



A cold day in **HELL**

Steve Braunias and Jane Ussher take their photo-essay series to Antarctica.

STEVE BRAUNIAS IS A *NORTH & SOUTH* CONTRIBUTING WRITER. PHOTOGRAPHY BY JANE USSHER.



Hell freezes over: Swedish icebreaker
Oden arrives in McMurdo Sound.

The first human being I encountered inside the low, long tunnel of Scott Base in Antarctica was a big Scottish engineer with a livid red mohawk marching across the top of his shaved head. He was a reassuring sight. I had anticipated visible signs of hilarity closely resembling madness. Outside was the frozen white nightmare of Antarctica with all its incredible geologies and absolute detachment from civilisation; on the day I arrived, it was minus five degrees, which the natives considered benign. The sky was entirely blue. The sun glared on two mountains. There was Erebus – in Greek mythology, the god of Darkness, and son of Chaos. The other, smaller mountain went by the less threatening name of Terror. The least anyone could do in the circumstances was tear their hair out.

New Zealand clings to Scott Base as its presence in Antarctica, and Scott Base clings to the hard, black edge of Ross Island. Each building – famously, they have been painted as green as a young cucumber – is connected by a tunnel, which reinforces the immediate notion that you have gone underground. It's not an entirely unpleasant sensation to be buried alive inside a cucumber, but after a while the walls seem to close in. I estimated it took about three minutes. Fortunately, I located the door that led to the smoking deck. It offered a view of the frozen sea. Currents form a pressure ridge close to the shore, forcing the ice up in spectacular and mesmerising shapes, as though a surf is about to crash with a hiss and a roar, but remains suspended. Of course the reality is that the entire continent collapsed into a cooling volcanic heap a long time ago. The gigantic and marauding glaciers, the sea under a thick lid of ice, the wind and the cold and the silence – the standard line about Antarctica is that it's beautiful, but it looks as though it's suffering a state of shock. It looks like Hell has frozen over.

Its recent history has seen it evolve into a sacred cow. Antarctica exists to be revered. Mankind bows down before it. Awe is compulsory. I was duly awed. But among the happiest sights I saw in my fortnight on the continent was morning tea on Scott Base. About a dozen men steamed up a small room with their mugs of tea and coffee, and crowded around a magnificent plate of freshly made sausage rolls. As well as Alan Williamson, the mohawked engineer from Dundee who now lives in Dunedin, several others had taken a razor to their heads since arriving on the ice.

Chris Knight, a mechanic from Palmerston North, chose to attack the back of his head. "Aye, well," explained Williamson on behalf of his razor gang, "when ye're oot o' society..."

They are about to get even more oot o' society. In summer, the population at Scott Base hovers at around 85, when scientists arrive to measure, monitor, sift, sample, prod and poke the continent. Only a core of 10 maintenance staff stay on after the last flight leaves at the end of February. Their tour of duty will last for 13 months. "Wintering over is the reward for summer," said Williamson. The working week goes down from six days to five; when the last plane leaves, the roller doors on the bar go up, and stay up. But he said that 16 more staff would soon be arriving to winter over, and he wondered whether it would create a split camp of two tribes – the core who all knew each other, and the fresh faces. "It could be a bit like *Survivor*."

Knight will notch up one thousand nights on the ice this winter. "It's my third winter, and my last," he said. "I don't want to get institutionalised." He talked about the drag of routines. "Breakfast served at the same time, lunch at the same time... The trick is to keep your own pace. Otherwise it can be a long winter. I've seen people walking around the base at 2am looking like zombies. They just couldn't cope with it."

In summer, the Antarctic observes an exaggerated policy of daylight saving, with its 24-hour sun. It next sets on February 21. After it dips below the horizon in April, Antarctica experiences weeks of midnight black. It was like Knight was auditioning for the Great New Zealand Understatement when he said, "June is definitely pretty dark." Damian Thorn, who will winter over as base cook, was looking forward to that. "I can't wait till it gets dark. I hate the sun. This constant sunlight is doing my head in, to say the least." And then he said: "But I'm loving every second of it here. Apart from the seconds I don't love it..."

Some of those seconds may well have occurred in the 17-and-a-half-hour shift he worked to prepare a dinner at Scott Base in honour of Prince Albert of Monaco. The principality has signed up to the Antarctic Treaty, and the monarch decided to tour each of the 27 bases on the continent. I saw him after his meal – a short, tired, unremarkable man who spoke in an American accent. Thorn could be found on the smoking deck, biting down on a cigarette at midnight, in the full glare of that cursed sun. The next day, he was given the wrong numbers for lunch, and had to face diners holding empty plates;



and that morning, there was a mad rush to supply packed meals for a departing flight – no one had notified the kitchen. He was not best pleased. Outside, the vast insignificance of the mystical, shivering Antarctic; inside, the actual stuff of life.

But it was a happy ship, an efficient cucumber, run with generosity, kindness, and humour. Scott Base operates as a Government agency, funded on a tight annual taxpayer budget of \$11 million, set up to



Life in the Scott Base cucumber. Above: Chef Damian Thorn. Left: Engineer Alan Williamson. Both will spend winter marooned on Ross Island.



Life in the Dry Valleys. Above: Professor Craig Cary of Waikato University. Below right: A mummified seal which dropped dead on the shores of a frozen lake.

“Americans come here for the booze, and we go there for sex.” He meant the Americans over the hill at McMurdo Station.

provide scientific access and to minimise the environmental impact. Ground staff suffer the usual joyless dictates of OSH, and put in long hours. After work, they went skiing, they climbed, they propped up the bar. They sometimes received unexpected gifts – a hike up Mt Aurora led to the discovery of a discarded 35kg jet rocket, which was nabbed, put in a backpack, and taken back to base to send home for the purposes of converting it into a potbelly stove.

Good music (Johnny Cash, Joe Walsh, Neil Young) poured over the airwaves courtesy of Steve Locke, a Telecom technician from Christchurch, who operates the radio station among his other various duties. He first came

to Scott Base in 1999. “To upgrade for Y2K. We all knew it was cobbles, but who’d turn down a trip like that?” He had former experience of living in obscure corners of the Earth: in 1984, he went to the Chatham Islands for six months, and stayed 13 years. This was his third summer at Scott Base, and eighth visit. But he wasn’t game to winter over. “There’s a saying here. ‘The first time you do winter is for the experience. The second is for money. The third is because you don’t fit in anywhere else.’”

And then he quoted another saying. “Americans come here for the booze, and we go there for sex.” He meant the Americans over the hill at McMurdo Station. He added, “There’s



Murdo, I found Wellington priest Father Phil Cody. “A lot of people get involved in a spirituality down here,” he said. “They are struck by the awesomeness of the place, and also its isolation – they need something to sustain them.” I asked how many people attended Sunday service. “Fifteen,” he said. McMurdo has a population of about a thousand.

Swedish vessel *Oden*, regarded as the world’s best icebreaker, had docked at McMurdo. Its brute, coughing force added to the impression that this corner of America in a foreign field looked like a dark Satanic mill. It’s a big, lively dump of a place, roaring with heavy machinery, boasting three bars, a Wells Fargo ATM, and an excellent library. Friendly and enormous Americans waddled in the dusty air. Popcorn marshmallows were on offer at the mess, where no one has yet solved the baffling and audacious Christmas theft of 250 kilograms of steak.

Returning home to Scott Base was always a reminder of modest and droll New Zealandness. The buffet trays in the dining room at lunch one day were marked SAUSAGES, SAUSAGE PIE, SAUSAGE PASTA, and CHICKEN CURRY WITH SAUSAGES. The salad selection was marked NO SAUSAGES.

Craig Cary, an American professor of biological science at Waikato University, greeted his overnight guests at his camp in the Dry Valleys on the mainland of Antarctica, and immediately asked,

“Where are the frozens?” He meant the box of frozen meat, bread and cheese. But the helicopter had left without delivering these precious goods. “This is the third time it’s happened,” said Cary. He recounted the history of the two previous failures. Then he said, “I mean, shoot! We had three chilly bins of beer came in from McMurdo. One of the guys asked, and in it dropped. No problem. But what do we have to do to get frozens out of Scott Base? They keep promising, and nothing happens. Nothing. It’s bad for morale. It ain’t right.” And so on, a litany of complaint about a new Antarctic absence – no frozen food in a frozen continent.

But Cary talked a lot, about everything. As well as giving detailed, impromptu lectures about his project in the Dry Valleys, he took time to deliver a dissertation on Germany’s military advance on Russia in World War II. I can’t remember whether this subject occupied his thoughts during the trek past a frozen lake to locate a mummified seal, or whether it was on the five-hour round journey to the top of a steep ridge to inspect the fabulous and grotesque shapes caused by the wind in ventifact rocks. He was an energetic and enthusiastic host.

“I think you’ve got a pretty good handle on what it is we’re doing here,” he said to me. But I had lost the plot of his “important study”. All I knew is that it was international, led by Waikato, and had something to do with a great many cross-discipline earth scientists studying microscopic life in the arid desert

probably more action when people come in for events.” He meant the scientists who arrive for field trips. You had to watch your step on Scott Base; according to legend, the shared dormitory bedrooms meant private assignations were held in the library, the drying room, the first aid room... For most, though, the truth about sex is that it conformed to the governing ethic of Antarctica: absence. No sex, no night, no trees, no humidity, no scent, no TV or cellphone reception, no hunting, no fishing, and – most artificial of all – no children, anywhere.

All else was the presence of nature, the weather, and, possibly, God. At the terribly pretty Chapel of the Snows church at Mc-







Left: Still life with skua. “White inside the weather,” wrote poet Bill Manhire of Antarctica, “white all the time.”

of the Dry Valleys. Cary took samples of earth beneath the seal. There were another 500 sites where his team scratched around in the soil. Walking inside a large blue tent, I found scientists from universities in South Africa, England, Australia and Waikato quietly sorting through 10cm bottles of collected soil samples while listening to *Dark Side of the Moon*. As well as lichens, algae and various assorted bacteria, the organisms under inspection were springtails, the largest terrestrial animal in Antarctica. It is 2mm in length. It lies dormant for 300 days of the year. Outside the tent, the Miers glacier, a towering inferno of white flame, frothed at the mouth.

A louder and rather more entertaining version of Antarctic Hell lay in store a few days later at Cape Bird on Ross Island. Kerry Barton of Landcare Research in Nelson conducts long-term population monitoring of breeding pairs of Adelie penguins. We arrived late one afternoon, and set up provisions in a hut overlooking the sea and the opposite shores of the mainland. On the beach were three sub-colonies of about 100 penguins. “I have a surprise for you,” said Barton, and led the way to the top of a mound. The surprise was outrageous: below us was a colony of 50,000 pairs of squawking, gargling, hooting, barking penguins on mounds of their pink-hued excrement of krill in a valley formed by a glacier that stood in the sea.

Soft, furry, gormless, the chicks had nearly fledged, and stood – or slept together face-down – in protective creches. The protection was against the only bird of flight. The skua is a fascinating thug. Closely related to gulls, it’s monogamous, has a life expectancy of 35 years (one banded skua at another cape on the island has reached the age of 40), and can fly vast distances – the great explorer Robert Scott saw a skua at the South Pole, making it the most southern bird in the world. In winter, it migrates as far away as the North Atlantic, to feed and sleep entirely on the sea. It’s large, with a lightly tan body, a sharp, hooked black bill, and webbed feet which it uses to scoop up krill. Its other main source of food, in summer, is penguins.

And so to walk through the valley of Adelie penguins was to walk through a valley of death. The ground was a boneyard. Every two steps revealed another headless skeleton of an annihilated penguin. Only its three-



Life – and death – at the Cape Bird penguin colony. Top: Penguins pass the time of day on a passing blue ice floe. Above: Cape Evans. Right: The Antarctic’s vicious bird of prey, the skua, bites the dust.

toed feet and flippers remained uneaten. This, surely, was Hell, preserved through the ages. For an updated version, I watched the final seven minutes of a penguin’s life. Two skua had succeeded in isolating it from the creche and the Adelie adults. That had probably been an hour ago. One skua planted a foot on the chick’s head, and plucked out its feathers. The other bird ate its vital organs from behind. The chick beat at its assassins with its flippers, but it may only have felt

like a gentle caress. On and on they ate it alive, and continued eating it when it finally, thankfully, stopped moving.

It was awful and amazing to watch, but it was just the usual rules of nature, red in tooth and claw, on a beach beside a glacier with adult penguins gliding to and fro in the sea on torn ice floes all day and all bright night, in that land apart, in Antarctica, frozen and mad and white and, to tell you the truth, beautiful. +



