

Antarctic Expedition: The Way Home

MISSION: TRY NOT TO MISS THE ANTARCTIC TOO MUCH

After everyone had safely returned to the Agulhas we were keen to be on our way. However, the shelf would remain our home for a few more days as back-loading had not yet been completed by the time we got back to the ship. Meanwhile, back on the Agulhas the Take-Over crew was reunited with the oceanographers that had remained on the ship to continue with their scientific experiments of the ocean. Stories and envious glances passed between the two groups: the oceanographers told of their wondrous journey in the Atlantic, South Georgia, the Sandwich Islands, Ernest Shackleton's grave and being chased by seals; the Take-Over crew in turn regaled the oceanographers with tales of endless glaciers, crevasses, ice vistas, helicopter rides, numerous slips and falls on the ice, crazy-looking lichen and the Take-Over games. All in all it was a fun-filled affair! Another welcoming surprise once arriving back on the ship was that I had been upgraded from a 4 berth cabin (as it was on the way down) to a 2 berth cabin. **HURRAY**, a bit more space to ourselves. And who can forget the opportunity to have a shower **EVERY DAY!**? SANAE, with all its wonders, can become slightly difficult for those used to showering every day. With a sewerage system that is ideal for about 40-odd people the Take-Over crew of *app.* twice that was, during our stay there, forced to shower at most once every two days. Other days were supplemented with 'French' showers. With all the physical work having to be done that proved to be a smelly affair. Having a shower every day on the Agulhas was therefore a luxury deeply appreciated by everyone: the Take-Over crew was happy to immerse themselves in a wonderful rain of water and the oceanographers were exhilarated to not be exposed to too much of a 'wiff' from the Take-Over crew. A win-win situation all way round!



Figure 1-2: Back-loading operations using the crane and crew.

And still back-loading continued and a few more days were spent up in the Monkey Deck seeing the back-loading procedures in progress. These had an additional element of danger this time as summer's peak had passed and the ice was now at its softest and most likely to fail. Back-loading therefore progressed with extreme caution and a sailing crew that was at all times highly alert and aware of the dangerous ice

shelf. Fortunately back-loading finished without any incidents, we waved goodbye to S50 who would remain at SANAE until the next Take-Over and we were soon on our way, heading north to Cape Town.



Figure 3-4: Back-loading operations using the Kamov.

Sadness set in as the shelf slowly disappeared behind us in the distance. For most of us this would be the one and only time we would have the opportunity to go to the Antarctic. It is an once-in-a-lifetime experience that very few individuals on earth get to experience and the significance of this was not lost to us. But the sadness was counteracted by the excitement of returning to South Africa and seeing our friends, family and significant others again. This especially applied to S49, the overwintering team of the previous year that after 14 months of being away from South Africa would finally be reunited with their loved ones. But before we could again see dry land in Cape Town there were two and a bit more weeks ahead of us, once again cooped up on the ship. The daily routine soon commenced with movies being watched at the highest volume in the lounge (These movies were often of the action-based type, watched by the drivers and PWD crew members and therefore avoided at all cost by myself and a few other ladies. This doesn't mean that action is not to our liking, however movies from the 70s with subtitles are simply weird...), the bar was frequented during bar hours (gin and tonics became the staple – they give an illusion of great adventures and bygone eras of intrepid explores investigating the unknown), the library became the (quiet) enclave of the respective team leaders, the smokers lounge was used as a Python lecture hall (that would be the programming language [named after Monthy Python's Flying Circus] – not the snake) and a bachelors held for one of the science members, with cake, merriment and all other aspects (the main difference being here that women were also part of the party – and not of the clothes-removing kind: all clothes stayed firmly on).

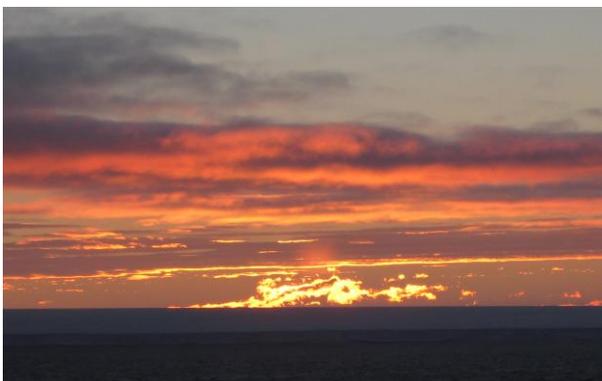


Figure 5-6: Sunsets and vistas at sea.

As we made our way north the days became shorter, stars emerged, stunning sunsets were seen at sea, a few whales spotted, a farewell said sea ice, ice bergs, to the seals, snow petrels, skuas and finally the majestic albatross. All seemed tranquil and quiet until we hit a storm. This wasn't a particularly bad one (swells reached approximately six metres) but soon the ship was rolling like a drunk old lady having had a bottle of champagne all to herself after only allowing herself a glass of sherry a night for the last three months. Walking down the passageways became a challenge – the movement of the ship would throw one from one wall to the other – stairs on the outside of the ship became treacherous and the sailing crew had a good laugh at the passengers as they, without fail, would be surefooted and without even the slightest hint of seasickness. It most **DEFINITELY** pays to be a sailor in a storm; we land-bound buggers generally just suffer. But all in all it wasn't too bad. The storm was brief, a day or two at most and we didn't quite hit its centre. Instead those of us brave enough to venture outside were rewarded with the most magnificent view of the actual centre of the storm, made more spectacular by the sun peeking through the clouds, highlighting the masses of thunderous clouds and rain! Many days were also spent outside at night (a precious commodity to us the last three months) watching the stars. With no other lights to pollute the skies the stars, as seen on the ocean, are simply stunning. No one has ever seen the Milky Way unless seen from the open ocean (or perhaps the deserts of Namibia, Mongolia, North America etc., you get my drift).

The excitement mounted as we crept closer to South Africa and not a wink slept when the news came that Cape Town would be visible the following evening. Bags were packed in a rush, our bills paid to the Bernie the purser, email addresses and telephone numbers exchanged and early goodbyes said. Slowly lights emerged from the sea – initially the lights from other vessels and finally Table Mountain, lit up in all its glory! Telephones started beeping, phone calls made and general happiness (and selective weeping) ensued. However, melancholy set in with the exhilaration felt by all: melancholy because the adventure was over, exhilaration because we were **HOME!**



Figure 7: S49 waiting to get off the ship.

But we were not quite home yet. We arrived in Cape Town at night and would only be allowed to dock between 12 and two pm the following day. There really is nothing worse than seeing land so close by and not being able to reach it... Somehow we did manage to patiently wait it out and the next day the tug dutifully led the Agulhas into her dock. We weren't quite prepared for what expected us there though. After all, this was the 2nd last time the Agulhas would ever make the trip down to the Antarctic! So we were greeted with pomp and fanfare and lots of administrative stuff. The waiting to dock now became the 2nd worst thing to do; the 1st worst thing to happen was being stuck on the ship for

hours (!) while your family waited for you on the dock. But eventually that also passed and finally, after being away for

11 weeks we were back in good ol' South Africa, looking forward to our next adventures, wherever they would take us.



Figure 8: Cape Town! We are home!

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