



“ALL FLIGHTS CANCELLED?” RENE HERZOG REPEATED INTO HIS CELL PHONE, AS IF IT WERE NOTHING. IT WAS 5 IN THE MORNING LATE LAST JANUARY AND WE WERE IN A HOTEL LOBBY IN PUNTA ARENAS, CHILE, AND RENE WAS ONE FLIGHT AWAY FROM COMPLETING HIS 10-YEAR QUEST TO CRUISE ON *GIANT I* IN ANTARCTICA. DENSE FOG PREVENTED OUR DEPARTURE FOR THE FOURTH CONSECUTIVE MORNING, BUT, REMARKABLY, THE GROUP OF SWISS ADVENTURE TRAVELERS—*GIANT* OWNERS RENE AND BRIGITTE HERZOG, WERNER AND GIANNA MEIER; AND FRIENDS TONI AND BRUNA BERGER—TOOK THE BAD NEWS IN STRIDE.

Story and Photos by **Jamie Welch**

BREAKING ANTARCTIC ICE

ONE GIANT STEP



“Ok, so we go to see the Patagonia National Park,” Gianna Meier said without showing her disappointment, and it was quite a consolation prize: enchanting glaciers and the spectacular Torres Del Paine—craggy mountain peaks rising over the Magellan Strait—not to mention up-close encounters with penguins, whales, guanacos (think llama but cuter), flamingos, ostriches, condors and foxes.

“I’m so glad we got to see Chile,” Brigitte Herzog said on a boat in front of a blue glacier, holding a glass of pisco sour, the national drink. “The people here are so relaxed and friendly, and their country is absolutely gorgeous. ‘Viva Chile!’” Inspired by Chile’s beauty, she nevertheless longed to be on her yacht *Giant* in Antarctica.

Born in Switzerland in 1946, Rene Herzog was racing sports cars in his teens and at 18 competed in the Ferrari World Championship. In 1971 he met Brigitte, a model, at a fashion show, and two years later they married. Both enthralled with the sea, in 1974 the Herzogs purchased a 19’ Chris-Craft runabout, the first of more than 30 other vessels they have since owned. In 1977 Rene founded Alucraft, a company that built 70’ aluminum yachts designed by Alberto Mercati. In the 1980s Rene built several megayachts, including 140’ *Texas* and 143’ *Galaxy* at Proteksan Shipyard in Turkey. In 1984 they built the 115’ Baglietto *Adler*, powered by a Lycoming Turbine. Rene closed out the decade by buying the company that built their first boat—Chris-Craft—before selling it to OMC.



A great boat and crew help Rene and Brigitte Herzog relax.



The march of the penguins is quite a sight



"Excuse me,
I was trying
to get
some sleep."



Swiss
Adventurers Werner
and Gianna
Meier in Antarctica

In the early 90s the Herzogs cruised on an 80' in St. Tropez, where they relaxed on the beach with longtime friends Gianna and Werner Meier, real estate investors who shared their passion for adventure. An avid polo player, Werner had scaled the Matterhorn in Switzerland and the Himalayas in Asia, had driven a motorcycle across Africa, scuba dived the Great Barrier Reef, played polo in Argentina, and had stepped on every continent but one—Antarctica.

"Werner and I were talking about a 70-meter luxury icebreaker in 1992, when other people were still talking about 80-footers," Rene Herzog said. Two years later in California they found a 2700-ton, Dutch-built icebreaker commissioned by the Soviet Union in 1974. With a hull of corten steel *Giant I* was originally the home of 52 officers based in remote corners of the world. The massive propulsion system—twin 3000 hp Smith Bolnes diesels; a massive Lohmann & Stolterfont pneumatic gearbox and a 12'-diameter propeller on a straight 70' shaft—was in good shape. So Rene bought the boat and hired a world-class re-fit team led by interior specialist John Misiag, who added Rolls Royce stabilizers; twin 350 kW Smith Bolnes generators; twin Dutch Mill reverse osmosis watermakers producing 40 tons a day; two Carrier A/C systems; and a boiler for heating in dry, frigid climes. An aluminum superstructure was added to Bureau Veritas class.

On the sunny Mexican coast the entire yacht was stripped, sanded, primed, painted and perfected in a way that, once inside the sweet-smelling mahogany interior, you'd never guess you were on anything but a brand new superyacht. *Giant I* set the yachting world abuzz when she was launched in 2001, and was a spectacle in every port she entered, including Antarctica, where in late January 2006 she awaited her owners after an 8,500-mile journey from the Med.

*Beauty by day
night, and
in-between*



*Captain Claus Marwitz
with his lovely
stewardesses.*

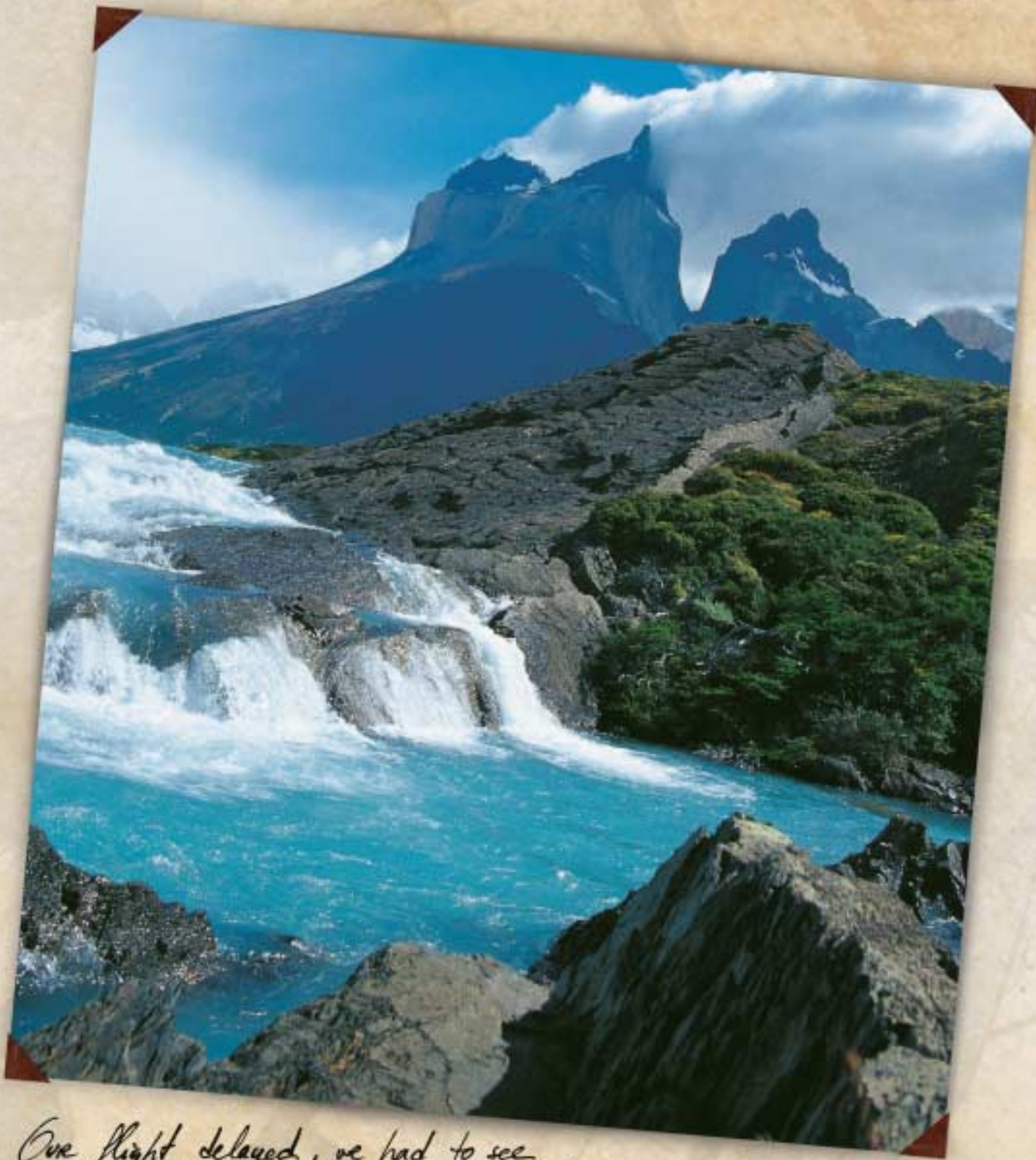
THE FINAL STEP

"We must go to the airport right away?" Rene repeated into his cell phone, purposely using the same tone as when our flights had been cancelled the three previous days. Within an hour we were flying over the Drake Passage and touched down at 8 p.m. on King George Island. Twin Zodiacs were on the beach waiting to take us to *Giant*, where the impeccable crew—35 hyper-friendly and hard working employees from Germany, Ukraine, Romania, Croatia and Philippines—greeted us with formal charm.

Captain Claus Marwitz gave us safety instructions in German and English, but on a floating tank such as this, everyone felt extremely safe. It's obvious why Rene invites journalists on his boat for long periods of time—he has a true luxury icebreaker that embodies silent strength and stabilized comfort on the water, with accommodations for 24 charter guests, a movie theater, two huge saloons, fireplace, gymnasium, sauna, Jacuzzi and the now-obligatory helipad.

The yacht was at once an oasis in a dry land, with the boilers in the engine room keeping the elegant Honduran mahogany paneling and cherry and marble sole warm and comfortable. The interesting art by Gauguin, Magritte and Dali helped guide new guests through labyrinth corridors, and a "healthy" Botero nude in the gym would later serve as sweat inspiration between meals. Speaking of which, soon we were dining in one of the four formal dining rooms, sipping vintage Beaujolais and eating a four-course meal prepared by Chef Frederic Huguet.

"Now *this* is what I imagined when I invested in *Giant* a decade ago," Werner Meier said. "Real estate investments are profitable, but an arctic icebreaker is exotic and special." As he spoke pancake icebergs slowly drifted in and out of our view, some with sleeping seals, as jumping chinstrap penguins and orca fins broke the icy cold water's surface. We were indeed smack dab in the remotest corner of the globe, the only place that doesn't accept VISA or MasterCard, and the feeling was, well, priceless.



*Our flight delayed, we had to see
Chile's legendary "Torres Del Paine".*

"I feel great,
like Amundsen!"
declared Werner Meier..



Twice the size of Australia, Antarctica is the world's highest continent, with more than half the land above 6,500', with peaks reaching nearly 15,000 feet. Nunataks—rocky crag projections from the ice—make up only one percent of *tierra firma*, the other 99 percent is covered with glaciers and pack ice. All life clings to the edge, and the beaches of the northernmost islands of the Arctic Peninsula become nesting and pupping venues for the world's cutest creatures: penguins and seals.

Our first anchorage, on Wednesday, January 25th, was off the volcano-formed Deception Island, the summer home of 250,000 Chinstrap Penguins—the largest such colony in the world—whom we found peacefully raising their chicks in the just-above-freezing summer sun. Measuring a relatively short 27" to 30" tall and weighing less than ten pounds, Chinstraps can waddle at roughly 3 mph. They are much better swimmers, able to dive to 230' to find their prey, mostly krill. The penguins were almost done raising their chicks, and soon would be heading off for the winter. Next spring they will return to their exact spot, find their life-long mates, lay their eggs and raise their chicks once again.

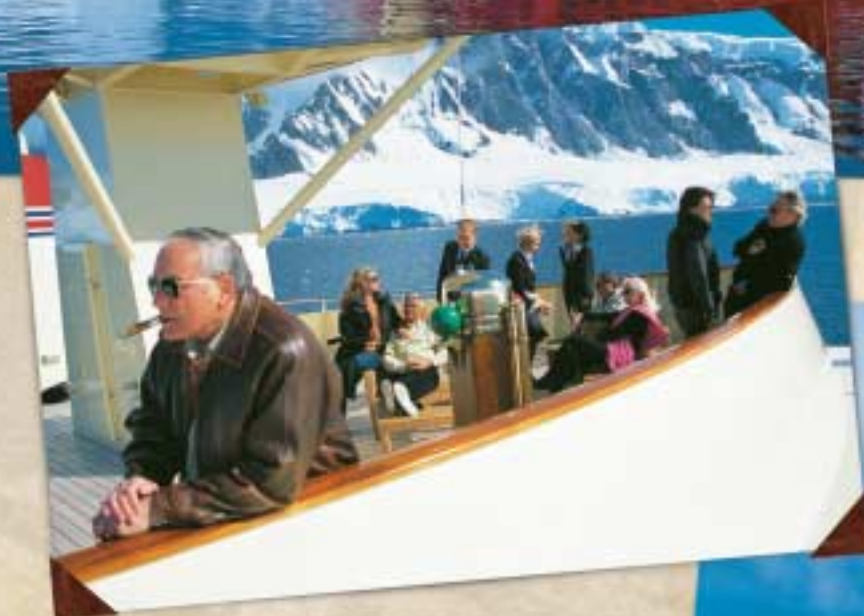
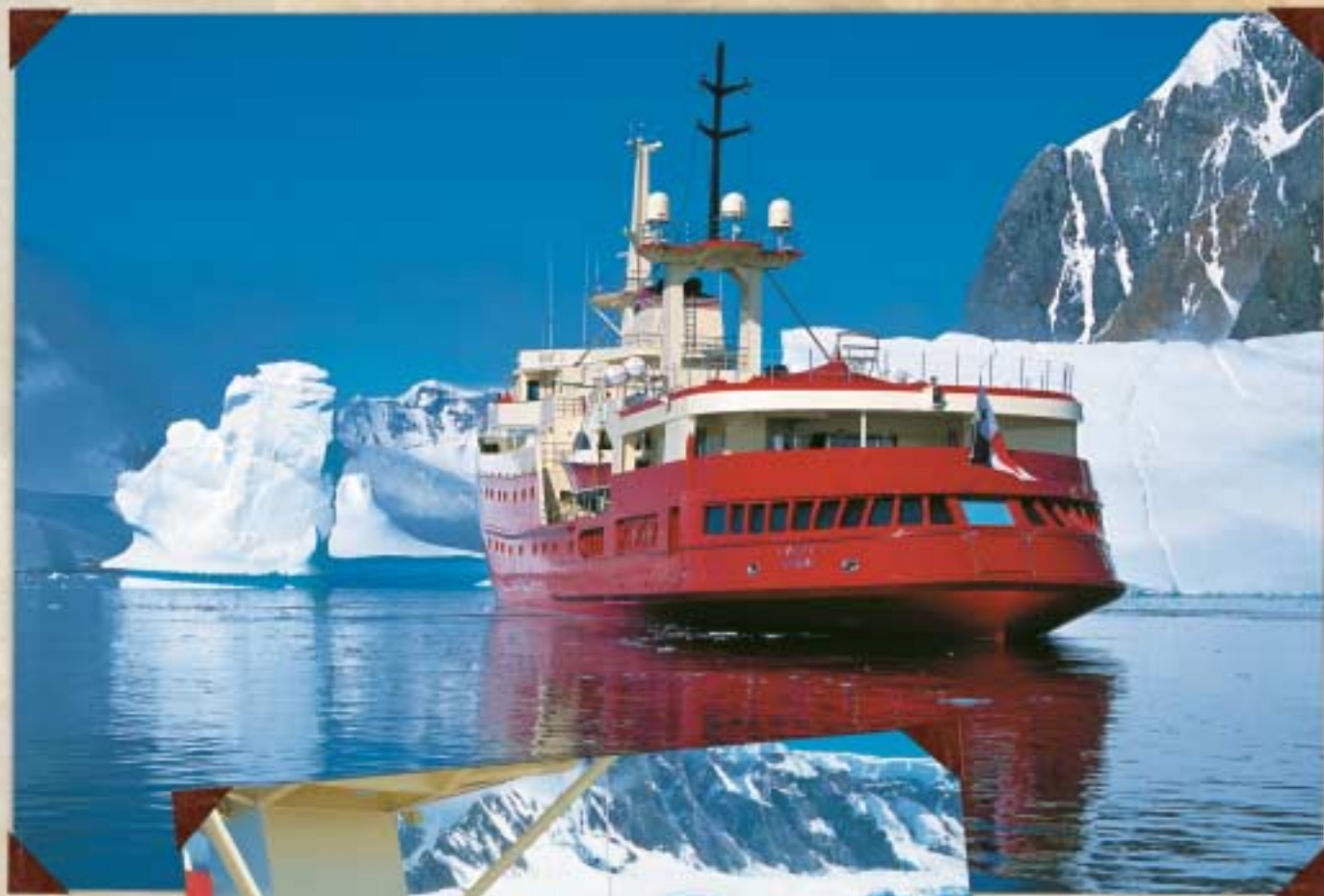
Back on *Giant* we watched for an hour two different species of whales—humpbacks and orcas—playing in our bow wave, while passing sleeping fur seals on the floating ice. "It's so beautiful," Brigitte or Gianna would say, followed by comfortable silence, as we all looked out from the Portuguese bridge. We had been in Antarctica for less than 24 hours and already had seen penguins, whales, seals, and a zillion different kinds of birds, including several species of albatross. The evening ended with a spirited game of rummy around the gaming table in the boat deck saloon, where Brigitte and Gianna carefully laid out the "international" rules, which would be strictly followed throughout the rest of the cruise.



*Our intrepid explorers
enjoy the summer sun.*

The following morning we awakened to the sounds of icebergs bumping off the steel hull, and opened our eyes to sunshine, which provided great photo ops for *Giant* surrounded by glaciers and fjords. The day became yet sunnier, and we boarded a Zodiac to explore the wildlife and enchanted beauty in every direction. A scientific field trip to the Vernadsky Base—a Ukrainian weather station inhabited by 13 transient scientists who carefully measure the atmosphere's ozone level—was very inspirational. Their barracks were well kept, ran on generator power, and included a bar and lounge with a sign cheekily announcing we were in the "southernmost post office in the world." Good news on the ozone: it's increasing. According to Dr. Alexander Kolosokov, ozone levels last year increased for the first time since first analyzed in the 1950s, indicating a cycle that has been repeating for millions of years. "The hole is actually closing," said Kolosokov, who, along with several of his associates, was invited onboard *Giant* for dinner.

The weekend was filled with more adventures alternating with gourmet food, fine wine and lots of laughter, and stops at the Chilean and Argentine bases, and Port Lockroy, the British base and site of the 1941 Antarctic Treaty, which set this mysterious continent as an internationally peaceful, scientific land, where all creatures are protected by law. Werner Meier celebrated the trip to Port Lockroy by kayaking in the frigid waters, as he watched the sun set on his beautiful icebreaker. Sunday we began making our way north again, where the sea conditions worsened, the waves increasing from four to eight feet off Deception Island.



*Med style in a land
without credit cards*





Will they miss us as much as we miss them?

On Monday morning we headed north into the dreaded Drake Passage and Cape Horn, the scorpion tail tip of South America, which, I have to admit, has been a 10-year dream destination of my own. Funny, but sailing the Drake wasn't quite as I had imagined—being served filet mignon and *crème brûlée* in a mahogany-paneled dining saloon with delightful Swiss hosts. Indeed we were smack dab in the Roaring Forties, but on Joshua Slocum's *The Spray* we most certainly were not. On Tuesday the seas did grow to 14', and there were some 18' monsters that provided *Giant's* non-bulbous bow—much better suited for ice breaking—with some serious pitching.

But we all survived thanks to a healthy dose of Dramamine, and after the two-day passage arrived safely in Ushuaia, Argentina, where our hosts promptly took us to see the Tierra Del Fuego National Park, its mountain peaks and peat bogs reminding our group of their Swiss homeland, which they would soon see. The next day we traveled up the Beagle Channel, witnessing five galactic glaciers along the way, and eventually making it back to Punta Arenas, Chile, where our enchanted adventure began.

Our journey ended with long hugs, many thanks, lots of memories and a warm feeling that we had all done something truly special. As our kindred spirits waved to the crew from the shuttle it became apparent it was the start of "just another day" for *Giant I*, which, as I write this piece, is celebrating Carnival in Rio, and will be heading north to "summer" in colder climes once again.

The trip was certainly not the last icy adventure for Rene Herzog, who is currently converting *Giant's* long-lost sister-ship, which he's christened *Hercules* and is currently expanding to 265' in Riga, Latvia—another example of his "out of the box," thinking.