

Anything is possible

By Keith Edwards

At The Cliffs Preserve in Northern Patagonia
the philosophy is simple—surprise the guest.
And they do, constantly.

Stepping into the main lodge is one of those moments I'll just never forget. The contrast between the crashing Pacific surf outside and the inside serenity is breathtaking. Chilean architect Louis Quiroz has crafted a light-filled, curving and soaring oasis in local woods, stone, slate and copper.

The natural warmth of the décor of the Cliffs Preserve is reflected in the

spontaneity of the staff. To my surprise Daniela, the effervescent chef, bounds up and hugs me like a long-lost friend. She practically drags me to see her great love, the kitchen. It is filled with a profusion of herbs, vegetables, fruit and edible flowers that just a few hours ago were growing on her organic farm. Meat, fish and shellfish are the finest local fare from field and sea. Right away I realize this is a very special place.

Set in 8,000 acres of temperate rain forest fronting six miles of spectacularly craggy virgin coastline, The Cliffs is very exclusive. There are only six villas with 18 suites, as well as a main lodge. And it's all hidden at the end of a road deliberately devoid of any signs. My fellow guests include a party of New Yorkers who have flown down on their private jet and couple of Chilean doctors. In hushed whispers,

they tell me that Prince Albert of Monaco recently spent New Year's here.

Magic staff

I'm assigned a personal guide, Felipe, who is part ecologist and part Jeeves. Anything is possible, from helicopter fly-fishing to lengthy hikes in the forest or horseback riding. Perhaps a boat trip to see the sea life or an hour or two to simply relax at the spa?

Luis, the sommelier, appears and suggests a pre-lunch cocktail. I soon understand why his nickname is "the magician." Into a blender goes pisco, chunks of apple, fresh ginger and Drambuie. Out comes a complex piquant nectar. It might even be healthy!

For lunch, Chef Daniela's polanco-coated shrimp over guacamole is followed by baked Austral hake, topped with caper foam and accompanied by

grape ratatouille. Dishes are mercifully moderate in size, leaving room for a delicate mousse over sun-dried peaches.

Luis, meanwhile, has produced a lovely, slightly oaked Chardonnay from the Casablanca Valley. The Cliffs delights in sharing the finest Chilean wines from all the regions of the country, ranging from the velvety Carmenères of Maipú to Casablanca's mineral-driven Sauvignon Blancs.



After lunch, Felipe suggests sea kayaking in a quiet cove. When I manage to get my wetsuit on back to front he recognizes me for the city slicker I am and teams me up with the delightful Macerana, who usually works in the office. After sorting out how to coordinate our paddling, we are soon in swells that hint at the vast power of the ocean. A curious penguin pops up to take a look at the intruders and pods

of dolphins frolic by, but a dozing sea lion barely opens an eye. The sun is dazzling in a cerulean blue sky. A more perfect day has yet to be invented.

Home sweet home

I return to my suite in the Chungungo Villa, one of six spaced out across the cliffs. It is similar in décor to the main lodge—light-filled, with warmth generated by pegged plank floors,

wood and fabric walls. All of the woodwork and furniture at The Cliffs was crafted in the on-site wood shop by a team of 12 craftsmen over a period of seven years.

I admire the huge bedroom under its vaulted ceiling, with a sitting section, spacious dressing area and large bathroom complete with Jacuzzi and shower. Although I can see over the cliff top vegetation to the ocean, it's

completely private.

The two suites in the villa share a spacious lounge with separate dining area and fully equipped and stocked kitchen and bar. Here, if you prefer, a chef will prepare your meals. Every morning a fresh loaf of home-baked bread appears on my counter. There's even a cozy mezzanine sitting area with panoramic views.

I relax by soaking in the villa's wood-

fired hot tub at the cliff edge. Away from the city lights, the velvet night sky is shot through with so many brilliant stars they seem almost artificial.

Animals, wild and tame

The next morning the frigid Humboldt current has thrown off a sea fog. It quickly dissipates into a cloudless blue sky—ideal weather for a boat trip. Bouncing over the frothing swells

with squadrons of petrels wheeling and diving, we arrive at a series of jagged rock formations. Here there are furtive sea otters, red-legged cormorants, comatose sea lions and colonies of comical flipper flapping penguins. It's as if we have stumbled into a *National Geographic* special.

Following lunch I visit the stables with Marcos, a veterinary student who reassures me that I will not have



forgotten how to ride a horse, even if it has been 50 years since I was last in the saddle. After a wobbly start and some expert guidance in how to sort out who's in charge (the horse has the upper hand), I drift off into a daydream where I'm a clanking conquistador in this virgin land. This fanciful vision ends after my ride through forest and beach when, dismounting, my boot gets stuck in the stirrup and I land unceremoniously in the soft sand.

The ever-perceptive Felipe suggests a relaxing massage in the spa. Between Marianne, the charming diminutive masseuse, soothing music and a rosé Cabernet Sauvignon sangria conjured up by Luis, I'm soon back to normal again and as relaxed as a dozing sea lion.

The next morning there is another

fleeting sea fog that seems to amplify the bird song. On my way to the lodge I disturb two grey fox cubs gambolling on the lawn. Some local fishermen report seeing two usually elusive puma cubs in the area. I've got my eyes open.

Gastronomic alchemy

Breakfast like, every meal at The Cliffs, delights every sense. The wild surf blends with the chiaroscuro of sun and fog and on my plate, scrambled eggs are soft and buttery with a zing of local herbs. It is all accompanied by fresh-baked bread spiced with Mapuche merken herb spread and coffee with two chocolate buttons.

I learn from Drake Smith, the site manager, that Daniela and fellow chef Miguel are encouraged to experiment

and be creative. Their only limitation is that everything must be fresh, local and finely attuned to the guests' preferences. They produce an amazing array of dishes by playing off their Chilean heritage. The result is little short of gastronomic alchemy. Miguel and Daniela love to talk with their guests about the bounty of the sea and the farm. You can even take part in hands-on lessons in the kitchen. It's no surprise that US TV chef Anthony Bourdain shot one of his episodes of *Without Reservation* here.

On my last evening Felipe suggests a brief walk before dinner. We trek along the shore and then up a cliff over a sheltered bay. As we turn a corner, I'm in for another surprise—in a clearing sits a table with linen, crystal and silverware. Chefs Daniela and Miguel burst out laughing at my jaw-dropping reaction. Luis seats me and formally presents the wine suggestions as I sample the guacamole, smoked salmon and sushi appetizers. What would I like for dinner? asks Daniela. I settle on medley of flambéed seafood. They even have dessert.

Sipping wine, gazing up at the stars on my last night, I ponder the words of Jim Anthony, The Cliffs' founder: "We cannot improve on what nature has given us, we can never replace it,

we can only preserve it for future generations." The fortunate few who come here and experience the spontaneous warmth of the people, the rugged beauty of the ocean and serenity of the land are part of that preservation. Truly a remarkable and surprising place.

The weather during my stay was perfect but it can be changeable. The

powers that be suggest that to sample all that The Cliffs Preserve has to offer, something approaching a week's stay is appropriate. December to March, the southern summer, is their peak season. ■

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