

11 December 2005

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We are here! My letters are totally inadequate to describe it to you. Escorted by twenty-eight sooty albatross, which stay with the ship all afternoon, swooping and wheeling around the bridge, we arrive at the ice flow and the ever-increasing icebergs... Penguins scatter from their ice floats as we approach. Seals roll over and look the other way... Out on the bow, the crunch of ice as we splinter through it, the rattling of the ship, the howling wind that stings me to the bone, the streaming eyes, the fingers that won't move... This will be a challenge of photography and sound. But we are here in all its sensations...

14 December 2005

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I have landed. I sit looking out from an icy cliff. I don't know what time it is. It could be 11:30 pm. And I am sitting in the stillest, most silent of places in perfect blue and white. The icebergs appear to float in the sky, so still is the water... And every now and then the penguins' call drifts in from the islands. I am at Jack's Hut, just north of Casey Station...



15 December 2005

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...I spend the morning with Saz and Andrew, drilling sea ice to analyse the algae which grows there. It is the algae which feed the Krill which feed the fish which feed the seals and penguins. If the sea ice melts, the algae dies - and the food chain...

21 December 2005

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Things are getting frustrating for everyone here. The temperatures are above normal and the melt is coming early. This makes all travel very difficult as, to travel, we have to cross a layer of slush over meters of ice. It would be alright on the plateau but we can't get there. We are limited to boats... So a lot of today I spend photographing around the station... before the flood arrives from the melt lake behind station.

29 December 2005

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Today I float on the surface of a giant white flying saucer. To stand on the plateau and look around is like standing in the centre of a flat white disc suspended in the clouds. The edges of the disc glow where the sun hits and all around - above, below and joined at the edges - is sparkling white. No features, no noise, no life at all, not even an insect. About three quarters of the way to Wilkins where we are heading, the surface changes to blue ice. It is the most exquisite thing - a cool, gentle turquoise disappearing downwards in a translucent glow, the polished surface reflecting back at us and impossible to grip underfoot, the snow blown off by the winds. And the disc forever floating outwards. In places, lines of deeper turquoise snake a route across the ice - old crevasses refrozen over...



30 December 2005

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...We are standing on 700 metres deep of ice. The height above sea level is 716 metres. In places, the rock bed beneath the ice is even below sea level but the ice continues its gentle rise inland. It also moves 12 metres a year towards the Vanderford Glacier where it finally breaks off into the ocean...

2 January 2006

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...We go dip netting today - Cath, Chris, Ben and I, with Tricky at the helm. We boat over to Shirley Island. Cath and Ben don their dry suits and wade about collecting little critters, and I hold the bucket, help them on with their dry suits and document the story. Adelie penguins splash around beside us and come to check us out. Back in the lab we record and sort the algae, amphipods and copepods. We look at them through microscopes and analyse how long they are surviving compared to the control specimens. We are working on a contaminants clean up operation in response to an old oil spill. Everything nowadays is very strict and much training goes into proper environmental management. Not that people can survive anywhere without leaving some footprint.

9 January 2006

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...The day is spent walking the whole island, going to each penguin colony in turn to count the penguin chicks and to count the chicks in the Skua nests... It's a rocky island, very barren with just a few patches of moss, lots of penguins, skuas, storm petrels and seals. The ground is scattered with dead carcasses, either freeze dried with all their flesh, or skinned clean to the bone by the skuas...



...The skuas set up nest next to the penguin colonies and patrol their rightful territory, wings stretched to their one metre span as they swoop low, or tucked firmly back as they stalk the colony, planning their next move. The penguins bark indignantly in response. At this time of year, the penguin chicks form crèches, huddling together in furry bundles while both parents hunt for food. There are still a few eggs around but it is probably too late for them to survive now...

2 February 2006

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We are level with the Persian Gulf, five hours behind Hobart. The approach to Mawson is magnificent. I am up early for the entrance through the sea ice, the penguins scurrying at the last minute as our big ship lurches upon them, past the bergs, and there on the horizon the thousand-metre peaks of Mount Henderson and the Framnes Mountains – the David Range and Masson Range. At first I think it is an early morning mist below the peaks. Of course it is the ice plateau, with the stark black peaks piercing through... Once in the harbour there is only 300 metres clearance on either side of the ship and in the Mawson weather, it is easily blown onto the rocks. To get into harbour we must wait for the katabatic winds to die down in the afternoon...

3 February 2006

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...In the evening, I escape to the edge of station limits. Ice cliffs like stretched crimplene curve into the distance. I can walk along West Arm and around the other side where a huge ice cave gleams blue from inside. Penguins waddle around the rock and plop in and out of the water. The edges are patterned with the ice of a sea that freezes as it is blown onto the rocks. Or I can walk to the east and this is my silent haven. If I skirt the edge of the magnetic quiet zone where we cannot enter, I come to an icy bay where the ice creaks and groans as it shifts upon itself and the seals wallow in the sunshine, rocking gently on the ice. They barely lift their heads at my approach and simply wriggle their bulk into a slightly more comfortable position with a deep sigh and scratch of their bellies... In the evenings when I come here, the seals are

more active and swimming under the ice. They must hear the echo of my feet as I approach on the rocks as, no sooner do I arrive, than a head will pop up by my feet at the ice-hole edge, great eyes staring. I throw in my underwater microphone, made by PJ at Casey, to record them calling under water. I get the sounds of ice creaking and groaning and the odd distant puff of exhaled air.

7 February 2006

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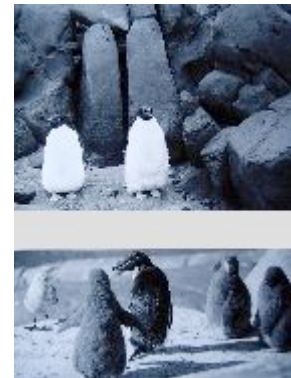
I get up at 5 am to watch the weather balloon being launched. It is filled with hydrogen from a separate porch before being carried out and released with its monitor attached. There is a renewable energy program at Mawson and they make their own hydrogen. This is part of a demonstration project where they are running barbecues and quads from hydrogen instead of fuel. Alongside the wind generators, there is little reliance on fuel here. About thirty percent of power comes from the two wind generators...

8 February 2006

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I score a trip to Bechervaise Island today as I see the barge heading off and jump on.

We travel with Lisa and Matt, two penguin researchers who have been living in the googy on the island for the last six weeks. The googy is a small round space ship on legs, the entrance by ladder from the underside...



The island is a structure of sculptured rocks, squeezed and pulled into magnificent abstract shapes, rising to a low hill in the centre which we climb for the view. On this island there is a weigh bridge. The penguins are channelled so they must cross this bridge to reach the ocean. The difference in their weight is measured before and after their time at sea to determine how much they are feeding their chicks. It used to be that their stomach contents were also monitored for proportion of krill to fish. The chicks, I believe, do much better when fed on krill...

11 February 2006

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We arrive at Davis, clocks on an hour - we have been heading east again. We get here ahead of schedule as Kapitan heads the ship in closer to the pack ice. The usual last minute

scampering of penguins as the ship knocks their ice flow, and the seals' slow lifting of the head. We pass a pod of killer whales and some young emperor penguins.

Davis is the biggest of the stations... Here there are upper atmosphere and ozone projects, work being done on the inland salt lakes, glaciology on the Amery ice shelf and seal studies. Nearby is the Marine Plain with whale bones fossils. And in the Prince Charles Mountains beyond, fossilised wood can be found...

12 February 2006

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...The magnificence of this flight over the Sorsdal Glacier and the Vestfold Hills will remain imprinted in me forever; the enormity of the steep, sculpted surfaces on the glacier - sometimes great folded hills of ice rippling in regular patterns, or cracks of turquoise caves down deep in crevasses. Sometimes sheets of blue ice in sweeping patterns as if tossed in the wind and frozen as they landed. We fly low over its surface, and high and around and low again, across the edge where it cracks and splinters to the sea or bulges in a billowing, pleated skirt. Each glacier I have seen pales in comparison to this. It is fully a part of me.

We fly over the Vestfold Hills; between each ridge line nestle salt lakes of deepest glacier turquoise, rimmed with ice. We dip low up the valleys, the helicopter tilting on its side. And through the umber rock, great black stripes of dolorite split the surface. Aluminium, quartz, garnets, amethyst and silica lie dormant here.

Where lakes are frozen, the patterns on the ice are an abstract maze of black and white circles and stripes...

...I meet the glaciologists working on the Amery ice shelf. Siobhan is monitoring the breaking off of 'Loose Tooth', an enormous ice berg in the making. Others drill down to study sea creatures below the ice.

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...At lunch time I hear that Leanne and Jen, the seal researchers, are off on a reconnoitre... After a brief map check at the hut, we set off on the five-hour walk back to station, along the fjord, across to Weddel Bay, in search of seals. We check their stage of moulting in preparation for tagging. The tags monitor their feeding habits over winter, sending messages via satellite on their location and depth. Leanne, the vet, must come back to anaesthetise them in order to tag them. A difficult job...

15 February 2006

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...The Vestfold rocks which cover the landscape are over a billion years old. Amongst the rocks are scatterings of tube worm fossils from an ancient ocean bed, bleached white and fine as porcelain. Bird bones also litter the ground. A strange sponge clusters around the lake. Thin ice hangs on the lake surface. The rocks are swirled and coloured and stretch for miles; no vegetation, just the rippling Vestfold Hills of large loose rocks on dry soil and great black stripes of dolomite woven through. I would not have blinked an eyelid had a dinosaur strode across the horizon...

18 February 2006

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...I saw the moon tonight!! I haven't seen the moon since sometime back in early December. It's very pretty.