

The New Ice Age

Antarctica's long dark winter evokes visions of early explorers barely surviving in huts, their huskies and sleds snowbound outside in the harshest conditions imaginable. But times have changed.

Although expeditioners like Mawson, Scott, and Amundsen explored and wintered on the continent in the early years of the century, the notion of operating permanent year-round bases in Antarctica was relatively new until the 1950s and 1960s. Even after the Second World War, Antarctica was still being opened up and there were many blank spots on the map. Mawson station, opened in 1954, and Davis in 1957 are Australia's two oldest, continually operated bases on the continent.

In the past, life at these bases was hardly luxurious. It meant camping in cramped zinc-alum sheds, listening to katabatic winds scream in the long winter night. Communication with the outside world was restricted to just a few telegraphed lines. Expeditioners heading south were issued with pamphlets listing five-letter codes covering almost every conceivable situation so they could communicate with their families and still keep within strict 'word limits' during their year on base. Humour boosted morale and was an important element of life there. For instance 'YIKLA' was code for 'This is the life'!

Today, living year-round in Antarctica is considerably easier. The weather hasn't changed of course, but you can pick up a telephone and dial direct anywhere in the world. The cost is very modest and is subsidised at 90 cents a minute. All that individuals need to do is to collect the bill at the end of the year.

Because the summertime work of scientists tends to capture the public's imagination, with revelations about the ozone hole or whale numbers, people tend to overlook the efforts of the 20 or so winterers at each base – mostly tradespeople – who keep the bases going long after 'the boffins' (research scientists) have migrated to warmer climates. In doing so, they also keep alive claims to sovereignty of sections of the continent and maintain their environmental interest in this sensitive part of the planet. Aside from its wealth of marine resources, Antarctica controls much of the southern hemisphere's climate. As the only other wholly southern hemisphere continent, Australia, more than any other large nation, has the most stake in what happens here.

So what is life like down there? Over the past year, wintering on an Antarctic base has become positively civilised. The conclusion of last summer of a 10-year building programme has seen the historic zinc-alum shacks and even older wooden sheds built at an early Antarctic base, on Heard Island in 1947, supplanted by vast, bright-coloured buildings with bay window views and ski lodge decor. There are video lounges, gymnasiums, bars, and libraries. The workshops are comparable to anything in modern industrialised countries. The food is plentiful. There are even field huts that double as weekenders for those who feel the need to get away from it all. The money's good and everything from beer to socks is supplied free. Not everyone is pleased with the new luxury. Nowhere were the changes felt more keenly than at Mawson, where the old quarters, with their rugged outpost atmosphere, were shut and the last team of huskies removed. To many old Antarctic hands, it marked the end of the great 'Intrepid Age' in Antarctica.

There are some things about life in Antarctica, however, that even central heating and watching a live-via-satellite sports broadcast cannot change. The Antarctic territory is still one of the most exotic places on Earth. Few people will ever get there. There are no flights which land there – you have to travel as the early explorers did, almost a century ago, by sea. Going to Mawson, for example, means a two-week voyage on an icebreaker such as Aurora Australis, across 5,000 kilometres of the Southern Ocean, one of the roughest stretches of water on Earth. Waves can exceed 15 metres, the ship can pitch 40 degrees and, if you're not a good sailor, even the industrial strength Avomine prescribed by Antarctic Division doctors won't keep breakfast down. Most often though, tourist ships sail from South American ports, which offer the easiest access to the spectacular coastal scenery of the Antarctic Peninsula.

Once there, after the short shipping season has ended, some time in February when the ice closes in, there is no changing your mind and heading home. You are there for the duration, at least until the pack ice breaks up the following November. Like the early explorers, you are confronted with the challenge of getting along with a small, isolated group of people through the long winter night. Learning to put up with their foibles the way they have to put up with yours, which is why everyone applying for a job in Antarctica is interviewed by a psychologist before being accepted. As one veteran diesel mechanic at Davis put it, 'If you make an ass of yourself down here, there's no place you can go.'

Questions

1. **During Antarctica's winter,**
 - A. explorers live in huts.
 - B. sleds become snowbound.
 - C. explorers are often killed by the cold.
 - D. the skies are dark.
2. **Permanent bases on Antarctica**
 - A. were first set up by Mawson and Scott.
 - B. were first set up in the middle of last century.
 - C. were set up during the Second World War.
 - D. were set up for explorers.
3. **When the bases were first set up,**
 - A. katabatic winds were a problem.
 - B. they were quite comfortable.
 - C. they were quite uncomfortable.
 - D. explorers enjoyed living there.
4. **Today's bases**
 - A. are difficult to access in poor weather.
 - B. are much improved.
 - C. are only operated in summer.
 - D. are only used by whale scientists.
5. **Each base has winterers because**
 - A. 'the boffins' need a holiday.
 - B. countries need to keep territorial claims.
 - C. Antarctica controls much of the southern hemisphere's climate.
 - D. the ozone layer requires year-round study.
6. **The recent 10-year building programme**
 - A. involved putting sheds on Heard Island.
 - B. replaced the wooden sheds with zincalium sheds.
 - C. replaced the wooden sheds and zincalium sheds.
 - D. involved new construction at Mawson base.

7. The recent improvements did not

- A. provide free beer.
- B. make everyone happy.
- C. bring colourful buildings to the area.
- D. boost salaries.

8. Getting to Antarctica

- A. is difficult due to lack of flights.
- B. is difficult due to the cold weather.
- C. is difficult due to the expense.
- D. is difficult due to the exotic surroundings.

9. When travelling to Antarctica, Avomine is used to

- A. make the food taste better.
- B. help prepare against the cold.
- C. tackle seasickness.
- D. help control the ship's pitch.

10. One of the similarities of life in Antarctica today to life there in the past is that

- A. psychological tests are used.
- B. the shipping season runs between February and November.
- C. applying for a job there is difficult.
- D. living with a small group of people is difficult.