

# Waiting to take a shower

By Ron Naveen

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Working at a remote Antarctic field camp — in my case, assessing and monitoring the penguin and seabird populations at Petermann Island in the Antarctic Peninsula — inevitably involves a large amount of waiting. Lounging time and hangin' out are simply facts of research life.

My season begins with an early November sojourn to Punta Arenas, Chile. That is where I annually try on and sign out clothes and cold weather accoutrements at the National Science Foundation/Raytheon Polar Services Co. warehouse. Then, my team and I wait for clearance to board the *Laurence M. Gould* for the long ride south across the Drake Passage, down the Bransfield Strait, through the Lemaire Channel, and — voila! — into Petermann. As the project's principal investigator, I spend much of these three days across the Drake praying and entreating the penguin gods for light, loosely consolidated ice, so the *Gould* will have no problems inserting us into Petermann.

This is the second of five planned field seasons at Petermann. All is going rather well. The Drake crossing was smooth and the penultimate, shipboard evening was an overnight at Palmer Station, 20 miles north of Petermann. It was a welcome visit with many friends and colleagues. The next morning the *Gould* departed, wended through the loose pack in Bismarck Strait, avoided the stranded berg at the south end of the Lemaire Channel, and finally got us ashore at Petermann as planned and on schedule. With assistance from many of the crew and technicians on board, we took just a few hours to bring supplies ashore by Zodiac, then sledge our hard plastic Roughneck tubs inland and erect our campsite: an arctic oven, office/cooking tent, two Scott pyramid tents, a single pup tent, and a lightweight tent to protect our generator and fuel. We've camped a hundred meters inland, west of the old refuge hut erected by the Argentines in 1955. It's presently maintained by the Ukrainians from the Vernadsky research station, located 10km south.

It's blissful to be "home." Petermann is a fantastically beautiful location, about a mile in length from north to south, a half

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mile wide. It's bordered on the east by the narrow, one-mile-wide Penola Strait and the high mountain peaks of the Peninsula, and on the west by open ocean.

Most famously, Petermann is where the famed French explorer Jean-Baptiste Charcot spent the winter in 1909, tying his vessel *Pourquois Pas?* into the northwestern corner of Circumcision Bay, immediately north of the hut. Charcot sighted the bay on Jan. 1, which, for many, is a holy day commemorating when Christ was circumcised.

Charcot explored and mapped much of this sector of Antarctica and it is a thrill to work in his illustrious footsteps. Remnants



Photo by Ron Naveen / Special to *The Antarctic Sun*

*A gentoo penguin toboggans down a snowy hill near one of the colonies Naveen visited.*

from that Second French Antarctic Expedition include a rock cairn Charcot's team erected on the top of Megalestris Hill to the west and the rubble of signal cairns that were placed on the northeastern point of the island. Part of the background research for our work was examining Charcot's penguin and meteorological data and photographs from 1909. When our five-year study concludes, I'm looking forward to generating valuable "then-to-now" comparisons.

At the far northern end, the Adélie penguins' breeding season was well advanced when we arrived. The nests were mostly set up and being defended, with many two-egg clutches already complete. By contrast, the gentoo penguins were still consumed with "meet and greet" ceremonies and donkey-like braying to proclaim their territories. No gentoo eggs were in sight. For this, we had to wait.

Melissa Rider, our camp manager, was pleased with the "put in." The tents were secure and we've managed to protectively stow the bulk of our food and water in the hut, which we can access when needed.

Melissa, my colleague Ian Bullock, and I were anxious to reconnoiter the entire island to check on all of the more than 250 penguin subcolonies, and to see where the resident skuas, sheathbills, shags, gulls, and terns may be in their breeding cycle.

But this, too, must wait.

We were a mere five hours on site when pounding rain and wind erupted, which is highly unusual. The previous November and December, we encountered no rain at all. Unfortunately, it was a prelude to the next three weeks, a rare season when the usually strong and persistent high-pressure system over the continent has shrunk and low-pressure systems swing closer to the Peninsula, bringing us truly horrid weather. The blue sky days and alpenglow evenings of our first season were a distant memory. Occasionally, the lower temperatures at night turned the precipitation to snow, but, within hours, we were back to soggy gear and field notebooks.

Fortunately, the huge upside was that the penguins, characteristically, were totally nonplussed by the elements. They have their own, built-in Gore-Tex and blubber systems for warding off the cold and wet. They were happily tobogganing the snow slopes and appeared to be "on schedule" for a productive breeding season.

Despite the rain, the work moved forward and we were collecting data on the penguins.

I also waited for the tour ship that was scheduled to extract me and insert another of our researchers, Stacey Buckelew, to take my stead. Par for this season's course, however, Stacey was delayed 10 days because of thick ice drifting into Penola Strait from the south and west.

One afternoon, the weather broke and presented us with another upside. This time it's something that needn't be delayed. Instead it was a rare, sun-drenched moment. Best of all, the wind slacked completely and we were down to our shirt sleeves, a very welcome change. At extreme low tide, which exposes much of the cobble in the small bay south of the hut, Melissa planted a jug of hot water in the snow bank above the rocks and, seriatim, we enjoyed our first shower in weeks.

Some things are definitely worth the wait.

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