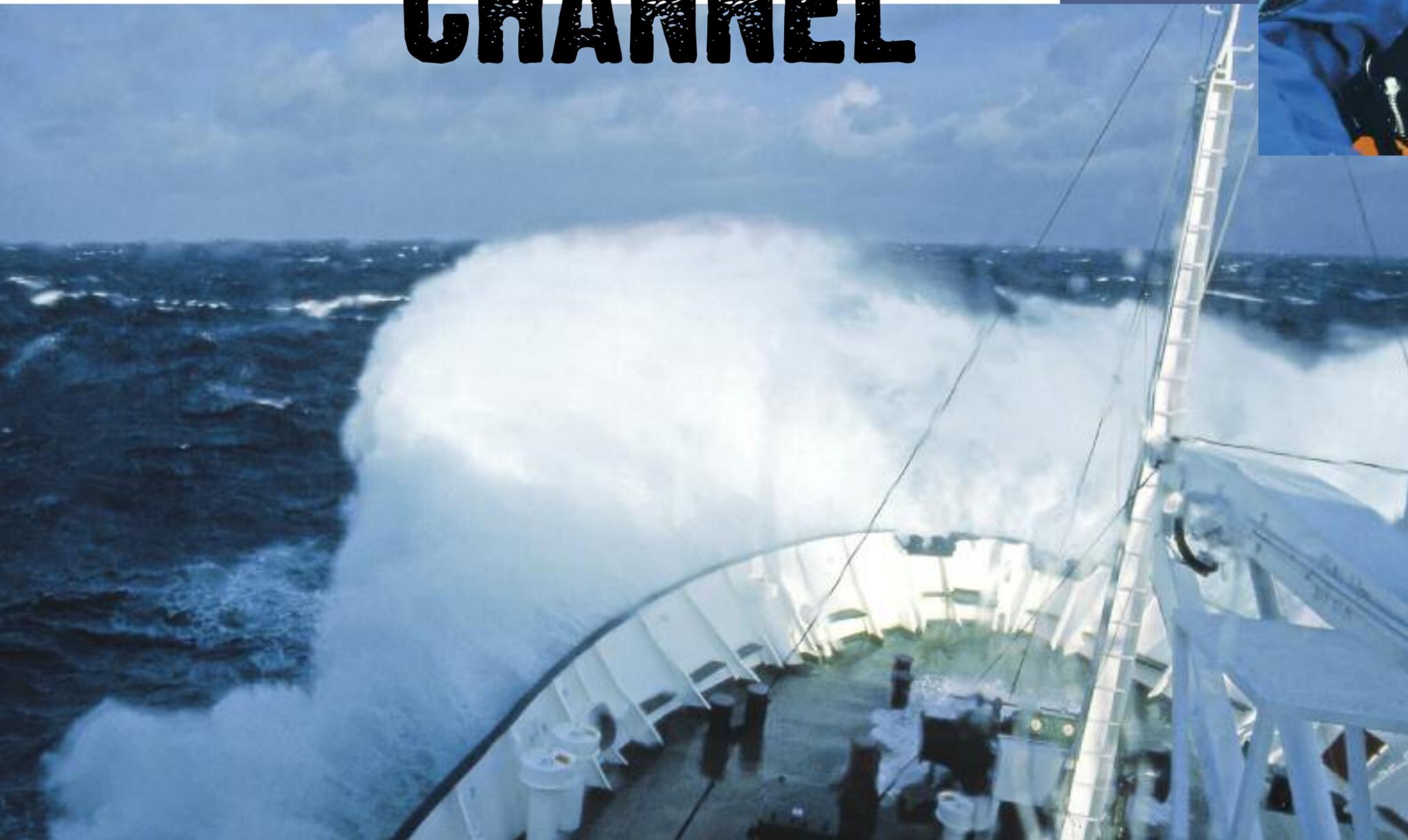


> AT THE SOUTHERN TIP OF SOUTH AMERICA LIES A REGION AS WILD AND REMOTE AS ANY OTHER ON EARTH. IT IS A LAND KNOWN FOR ITS RUGGED LANDSCAPE, TEMPERAMENTAL WEATHER AND FRONTIER FEEL. OUTDOOR ENTHUSIASTS FROM AROUND THE WORLD COME TO HIKE IN MOUNTAINS SO JAGGED THEY RESEMBLE THE WILD DRAWINGS OF A CHILD.



MICHAEL SALVAREZZA  
CHRISTOPHER P. WEAVER

# THE BEAGLE CHANNEL



**T**hey also come to experience the region's expansive deserts and impressive waterfalls, and to witness a robust diversity of life, including some 200 species of seabirds that come here to breed. At the foothills of the Patagonian mountains lies the city of Ushuaia, often referred to as 'the city at the end of the world'. Adventurers often stop here on their way to Antarctica some 1000km (800 miles) south across some of the most tempestuous seas on Earth. Visitors to Ushuaia instantly connect with a sense of isolation and distance from the rest of the world. Indeed, this confluence of natural beauty and remoteness, of unpredictable weather and fearsomely wild landscapes serves as a demarcation point between the tamed and untamed natural world. In many ways Patagonia is not just a region of South America... it's very much a state of mind.

Slicing through Patagonia and the area known as Tierra del Fuego is the Beagle Channel, a 240km stretch of water (150

miles) long extending across the southern tip of the South American continent. Along with the Straits of Magellan to the north, and the open ocean to the south, the Beagle Channel is one of three navigable passages around South America between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. For those journeying on to Antarctica, the Beagle Channel serves as the gateway to the Drake Passage, known for having the roughest water in the world. It is often overlooked in the excitement of preparing for polar adventures, serving merely as a prelude to the remote regions to the south. For divers, however, the waters of the Beagle Channel are, themselves, an adventure waiting to be experienced.

Because the area is often overlooked by divers bound for Antarctica who use this region simply as a launching point on their journey, it may be surprising to learn that the diving here is quite beautiful. Divers are able to visit interesting shipwrecks, dive with jellyfish and huge king crabs, and discover many varieties

Main: The Beagle Channel is the gateway to the Southern Ocean and the tempestuous Drake Passage.

Top: There's plenty of encounters with interesting varieties of marine invertebrates; Divers must be familiar with kelp diving techniques.



King Crabs grow large in the cool waters of the Beagle Channel. The waters of the Beagle Channel are home to dense stands of kelp, which reminded us of some of the kelp forest diving in California or the Pacific Northwest.

around the kelp along a gentle slope that goes no deeper than 12 metres /40 feet.

Isla Redonda is a small island in the heart of the Beagle Channel directly in front of the Tierra del Fuego National Park. On this island is a small base for the Coast Guard and, colourfully, the World's End Post Office. Deep walls that drop sharply to 27 metres/88 feet surround the island. Here, divers will find giant king crabs and can explore dense kelp forests.

The weather and water conditions in this region are extremely unpredictable; its been said that in Patagonia the wind is the landlord. Strong storms and lashing winds can arrive suddenly with almost no warning, and the water conditions can deteriorate rapidly. Because of this the seabed is littered with the remains of many unfortunate casualties of this climatological battleground. Many of these shipwrecks aren't easily accessible – the same conditions that sank them make diving them nearly impossible – but for shipwreck enthusiasts there are some wrecks that are regularly visited.

The *Mañana* is a small wooden boat that ran aground near the airport and now rests in 12 metres/40 feet. Covered in sponges, kelp and sea squirts, this wreck is home to several species of small fish and king crabs. Other shipwrecks in the area include the *Sarmiento*, a partially submerged old steel steamer near the eastern part of the Beagle Channel and the *Monte Cervantes* near the Les Eclaireurs lighthouse is broken into two distinct pieces. The hull lies beyond recreational diving limits at 100 metres/330 feet but the ship's decking, masts, cabins and other pieces of



#### TIPS FOR KELP DIVING:

- Because of tangle hazards, descents while inside kelp should be avoided.
- If you happen to get snagged, try to free yourself without twisting your body because this will only tangle you further!
- If freeing yourself fails, try to double the kelp back on itself until it snaps. This is usually a better solution than using a knife.
- Divers should remember to use the kelp crawl if they find themselves on the surface in the middle of a kelp bed.
- To perform the kelp crawl, divers should inflate their BC fully so they're as high in the water as possible. To lessen the chance

of getting tangled, all dive gear should be tucked away and any loose kelp should be cleared from the diver as much as possible. Then with alternating arms, push the kelp under the body and glide over the top of the canopy. Fins should be trailed behind and not kicked, as they'll most likely get tangled. During a kelp crawl, plan the shortest path through the kelp in order to get back to the boat or shore safely.

- Please note: the kelp crawl should never be a substitute for proper dive planning, navigation within the kelp, or poor air monitoring!

SURFACING FROM THIS DIVE, WE WERE AGAIN GREETED WITH THE UNEXPECTED: A SWIFT SURFACE CURRENT HAD CROPPED UP AND THE DIVE BOAT WAS PIVOTING WILDLY AS IT STRUGGLED TO REMAIN AT ANCHOR IN THE CHAOTIC FAST-MOVING WATERS. WE QUICKLY GRABBED A STERN LINE AND HELD ON TIGHT AS WE SWUNG BACK AND FORTH IN THE WATER

wreckage are more accessible at 40 metres/130 feet. However, given the depth, and an absence of natural shelters in an area known for unpredictable weather, this is an advanced dive. As we eagerly anticipated our own Antarctic adventure, we decided to try the diving in the Beagle Channel with Ushuaia Divers, a local dive operation offering personalized service, a clean and comfortable boat and an unparalleled knowledge of the changeable conditions in this region. After gearing up in our drysuits to protect us from the cold waters (water temperature in winter is generally around 2-4°C/36-40°F while in the summer months it reaches 8-10°C/46-50°F), it was time for our first dive in a dense kelp forest along a dropoff near the East Point of Bayo Casco.

We dove to 15m/50 feet for 40 minutes and found clear water (9m/30 foot visibility) and a fascinating array of marine life, including king crabs, decorator crabs, starfish and a variety of other crustaceans inhabiting this site. This

#### USEFUL STUFF:

Language: Spanish (official), English, Italian, German, and French  
 Currency: Argentina peso  
 Time: GMT -3  
 Climate: Mostly temperate; arid in SE; sub Antarctic in SW  
 Natural Hazards: Earthquakes, violent windstorms (*pamperos*), heavy flooding  
 Diving Season: Year round  
 Local Dive Operator: Ushuaia Divers  
[www.tierradelfuego.org.ar/divers/pages/home.html](http://www.tierradelfuego.org.ar/divers/pages/home.html)

site reminded us of some of the kelp forest diving in California or the Pacific Northwest – albeit with much different marine life.

While waiting out our surface interval we came face to face with the ferociously unpredictable weather in this region. After a morning of calm weather with no winds and peeks of sunshine in the generally cloudy sky, wind speeds suddenly cranked up in a matter of minutes, creating an almost instant 1 metre/2-3 foot chop in the previously calm channel. Dark moisture-laden clouds began to roll by, and an ominous drop in temperature hit the area. It never actually rained, but the howling wind was hair-raising enough!

With that as backdrop, our second dive was on a small, unidentified sunken sailboat lying nearby in 12 metres/40 feet. The wreck is totally covered in kelp and marine crustaceans and almost indistinguishable from the rocky surroundings. It hosted a wide variety of marine life and that small sunken craft is now a thriving little eco-system submerged in Beagle Channel.

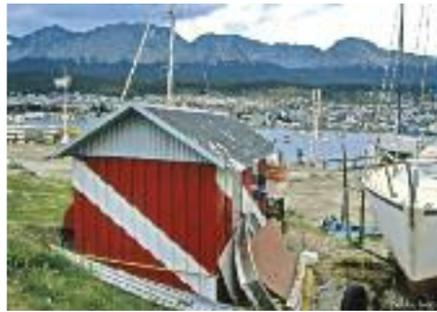
Surfacing from this dive, we were again greeted with the unexpected: a swift surface current had cropped up and the dive boat was pivoting wildly as it struggled to remain at anchor in the chaotic fast-moving waters. We quickly grabbed a stern line and held on tight as we swung back and forth in the water while deliberately making our way back to the boat. Soon enough we were safely on board, sipping hot coffee, eating fresh biscuits and marveling at this strange and wonderful place.



The Beagle Channel is home to encrusting sponges, and in turn they host marine crustaceans. Ushuaia is at the foothills of the spectacular Patagonian Mountains and is often referred to as 'the city at the end of the world.' Starfish come in a wide array of colours down here. Heading to Antarctica down the Beagle Channel.



Ushuaia Divers dive boat. Diving in Patagonia is a unique experience. Sturdy vessels such as the Polar Pioneer set sail for Antarctica from Ushuaia. Author Christopher Weaver with local dive leader Carlos Giuggia.

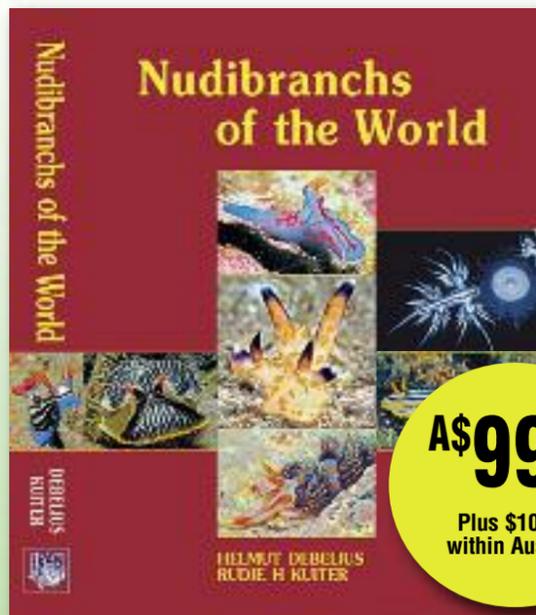
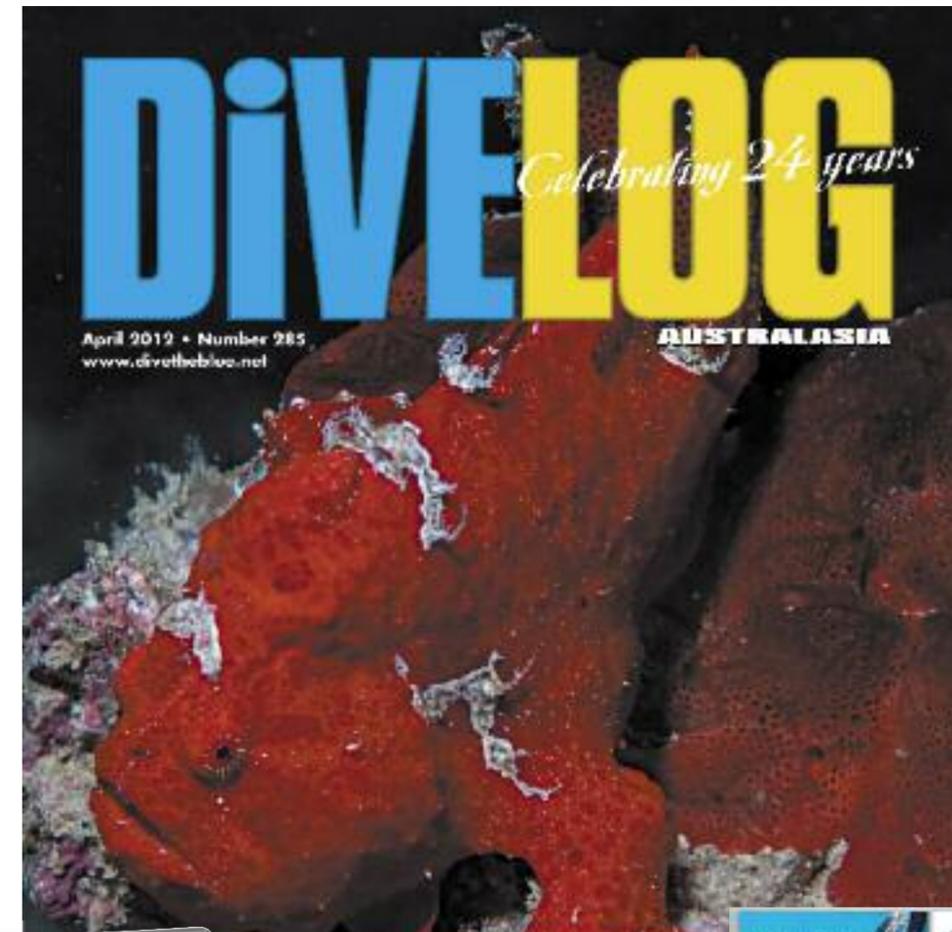


Ushuaia, the city at the end of the world. The Beagle Channel, gateway to the infamous Drake Passage. Patagonia, land of wild mountains and wilder weather. What more do you need to get your explorer juices flowing? If you're in these parts, don't overlook the diving opportunities here. Just remember to keep an eye to the sky!

© 2011 Eco-Photo Explorers



**HOWEVER YOU LOOK AT IT...**



**Over 2500 photos  
More than 1180  
species illustrated**

**Perfect for divers,  
snorkelers, naturalists,  
scientists and  
photographers**

**A\$99<sup>00</sup>** incl GST  
Plus \$10 p&h within Australia

**Order now from Mountain Ocean & Travel Publications  
email [books@motpub.com.au](mailto:books@motpub.com.au) / Tel 03 5944 3774**

Price includes 10% GST for Australian Residents. Add A\$10 p&h per book within Australia



**IT'S FREE TO YOU!**



For iPad and iPad 2.  
iOS versions 4.3 or later  
Download a QR code reader.  
Scan this QR code to go straight to the App store



Follow us on



**ONLINE VERSION FOR PC OR MAC**

Type [www.divetheblue.net/dlonline.html](http://www.divetheblue.net/dlonline.html) into your internet browser. Navigate the Flip version of the magazine by turning the pages with your mouse. Alternatively visit [www.divetheblue.net](http://www.divetheblue.net) and click on the homepage DiveLog banner to access the magazine.