

It has been a long time since I came to Punta Arenas for the first time. The most southern continental port of Chile offers many things to do and if your ship calls in for only a few hours – you cannot expect much. That’s why I never had enough time to explore the town on my own. All of a sudden, in December my first Antarctic commission started in Punta Arenas. Having arrived early in the morning, I went out on a good long walk straight away...



If you see online a panoramic photo of Punta Arenas – it will certainly be one taken from Cerro de La Cruz, a hill slope facing the local port. In my humble opinion, the alternative view from Cerro de Los Soñadores shows us the town that looks more like the one visited by Rockwell Kent in 1922-23: *“...A port of commerce; warehouses, a foundry, shipyards, blocks of office buildings, churches, streets of one-storey homes and little shops – there at a mile away one eye-ful on the wide, desolate, fire-scarred plain of the continent”*. (Kent, *Voyaging...*, 1924, p.5)



Punta Arenas is the Spanish equivalent of the historic name Sandy Point, once given to the stretch of low northern shores of the Strait halfway between Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Given its proximity to Antarctica, the area has a chilly climate, permanently affected by cold air from the Far South. However, the downtown of Punta Arenas is surprisingly green. Even in the early austral summer, sculpted cypresses along Avenida Colon are full of songbirds. You can imagine Kent living here in an iron hulk during the coldest months of winter!



Punta has its own “touristic circuit” – a network of old streets, where every second building calls to mind Kent and Ole Yitterock. Some are in perfect shape, like the old residence of pioneer merchant Alfonso Roux Girel, now hosting the officers mess of Chilean Air Force Base...



...Many others, unhappily, fell into long disrepair.



The glass tower of the modern hotel Dreams Del Estrecho stands in complete dissonance with the rest of Punta. The neighboring office of Capitaneria de Puerto looks decent along with two memorials, one of which commemorates Antonio Pigafetta – the loyal sojourner of Magellan on his first circumnavigation of the world.



The port of Punta Arenas has served Antarctic ships since at least 1897, when the *Belgica* of Baron De Gerlache's expedition called in for bunkering. That time its leader had to withstand a real mutiny of his Norwegian crew that accused him of discrimination. Nowadays, you can find at the pier a variety of expedition cruise ships, Southern Ocean toothfish trawlers and scientific vessels, such as American *Lawrence M. Gould*, named after the famous polar geologist and working down in the Peninsula region every summer since 1991.



Some other ships were stuck in Punta more than a hundred years ago.

“You wonder when you see that harbor first, wonder what miracle of time has carried you back over 50 years to open your eyes upon past glories of the sea. You look – and doubt your senses: there they are, the ships, the barks. What world is this, what port? And then your staring eyes discern the vessels shorn and stripped, with lowered yards, dismasted – hulks.” (Kent, *Voyaging...*, 1924, p.5)

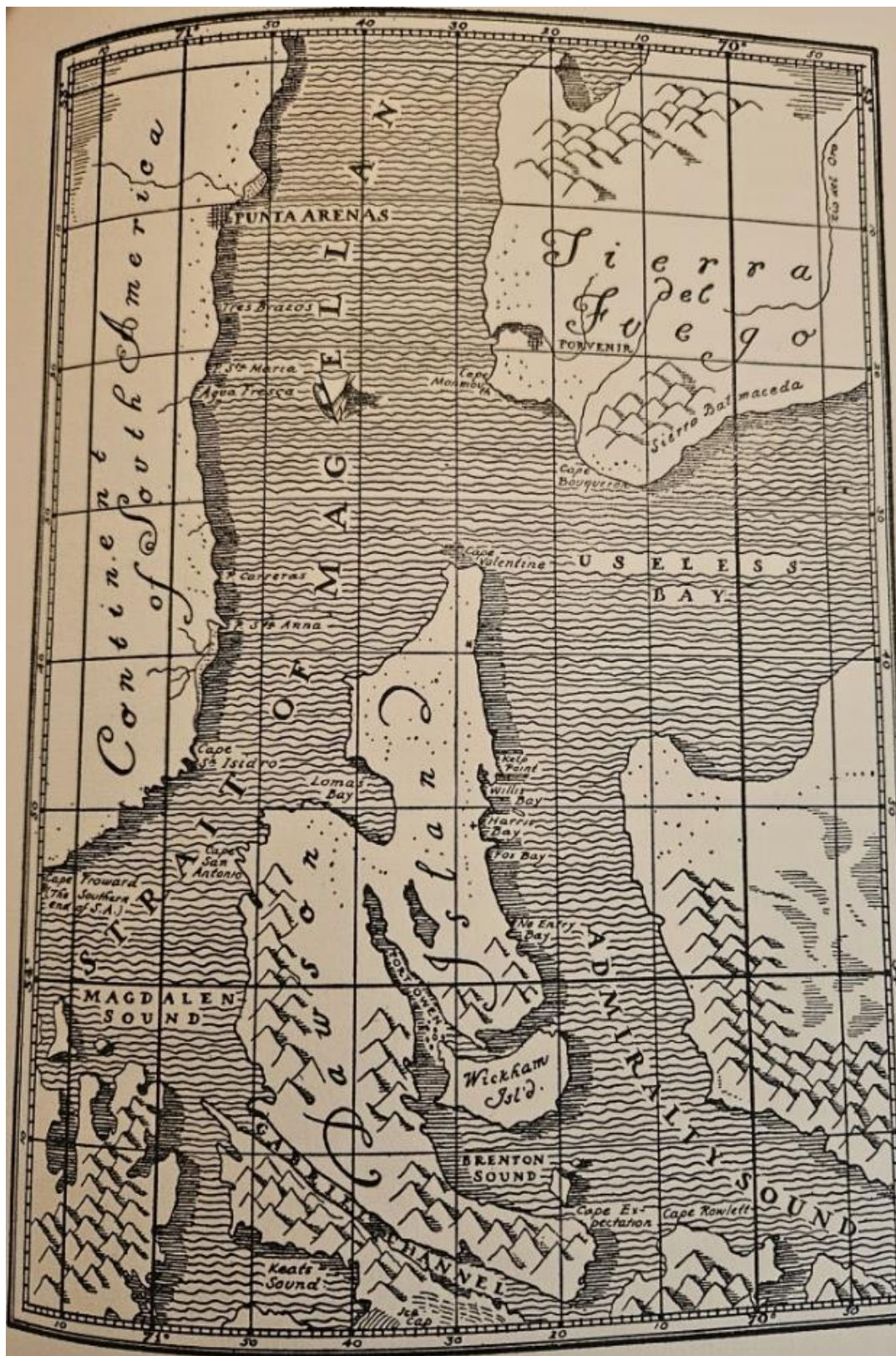
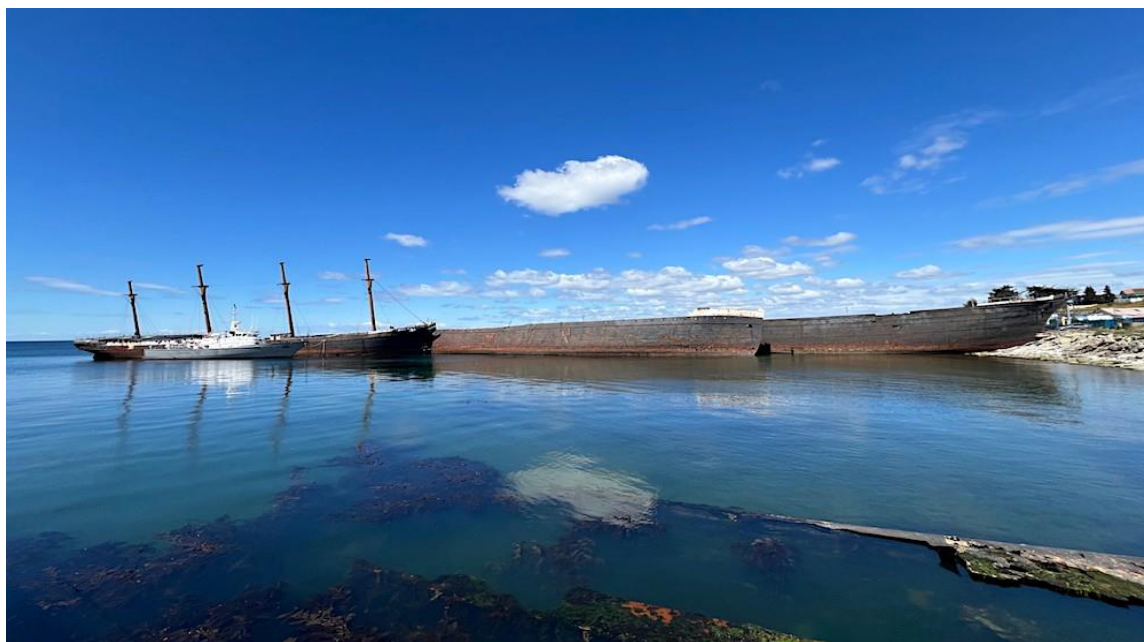
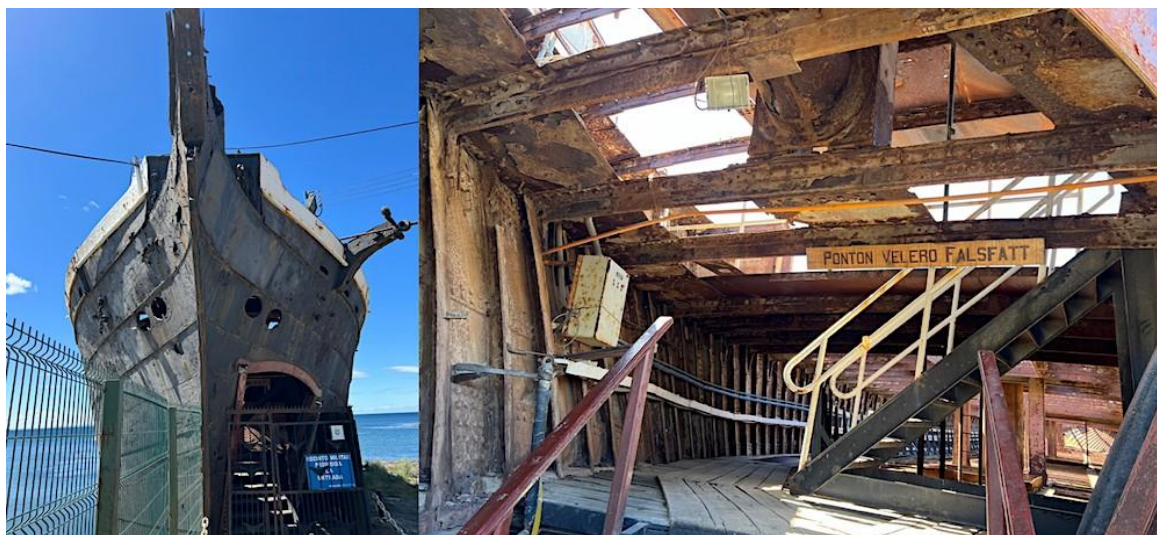


Chart showing Tierra Del Fuego, Southern Chile and the Magellan Strait (Kent, Voyaging, 1924)
Punta Arenas is near the top left of the chart



The Hulks of Punta Arenas are famous. If you walk along the waterfront towards Maria Behety Park, you see the Technical College first on your right, then a cluster of naval workshops on the left. A beach at the end of this formally restricted area gives access to the first group of hulks, grounded in the form of a breakwater. Even the workshops themselves are worn out and not guarded, so the small gate facing the beach is always open.



Three hulks are all British-built iron-hulled ships from late 1860s to mid-1870s: three master *Falstaff* (1465 t), freighter *Hipparchus* (1840 t) and four master *County of Peebles* (1700 t).

The stem of *Falstaff* rises over the beach, gracious even without figurehead lost in time. The hull is still strong enough to serve as a “pontón velero”, or an improvised pier for small ships. So does the *County of Peebles*, that had a patrol boat parked alongside at the time of my visit.



Another group of hulks stands on shallows a few miles west of the city, but the most interesting one can be found alone near Maria Behety Park's main gate. The Irish-built three master *Lord Lonsdale* (1800 t) was launched in 1889 and lost in 1909, when the vessel was caught by fire on a short call in Stanley, Falklands. Then en route from Hamburg to Mazatlan, the *Lonsdale* had to be sunk in Stanley harbor to prevent the spread of fire. Sold promptly to a meat-export company based in Chilean Patagonia, the barque was supposed to be towed through the Strait of Magellan and up to Puerto Natales, but this did not happen. For some reason, *Lonsdale* became part of Punta Arenas seascape. The barque was Kent's home and boatyard in July-September 1922 – the hostel for homeless sailors, supervised by the port authorities and supplied by empathic maritime brotherhood.



The infamous fire had not damaged her living quarters and upper deck: in his travel account, Kent mentioned “mahogany furnished cabin of the captain”, the ship’s saloon heated by a “pot-bellied iron stove”, masthead lights and even a working steam winch, later used for lowering Kent’s boat to the water. Since the artist left, time was merciless to the old ship. Now only her bow, ribs, sternpost and one of anchors remind us of the late glory.



From Maria Behety Park I took a cab to the other end of Punta, famous for the cluster of duty-free shops, known as Zona Franca. Every day apart from Sunday it attracts crowds, but my aim was further away from the downtown – Museo Nao Vitoria. Years ago, a group of enthusiasts built a replica of *Victoria*, the only ship of Magellan’s fleet that completed the first world cruise in 1522. Little by little, a whole museum arose around the first ship. Still unfinished replica of Charles Darwin’s *Beagle* stands ashore beside the recreation of schooner *Ancud* – the first Chilean ship to bring militaries and settlers to Sandy Point in the 1850s. Another copy of Ernest Shackleton’s James C. Caird and smaller artefacts made the exhibition complete.

On the way back to the city center, I asked my driver to stop by the Sheep Herders Monument and Municipal Cemetery. The former commemorates all pioneers of sheep farming in Southern Patagonia and Tierra del Fuego, many of whom the artist befriended during his voyaging in 1922-1923. Inaugurated in 1894, the cemetery became the resting place for many notable people of the region, from policemen and Antarctic skippers to the stars of local beau monde. The families of Ihnen, Marcou and all others who helped Kent to start his voyage to Cape Horn now rest under the cemetery's trees.



Plaza Muñoz Gamero, also known as Plaza de Armas, is the heart of Punta Arenas, a perfect spot to end up walking and sit in the shadow of Magellan's Memorial. The monument was ordered by wealthy merchant José Maria Menéndez on occasion of the upcoming 400th anniversary of the discovery of the Strait. A native of Galicia, Menendez recruited Chilean sculptor Guillermo Córdova, whose artistic style belonged to the Belle Epoque. When the memorial was unveiled in 1920, its realistic grandeur might look outdated, but this did not prevent locals from making it the most recognizable symbol of Punta.



In 1922, while circling around the town in search of supplies and outfitting for *Kathleen*, Kent might have stopped for a second under the shining feet of bronze Indio Fuego: tourists still hold, sometimes even kiss it in hope of returning to the shores of Magallania.



Across the street from the monument stands Palacio Sara Braun – the most fashionable, even though most eclectic of all architectural landmarks in Punta. The Jewish girl Sara Braun Hamburger was brought to Patagonia from the Baltic region of Russian Empire in the early 1870s. There she grew up to marry Portuguese sea wolf José Nogueira Rua, who himself came to Punta Arenas in 1866 with empty pockets and started in seal hunting. By the time of marriage, he already owned ships, sawmills, farms and coal mines, while his bride had a family retail network behind her.



After her husband's passing, Sara Braun successfully led business and remained the richest woman in Chile till her own death in 1955. The extravagant palazzo with glassed winter garden definitely caught Kent's eyes.

When *Kathleen* nearly sank near Dawson Island in the austral spring of 1922, the artist painted an artwork to reward those who overhauled his boat in Puerto Harris. The painting depicted the schooner *Sara* – the largest ship ever built in the region, named after Sara Braun and owned by her company Sociedad Explotadora de Tierra del Fuego. Ironically, the artist, who felt deep empathy for the vanishing Fuegian natives, commemorated one of the biggest assets of a company that contributed to their extinction.

Next morning, I safely embarked beautiful Silver Endeavour which is my floating home for the first three months of 2024.

About the author

Born in remote Kamchatka Peninsula, Northeast Siberia, Dmitry (Mitya) Kiselev is a polar historian, avid traveler and expedition guide, working for Silversea Cruises. When not travelling to the Arctic, Antarctic or other remote parts of the world, Mitya lives with his family on Cyprus



Mitya lecturing about Kent on a recent cruise