

NEW YEAR'S EVE AT CAPE HORN

by Heide Wilts – www.freydis.de

Fire on board

It is warm and summery in Argentinean Mar da Plata. The generator is working to supply the recently filled freezer. We have stowed away sufficient provisions and equipment to last us a whole year. Before leaving, we have a last cup of tea in the cockpit. Suddenly there are clouds of



smoke everywhere! Erich snatches the nearest fire extinguisher, tears open the door to the engine room and tries to put out the fire. The flames envelop him and singe his hair. Our neighbours on the jetty rush over to help us. The foam of altogether 26 fire extinguishers is poured into the engine room, the after cabin and the mess room. All to no avail. We defend Freydis with the courage of the desperate, but the fire continues to devour everything, feeding on pools of diesel, sea charts, plastic panelling and cables. It is only a matter of time until it reaches the gas flasks with its valves and gaskets - until our home, our whole existence goes up in smoke and sinks. When the fire brigade finally comes to our rescue, pumping tons of water into the hot hull, the engine room, the after cabin and the mess room are just stinking black caverns. All the electronics on board and the camera and sound recording equipment worth a hundred thousand marks have been burnt to a cinder. It takes us a long time until we are able to think clearly. There is one thing we are sure of: the fire must have been caused by a short-circuit in the cabling. For days we work round the clock. We wash, scrape, scrub, fill in cracks, paint and dispose of burnt remains. Our Argentinean friends and helpers comment in amazement: 'They are working like mad men.' Eventually the lights go on again, water flows from the tap, and the new electronics, especially flown in from Germany, are installed. One cable after the other is laid, until each power point has been connected up. The inside walls are painted white, the upholstery renewed. We keep our spirits up by treating ourselves to giant Argentinean steaks now and again. However, the shock is

great and only wears off slowly. Once Freydis has been declared seaworthy by three Argentinean inspectors, we breathe a sigh of relief and set off for Patagonia, only five days late. The sea becomes increasingly colder, but the sun shines warmly, and at night the "Southern Cross" directs us to the "roaring forties". Albatrosses circle around us.

The Falklands after the war

A breathtaking paradise for animals awaits us on the Valdes peninsular. Here is the kindergarten of the elephant seals. The chubby little fellows romp around on the narrow 30m long "caletta" where they are safe from the killer whales, patrolling the coast further out. The inquisitive pups, surrounded by friendly Magellan penguins, even allow one to stroke them. In the Golfo Nuevo cow whales swim around the ship with their high-spirited pups. At birth the "little ones" are already between 5 and 6 metres long. They jump up high out of the water and play with their mothers, hissing and blowing like a steam engine. It is impressive to observe the largest animals on this planet at such close quarters. A slight blow with a fluke and we could forget the rest of our trip. A strong storm from the west drives us out of the gulf. With three reefs and the storm jib hoisted, we escape in the direction of our next destination: the Falklands. In 1690 the Briton, John Strong, named them the Falklands in honour of the treasurer of the British navy, Viscount Falkland. In 1710 the French arrived and christened them the Isles Malouines after their home port, St. Malo. In 1766 the islands were left to the Spanish and were then called the Malvinas. It belonged to Argentina, then England - the ownership of the islands changed several times up until the Falklands War in 1982. Since then, the British have invested a lot of money here, a new airport, a satellite telephone network, housing estates, supermarkets. Most of the money, however, comes from the fishing licences for the Russians, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese and others who are literally emptying the sea offish with their factory ships, stern trawlers and enormous nets. After a windy, wet crossing - we have, after all, crossed the 50th parallel - we land at a sheep farmer's pier in King George Bay. His farm with its 17,000 sheep is the largest on the West Falklands. He employs three young shearers who shear 200 sheep per man per day. However, the intensive grazing is detrimental to the land, and wool prices are low, making sheep rearing less and

less economic. We fly in a small Cessna to Port Stanley. Below us: undulating hills, large rocks, a labyrinth of shiny, silvery lakes and fjords, a farmstead now and again, flocks of sheep along the green edges of the watercourses, lonely wrecks in deserted bays and finally housing blocks, barracks and the large modern airport. Port Stanley has grown since the war and has become noisier and its streets busier. Many of the beaches are dotted with Argentinean plastic mines, the exact location of which is unknown and therefore cannot be defused. The beaches have been fenced in, and warning signs erected. Penguins and sea birds - feather weights which are not endangered by the mines - enjoy these prohibited areas. It is windy and there is rain, snow and hail; spring in the southern hemisphere. Sometimes the sun even shines, and then until 9 o'clock in the evening, as the southern summer is imminent. When the wind drops to seven on the Beaufort scale we leave the Falklands in a south, southeasterly direction; 250 sea miles lie between us and Staten Island - and Cape Horn.

The windiest corner on the earth

Freydis shudders. A cold south-easterly wind bombards her with large hailstones. With storm sails only, she skims over the increasingly rough seas at 7 knots per hour in an awe-inspiring world of rapidly changing light. We pass by bleak, grey rocks with snow covered peaks, Islas Hermite. Crowned by dazzling rainbows, they appear and disappear again in a ghostly fashion behind curtains of snow and hail. Then Cape Horn comes on the scene, illuminated by a cluster of sun rays. There it is in front of us, the rocky symbol of so many cruel seafaring tales, awe-inspiring and ancient. A photographic orgy begins on deck. We anchor in a bay on the west side of Cape island. Only Erich the skipper and a fellow yachtsman dare go through the foaming breakers in the rubber dinghy and climb up to the top of the rock. As a storm is approaching from the south-west, we are relieved when they return unharmed two hours later. We make a hasty retreat to Puerto Williams, the southernmost town on earth. Despite having sailed all the oceans in the world for two decades, I still find storms terrifying. We experienced our worst series of cyclones a little further north on the south-west coast of Chile. Five storms, the last of which turned out to be a hurricane, raging for days hardly giving us break. This time Freydis is fortunately firmly moored in the safest harbour in Tierra del Fuego. After eight days of howling gales, the weather calms down a little, and we are able to land at Ushuaia on the Argentinean side of the

Canal Beagle. What was a sleepy village with 5,000 inhabitants when we visited it ten years ago is now a loud, busy industrial town with 30,000 inhabitants. Politically motivated subsidies have triggered off a construction boom.

New Year's Eve at Cape Horn

Disappointed, we leave Ushuaia's spoilt mountain panorama astern and sail into the fjords of the Darwin Cordilleras which end in imposing glaciers. The sun glistens relentlessly through the ozone hole. The ice cracks, rumbles, thumps and bangs. Pieces of ice break off continuously. The surrounding slopes are strewn with the remains of half-burnt dead trees -evidence of a slash-and-burn policy to create new pastures. We find a small ever-green beech which we decorate for Christmas and put on deck. A waterfall is gurgling on the shore. The cracking noise from the glacier sounds like a salute: Feliz Navidad! And our Christmas menu is clinging to the rocks. Fine specimens of mussels are simply waiting for us to pick them. They are a true delicacy of Tierra del Fuego, served with garlic sauce, fresh bread and white wine. On New Year's Eve we want to visit the Chileans at the small military station at Cape Horn. In glorious sunshine and safely anchored, we can leave Freydis on her own for a few hours and cross over in the rubber dinghy to the south side of the island of Cape Horn. Having walked through prickly bushes and hardy, stunted trees for three hours, we enjoy the incredibly clear view from the cliffs over to the Diego Ramirez Islands, 60 sea miles away, and the Drake Passage which awaits us Suddenly, we find ourselves standing in front of two rows of barbed wire and a mine field, planted in 1989 when there was the threat of a war with Argentina. But both the soldiers we contacted by radio welcome us in a friendly manner and escort us through this no-man's land. On the way, we pass the obelisk erected at this fateful site by the Societe amicale at Cape Horn in memory of the seafaring people, who for four centuries fought their way round Cape Horn in their square rigged vessels and who were only too often defeated. Over coffee we gather from the marines that they are stationed at this lonely, blustery outpost for two to four months at a time to pass on meteorological data to Punta Arenas and to supervise shipping. In particular, they are to safeguard Chile's sovereign rights, as Chile and Argentina are in conflict with one another over three small islands in Tierra del Fuego. The rights to the mineral resources in the continental shelf and in the Antarctic are at stake.