

PERITO MORENO – GLACIER EXTRAORDINAIRE



Ir. Chin Mee Poon

Ir. Chin Mee Poon is a retired civil engineer who derives a great deal of joy and satisfaction from travelling to different parts of the globe, capturing fascinating insights of the places and people he encounters and sharing his experiences with others through his photographs and writing.

We reached Puerto Punta Bandera shortly before sunrise. After buying our national park tickets, we boarded Catamaran Maria Turquesa for a cruise on the immense Lago Argentina, Argentina's largest body of fresh water.

After spending 3 days in El Chalten to fully enjoy the spectacular mountains and the marvellous trekking available in the northern part of Parque Nacional de Los Glaciares, my wife and I, together with my two brothers and their spouses, travelled by bus to El Calafate to explore the southern part which, in stark contrast, is well known for its many glaciers and the best way to scrutinise those glaciers is, without a doubt, a cruise on Lago Argentina.

Our catamaran set sail at about 9 a.m. and headed northwest. In Brazo Norte, an arm of the 1600 sq. km. lake, we encountered a gargantuan iceberg and the boat sailed around it slowly, allowing us a close inspection of the chunk of ice from different angles. Under the low morning sun, the ice put on a magic show with changing tints of blue and varying degrees of translucence.

Heading southwest, we passed another large iceberg and a hanging glacier, Totalizador, before coming close to the toe or terminus of Spegazzini Glacier. With an area of 134 sq. km., this glacier has a toe that varies in height from 80 to 135m. We had a close inspection of the glacier from edge to edge.

The catamaran then turned back and headed north to Brazo Upsala but as it did not get near Upsala Glacier, we could only look at it from afar. Four years ago a landslide caused

a mini-tsunami in the arm and since then, boats were not allowed to approach the glacier.

While the passengers were enjoying a simple lunch, the catamaran back-tracked all the way to Punta Bandera and headed west into the narrow Canal de los Tempenos, coming to within 350m of the toe of Perito Moreno Glacier. With an area of 250 sq. km., this glacier has a gently-curved toe measuring 5km in width and varying from 50 to 70m in height. The boat moved slowly from one edge to the other to allow all passengers a close inspection of this spectacular glacier. Like the glaciers we visited earlier, this one also originated from the vast ice-field covering this part of the Andes Mountain Range which forms a natural boundary between Argentina and Chile.

Unlike most glaciers in the world which are retreating because of global warming, Perito Moreno is stable. In fact, it advances up to 2m a day and chunks of ice 20 storeys tall calve and crash into the channel every now and then with thunderous roars reaching the ears of spectators a fraction of a second after their eyes have witnessed the spectacle.

Perito Moreno Glacier is separated from Magallanes Peninsula by a narrow strip of water that is partly Canal de los Tempenos and partly Brazo Rico. As the glacier advances, it eventually abuts the peninsula at the narrowest point and an ice-dam is formed, blocking the natural flow from Brazo Rico to the channel. Water in Brazo Rico then rises, and the increasing pressure eventually ruptures the ice-dam, causing it to breach progressively from the bottom upwards until a total collapse unites the two waters again.

This series of events occur cyclically and one must be extremely lucky to visit at the right time to witness the ice-dam collapsing.

A network of boardwalks on the slope facing the glacier connects a jetty at the channel to a visitors centre on top of the peninsula. After our cruise, we spent two hours on the boardwalks to view the glacier again from different angles.

Named after Francisco Pascasio Moreno (1852-1919), an outstanding Argentinean scientist/explorer who played a key role in settling a boundary dispute between Argentina and Chile, Perito Moreno Glacier is truly one of the most beautiful glaciers in the world and it is so easily accessible. ■

