes one deck down to the dining room. The ship has two large lounges which are used for lectures and showing documentaries and the ship also has an exercise room.

-The ship sails at 8 PM...a great dinner at 8:15PM...overview of tomorrow's activities at 10 PM...now writing this at 11 PM as the sun is just setting! The rain has stopped and we are optimistic about tomorrow.

Sunday January 23rd – Day 11

-We wake up early (hey, the sun rises at 5 AM) for our first full day on our ship that is cruising the Straights of Magellan and the Tierra del Fuego region at the very southern tip of South America.

-Last night, at dinner, it was determined that folks from 14 countries are on the ship. What they did not mention is that this ship has a capacity of 210 people, and there are only 129 passengers...and this is "high season". This must be why they have a photo and promo team on board (maybe to figure out how to pump up business.....they have already interviewed us). At any rate...THIS IS GREAT...no lines at the buffet tables and no waits for the Zodiac boats, and all of the folks on board are most friendly. Later, we learn that a major reason for the low number of passengers is the previously mentioned protests in southern Chile; they have 196 passengers booked for the next cruise.

-This is an amazing voyage...a beautiful ship and great scenery as we go through narrow channels with high, snow covered mountains and islands all around. Folks tell us that this looks just like the cruises thru through the Alaskan straights.

-At 9:30 AM the Spanish speakers gather in the lounge on the fourth deck while we English speakers meet in the lounge on the fifth deck. We receive more safety instructions about our first "disembarkation"...Ainsworth Bay. We are all dressed in several layers of clothing, including waterproof rain jackets, and we all are wearing our life vests. Marie and Kal are wearing the high top rubber boots that each of us have been given for the cruise, while Marcia and Jim wear our waterproof hiking shoes.



-We all walk down the exterior stairway to the stern area of the first deck where we board the Zodiacs (rubber, inflatable boats)...about a dozen folks per boat. We sit on the sides of the boat, facing inward, and hold on to ropes, as the crewman powers the large outboard motor and we shoot away from the boat at probably about 30 mph. It's a five minute trip to Ainsworth Bay, where our Zodiac is beached, and we disembark with the help of a portable gang plank deployed by the ground crew.

-We are now sorted by language, in groups of about a dozen, and assigned a guide that speaks our language (we get Paula, an Argentinian from Ushuaia). We are in an interesting area that has a tidal basin, leading to a marsh going up to a forested area. In the distance we can see the Darwin Range ice field and the Marinelli Glacier. For the next two hours, Paula leads us on a walk through the tidal basin, marsh and forest, pointing out and discussing the many bird species and all kinds of flora, including the moss and lichens.



We now re-board our Zodiacs and motor around an island in Ainsworth Bay, viewing several large elephant seals before returning to the Stella Australis and re-boarding our ship. Now, many of the “locals” we’ve met in Patagonia and on the ship like to say “in Patagonia we can have all four seasons in one day”, frequently followed by “or in one hour”. Today is a good example of this. During our morning excursion the temperature is in the low 50s, the wind is not too bad, but we go through periods of light rain to sunshine and back again.

-At 3:30 PM we meet for our second excursion of the day, Tuckers Islets. On this trip we stay on the Zodiacs for the whole trip, circumnavigating the main island and seeing cormorants, dolphin gulls, and the real highlight, many, many Magellanic penguins. The Zodiacs actually do “beach” on shore, to give us a good view of the penguins, but we do not get off of the boat. These birds stand about three feet high and we enjoy watching them moving around and watching us, especially the young juveniles. The Zodiacs quickly motor back to our ship. Just before we reach the Stella Australis, I turn my head and my baseball cap blows off my head. Two empty Zodiacs (with just the pilots aboard) which have been trailing the “passenger” Zodiacs make a big show of zipping to where my hat now floats, fishing it from the water and presenting it to me back on board!





-Before dinner we attend a lecture (with slides) on the “Birds of Patagonia” and after dinner there is a film screening of a National Geographic movie about Patagonia. It’s been another great day.

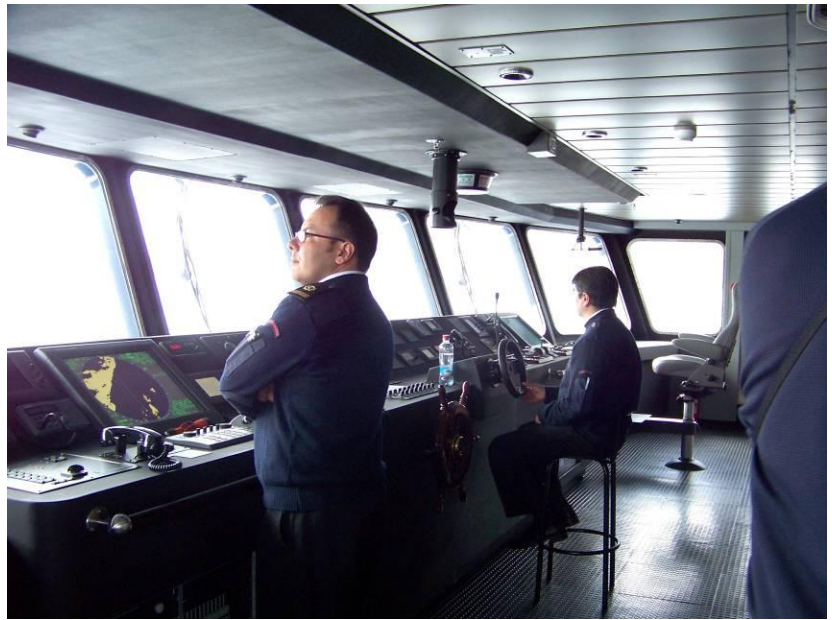
Monday January 24th – Day 12

-We are awakened at about 2 AM this morning by heavy seas.....our ship is rocking from side to side. Items are falling off the tables in our room and it is hard to stand upright. We open our drapes and watch the large waves. After about one-half hour things begin to calm down and we can go back to sleep. This morning we learn that for that one-half hour we had exited the channels and were cruising, exposed, in the southern Pacific Ocean, hence the rough water.

-At 7AM I head up to the lounge on the top deck for some morning coffee. Just as I arrive, I see our “sister” ship, the Via Australis, passing us in the opposite direction on its cruise from Ushuaia to Punta Arenas. That ship, built on 2006, is slightly smaller than our new ship (4 decks vs. our 5 decks and 66 staterooms vs. our 100). Later, we remark that this is the first ship we have seen on our cruise. Also, we have not seen any houses or structures (excluding a very occasional lighthouse or beacon) since leaving Punta Arenas, This is rather an isolated area!

-At 9:30 AM we attend a lecture “Discovering Tierra del Fuego”. This is an excellent presentation, given by one of the ships Chilean officers who grew up in this area. He passionately conveys information about the original native inhabitants and the early explorations.....Magellan, Drake, Fitzroy and Darwin.

-At 10:30 AM we are offered a tour of the ships engine room. Before going down to the first deck, we learn that our ship has a length of 89 meters, a width of 14.6 meters and a crew of 62. We descend to the first deck and walk past the officer’s staterooms (the other crew quarters are one more deck down), the crew mess and kitchen, and the storage area for the ships supplies. Then into the engine room (we each don hard hats and hearing protection). We see the two Cummins Marine diesel engines, each capable of producing 1400 horsepower.



-Later, I see an officer escorting some folks into the control room/bridge. I quickly round up Marie, Marcia and Kal and take them into the control room. Only when the officer politely locks the door after us to prevent any more from entering the bridge does Marcia realize this tour was meant only for members of the professional press!

-At 11:30 AM we attend an excellent lecture on glaciers, given by one of the ships officers. This is most appropriate, as this afternoon we will be visiting a glacier and then cruising past several more.

-Right after lunch, our ship enters the Pia Fjord and travels five miles before stopping at the front of the Pia Glacier. At 2:45 PM we enter the Zodiacs and travel for five minutes to a landing spot at the base of the glacier. The weather is pleasant; light overcast but no wind...temps in the mid 50s. We climb to an overlook and enjoy great views of the glacier. Our guide, Marco, tells us that the Pia Glacier is nearly one mile wide (exactly 1.2 kilometers) and about 600 feet high.



-After about half an hour we descend back to where the Zodiac boats are, and the crew has set up a refreshment table with hot chocolate, water, or Johnny Walker Scotch in glasses with ice that they have been carved from the an iceberg floating in the bay (while we were climbing to the overlook). Again "four seasons in a day", as the calm weather at the overlook on the hill turned nasty (with high winds and rain) while we were up there...Oh Well, we think it is fun to get wet

when you have enough layers on to keep dry and warm! Then, back on to the Zodiacs and back to the Stella Australis. Now, we really enjoyed this excursion. I don't think we have ever been to attractions where there are not a whole bunch of other folks or tour groups...this is "the rule" on this cruise and it is great!

-At about 6 PM we all meet in the lounge on the top deck for the cruise through "Glacier Alley". First the "Romanche Glacier (these glaciers were all named by explorers in 1882). Next comes the Germany Glacier, and the lounge turns on nice German music and the bar staff serves to us, in our seats in the lounge, little German sausages and beer. Next is the French Glacier, and we get French music and cheese and Champagne served to all. Here comes the Italian Glacier...the largest yet, a huge one coming all the way down the mountain into the sea) and they serve to us pizza and red wine and Italian opera music. The last glacier is the Holland Glacier, and it is spectacular. The lounge gives us beer and meatballs to celebrate Holland. This has been most enjoyable and we had a chance to chat with some of our fellow travelers.



Dinner at 8 PM, then off to get a good night's sleep, as early tomorrow morning we will "Go to the End of the Earth", Cape Horn!

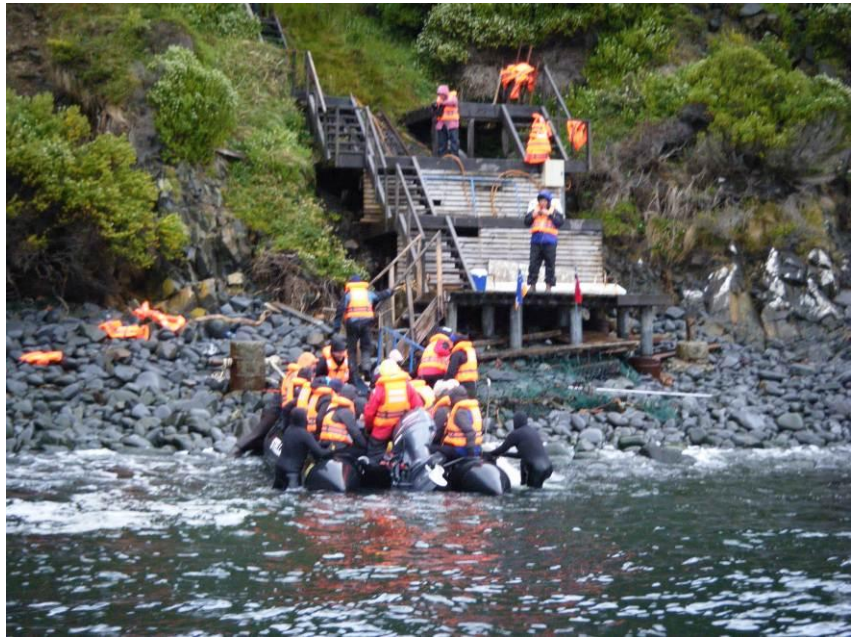


Tuesday January 25th – Day 13

-We are up early this morning, as the plan is to disembark at 7:15 AM and land at Cape Horn, Chile. Now, we know that they will not try to run this excursion if the seas are too rough. Marie's and Marcia's cousin, Judi, was not able to land on Cape Horn when she and her husband, Larry, were on this cruise in 2007. The Cruceros Australis web site states that they are able to land passengers at Cape Horn on 70% of their cruises. I learn later, from a crew member, that the majority of the cancelled landings on Cape Horn are due to high wind levels at the ocean surface. If the wind is above 40 knots, they won't land as this high of a wind can "flip" the Zodiacs (not when they are full with passengers, but when the driver is returning "empty" to the ship to pick up more folks). When we awake, the seas look quite rough as we have left the protection of channels and are cruising towards Cape Horn, which is actually a relatively small island, the most southern point in South America, only 350 miles from Antarctica.

-At 6:30 AM the Stella Australis arrives at Cape Horn and anchors about 1000 yards off shore. A landing crew heads ashore, and the passengers assemble in the lounges. Shortly after 7:15 AM we board a Zodiac and head for Cape Horn! We learn that today's early departure for the Cape is required to give us time to later cruise 78 nautical miles for a late afternoon stop at Wulaia Bay.

-The Zodiac ride to shore takes several minutes and is our roughest one yet. There is a stiff wind, on and off rain, and we are told that the temperature is 48 degrees. We are dressed in many layers, including long underwear, have our waterproof parkas on, waterproof hiking shoes, warm hats and gloves, all held together by our life jackets, so we are quite comfortable. Our Zodiac lands on the shore of Cape Horn, where four crew members (two in wet suits standing in water up to their waists) help steady the Zodiac as we scramble ashore.



-First we climb up a narrow stairway, up 160 steps, towards the top of the island. On the exposed top of the island, we are blasted by wind gusts in the 60 to 70 mph range! It is a struggle to keep from being blown off our feet. We first walk to a monument at one side of the summit, then over to the other side where we walk inside a small chapel. Then we enter the lighthouse and walk up top. Next down to the living quarters of the couple that maintains the lighthouse (and sell souvenirs to tourists); they are the only residents of Cape Horn. After about 20 minutes on top, we walk back to the stairway down...this time walking into the face of the wind. "Horizontal" rain drives into our faces and really stings! It is impossible to look ahead. Reaching the stairs, we are now sheltered from the wind and have an easy climb down to the shore where we re-board a Zodiac and have a fairly rough trip back to the Stella Australis. This was an exciting, memorable excursion.



After breakfast, Marie and I watch an excellent documentary film in the fourth deck lounge. It's about Ernest Shackleton and his heroic leadership in securing the survival of his crew when their exploratory ship became icebound near Antarctica in 1914. The afternoon lecture, on Charles Darwin's work in Patagonia, documented in his book "The Voyage of the Beagle" is also interesting.

-At 4:30 PM we disembark for our last excursion, a visit to Wulaia Bay. This is the exact area where the English captain Fitz Roy and Charles Darwin made contact with the Yaghan aborigines in 1830. This has turned out to be a sunny afternoon, and we enjoy our hour+ hike to the top of a small mountain for a great view of the bay and the many islands, channels, and mountains.



-Just before the 8 PM dinner call they announce from the bridge that whales have been sighted off the port side. Many rush to the outside viewing areas and are rewarded with close views of whales. Then, at dinner, there is a dash to the windows on the port side of the dining room, as a pair of dolphins are sighted swimming alongside our ship.

-Tonight the Stella Australis will dock in Ushuaia, Argentina, the southernmost city in the world. We will depart the ship early tomorrow morning and next spend two days in Ushuaia. We have really enjoyed our five day/four night cruise on this new ship. On our feedback forms, we rated everything "excellent". The "all inclusive" package was great, with nothing to pay (except for the tip for the crew, easily payable with credit card at the reception lounge...they say they will split the tips evenly among all members of the crew).



Wednesday January 26th – Day 14

-This morning at 9 AM we depart the ship Stella Australis, our home for the last four nights. We walk to our hotel, the MIL 810, a few blocks from the Ushuaia, Argentina docks. Ushuaia is the southern most city in the world and has a population of 65,000. It is in a pretty setting, on the Beagle Channel with snow capped mountains on all sides. The city sits on hillsides and is most colorful, with many roofs in pastel colors. We walk around the city this morning and visit a small museum.

-In the afternoon, we take a three hour cruise on the Beagle Channel on a large tour boat run by the Tolkeyen/Rumbo Sur group, seeing many birds (mostly cormorants) and sea lions. Not the best excursion...the ship was hot and crowded and they had difficulties with the PA system. Today's weather has been most pleasant....high in the low 50s and sunny with little wind.



-We see a three mast German Navy sailing vessel, used for training, anchored in the Ushuaia harbor. Wolfgang, Marie's and Marcia's cousin had alerted us that it would be "quarantined" here. We find out from locals that one of the student sailors, a female, fell to her death from the rigging while the ship was in Brazil. The ship's crew almost had a mutiny over poor rations and unreasonable drills high up in the rigging and on the masts. The ship's captain has been replaced and the crew flown back to Germany. The review commission from Germany is scheduled to arrive in Ushuaia tomorrow.



-Also in the harbor is Paul Allen's (of Microsoft fame) huge yacht Octopus.

-We find a good restaurant for our dinner pizza. Now, we have found restaurant food in Argentina extremely reasonable, about one-half the price of comparable fare in the USA. Then back to the hotel to get a good night's rest for more active excursions tomorrow.

Thursday January 27th – Day 15

-Today is our last full day in Ushuaia, Argentina, at the very southern end of South America. We are doing all day excursions that our travel agent Isabel at Buenos Aires Tours has suggested and booked for us with the "Canal Fun" group.

-Marcia and Jim have chosen to do the "Gable Island" excursion. We are picked up at our hotel at 8:30 AM by a Canal Fun mini-bus. As we board the bus, we note that we are most probably the "most mature" folks on this trip. There are 14 passengers, two guides, Juan and Pablo, and our driver. There is only one other couple from the USA. There are several French speakers, two Italians, and the rest are Spanish speakers. Juan, our main guide, looks just like Frank Zappa (scraggly beard and mustache, but also with dreadlocks) and spends the first fifteen minutes memorizing our names and marital status and telling jokes (in three or four languages), making everyone smile....we quickly "bond". We drive east from Ushuaia on a paved road for 45 minutes, then on a dirt road for half an hour. The area we drive through is heavily forested, unlike most of the other terrain we have seen in Patagonia.

-We now stop near the shore of a shallow river, don boots and life jackets, and board a large rubber raft. We paddle the raft for the next two hours. First down the river in to the Beagle Channel, then eastward in the channel passing right next to small islands inhabited by cormorants and sea lions, until we turn into the wind for a tough paddle to landfall at the Estancia Harberton, the first ranch in Tierra de Fuego, founded in 1886 and still run by descendants of the Scottish founder. Here we all board a large, enclosed Zodiac boat for a trip to the Penguin Rookery on Martillo Island. We land on the island and our guides take us on a twenty minute walk among hundreds of penguins. Most of the penguins are Magellanic penguins, but we also observe Gentoo penguins, which are more common in Antarctica. This is great fun, watching them jump into the ocean and swim, seeing the juveniles molting, and even spying some babies. This has turned out to be a fine day weather wise, with temperatures in the high 50s, plenty of sun and varying winds.



-The Zodiac now takes us to the shore of Gable Island. We walk up to an old metal shack and go inside, finding two picnic tables laid out with tablecloths and snacks. A crude stove warms the shack. It is apparent that our van driver had gone ahead and prepared our lunch spot and our lunch. We are served, as a main course, "hake" white fish with

potatoes and vegetables and then desert. Most delicious. We next go on a two hour hike around Gable Island. We see some beaver dams and beaver lodges. Beavers are not indigenous to Tierra de Fuego. Canadian beavers were introduced by some Argentines in 1946, hoping to build a fur trade. Having no natural predators, the beavers have overrun Tierra de Fuego and are said to be seriously damaged the ecosystem. Also, their fur is not of acceptable quality for "harvesting". The Zodiac takes us back to our van, and we return to our hotel at 7 PM....a full day.



-Note from Kal: Marie and I took a 4 wheel drive off road excursion. We crossed the Andes via a highway, then did our off road drive along the side and in the largest lake in Tierra de Fuego. Lots of fun. The drivers/guides grilled a lunch for us in a primitive shelter. We shared a table with our co-travelers (a Brazilian mother with her 20 and 16 year old sons. An Argentine and a German). We greatly enjoyed the conversation comparing our various countries. The Brazilian boys (based on seeing Michael Moore flicks) think Americans only eat fast food!

-The four of us go out at 8 PM and enjoy a nice dinner in a restaurant situated in an old mansion.

Friday January 28th – Day 16

-This morning we check out of our hotel of the last two nights in Ushuaia, Argentina, the MIL 810. We really liked this hotel; good location right downtown, nice views of the harbor, comfortable rooms, and a nice breakfast spot (included), with a balcony, right near our rooms on the fourth floor. Also cable TV with the BBC service in English and live coverage of the Australian Open Tennis tournament (in Spanish). Today we are scheduled to fly to Iguazu on the Argentina/Brazil border, home of the famous Iguazu Falls.



-At 10:30 AM we are picked up at our hotel by the transfer agency Isabel (our TA) has contracted with for most of our transfers. The van driver is accompanied by an agent from the agency (Tiempo Libre) who has printed out our boarding passes for our flights today....first flight to Buenos Aires then on to Iguazu. She accompanies us to the Aerolineas Argentina counter to make sure that we have no problems checking in. They do not charge us the penalty for checked bags weighing more than 33 pounds. Unfortunately, they inform us that the plane we are to take to Buenos Aires has not yet departed that city, meaning our flight will be four hours late, most probably causing us to miss our connections to Iguazu. We pay the \$8 per person departure tax.

-After about an hour, we are called to the Aerolineas Argentina counter, where we find that they have put us on a 1:50 PM flight to Buenos Aires. This looks great until we board the flight and find out that it is flying to El Calafate first, information not provided by the agents or any of the electronic message boards in the boarding area. We arrive in El Calafate at 3:15 PM. Passengers exit and the new passengers board. At 4:15 PM I cannot believe we have not left for Buenos Aires. They announce that the co-pilot is sick and seeing a doctor. It is hot, sitting in the plane. At 5:20 PM we hear the ominous sound of the baggage doors being opened. They now announce that the co-pilot has left for further tests in the hospital in town. The flight is cancelled. Please leave the plane.

-Now, you have to understand that El Calafate is a town of 20,000 people. The airport is small, and 12 miles from town. We collect our bags and stand in line with 100+ other stranded passengers, getting no information. It does appear that our trip to the famous Iguazu Falls is in serious doubt, but we are more worried about figuring out how/when we will get out of southern Patagonia and where we are going to spend the night! We e-mail Isabel to notify her of our problems and ask her to try to cancel our rooms for tonight at the hotel in Iguazu.



-At 7:15 PM the airline starts assigning us to hotel rooms in El Calafate and we board buses to take us into town. We depart the airport at 7:45 PM, arriving at our hotel, the Kau Yatun at 8:30 PM. Unfortunately the management of the hotel says that Aerolineas Airlines has not contacted them. After a little bit, we are assigned rooms and assured that the airline will also be picking up our meals. Now, this is not a luxury hotel, but the rooms are fine and we enjoyed our dinner in the cozy hotel restaurant, with entertainment from a singer/guitar player.

-Now, our travel agent, Isabel has e-mailed us and is working hard on arranging how to get us to Iguazu Falls so that we can still see this great site. She has now called us and will investigate some more options to possibly extend our time at the Falls vs. in Buenos Aires. We are hoping to get out of southern Patagonia tomorrow.

Saturday January 29 – Day 17

-We wake up today in El Calafate, Argentina in southern Patagonia rather than at Iguazu Falls in far northeastern Argentina, where we are scheduled to be. As reported yesterday, our relatively simple flight from Ushuaia to Buenos Aires to Iguazu became a “long day at the airport” when Aerolineas Argentina transferred us from our first flight to Buenos Aires (as it would have been four hours late and we would have missed our connection to Iguazu) to another flight. This flight went first to El Calafate where the co-pilot became ill, and they cancelled that flight. They eventually got all of the 100+ passengers on our MD 80 jet hotel rooms for the night in Calafate. Now, our good travel agent, Isabel, informs us that if they had kept us on the original (4 hour late flight) we would have made our connections, as their flight from Buenos Aires to Iguazu was also several hours late in departing BA! Aerolineas Argentina is rapidly moving up my list of least favorite airlines.....getting ready to challenge United Airlines. In fact, I have a new slogan for them: “Aerolineas, striving to be the United Airlines of Argentina”.

-We have a nice breakfast at our hotel in Calafate. The weather today is beautiful...in the 60s and sunny. We enjoy watching the sheep, sheep dogs and wildlife around our hotel.



No word from Aerolineas (despite their promise) on when we would pick us up at the hotel for transport to the airport and when our plane would depart. Fortunately, we were in e-mail contact with Isabel who was working in our behalf and keeping us informed. She told us that Aerolineas had told her that our flight would leave at 11 AM, and they would pick us up. We wait and then learn the flight will depart at 12:30pm and they will pick us up at 11 AM. We get to the airport and check in, only to learn that the flight will now depart at 2 PM. Complicating matters is that our original flight(s) had us landing at the “domestic” airport in Buenos Aires for an easy connection to our domestic flight to Iguazu. Now, they are flying us to the international airport in BA, where it can take 1-1/2 hours to transfer to the domestic airport. If we arrive in BA at 5 PM, get our luggage and transfer to the domestic airport, we may be getting there at 7 PM, just when our flight to Iguazu is scheduled to depart. Oh well; let’s be optimistic....maybe the Iguazu flight will be late departing and we can make it!



Meanwhile, Isabel has been trying to rearrange our schedule so that we can get two nights at Iguazu Falls and just one night, at the end of our vacation, in Buenos Aires. At our request, she has secured us a second night at the very expensive Sheraton Falls View, inside the National Park at Iguazu Falls. However, if we miss tonight’s 7 PM (and last flight) to Iguazu I think we will give up on seeing the falls and just stay in Buenos Aires. Anyways...looks like a second straight stressful day in airports and on airplanes, but we’re up to it!

-We board our airplane at the El Calafate airport and take off a little after 2 PM, arriving at the Buenos Aires International Airport a little after 5 PM. As we land, Kal says “that was easy...only 26 hours” (from the time our ill-fated

plane landed yesterday in Calafate until we finally arrive at Buenos Aires). We are able to rather quickly gather our luggage, and we arrange for a large remiss (taxi) to take us to the domestic airport. Aerolineas is offering a free bus (as their original flight was to have landed at the domestic airport), but we choose to pay \$46 to the remiss company, Traslado Empresarial, to save some time....hoping to make our flight to Iguazu. We have a great driver, and he skillfully and quickly weaves through the relatively light Saturday traffic, getting us to the domestic airport in a "record" 35 minutes, at about 6:10 PM. We check our bags and find that our 7:05 PM flight is on time (the first one on this vacation, including the United flight from the USA)! We phone Isabel to let her know that we made it (so that she can finally relax and stop planning more "contingencies" for us). The plane is a brand new Embraer 190 and we enjoy the 1-1/2 hour flight in the comfortable seats.

-We are traveling to the Iguazu Falls area in extreme northeastern Argentina, right on the border with Brazil. This area is much closer to the equator than where we have been in Patagonia, and we expect highs in the mid 90s and lows in the mid 70s. We land on time and are transferred to the Sheraton Hotel, the only hotel inside the park. We check into our rooms for the next two nights, and then go down for some drinks and planning of tomorrow's excursions.

Sunday January 30th – Day 18

-We wake early at the Sheraton International. Looking out over our balcony we get the first view of the Iguazu Falls from our "falls view" room. We have very much been looking forward to today, when we will have a full day to explore the falls. We have read that the falls, which lie on the Rio (river) Iguazu and run along the border of Argentina and Brazil, stretch for over a mile and the water falls 270 feet.

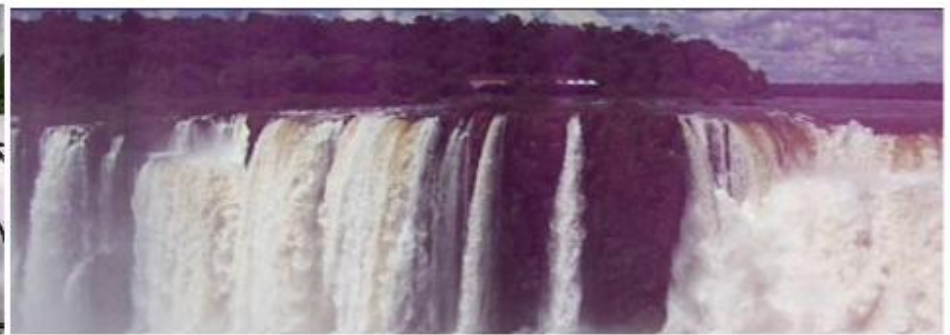
-We have an early and excellent breakfast in the Sheraton's restaurant and start walking into the park when it opens at 8 AM. We have been told that the Sheraton is the only hotel inside the park and if you start early, you "have the park to yourselves" as it takes an hour or two for the tourists and tour groups to arrive from the other accommodation in the town.

-Just as we are entering the park at 8 AM we spot about ten monkeys playing in the trees right next to the trail. This reminds us that we are in a tropical forest. We first walk the entire lower circuit path, getting great views and photos of the falls. We don't see another tourist until 8:30 AM when one power walks by us. It's 9 AM before we see our second tourist. At 9:30 AM we head down to the water level to take a power boat ride that we had pre-paid for (their motto is "You Will Get Wet"). It is a hot (it will be in the mid-90s) sunny and humid day, so we decide not to use the rain wear we had brought. They give us a waterproof sack to hold my backpack and Marcia's and Kal's cameras. We board the boat and have an exciting 25 minute ride through the river rapids and up to the face of several of the falls. We all get soaked...there are inches of water running down the deck of the boat. We have a great time and slowly start to dry out after we leave the boat. We next walk up many steps and do the upper circuit path, which takes us on walkways right above the top of several of the falls. By now it is about noon time, and we decide to walk back to the Sheraton to clean up and change into dry clothes.



-At 12:30 PM we regroup and walk back to the falls, first stopping at an area offering food for our lunch. We enjoy, as we have all day, the unique birds of the park, but mostly the unique mammal called a "Coatee", which looks like a small raccoon with a long, skinny tail and a protruding snout. They are all over the park, with many juveniles, and run around looking for handouts. The park is now packed with tourists, most of whom are Argentinians enjoying a nice summer Sunday.

- Now, last night we had an embarrassing incident. Poncho, our taxi driver picked us (and one other couple) at the airport for our transfer to the Sheraton Hotel. On the way, we stopped at the park entrance, and Poncho told us that we now had to pay a 100 peso (\$25 USD) per person park entry fee (we had forgotten that Isabel has warned us about this). As I have previously mentioned, we've had a hard time acquiring Argentinian Pesos...the ATMs we find are usually out of money, or we are running through airports trying to catch planes, and forget to try their ATMs. So....there's no way we have 400 Pesos between the four of us. As we contemplate walking back to the airport, Poncho finally convinces the park guard to take \$105 USD to cover the four of us. I mention this because we are now on a crusade to find an ATM. Last night, at check in, they indicated to Kal where one might be, so we set off (while I am saying that there's no way, if we find it, that it will still have cash on a Sunday afternoon). Anyways, Kal prevails and we find an ATM with Pesos.....we are back in business!



-Marie and Kal next walk the 1-1/2 miles west (while Marcia and Jim take the park train) to arrive at the walkway to the “Devil’s Throat”. The half mile walk way take us over the various rivers and tributaries feeding the falls until we arrive at the amazing confluence of several major rivers and the resulting cauldron of waterfalls...a fantastic site. We all take the train back.

-Back to our rooms before the park closes at 5 PM. Boy, is it hot! We clean up and enjoy a nice dinner. Tomorrow we return to Buenos Aires.

Monday January 31st – Day 19

-We wake up this morning after our second night at the Sheraton Hotel inside the Iguazu National Park. Yesterday, while we were in the park, we heard rumors of a wide spread power outage in the town and the whole area. This seemed to be confirmed by the lack of lights in a couple of the shops that we saw in the park. When we returned to the Sheraton, we noted that they had all the exterior doors wide open in the main areas, and that our rooms were getting quite warm. Lights were working, and the air conditioning system was circulating air, but not cooling it. Apparently, the hotel was using their backup generator, but it did not have enough power to chill the air. We had a good dinner in the hotel restaurant but it continued to warm up, and we experienced several total power outages, but only for a few seconds each, while we dined.



-This morning, with the sun beating against “our side” of the hotel our rooms really heat up. After breakfast, we go outside to stand in the shade and try to find a breeze to help us cool off. Our remiss driver, Poncho, arrives and we leave beautiful Iguazu National Park in his air conditioned van for the Iguazu airport to catch our 10:20 AM flight back to Buenos Aires. The airport feels quite comfortable when we arrived, although it does seem to start warming up after we experience a short, total power outage. Aerolineas Argentina did not, again, charge us for our overweight bags...thanks! I fear I may have been too critical of this airline. I read a brief history of Aerolineas in their in-flight magazine, and it appears that a series of private owners, over the past decade really “ran it into the ground” with all flights suspended with bankruptcy in mid-2008. As this is the only airline serving medium and small cities in Argentina, and there were large rallies of support from the airline workers and customers, the government took over the airline. They have started to order new airplanes (they had gone 17 years with no new planes) and we are flying today on one of the new planes, an Embraer 190.

-We land at the Buenos Aires domestic airport shortly after 1 PM and secure a remiss (taxi) for the fifteen minute ride to our “boutique” hotel (I think this means a small hotel with just a few rooms....9 in this case), The Synergie in the trendy Palermo/Soho district. The location is great and we very much like our large rooms (big bedroom with fireplace and flat screen TV, balcony, living room and a nice bathroom with one fancy shower).



-At 3 PM we go for about a two hour walk, to and through a lovely botanical park. Then back to the hotel for some drinks and rest before dinner. Our Tour Agent, Isabel, has made dinner reservations for the four of us at the “best” restaurant in Buenos Aires, the La Cabrera. Isabel e-mails us that it’s “illegal to leave the country without having the best Argentinian beef”.

-We take a short walk to the restaurant for our 8:30 PM reservation (that’s when the restaurant opens for dinner...they eat dinner late in Argentina)! The food is great.....best steaks we’ve ever had. The best cut appears to be the medio lomo (tenderloin). Many interesting (unnamed) side dishes! We walk back to our hotel, getting there at midnight.



-Tomorrow will be our last day in Argentina; our flight home leaves the International Airport at 10 PM on Wednesday. Please insure that the snow storms miss Washington DC, Dayton OH, and upstate NY!

Tuesday February 1st – Day 20

-We all sleep in (to varying degrees) this morning, as we were up past midnight last night after our excellent dinner at the La Cabrera steak restaurant. This is our last day of vacation; tonight at 10:05 PM we fly home from Buenos Aires, Argentina. After breakfast we pack up our luggage and check out of the Synergie Hotel. We enjoyed our short stay, here, with its good location in the Palermo/Soho district, large rooms and helpful staff. Isabel, our Travel Agent, has been able to negotiate a 50% reduction in the charge for the first night's reservation (which we missed due to the one day delay in flying out of southern Patagonia and our subsequent decision to sacrifice one night in Buenos Aires for two nights at Iguazu Falls). The hotel agrees to watch our bags and luggage for us while we do some more exploring in BA.

-At 11:30 AM we depart the hotel for a 25 minute walk to the Buenos Aires Zoo. It has been hot and humid in Buenos Aires, but today is beautiful, with a high temperature predicted of only 73 degrees and there's not a cloud in the sky. I enjoy looking at the cars in use in this city. In addition to the familiar German, Japanese and South Korean models, there are a lot of Fords and Chevys (although many of the models are European designs not seen in the USA) and an occasional Jeep or Chrysler. What is surprising to me is the large amount of French and Italian cars (Renaults, Peugeots, Citrons, Fiats and Alpha Romeos) that are rarely sold or seen in the USA.

-The Buenos Aires zoo was first opened in 1885 and most of the existing buildings reflect century old architecture. The zoo covers 45 acres and we spend an enjoyable two hours viewing the wide variety of animals and the many Buenos Aires families enjoying the zoo with their children during their summer school break. While some aspects of the park look a little worn out, the animals appeared healthy and this zoo seems somewhat unique in that it encouraged patrons to feed many of the animals (with special, purchased food) and several varieties of small mammals (like the Patagonia Mara), are allowed to roam outside the fences and on the walkways.



-We next have a late lunch at a pizza restaurant and return to the Synergie Hotel a little before 5 PM. Signing on to the internet we discover that we have an e-mail from our daughter telling us that United Airlines has contacted her and told her that our Wednesday morning connecting flight from Washington DC to Albany has been cancelled. Getting on the United web site we learn that Marie's and Kal's flight to Dayton has also been cancelled due to a large snow storm.

-At 6 PM a remiss (taxi) takes us to the BA International Airport. Marcia and I check in and have our checked luggage shipped only as far as Washington, as United will not commit as to when they can get us to Albany. Marie and Kal are delighted to find that they are now booked on a flight to Dayton that will get them home only a little later than originally planned, and check their bags through to Dayton. Before boarding our plane, I get back on the Internet and reserve a hotel room for Wednesday night near Dulles airport...we have a feeling it may take a while for us to get back home.

-We board (a full) United Boeing 767 which takes off, on time, at 10:05 PM for Washington DC.

Wednesday February 2 – Back In The USA

-We land at Washington-Dulles a little before 6:30 AM. Marcia and I now "split" with Marie and Kal, who are directed to clear customs in the "transfers" area, as they are booked on an 8:30 AM flight to Dayton which should get them home by 11 AM.

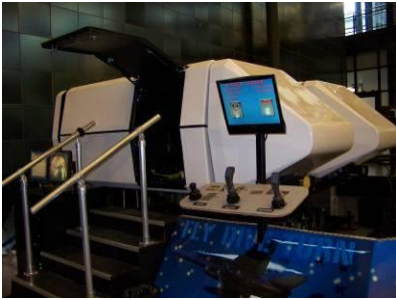
-Marcia and I are directed to the customs and baggage claim area for flyers whose flights terminate in Washington. After clearing customs and claiming our bags, we go to the United Airline rebooking counter. We are now rebooked on a direct flight to Albany that will depart Dulles at 5:03 PM and should get us to Albany at about 7 PM. We will have "another long day in an airport", but are glad that we will get home tonight. They have what is said to be an excellent Air and Space Museum near this airport, and Marcia and I plan to take a shuttle bus over to the museum mid-day; this should help break up the wait.

Thursday February 3rd – At Home

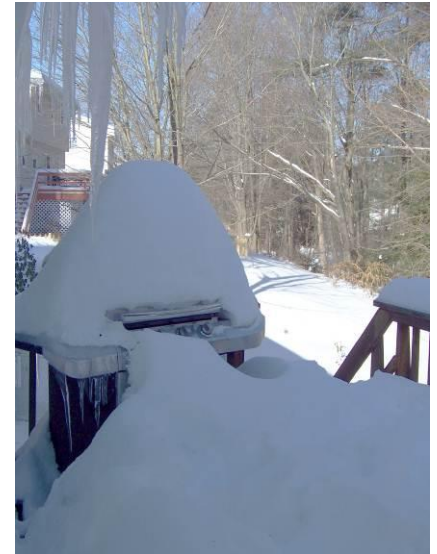
-This will be the last e-mail that we bother you with...a brief one about our final arrivals home and a "rating" of some of the components of this vacation.

-Marie and Kal, after our 6:30AM arrival from a 10-1/2 hour flight from Buenos Aires, cleared customs in the "transfer" area at Washington Dulles airport and then boarded an 8:30 AM United Airlines commuter flight to Dayton. They found the weather not great in Dayton.....icy and snowy, and were a bit surprised that the flight went through. Kal's bag (checked through from Buenos Aires) did not arrive. They got home by noon and then went to the kennel to pick up their two dogs, who were fine.

-Marcia and Jim, knowing that their 8 AM flight to Albany NY was canceled (due to the snow storm) rebooked on a 5:03 PM flight. We paid 50 cents at the transportation center outside of gate 2E and took a 10 minute shuttle to the Aerospace Museum near this airport. We found this to be a most excellent museum and I highly recommend it. We spent three hours checking out the many restored classic military and civilian planes. Admission is free. We did pay extra to use a flight simulator (I was the pilot, Marcia the gunner), but this was not the PC type of experience I was used to. The simulator cockpit would actually rotate to your input and turn completely over if you did "roll".....great stuff. We also paid extra to see a ½ hour IMAX movie "To Fly" that was highly overrated.



-Our flight home on a United Airlines commuter Bombardier regional jet left on time at 5:03 PM. We encountered heavy turbulence as we neared Albany (where the airport had been closed from 8 AM Tuesday until 4:30 PM on Wednesday). The landing was something to watch, as we noted icing on the wings, and blowing snow as we landed on a snow covered runway. I was surprised (but happy) that we landed in such conditions. As we waited at baggage claim, I talked with members of the USA Luge team, whom I noticed due to the "Norton" patches on their vests...my former employer of 39 years (they were on our flight, back from the World Championships). Like Kal, my checked bag never arrives...hey United, what's up with this?...I checked both bags at Dulles for a direct flight, and Marcia's suitcase arrived and my identical bag still can't be found (as I write this a day later). We arrive home to twelve inches of fresh snow, on top of several more from other, recent storms. Shadow, our Pomeranian, has been well watched over by our neighbors and is happy to see us, as we are happy to see him.



OK...here's our recap of some comments and the good and bad (of what was a great vacation):

Comments:

Planning:

-Kal outlined a proposed 20 day tour, based on his studies of the "Moon" travel guide, information from Marcia and Marie's cousin Judi, and the Internet. We sent this to Isabel at Buenos Aires Tours who offered good revisions, based on her experiences, and then "made it all happen" by booking the internal flights, accommodations, and excursions. I also used the Insight Patagonia tour guide and Fodor's Argentina tour guide. Both of us utilized Destination Expert's comments and those posted by individual contributors on the great TripAdvisor.com Forum for both our strategic and tactical planning...that is one great web site.

Language:

-While Kal has some understanding of Spanish, which was most useful, we were basically English speakers in Spanish speaking countries. Waiter/Waitresses, for the most part, knew no English but this was not a problem, as most all menus had English "subtitles" and we could point to what we wanted. In any event, it was always enjoyable interacting with our

waitresses and waiters. Our remiss (taxi) drivers knew no English, but this was not a problem. We always had a printed version of where we wanted to go, and they got us there quickly. Hotel desk people had an OK understanding of English, and all of the excursion guides were very proficient in English...Kal claims they all pronounce it better than me! When all else failed we could fall back on my daughter's Spanish-English dictionary.

Weather:

-Great in Iguazu, Buenos Aires, an Ushuaia. Could have been a little warmer and clearer in El Calafate, Torres del Pines and on the Cruise through the Magellan Channel and Cape Horn, but, again it wasn't bad. 90s and 80s in BA and Iguazu...50s and 60s for most our time in Southern Patagonia.

Pluses

- Isabel – Buenos Aires Tours - 

-The scenery and the animals, the main reasons that we planned this trip, met our high expectations. We also enjoyed the opportunity to take some rather demanding hikes and also some easier walks.

-The all-inclusives that we booked for the 5 day cruise around Cape Horn and in Torres del Pines.....both were expensive, but reduced hassles and were very much enjoyed.

-The 5 day cruise from Puerto Arenas to Ushuaia was, again, expensive but a totally first class operation. Being able to land at Cape Horn will be something that we will always remember.

-The people we met.....the Argentinians and the Chileans, were all wonderful.

-Food was always good or very good, and restaurant meals were about one half of the price we'd pay for comparable fare in the USA.

-Trip Planning: Could not have done this without the good help of Isabel from Buenos Aires Tours who not only planned this (for a modest fee), but met us the first day in Buenos Aires and then contacted us every day to insure we were OK and stepped in when we had the issues with the demonstrations/blockades in southern Chile and the flight delay in El Calafate.

-Trip Advisor Forum...always a wealth of information.

-Excursions : With the exception on the 3 hour Beagle Channel boat trip, all of the excursions and tours that we did were very well done with very good guides. (Note from Marcia – some of my best sea lion pictures were from this boat trip- we got so close the smell almost knocked me over!)

-Ground Transportation: The transportation, back and forth, from the ex-BA hotels to our accommodations, arranged by Isabel, and our own arrangement for remises (taxis) to and from our accommodations in BA and the airports were always on time with good vehicles which were safe, quick, and had relatively inexpensive fares.

We Were Lucky: The strike being settled in Southern Chile on the afternoon before we were scheduled to enter Chile. This could have derailed our plans for the next eight days (three days in Torres del Pines and five days cruising out of Punta Arenas). I do think that events like this are rare, and I would not want to discourage anyone from planning a trip to Patagonia.

-Our Traveling Companions – Marie and Kal...they are the best....thanks for putting up with me!

Negatives:

-We spent a lot of time on airplanes on this trip (understandable, due the long flights to and from the USA and the distances inside of Argentina) but we spent way too much time sitting in airports (United Airlines delay in departing Washington, UA flight cancelation to Albany due to weather on our return and then the lost baggage, and Aerolineas flight delays due to weather/mechanical/sick co-pilot in Buenos Aires, Ushuaia, El Calafate and Iguazu.....these were really the only unpleasant periods of our visit, but I guess hard to avoid due to the scope of our travels.

-Kal and Marie didn't like the snack (the same old ham and cheese sandwich) which we always had on the Aerolineas flights, while Jim and Marcia came to like them (in that it meant we were finally airborne)!

-Accumulating Argentina Pesos seemed to be difficult for us, as the largest denomination is 100 peso (\$25 USD) and ATMs were frequently out of cash.

-Having to tip and then sign for tips after meals and when ordering drinks at the Hosteria del Patagonia "all inclusive" resort was time consuming and looked like just a ploy to extract a little more revenue. Much nicer on the 5 day Stella Australis cruise where we just wrote a check at the end for a nice tip to be divided amongst the crew.

-Unfortunate that the electrical supply in the Iguazu area failed while we were there, cutting off the air conditioning to the Sheraton.

Best, Jim