



Península Valdés, a World Heritage marine site off the coast of Argentina, provides shelter to a trio of irreplaceable marine mammals, and it is also home to nearly 200 types of seabirds

Orcas, or killer whales, have developed a dramatic way of capturing sea lions or young elephant seals by hurling themselves at their prey near the shore.

SPOTLIGHT | Península Valdés

## Protected promontory is a haven for marine mammals in placid Patagonian seas

Península Valdés, a promontory poking into the Atlantic off Argentina, is basically an island. Discovered in 1779, it is linked to South America by a narrow isthmus, 11 kilometers (6.8 miles) wide on average. This island environment makes it a haven for marine birds and mammals, and the peninsula also owes its place on the World Heritage List to its great variety of coastal species. These include nearly 200 types of seabirds, which find shelter, food and nesting sites on its spectacular cliffs and surrounding islets.

Lying between the Gulf of San José to the west, the Nuevo Gulf to the south and the Atlantic to the east, the peninsula has calm, lukewarm waters that are perfect for the breeding and colonizing needs of three large, threatened marine mammals: the southern sea lion, the southern elephant seal and the southern right whale. This natural panorama gives Península Valdés its unique universal value — a key criterion for World Heritage status.

The placid Patagonian seas shelter the planet's northernmost population of southern elephant seals, the only one reportedly on the increase, largely thanks to the site's protected status. Over 1,000 come ashore to

mate and calve from August to November. The site is also a breeding point for the southern sea lion, a species that has been relentlessly hunted over past centuries, although it presents no serious conservation problems today, again partly due to World Heritage protection.

The rarer southern right whales use the protected zone as mating areas from April to June. Though found worldwide, their numbers are small. The American Cetacean Society puts their population in the southern hemisphere at around 4,000; those at Península Valdés make up around 38 percent of this total.

Whales are protected in other World Heritage sites, but these sites do not safeguard southern right whales or play host to the seal and sea lion populations that make this South American site so rich in marine fauna. They also lack orcas, or killer whales, which visit Península Valdés between October and December. They have developed a spectacular approach to hunting, pursuing young sea lions or elephant seals into the shallows, then grabbing them in their jaws. "It's unique the way these orcas have adapted their

hunting techniques to the coastal environment, one of the most important features of this site and partly why it's protected as World Heritage," says Fanny Douvère, Unesco's World Heritage Marine Program coordinator. In recent years, it has also become big tourist draw.

Argentina's government has played a defining role in shielding this trio of irreplaceable marine mammals, passing legislation protecting them, even declaring the southern right whale a natural monument. In 1974, the Gulf of San José, one of the whale's main breeding spots, was declared a Provincial Marine Park. In 1983, Península Valdés was made a Natural Reservation for Integrated Tourism Development, which ensures that the site stays environmentally friendly. All these steps have been vital in maintaining the ecosystem.

Pressures and stress levels on Península Valdés have remained relatively light until recently. Despite a small local population of 200 people and a few scattered sheep farms, tourism is a danger that Unesco and the Argentine authorities will soon be forced to confront head-on. The whales, seals and sea lions are im-

portant economically as tourist attractions, since the main motivation for a trip to Península Valdés is wildlife observation. Whale-watching, for instance, generates an estimated \$10 million per year.

Since it was designated a World Heritage site in 1999, Península Valdés has seen a steady rise in tourism. "It has become a major destination for cruises and whale-watching," says Douvère. "The annual number of tourists is going toward 150,000 and might soon be at a tipping point, considering the size of the area — 360,000 hectares [889,579 acres] — and its limited tourism infrastructure facilities."

Though World Heritage status did not automatically protect the whales, it does encourage local management to address issues that affect the marine area and its biodiversity. To help the site's management find ways to accommodate tourists and ensure that any infrastructure conceived for them keeps the vulnerable habitat out of harm's way, the World Heritage Centre sponsors cooperation among site managers by bringing experienced staff to Península Valdés from other sites who can share their own solutions to sustainable tourism.

JASMINE ROSSI

### Valuable volunteers

Protecting World Heritage properties is crucial to our planet, and each year thousands of volunteers make a difference by giving their time to restoration or research projects that help save whales, develop educational schemes or contribute to other valuable preservation efforts.

Volunteers, often working in remote locations, might fight dangers from natural causes like earthquakes or floods, or battle human-induced problems caused by pollution or tourism. They must be at least 18 years old, but no experience is necessary; both ordinary citizens and specialized professionals do their part. Most projects are coordinated far ahead of time, so it is best to submit an application well in advance on <http://whc.unesco.org>

J.J.

EXPLORING | Whale-watching, scuba diving, kayaking and more

## Up close and personal with rare wildlife

It is one of nature's rarest spectacles: a killer whale (orca) cruising back and forth less than 20 meters (65 feet) off the coast suddenly turns and beaches itself, three tons of predatory energy slamming onto a rocky shore to snatch a sea lion pup in its viselike jaws and then ride the waves back out to sea as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Argentina's Península Valdés is one of only two places on the planet where this wildlife drama unfolds, made all the more compelling by the fact that visitors can actually watch from a nearby viewing area.

South America's version of the Serengeti Plains, the mushroom-shaped peninsula is found about halfway down Argentina's rough and tumble Atlantic Coast. The monotonous terrain and sparse vegetation belie an astonishing array of wildlife, both onshore and off the coast. Nowhere else on the continent are so many large animals found in such huge numbers at such close proximity: hulking elephant seals, cute little Magellanic penguins, the llamalike guanaco, a huge flightless bird called the rhea and the world's largest concentration of southern right whales.

What makes Península Valdés even more compelling is that so many of these creatures seem oblivious to humans. Visitors can easily observe them while boating, walking along the shore or driving on the peninsula's trademark gravel roads.

Most people base themselves at nearby Puerto Madryn, on the western shore of the



JASMINE ROSSI

The island environment shelters huge numbers of seals, sea lions, whales and penguins.

Golfo Nuevo, which has an airport with direct connections to Buenos Aires and a bustling seaside town with the largest number of hotels, restaurants and shops in the peninsula region. International rental car agencies offer a wide variety of vehicles in which to explore the peninsula.

It is about an hour's drive from Puerto Madryn to the national park entrance station on the Ameghino Isthmus. The adjacent visitor center has a small museum with displays on local wildlife and a tower with sweeping views across the peninsula and

the gulfs on either side. Twenty minutes down the main road is Puerto Pirámide, the only town inside the park and home to many of the area's adventure-travel outfitters.

Taking half a dozen visitors into the Golfo Nuevo in a small wooden boat, one of them, the wildlife guide Mariano de Franceschi, spots a couple of dark-gray behemoths — a mother right whale and her newborn grazing in shallow water. He pulls the boat directly beside them, close enough to reach out and scratch their backs — but that is forbidden by park rules.

"They are called right whales," he explains, "because they were the right whale for hunting, the correct whale." So much so that they were nearly hunted to extinction in the early 20th century. Península Valdés is one of the few places where their numbers have remained steady.

Whale-watching cruises might be one of the more popular ways to explore Península Valdés, but they are far from being the only means to get up close and personal with the local wildlife. Scuba diving, mountain biking, guided vehicle excursions and kayaking are other possibilities.

Pirámide-based Patagonia Explorers ([www.patagoniaexplorers.com](http://www.patagoniaexplorers.com)) offers sea-kayaking trips with daily hikes and camping along isolated shores inaccessible from the land.

For those with limited time, a self-drive circumnavigation of the peninsula's perimeter road can yield numerous wildlife encounters: thousands of elephant seals and southern sea lions below the cliffs at Punta Delgada, frolicking in the surf or protecting their sandy patches of turf with aggressive department; flocks of rhea and herds of rust-colored guanaco browsing the steppe near Caleta Valdés; armadillos and gray foxes around the ranger station at Punta Norte. Visitors can also see the salt pans (*salinas*) that are the lowest points in South America (42 meters below sea level).

Several old sheep ranches (*estancias*) around the peninsula have morphed into boutique hotels or small adventure travel hubs. In addition to six cozy ranch-style rooms, La Ernestina at Punta Norte offers guided walking and 4x4 tours, as well as access to beaches normally off-limits to visitors ([www.laernestina.com](http://www.laernestina.com)). "The family has owned the estancia since 1907," says Juan Copello, who is both the ranch owner and an orca researcher. "It's still a working ranch with 7,000 merino sheep producing wool."

Both air and water temperatures are noticeably warmer during the southern hemisphere summer (December-March), but spring (September-November) — when the orcas, right whales, elephant seals and penguins are in residence — is the best season for wildlife viewing.

J.R.Y.

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