

THE BIG STORY: **ANTARCTICA**



ICE SORE: Sea ice and B15K, a 60km x 5km iceberg that outwitted the ship

EVERY traveller to Antarctica needs their own Circe, the Greek sorceress who warns Odysseus about the Sirens. Those who "bewitch all men" with their song sit in a meadow just beyond the beach and "all about is a great heap of bones of men", the bones of the sailors who did not stop their ears with wax when they sailed past the land of the Sirens.

Yes. Like the Sirens of yore, Antarctica will bewitch you. But not necessarily in the way you think.

In early December in Cape Town, I boarded the polar vessel SA Agulhas on her annual replenishment voyage to Sanae IV, South Africa's scientific research station in East Antarctica — but, during the ship's 8 400km round trip, I didn't see a single sodding whale. No matter how many times I responded to the clarion calls sounded from the decks, tearing up seven flights of stairs to the bridge, I always "just" missed them, as the smug smattering of whale spotters gathered outside liked to put it.

A little irrationally, perhaps, I wanted to punch them all.

On your way to the Antarctic, you may not always spot the obvious icons of the world's "driest, windiest, coldest and highest" continent. You may not see whales queuing to perform tricks next to the hull, leopard seals lolling on floes or hunkering armies of French-speaking penguins marching across the ice shelf.

You may find that Antarctica is nothing like the documentaries you've seen on DSTV and that its real music lies in the slower, subtler, smaller rhythms of the ice.

Hands shoved deep into pockets, we often stood out on the pitching aft deck for hours, laughing at jokes only South Africans would understand and marvelling at the Wilson's storm petrels

while they fed on the beasties churned up in the wake.

To us it seemed impossible that these sooty little birds, with clean rumps the colour of supermarket milk, could spend most of their lives on this frigid, roiling deep. Unless you're Lewis Pugh the Human Polar Bear, your 70 000g will have seconds to live should you blunder into these subzero seas. Yet a storm petrel's 40g, fortified by waterproof feathers and a desalination gland at the top of its bill, belie its extraordinary toughness in icy conditions. A Leach's storm petrel can live up to 35 years — 15 years longer than a lion.

After our 30-day voyage at sea, thwarted by compacted sea ice and a 60km x 5km iceberg, we reached our offloading zone on the Dronning Maud Land coast at 70°S 8°W. If Antarctica is shaped like a tadpole, the Antarctic Peninsula, which faces South America, is its frigid tale and Dronning Maud Land, the Norwegian-dependent territory where Sanae IV is based, is its head.

6 No matter how many times I responded to the calls from the decks, I didn't see a single sodding whale



# Sailing to the Sirens

Tiara Walters discovers Antarctica is nothing like the documentaries you've seen on TV and that its real music lies in the rhythms of ice, weird creatures and gigantic silences

From here the expedition's five drivers hauled Sanae IV's supplies for the year across 315km of ice to the station. For the rest of us — a mix of scientists, maintenance personnel and me — it was a 90-minute chopper flight over cold, incendiary beauty.

We flew over crevasses — tears caused by the perpetual movement of the ice sheet towards the sea — so huge that just one could swallow all of Soccer City Stadium, its 94 000 spectators, vuvuzelas and all.

To the southeast lay the 400km-long Jutulstraumen Glacier, the second-largest drainage glacier on Earth, and Sanae IV. Our nearest human neighbours were over 300km away and, apart from a snow petrel colony 35km from the station, there was almost no wildlife. All seals and penguins and other seabirds cling to the plankton-rich coast because Dronning Maud Land's badlands are too frozen to sustain them.

We had entered the biggest St Elsewhere on the planet.

After we had crossed the continental divide — the line where the floating ice shelf and the continent meet — we flew over the Ahlmann mountain range's "nunataks" — Norwegian for the exposed, wind-battered tops of mountains buried under thousands of meters of snow.

These nunataks thrum with some of the most admirable life forms on the planet: microscopic invertebrates and lichen, a tender fusion of green, black and yellow blobs of fungi and algae.

It all sounds terribly unsexy, but these creatures are engaged in battles for survival so moving that their lives are poems of endurance, a homage to the will to live in the most extraordinary circumstances. There is almost no fresh water in the Antarctic — most of it is locked up in ice and snow. When the South Pole tilts away from the sun, lichen dry out completely, living a frozen, liquidless life for all of the black, austral winter.

But in October, when the sun rises over the midnight snows, lichen may find brand-new life in meltwater pools and the sheltered cracks and crevices of nunataks. But summer brings its own tests — 24-hour sunlight that batters these hardy blobs as much as the 250km/h winds that swoop over in winter. And yet, certain lichen live for hundreds of years.

And through these forests of lichen steal microscopic invertebrates like water bears, plump little animals with eight stumpy legs.

"They are super, super cool organisms," Dr Jennifer Lee, a Stellenbosch University researcher, would tell me at Sanae IV's laboratory. When their natural habitat becomes too parched, they lose all the water in their bodies, just like lichen. When moisture becomes available again, they simply



SEABIRD: A Titan Bell 212 helicopter takes off to do a bay ice recce before the expedition members can offload Sanae IV's cargo for the year

rehydrate and carry on.

It is in these fainter shadows and quieter rhythms of the place that Antarctica makes itself known. But most of all, Antarctica is in the silence.

After leaving Circe on the Isle of Aea, Odysseus and his men sailed ahead in a gentle breeze that "sped their ship on her way". But, just before the Sirens began their "clear-toned song", a strange, "windless calm" descended as if "some god had lulled the waves". Perhaps that's

what Kafka meant when he wrote, "The Sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence ... it is conceivable that someone might have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never."

I wanted to know what this silence felt like, the kind that Sanae IV veterans spoke of, where you can hear the blood pump in your ears.

So, a few days after our arrival at the station, I signed out a radio, grabbed a

skidoo and rode out a kilometre until I could no longer hear the drone of the station generators.

It took forever for the tuk-tuk-tuk of the skidoo's engine to die down, but eventually the tuks grew so far apart that I wondered whether the last one had lost its way in the silence, and the air grew so still that even the silence was sucked out of it.

I pulled my balaclava over my head and lay down. I felt the continent spread

out underneath my back and thought of how there was nothing but 2 000km of ice, snow and rock, lichen and microscopic invertebrates between the South Pole and me.

I should've left then, gunned the engine and ridden back to base, because Antarctica can mess with you, make you long for something you might never find again once you get back to the real world.

But it was too late. I had already listened to the song of the Sirens.

So I just lay there a little longer.

● For more on the South African National Antarctic Programme, visit [www.sanap.ac.za](http://www.sanap.ac.za).

For details on how to visit Dronning Maud Land as a tourist, see [www.antarctic-company.com](http://www.antarctic-company.com), the website of The Antarctic Company, which departs from Cape Town for East Antarctica between November and January. Prices range between €15 000 and €32 000 (R170 000 and R364 000).



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