the silence of the sirens

On her journey to the world's 'driest, windiest, coldest and highest' wilderness, Tiara Walters finds Antarctica's soul in its all-encompassing quiet

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS **TIARA WALTERS**

The setting for the SA National Antarctic Expedition – better known as Sanae IV – at 70°S in Dronning Maud Land, Antarctica. Scientists and engineers live here year-round.

Every traveller to Antarctica needs their own Circe, the Greek sorceress who warns Odysseus against the songs of the sirens before he sails home to Ithaca. These deadly Delilahs live in a flower meadow just beyond the beach, but 'all about' them is a 'great heap of bones of men'; and then, this caveat: 'Round the bones the skin is wasting'. These are the bones of the sailors who did not, as Circe advises Odysseus, stop their ears with wax when they travelled past siren country.

Yes, like the sirens, Antarctica will bewitch you. But perhaps not in the way you think.

When I sailed to Sanae IV, South Africa's scientific research station in Dronning Maud Land, East Antarctica, I didn't see a single sodding whale during the ship's 8 400km round trip to and from the ice shelf. No matter how many times I had responded to clarion calls from the decks, tearing up seven flights of stairs to the bridge and buckling out portside, starboard and aft deck doors, I always missed them 'just', as the smug smattering of whale spotters liked to point out. A little irrationally, you might say, friends or not, I wanted to punch them all.

During your trip to the frozen south, you may not always spot the more obvious icons that have come to shape our understanding of what we think the world's famously named 'driest, windiest, coldest and highest' wilderness is like.

You might find that Antarctica is nothing like the wildlife Shangri-La you've seen in documentaries; that there are few hunkering armies of French-speaking penguins marching across the shelf; that Antarctica's music lies in the slower, subtler, smaller rhythms of the ice.

As we steamed from Cape Town towards Dronning Maud Land, I often joined the smokers on the pitching aft deck. Iced-up fingers shoved into pockets, we spent hours watching flocks of seabirds as they fed in the ship's wake. But it was the smallest species among them – such as the delicate Wilson's storm petrel – that fascinated us most. To us it seemed impossible that these sooty little birds, whose 40g belie their toughness in icy conditions, could survive this frigid, roiling deep. We were, after all, sailing through the Roaring Forties and Furious Fifties – the stormiest of high-sea latitudes.

During the most tempestuous moments on that aft deck, the birds' natural habitat seemed unapologetic – a boundless, black sheet of storm-tossed taffeta. ▷

CLOCKWISE On calm summer days, the Dronning Maud Land ice shelf is a serene but frigid oasis; the SA Agulhas steams next to Antarctica; Adelie penguins, the little clowns of the Antarctic, blunder across sea ice.

ANTARCTICA'S MUSIC LIES IN THE SLOWER, SUBTLER, SMALLER RHYTHMS OF THE ICE.

Wandering albatrosses, their three-metre wings outstretched and clipping the water just so, danced and spun among the waves because they could; because it was fun to outfox the rancorous ocean, and because it was what the kings of the Southern Ocean skies knew how to do best.

It took a month to sail to Antarctica – thwarted as our journey was by compacted sea ice and a 60km×5km berg that threatened to crush the ship.

We finally made landfall on the very edge of the Dronning Maud Land ice shelf at 70°S 8°W. From here, as they do each summer, an elite brand of South African defence force bruisers with battle-axe biceps employed a fleet of tracked vehicles to haul the station's supplies some 300km inland. For the rest of us – a mix of scientists, maintenance personnel and a journalist – it was a 90-minute chopper flight to the station, where we'd stay for six weeks.

the wildlife that most Antarctic tourists would like to see, but its nunataks are a rabbit hole for some of the planet's most extraordinary, but unassuming, life forms – microscopic invertebrates and lichen, a fusion of fungi and algae whose very lives are poems of endurance.

There is almost no fresh water in the Antarctic – most of it is locked up in ice and snow – and, when the South Pole tilts away from the sun during winter, lichen dries out completely, living a frozen life for most of the long dark night.

It's almost as if Dronning Maud Land's lichen dies for half the year, freezing and thawing, drying out in the sun-starved winter and resurrecting itself in summer.

In October, when the sunlight of spring creeps over the midnight snows, lichen may find brand-new lives in meltwater pools and the sheltered cracks and crevices of nunataks.

audience. The sun finally slipped behind the mountains at 12.40am. The first night of the year lasted all of three minutes, and I fell half asleep as a brilliant wash of cold, yellow light from the rising sun lit my exposed face.

It is in the fainter, quieter pulse of the place, in the gigantic lives of the tiny Wilson's storm petrel, and the Lilliputian planets on Dronning Maud Land's nunataks, that Antarctica makes itself known.

But most of all, Antarctica is in the silence.

After leaving Circe and her spellbound lions and wolves on the Isle of Aea, Odysseus and his men sailed ahead in a gentle breeze that 'sped their ship on her way'. But, just before the sirens began their 'clear-toned song', a calm descended on all the waters as if 'some god had lulled the waves'. Maybe that's what novelist

ONCE THE SUN SETS IN MAY, IT WON'T RISE AGAIN FOR ANOTHER FOUR MONTHS.

As we rumbled above Dronning Maud Land, we flew over crevasses – tears caused by the perpetual movement of the ice sheet – so huge, just one would've swallowed a stadium large enough to hold 100 000. We'd entered the biggest St Elsewhere on the planet.

After crossing the continental divide – the line where the floating ice shelf and continent meet – we flew over the Ahlmann range's 'nunataks', Norwegian for the exposed rocky summits of mountains buried under thousands of metres of snow.

Dronning Maud Land's near-Martian badlands are too inhospitable to sustain

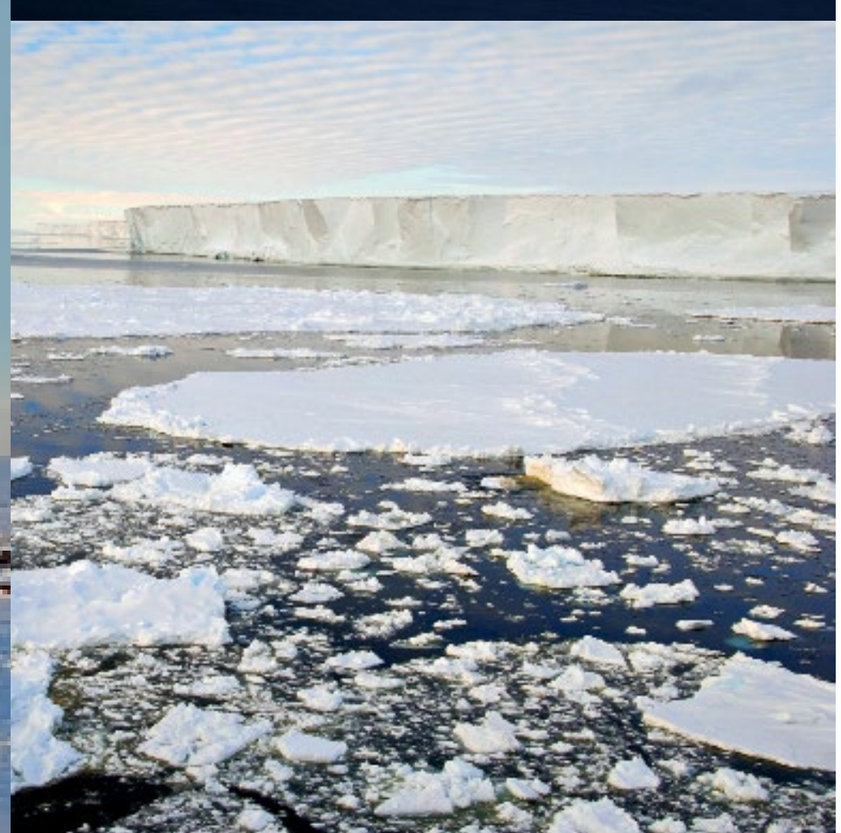
Conversely, the first sunset of the year at the end of January has always been significant to the early explorers as well as contemporary Antarctic residents – it heralds the increasingly shorter days and, eventually, an interminable blackness in which little outside work can be done. Once the sun sets in May, it won't rise again for another four months.

On the 26th day of that January, I grabbed a sleeping bag and two pillows at 11.45pm, and clambered onto the station's roof to watch the year's first sunset.

The Dronning Maud Land winds can whip up a furious bluster, but that evening the air was as still as a captivated

Franz Kafka meant when he wrote 'the sirens have a still more fatal weapon than their song, namely their silence ... it is conceivable that someone might have escaped from their singing; but from their silence certainly never'.

I'd always wanted to experience that all-encompassing quiet – a total escape from stress-torn modern life; the type of silence that was even quieter than wilderness as we know it. I wanted to know what it would be like to find yourself in a desert so otherworldly you couldn't even hear a beetle burrowing beneath the sand. And if you could find such a place, would nothing sound like... something?



CLOCKWISE They may be white, but ice and snow become a spectacular canvas for light and colour when the sun sinks below Antarctica's horizon. During the high summer months, the sun never sets over the frozen continent; for all the world's modern technology, not even the mightiest ice breakers can reach Antarctica through the impassable sea ice of winter. This is why all stations are re-fuelled in summer, when the sea ice is broken up; built at a cost of R64 million in 1997, the 176m-long Sanae IV balances atop four-metre stilts at the edge of a 200m cliff.

The station's 1.3km² grounds are used for space-weather studies, but one windless afternoon I used it to launch an experiment of a different kind: the quest for the sound of nothing.

I signed out a Skidoo, and rode out to the edge of the grounds, to where the rest of Antarctica's plains unfurled like streaming rivers of plaster of Paris. I killed the engine, and it took forever for its rat-tat-tat to die down, but eventually the tats grew so far apart I wondered whether the last one had lost its way.

I pulled my balaclava over my head, lay down, and felt the cold continent spread out beneath my back. I thought of those albatrosses; of the other incomparable things I'd seen in this universe of otherness; of the rush of joy I felt jumping on a mattress and whooshing down a mountain slope, the not-quite-setting sun illuminating the blue ice in the valley. Everything ached at the thought of leaving Antarctica and returning to the land of concrete edges and traffic noises; and then I felt better when I remembered that, right then, there was nothing but 2 000km of ice, snow, rock, lichen and microscopic invertebrates between the South Pole and me. My breath stabilised, and grew inaudible, until nothing was left but the one sound that, for a moment, seemed to make the experience of true silence unattainable – blood beating through my eardrum.

This is when I should've left, I guess, gunned the engine, ridden back to base, because Antarctica can mess with you. Make you long for something you might never find once you get back to the real world. But it was too late. I'd heard the silence of the sirens between each pulse of blood. So I just lay there a little longer. ⌂

GETTING THERE

To apply for a position on the South African National Antarctic Expedition, visit sanap.ac.za. For details on how to visit Dronning Maud Land as a tourist, see antarctic-company.info, the website of The Antarctic Company. Prices for expeditions departing from Cape Town range between €15 600 and €40 000 (about R250 000–R580 000).