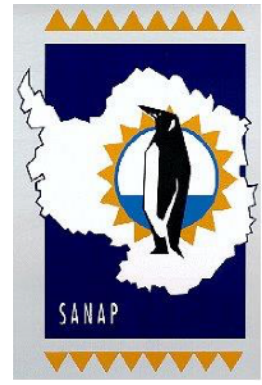




71° Below

**SANAE 57 Newsletter
December 2017**



Welcome to the first newsletter of the 57th South African Antarctic Expedition! It has been a whirlwind trip so far and we have only just begun! The whole overwintering team has been busy training, purchasing 15 months worth of supplies, visiting family and generally keeping busy around the warehouse and on the ship. In this brief newsletter you will meet the team, get an update on our activities and get some insight into the voyage to the ice on the amazing SA Agulhas II.

Team Preparation

This type of expedition is new to most of the team. Three of the team have overwintered previously. John Skelete has been to Antarctica for a year. Hloni and Elias have overwintered on Gough island. Fifteen months in isolation is a daunting thing to prepare for. The seven uninitiated overwinterers were constantly asking the three experienced team members for advice. Dinner conversations would almost always return to the conditions and the things that we will need to pack. Planning has to be meticulous since there will be no chance to quickly grab something from the local shop once we set sail.

Long before we sailed we received an email from the current team leader. This was a long list of advice that has been compiled by previous teams and added to year by year as successive teams complete their expeditions and hand over to the new team. This includes advice on extra items to bring as well as some information regarding life at the base.

We also needed to get a handle on the general logistics of actually getting to the icy continent. Since we were sailing there, with our items in big containers, there was no real weight limit. However we needed to realise that the items in the containers would not be accessible during the voyage and transport to the base. So we needed enough toiletries and clothes to keep on the ship with us, while the rest was inaccessible in the hold of the ship.

It helped to categorise our shopping lists according to use. Then it was some simple math to decide how much we would need. For example, a single use of dental floss is approximately 40cm long. We will be away for approximately 450 days. Thus we would need roughly 180 metres of dental floss! Similar calculations were done for toothpaste, deodorant, body wash and chocolate!

The overwintering team then spent 12 days training for the upcoming expedition. After an introduction to the department and the people we would be working with over the next 15 months we had a programme of courses laid out for us. There was firefighting, first aid and search and rescue training. We also spent a day with Frank, an army chaplain from the SANDF, who took us through some conflict resolution exercises, as well as some team ice-breakers where we got to know our team mates better. Cold weather training and bulldozer driver training was conducted at Barloworld, introducing us to the machines we would be driving while on the ice. We also attended a fantastic two day cooking course with the amazing Kelly, from Cooking with Kelly. We will now eat tastier and more varied meals, a crucial aspect to maintaining morale during a long period of isolation.

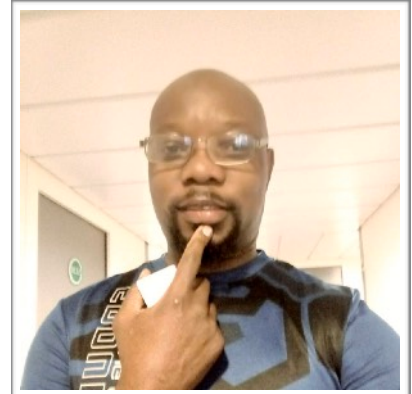


Meet the team



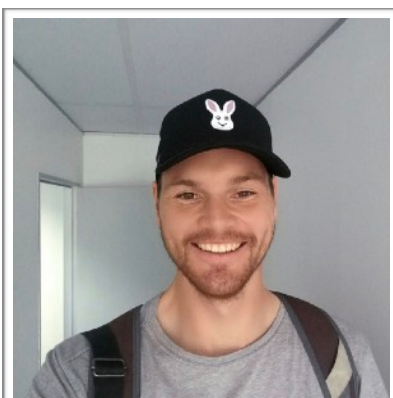
Will Jelbert: I am the team leader and doctor for the expedition. My role is to manage any health issues that arise during the expedition. As team leader I also have to coordinate everything through head office in South Africa regarding the base and activities here during the take-over and throughout the winter. I chose to come and be a part of this programme because I enjoy a challenge and I love adventure and exploring new places. One thing I can't leave behind is my camera. I am hoping to take some amazing photos in this remote and beautiful part of the world.

John 'Biggie' Skelete: As a diesel mechanic my role is to maintain the base and equipment and safeguard my fellow teammate's safety. I joined this programme at an early age and grew up with it and I enjoy contributing to the programme. My knowledge, expertise, skills and experience is needed and I am proud to be given this opportunity to share this. One thing I can't live without is my sense of humour!



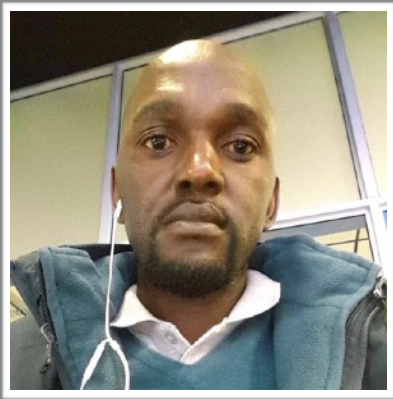
Sabelo Biyela: I am a diesel mechanic. Together with John I will be responsible for maintenance and general repairs of the vehicles, earth-moving equipment, and diesel generators. I opted for this opportunity because of location rather than job title. I found it as a once-in-a-lifetime experience to enable me to explore new limits of body, mind and soul. It will give me enough time to discover myself as an individual and what I want to do in the near future. One thing I can't live without...my Bible!

Luxolo 'Luks' Tanyana: I am a mechanical engineer and my role is to maintain the systems at the base, including the refrigeration, air conditioning, wastewater system and all the vehicles. I chose to come on this expedition because it is a great opportunity to gain different experiences, face a new environment, and add value to the department. One thing I won't survive without is my laptop. I like watching series and movies!



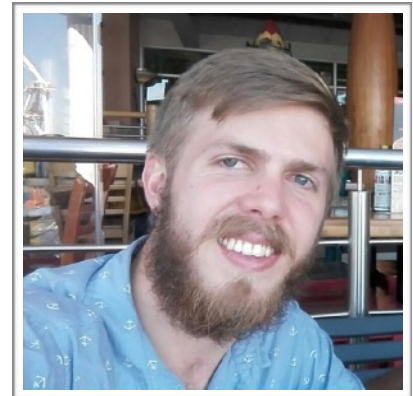
William 'Bo' Orton: I'm the electrician so I will be making sure that the entire electrical installation are functioning effectively. That's the idea anyway. I chose to go on this expedition because it's the most isolated place I can go and still earn money. Plus it's the South Pole! One thing I can't do without for 15 months was a tough call between my music collection and a computer to play some games on...

Lehlohonolo 'Hloni' Rakoteli: I am the team's Communications Engineer. I was drawn to the beauty of Antarctica and the fact that I will be counted amongst less than one percent of the Earth's population to set foot on this magnificent continent. One thing that I can't leave behind is my smart phone. Although there is no mobile coverage there is so much else one can do with it on the expedition... Trust me!!



Foster 'Swakoteka' Mashele: I am an electronic engineer working for the South African National Space Agency. Together with Stephanus, I will be maintaining the VLF antennas, Riometer and magnetic sensors equipment. I joined the programme to make contributions to the world of science and gather data that will be used by scientists in their research. One thing I can't survive without is my music library!

Stephanus Schoeman: I am the team's radar engineer, working with the South African National Space Agency. My job is to look after the SuperDARN Radar at the base. I chose to join this expedition mostly for the adventure and novelty of the experience. But I am also hoping to obtain new knowledge and skills. One thing I can't live without is chocolate. I invested heavily in chocolates, which I will try very hard not to finish in the first month we're there!



Elias 'Maeli' Seabi: I am a meteorological technician. I am responsible for overseeing the weather observations at SANAE. This data is sent to SA for research into changing global weather patterns. I chose to join this expedition in order to build my career and make some money. I have overwintered on the SA station on Gough Island and it was a great experience. Antarctica will be totally different. One thing I can't live without are appetite pills. As time goes on in the base I will crave fresh food but that will all be gone. This is when the appetite pills will come in handy!

Cobus Van Der Merwe: I am an electrical engineer working as a cosmic ray researcher for North West University. This research has been carried out by South Africa in Antarctica for over 50 years! I joined this expedition because I am young and crazy enough to take on most adventures at this stage of my life. I don't have too much holding me back. No better opportunity to satisfy my adventurous spirit. One thing I couldn't leave behind are my running shoes. Must stay active!



The Adventure Begins



After a delay of just over a week we finally set sail on the 8th of December for the Southern Oceans. It was a beautiful sunny day, 39°C, as we left Table Mountain behind us. All the while we knew we were heading for the coldest environment on Earth. Even though it is now summer in the southern hemisphere there are many on the ship who have been to Antarctica before (some several times) and know how harsh and unpredictable it can be.

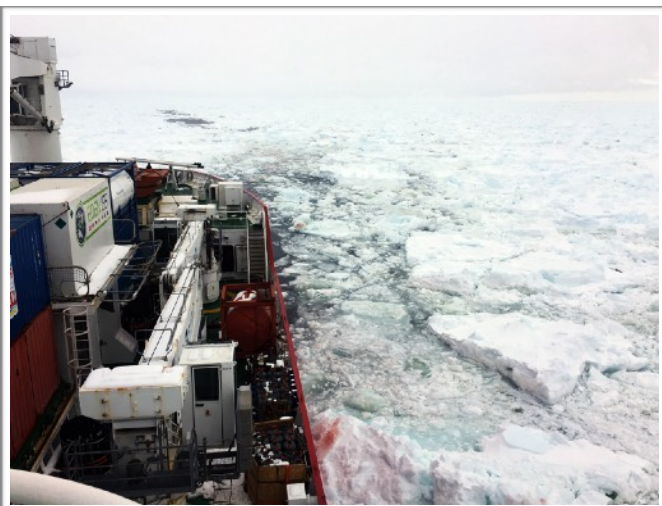
The SA Agulhas II is an amazing vessel! There will be further information and pictures about this in the next newsletter. The overwintering team went on a ships tour of the engine and technical decks, as well as a bridge tour. The ship itself is immaculate and well run. Captain Gavin Syndercombe runs a tight ship! We have all been extremely well taken care of by the professional and attentive crew. The food is also excellent!

One of the scientific missions on the way to Antarctica is to drop off a small team (four scientists and one medic) onto Bouvet island. Bouvet (owned by Norway) is one of the most remote islands on Earth. It is a 4x5km volcanic island just breaching the surface of the Atlantic ocean. The team is there to monitor and tag several animal colonies that call the island home, like penguins and fur seals amongst others. A helicopter flight was planned also to photograph some of these animal colonies to get accurate population counts.



Unfortunately we encountered severe weather conditions and couldn't safely drop the team off onto the island. There was the potential that we would have to abandon the whole Bouvet expedition in order to make it in good time to Antarctica. This would be devastating to the small team of scientists that would then have made all the preparations for food, fuel, water and scientific gear which would not be used!

However we checked with the actual base on Antarctica and realised that there were delays on that side due to severe weather conditions also! This meant that we could hang out by the island for a bit longer and wait for a break in the weather. It eventually did clear enough for the helicopters to drop the team and all their gear safely onto the island, which was a huge relief.



We continued on our way and after three days encountered quite thick sea ice along the route. The ocean in this region is often around -2°C, since salty water freezes at a lower temperature than pure water! It is amazing how rapidly the sea ice conditions can change. The ship became stuck for a several hours in thick ice. The captain tried to get free by rocking the boat (literally!) and going back and forth ramming the ice trying to find a way forward. A few hours later the tide came in and lifted the ice slightly, making the ice less dense and the ship was able to make good progress. Eventually we reached Antarctica, the place we will be calling home for the next fourteen months!

Our Sponsors

A huge thanks to our sponsors who generously donated some of their quality products to the overwintering team to make our winter more homely! We will keep everyone updated as we get a chance to sample these delicacies! Currently, however, they are all stored safely, yet inaccessibly, in a container as we sail south.

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