Diving Patagonia: Puerto Madryn & Valdes Peninsula

Puerto Madryn in Argentina is a major wildlife destination in South America. A mid-sized town, located on the east coast, in the province of Chubut – in the heart of Patagonia – this is one of the best places to visit in the country. Read on to know why I wholeheartedly recommend adding it to your scuba diving destinations!



Península Valdés (Patagonia) is a site of global significance for the conservation of marine mammals. It is home to an important breeding population of the endangered **southern right whale**, as well as important breeding populations of **southern elephant seals** and **southern sea lions**. The **orcas** in this area have developed a unique hunting strategy to adapt to local coastal conditions.

I recently had the unique opportunity to visit this area encouraged by **Divers Alert Network (DAN)**, PADI & Aqua Lung. I'm overjoyed by the chance **DAN** is giving me to share my experience in **PATAGONIA**.



SEA LIONS

Scuba diving & snorkeling with single-furred sea lions at the Natural Reserve of Punta Loma, Puerto Madryn, is a MUST-DO if you visit this city. A stable population of around 600 single-furred sea lions live at Punta Loma all year long.

Southern Sea Lions in this area were heavily hunted for oil and leathers, legally until 1953 and illegally into the 1970s. However, important conservation measure were taken, and the population responded well, with evident recoveries. There are actually seven species of Sea Lions in the world, but people tend to lump them all into one category. They all belong to a group of animals known as *pinnipeds*.

Sea Lions are very interesting animals, and they can end up being extremely large. Males are much bigger than females, which helps them gain the ability to mate, as females will look for the largest males out there to partner with. Sea Lions are found in bodies of water all over the world, but not in the Northern Atlantic Ocean. Many researchers find this to be a very interesting, and also mysterious, fact. Temperatures are compatible with where some Sea Lions live. Here there is also plenty of food that they like.

Some species of Sea Lions live in the sub-arctic areas, while others live in warmer climates, including California. They have long, torpedo-shaped bodies that are well designed for movements both in the water and on land. All species of Sea Lions are considered to be mammals. This is because they give live birth to their young and the females also nurse the pups with milk they produce.



They often are found in extremely large colonies. For their protection, they will stay very close together, both on land and in the water. The big colonies though also have many sub-groups found within them. It is common for Sea Lions to move from one sub-group to another during various stages of their lives.

The future is unsure for many species of Sea Lions. For years they've been hunted by humans, and the destruction toll is high. Environmental concerns still exist in their natural habitats as well. The fact that humans are taking control over the waters where they once lived in peace is a huge concern. Even with conservation efforts in place, there is still a great deal of work to be done for these animals to survive.

Overall, this is certainly a must-do experience for all scuba divers!

You may contact Lobo Larsen for further information.

SOUTHERN RIGHT WHALES

Right whales were one of the first species to be hunted. Tragically, they became the target of huge scale whaling and were hunted to the brink of extinction.

Hunting of southern rights was banned in 1935, but illegal Russian whaling continued until the 1970s. Whalers considered right whales to be the “right” whale to hunt because they are slow swimmers and easy to catch. Plus, thanks to their extremely thick blubber layer, right whales are buoyant and float when dead, making things easier for the whalers. Their enormous bodies contained vast quantities of oil, meat and baleen, making them very valuable.



Their life expectancy is about 50 years. There’s an estimated number of 7,500 whales left in the Oceans. I believe that whale watching has become a true conservation story that turned the fate of, perhaps, the most amazing animals in the world. As I read on a sign in Puerto Piramides: "In the 1800s, thousands of voyages with tens of thousands of men, hunted hundreds of thousands of whales, by traveling millions of miles, for tens of millions of gallons of oil, for hundreds of millions in profits. Today, whale-watching is a multi-billion dollar global industry."

Don’t miss out on this amazing experience in Puerto Piramides!

You may contact Bottazzi and Ocean Patagonia for further information.



ELEPHANT SEALS & MAGELLAN PENGUINS

There are two species of elephant seals, the northern and southern. Southern elephant seals (*Mirounga leonina)* live in sub-Antarctic and Antarctic waters that feature brutally cold conditions but are rich in fish, squid, and other marine food. Southern elephant seals breed on land, but spend their winters in the frigid Antarctic waters near the Antarctic pack ice.

Southern elephants are the largest of all seals. Males can be over 6 meters (20 feet) long and weigh up to 4 tonnes (8,850 pounds). But these massive pinnipeds aren't called elephant seals because of their size. They take their name from their trunklike inflatable snouts.

When breeding season arrives, male elephant seals define and defend territories. They collect a harem of 40 to 50 females, which are much smaller than their enormous mates. Males battle each other for mating dominance. Some encounters end with roaring and aggressive posturing, but many others turn into violent and bloody battles. Sea elephants, as these seals are sometimes called, give birth in late winter to a single pup and nurse it for approximately a month. While suckling their young, females do not eat—both mother and child live off the energy stored in ample reserves of her blubber. Females give birth to a single pup each year after an 11-month pregnancy.

We had the amazing chance to be present when a four-ton male chased different females for about 2 hours. He finally managed to copulate with one of them, right in front of our astonished eyes!



We spent several afternoons with cute Magellanic Penguins, which are named after the explorer Ferdinand Magellan, whose crew first spotted them in 1520.

Female Magellanic Penguins mature sexually around 4 years of age, males around 5 years. Magellanic Penguins gather in huge nesting colonies during the breeding season along the coasts of the Falkland Islands, the south end of Chile, and Argentina. These colonies can number as high as 400,000 individuals. The Magellanic Penguins are monogamous, returning to the same mating partner every year. The male will usually arrive a bit earlier during the mating season to make sure some other opportunistic Penguin hasn't tried to move into their burrow. The female is able to find her mate through his call. The Penguins begin arriving and mating in September, the egg laying begins in October.



Magellanic Penguins live an average of 25 years in the wild, and their biggest threat nowadays is Oil spills washing up along the coast of Argentina.

You may contact Reserva El Pedral for further information.



SCUBA DIVERS' DUTY?

I mean it. I'm really asking: what are our duties as scuba divers? I leave this answer open to everyone. My humble view is that in today's threatened world, it is our duty to become ocean stewards. This area in Patagonia has an astonishing biodiversity protected by UNESCO. You should visit it, to enjoy nature at its best, and learn how to protect it at the same time.

Last but not least: there's a new deco chamber in Puerto Madryn's hospital. Although if you are responsible diver, following DAN recommendations, you probably won't need it!



About the author

Manuel is a PADI, Aqua Lung & DAN Ambassador. He travels around the world promoting safe scuba diving standars & sustainable practices. For more info visit www.manuelbustelo.com