

NOTES FROM UNDERNEATH

A BIG guy with a big heart, smiling eyes and a quiet but enduring passion for his itinerant Boer ancestors, 43-year-old Antonie Minnaar from Pretoria had longed to visit Antarctica for many years. He finally did so when he was chosen as one of five diesel mechanics from the defence force to haul cargo for South Africa's 50th annual expedition to Dronning Maud Land, West Antarctica.

The SA Agulhas had steamed out of Table Bay in early December and made Antarctic landfall on Boxing Day. Now, on the morning of January 14, Antonie and I find ourselves hurtling like outlaws across Antarctica's blanching badlands in an 18-ton Challenger, Johnny Cash crooning in the vehicle's cab.

"Easy now. Easy, easy . . . hokaai!" Antonie pleads with me. We are fourth in a train of five Challengers headed for the RSA Bukta coast, 178km away, to unload the expedition's remaining freight of fuel and containers from the SA Agulhas.

Antonie and his apprentice driver, diesel mechanic Marlon Manko, have goaded me into taking the Challenger's wheel.

I said yes because I am the only hen among 11 alpha males and knew I'd be ragged if I didn't.

Dubbed the Ou Vrou, our hoary Challenger feels like the SA Agulhas all over again — only now our ocean is a savage sea of snow and, as I careen the vehicle over a wave of ice, it rears and crashes down, scraps of white scattering like sea spume. A five-ton diesel tank and a three-ton sled hooked up to the Challenger bellow in tow, jangling our internal organs like a bunch of Folsom Prison keys.

"Hey, Minnaar, what you dopping boef? Who the hell's at the wheel?" the voice of Andrew Kietzmann fizzles and sputters through our Challenger's VHF radio. Andrew, 36, a veteran of the ice who has been to this, the world's biggest deep-freeze, five times, is in the Challenger behind us.

"Copy that Kietzmann. That would be me," Antonie, who is loling in the sleeper bunk next to me, replies, choking back a chuckle and changing gear with a big toe.

"Ag, k*k man, Minnaar," Andrew laughs. "Copy that," Antonie chirps and hangs up. "Reg, suster. Remember, 'vol hasie' means full throttle. Don't confuse it with the tortoise again. If you're going too fast, just drop the revs, lose a gear and you'll be fine."

This time I drive for 20km without becoming the first woman in polar long-hauling to overturn a Challenger, but the contrast between snow and sky is dismal and I stretch my neck like a Sandton building crane to stop the Ou Vrou from staggering into one of the crevasses that derange this part of our route.

For the five Challenger drivers, however, this brutal Eden is as workaday as a switchboard is to a Sea Point receptionist. Team leader Gerrie Grundling, who was Defence Force Sports Personality for 2008, Andrew Kietzmann, Antonie Minnaar, Essie Esterhuyzen and Coenraad Groenewald may be boykies from Pretoria and Cape Town, but here they are the Ice-road Truckers of the Antarctic.

Since off-loading began in late December, the quintet has heaved SANAE IV's army of provisions along a 3 000km network of ice routes, made all the more testing by frigid temperatures, cracking bay ice and swamps of soft powder snow.

When we take a breather on the ice 120km from RSA Bukta, I ask Gerrie why he has returned to Antarctica year after year, four times in fact, when the labour is unrelenting and the fruits seem few.

"Yes, a driver's life is interesting. It is a difficult life. You sit here and you work your fingers through. You work in the cold a lot, maar dis vir ons lekker," says the 44-year-old Gerrie, a military man who speaks like a cool



A FEELING FOR SNOW

Braais, 18-ton old ladies and nude slumber parties in mummy bags — Tiara Walters reveals the nuances of a South African expedition to Antarctica, and her own place in it

assassin. No matter how much the ice roads try hinder his way, Gerrie always sounds as if he is reading the December forecast for a Seychelles beach. "And tomorrow is pay day. Yes, on January 15 the army bar is going to be full."

Thirteen hours after trekking in convoy, we reach our bukta and the caboose where we will stake out for the next days. The drivers and their support crew — a troop of SANAE IV engineers and diesel mechanics — go on, jockeying tanks into position and rolling out fuel hoses towards the edge of the 40m-high shelf. Everything must be in place to pump fuel in the morning.

In the meantime, I take to our caboose — a mobile sardine tin that, remarkably, packs in eight beds, a kitchenette and a broken toilet seat sans toilet — and try make it home.

It is late now and it is cold and the air inside the caboose is garroted by such a chill that the floor has been covered in shards of frost. Gerrie and his men had worked here a few days before and the ice hunks they'd left on the gas stove were still frozen fast. I hack them up and boil them on the stove for drinking water. The steam from the murmuring tin pot rises and swells and fills the caboose with a woosh of warm air.

Outside it is snowing, the low, grey sky flagging like suspended panes of silk and B15K, a 60kmx5km berg, shivering in the bay ice.

I grab two loaves from the pantry and make 22 cheese and tomato braai broodjies with swishes of chutney. It is the Antarctic, but the guys are spoiling for a braai, which shows it matters not how far a hot-blooded Suid Afrikaanse man finds himself from home because home is where the braai is.

As soon as the 11 guys return, the static air in the caboose ruptures with the squeal of snow boots and the drone of famished male voices. Jannes Fourie, a blond, broad-shouldered diesel mechanic from the West Coast, chants an Afrikaans folk song: "Wat maak kamp so lekker? Dis koffie, pap en wors. Dis koffie, dis koffie, dis koffie, pap en wors."

We turn in at 2am. The first night in the caboose is hard and bitter. We've closed the front door, but the cruel Antarctic cold knows the caboose's foibles and curls her long fingers through the cracks. Everyone else is passed out, a heaving morass of mummy bags snoring like old, broken zips, but I cannot shake the dull throbbing that has gripped my hands. As you do in the dead hours, I fall into a strange delirium and only think of putting on my gloves, which I'd burnt while holding my hands low over the braai coals, three hours later.

"You should've taken off all your clothes last night," Gerrie says in his weather-man voice when we're all huddled in the kitchen over

coffee and Ouma beskuit.

"Wat?" I splutter back in Afrikaans. "Ernstig," he says, unphased, face deadpan. "Those mummy bags are amazing. They're designed to take the heat your body radiates and use it to insulate you. Wear too much, and the mummy bag can't do its job — so that snowsuit of yours helped you niks."

"The only reason we didn't sleep in our birthday suits was because you were there," he quipped and walked off, chortling.

Over the next two days we unload 88 drums of jet A1 and skidoo fuel, 28 containers and the remaining 165 000 litres needed to complete SANAE IV's 400 000-litre polar-diesel supply for the year.

When the Challenger train finally trundles out of RSA Bukta at 10pm on Saturday evening, Antonie, Marlon and I start fantasising about the first thing we'd do once we get back to South Africa.

"A long, steaming bath," I say. The caboose was so cramped and cold and the past three days so packed that none of us managed to change clothes. Right now I would have thrown myself in front of a Challenger for a hot tub. "One with candles and birthday oils from friends and corny music from DSTV's New Age channel."

"Caramel sweets," offers Marlon. "Those little ones with horns."

"When my wife is dressed up, no one is as beautiful. We'll drop my daughter at my

mother's house for a night and go somewhere for a little R&R," says Antonie. "Or maybe not, as the case may be," he sniggers.

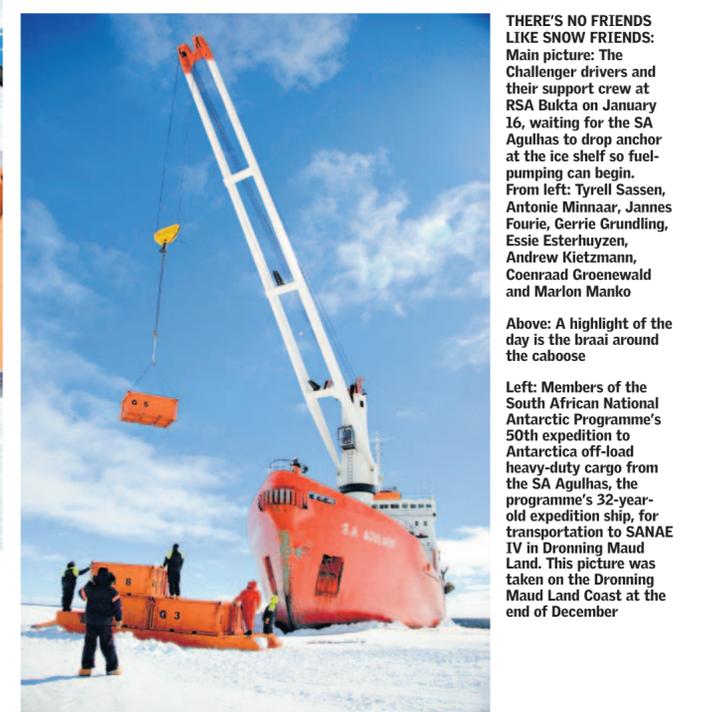
The 178km journey back to SANAE IV would eventually turn into a vicious, 24-hour melee of storms and whiteouts, forcing us to navigate solely from GPS waypoint to waypoint. Our fuel-heavy, tank-laden sleds would slow the entire Challenger train down to 10km/h and some loads would be abandoned 25km from SANAE IV, only to be collected once the storms had abated the next day.

This place, the Antarctic, is as SANAE IV structural architect Hennie Stassen puts it, "unrelenting, but very forgiving too".

His words remind me of the misery the Challenger drivers experience here at the bottom of the world, of the contradiction of their lives, of the way so many of the veterans of the South African National Antarctic Programme had once sworn they'd never return to this place of hardship — only to find themselves back on the SA Agulhas the next year, gazing beyond the prow, out across the rippling deep, as if they're about to cross the mythologised horizon of the Antarctic for the very first time.

● Applications for the South African National Antarctic Programme's 2010/2011 expedition to SANAE IV are now open. Visit www.sanap.org.za for more. For live updates direct from Antarctica, see Tiara Walters's blog at blogs.timeslive.co.za/tiara

Pictures: TIARA WALTERS



THERE'S NO FRIENDS LIKE SNOW FRIENDS: Main picture: The Challenger drivers and their support crew at RSA Bukta on January 16, waiting for the SA Agulhas to drop anchor at the ice shelf so fuel-pumping can begin. From left: Tyrell Sassen, Antonie Minnaar, Jannes Fourie, Gerrie Grundling, Essie Esterhuyzen, Andrew Kietzmann, Coenraad Groenewald and Marlon Manko

Above: A highlight of the day is the braai around the caboose

Left: Members of the South African National Antarctic Programme's 50th expedition to Antarctica off-load heavy-duty cargo from the SA Agulhas, the programme's 32-year-old expedition ship, for transportation to SANAE IV in Dronning Maud Land. This picture was taken on the Dronning Maud Land Coast at the end of December



IT'S OFF TO WORK I GO: The writer on 'smelly duty'. The 'smelly' is a snow smelter that provides water



ROUGH AND TUMBLE: The Challenger MT865, the jewel of Sanap's tracked-vehicle fleet, stuck in snow

‘We've closed the door but the cruel Antarctic cold knows the caboose's foibles and curls her long fingers through the cracks

WHAT? SANAE IV (South African National Antarctic Expedition) in Dronning Maud Land, West Antarctica, at 72°S 3°W. SANAE IV is run by the South African National Antarctic Programme, a division of the Department of Environmental Affairs.

WHY? As a signatory to the Antarctic Treaty, South Africa must maintain a year-round presence in Antarctica while conducting scientific studies.

WHEN? In order to avoid being sucked in by snow, SANAE IV was built between 1993 and 1997 on the 210m-high Vesleskarvet nunatak ("barren little mountain"), which is found 178km inland. SANAE IV also contains a sauna, a gym and a hospital equipped for brain surgery. It has room for 100

people and during summer is filled with engineers, Challenger drivers, dozer operators, diesel mechanics, helicopter pilots and scientists. During the Antarctic winter, SANAE IV accommodates a small team of about 10 scientists and engineers.

ITS WORK? Invasion biology, geography, geomorphology, seismology, meteorology, space physics, oceanography, climate-change research, base maintenance and construction.

WIN COOL GEAR

This December South Africa celebrates 50 years of scientific achievement and polar exploration under the auspices of the South African National Antarctic Programme. In celebration of the 50th anniversary, the Sunday Times Lifestyle and Cape Union Mart are giving five lucky readers a K-Way Kilimanjaro II Daypack worth R550 and a Cape Union Mart gift card worth R500. The 30-litre daypack has been tested on Kilimanjaro and features a hydration-system-compatible compartment and rain cover. To enter, tell us: how many years has South Africa been involved in the Antarctic? Post your answer to Antarctica@SundayTimesLifestyle.com, PO Box 1742, Saxonwold, 2132 or e-mail lifestyle@sundaytimes.co.za. Competition closes on February 9.

SANAE IV AT A GLANCE

Explore

AVELINO ROCHA