

The doc's head over heels in love – with snow

And all set for challenges like rescue climbs in Antarctic crevasses



JOHN YELD
ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

Aithne Rowse fell in love with snow when she was a primary school pupil in Johannesburg nearly two decades ago.

Now the medical doctor is set to see more snow and ice during the next 14 months than most South Africans will see in a lifetime.

Dr Rowse, 29, has arrived in Antarctica as a key member of the 10-strong Sanae (South African National Antarctic Expedition) team which will be the first to resume over-wintering in Antarctica after a two-year break.

This was because the old Sanae III base was closed for safety reasons before the new Sanae IV base at Vesleskarvet, which they will be the first to occupy, was ready for them. This is the 36th team since South Africa became involved in Antarctica in 1959.

Dr Rowse – her first name is pronounced “A-knee” – applied to join the team at the last minute and sailed south aboard the supply ship SA Agulhas with two other team members last month to meet the others who had travelled down earlier in November.

A graduate of Wits University medical school who had been working at Johannesburg General and Baragwanath hospitals for the past few years, she has achieved a notable first by being the first woman to be chosen for a Sanae team as well as being the first woman doctor.

But it's a distinction she's quick to play down, pointing out that other countries – notably New Zealand – have included women in their Antarctic over-wintering teams for several years.

By the time she arrived at Vesleskarvet in mid-January she'd been asked how she felt about being the first Sanae woman so many times she didn't even want to discuss the gender issue, preferring simply to get on with the job at hand.

But talking about Antarctica was something else and her eyes sparkled when she responded to a question about her first impressions on seeing the frozen continent: “I loved it!”

She'd never experienced anything like the vast expanse of pure white ice and snow that greeted her, although there had been that memorable day at school in Johannesburg so many years ago.

“It snowed that one day during spring and we just poured out of the classroom to go and look.

“They couldn't keep us inside,” she recalled with a chuckle.

But Antarctica was of a different order of magnitude and the moment when the SA Agulhas reached the dense pack ice

“great”, she said.

“And then seeing the ice shelf at the bukta (the bay where the ship discharged its cargo) was a wonderful experience.

“Vesleskarvet was pretty much what I'd imagined because I'd seen pictures of the construction of the new base, but even photos don't display just how spectacular it all is.”

She's not intimidated by her medical responsibilities during the coming year.

Before leaving for Antarctica she did some “crash-course” extra training in radiology, orthopaedics, optometry, dentistry and the treatment of ear, nose and throat ailments.

“My colleagues were all extremely helpful and nice and lent me useful articles, and I was also able to speak to a couple of the doctors from previous Sanae teams and they shared their experiences with me,” Dr Rowse said.

She's an outdoor type who was taken hiking at an early age and she's also worked for a company which runs canoe safaris on the Orange River.

Now she's looking forward to some slightly tougher challenges on ice, including hands-on training in how to rescue someone from a crevasse.

“I got my brother-in-law to take me out rock-climbing a couple of times and I enjoyed that, so it (climbing into crevasses) should be fun.

“But I've got a lot to learn,” she conceded.

On one of her first nights after arriving – it was actually daylight because January is still high summer in Antarctica and the sun is above the horizon for its full 24-hour cycle – she and some of her colleagues went on a three-hour hike around the mountain outcrop on which the new base is being built.

The temperature was a chilly -10 deg C or so but that didn't worry her at all.

“It didn't seem that cold because we were walking, but plodding through the soft snow in some places – that was strenuous!” she laughed.

Most of her friends and relatives have been highly supportive of her adventure.

“Although there have been one or two who tell me I'm incredibly stupid,” Dr Rowse confided.

“Actually, you can divide people into three groups.

“There are those who would never go to Antarctica and who say so; those who say it would be nice to go but who wouldn't, even if given a chance; and then those who say they would love to go – and who really mean it.”

Aithne Rowse has grabbed her chance with both hands and it's obvious she really means to make the most of it.



Consultation: Dr Aithne Rowse, the first woman member of a South African over-wintering team in Antarctica, chats to summer construction team doctor Etienne Groenewald in his room at Vesleskarvet