

## My Antarctic Diary, 2005

21st Feb.

Hello everyone, its about 5.00pm on my first day at sea. We are 200 nautical miles south-west of Hobart in fairly calm seas. I'm still finding my sea legs but haven't been sick. The anti-seasick tablets make me very sleepy and I had a delicious sleep last night, feeling snug and safe in my bunk as the ship crashed through the sea.



It was very beautiful leaving Hobart, with a big moon reflecting on the water and lights twinkling along the hills.

The ship is bright  
orange, I guess so it shows up against the snow  
and ice. ( Maybe they just had heaps of that  
colour left over from something. )



22nd Feb

Hi everybody, it doesn't really feel as though  
I'm on my way to Antarctica. It feels more like  
I am on a floating health farm, fabulous food,  
great gym, no stresses or worries. It has been  
foggy all day today with calm seas but even so I  
am very careful about going on deck. It's such a  
big ocean that I can't help imagining how  
terrible it would be to fall overboard. I  
watched shearwaters ( mutton birds ) flying  
around the ship yesterday, cheers, alison



23rd Feb

Hi everyone, and welcome to all the new people who have emailed me. It's a grey day today with calm seas and we are still chugging across this huge ocean, with about nine days to go until we reach the ice. This morning I wandered around the ship taking photographs of all the signs.

There are signs everywhere, and many of them have pictures of people running, up or down, to reach exits.

The deputy voyage leader found a room for me to work in this morning, so soon I am going to go down there and do some drawing and painting.



24th Feb

Hi everybody, the seas got much bigger overnight so the boat is rocking and rolling but ( touch wood ) I don't feel seasick. Everyone staggers around the ship hanging on to rails all the time. The ocean is very dark blue and glittering. Its still not very cold, though the wind drives you inside pretty quickly. An albatross flew behind the ship for a long time today, gliding across the waves without flapping its wings at all, just smooth sweeps over the peaks and troughs. I met the chefs this morning, there are three, Alan, the head chef, Tony and

Katrina. Katrina took me for a tour of the pantries and freezer and it was interesting to see such big supplies of eggs, meat, vegetables etc. The meals they make are fabulous and if I don't keep going to the gym I'll be a whopper by the time I get home. There's about 2000 nautical miles to go now, before we get to Mawson, but we'll hit ice before then. All the seasick people are hanging out for the ice because then the ship stops rocking.



25th Feb

Hi everybody, I am loving this trip. Last night at about 10.30pm a green aurora stretched across the sky, shimmering and dancing in front of the



stars. It began way up ahead of the ship ( the south/west I guess ) and swooped right over us in a wide band of neon green, then finished in a swirl. It was as though Casper the ghost had zoomed across the sky then disappeared with a flick of his tail. Auroras are particles charged by the sun that are magnetically drawn to the poles. They occur near the Artic circle too. It was beautiful to see and I think we will see more, and different coloured ones, as we travel south.



I have been given a small room near the back of the boat ( the stern? ) to work in and it has the most incredible sound effects. The Aurora has a ballast system to help keep it even in

rough seas, and this involves shifting water from one side to the other through a series of valves and pipes. As the water moves it groans and howls and squeaks and bangs, so that it seems like the ship is talking to me.

I spoke to the Mate today, Peter, and he is going to show me around a level of the ship every day, so I can describe it to you. I think there are about seven levels, so I'll start with the top one tomorrow, hasta la vista, alison



26th Feb

Hi everyone, its late on Saturday night and I am wide awake, having slept all afternoon. I made the mistake of laying on my bed after lunch, and

this ship, it rocks you like a baby. I didn't wake up until dinner time, 5.30. This morning we had our first muster, or fire drill, where we had to put on all our polar clothing and life jackets and go to the helideck, the big space at the back of the ship. Everything on the ship has a different name; the floor is the deck and the walls are the bulkheads. We have reached an area in the southern ocean called the convergence, where the cold polar water meets the warmer currents, and the temperature has dropped a couple of degrees. The mate, Peter Petroff was busy today so the description of the top layer will have to wait until tomorrow, until then, Alison





27th Feb

Hello everybody, it's a week tonight since we left Hobart and although time has flown, it seems a lifetime ago too. The sea got very rough last night ( 5 metre swells ) so everything that isn't stowed away carefully goes flying across the room. The chairs in the dining room all have wires underneath them with clips attached, so they can be anchored to the floor when its rough. All the benches and tables have rubbery blue cloth to stops things slipping, and we are still staggering around like drunks. Sometimes the ship hits a wave with such force that it feels as though we've hit a rock.

But the very exciting thing that happened today was that we passed our first iceberg, a huge thing, about as big as a ten story building, in the shape of a crouching lion. After we first saw it, it took about two hours to get level with it, and we passed quite close, about a kilometre away. The shape and colour was very beautiful and the base was like an icy beach. As the waves washed against the beach they turned pale turquoise, with white foam laced through. We stood on the top deck photographing and it was freezing in the howling wind. Anyway, I'd

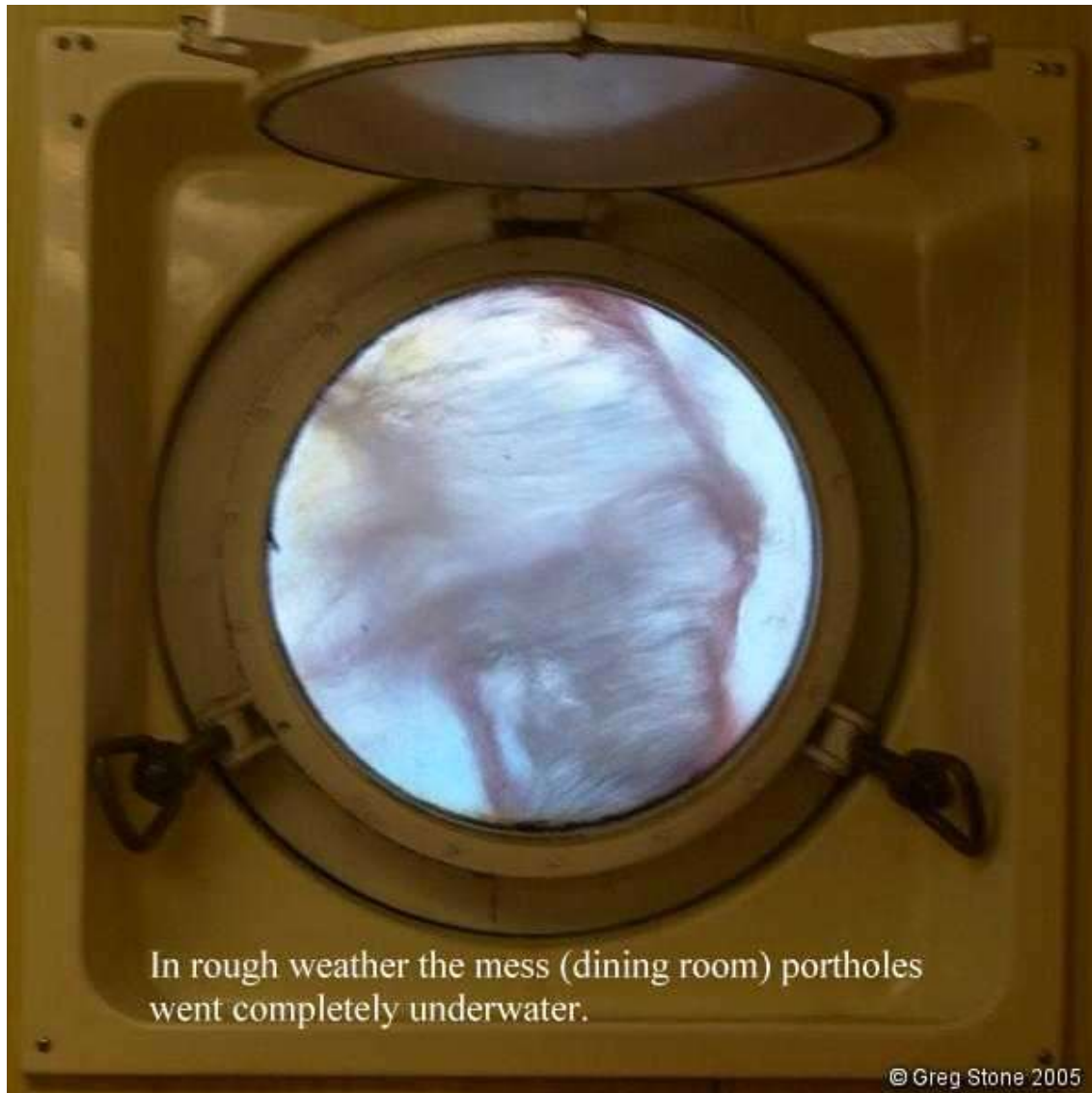
better go to bed, I had a big headache today so  
I need to rest. Shipboard life is so busy,  
cheers, Alison



28th Feb

Hi everybody, when I looked out my window this morning there were two icebergs on the horizon. The seas were pretty big overnight but today it was wild. We were steaming into the wind and 6 metre waves, but there were also big swells coming in from the side every now and again. I think they call it "confused seas", anyway, it makes the ship rock hugely. Our biggest tilt today was 27 degrees and you really had to hang

on. The crew have closed all the hatches on the dining room ( the mess ) portholes because they go underwater on every big roll and can break if the seas are too big.



Peter the Mate gave me a tour of the upper deck after lunch, despite the crazy weather and showed me the radar, weather and satellite equipment and the compass, which has two iron balls on either side of it to compensate for the

magnetic pull of the poles. The wind was so fierce that it was difficult to breath and I was frozen after a few minutes, but after we moved to the back of the deck, out of the wind, it was beautiful. The sun came through the clouds and turned the sea into a churning silver mirror. The ship lurched and rolled beneath us ( it feels a bit like riding a bucking horse ) and we watched an albatross sweep across the waves, with two massive icebergs as a backdrop. It feels as though we are approaching an ancient icy kingdom and the icebergs are sentinels guarding it. It snowed a tiny bit this morning, cheers, Alison



1st March

Hello everybody, we are steaming past more and more icebergs. I walked around the upper deck this morning and counted 14, some in close, white as white, and others far out on the horizon, almost blending into the sky in a hazy grey. One monster we passed this afternoon had a flat top tilted towards us, criss-crossed with crevasses, and where the cracks broke through the side, the sun was shining through in glowing blue, really beaming, as though it was lit from within. Sometimes today the weather was clear and sunny, hot if you were out of the wind, and the next minute it would be snowing.





After lunch, Peter the Mate ( its like the deputy captain ) continued his tour of the ship and today we looked at the rescue equipment. If someone fell overboard you'd throw them a life ring, though the water is so cold you would probably be dead before you could reach it. Next size up are the life rafts, white capsules about 1 metre long, lashed to the deck, but which inflate into rubber rafts with canvas tops when tossed over board. Then come the life boats, one on each side, big orange capsules. They look like giant kinder surprises and I hope I never have to get into one, other than for a look. They fit 68 people, sitting side by side on hard fibreglass seats and the toilet is a bucket. There is a motor and steering equipment, but once you run out of fuel there are oars, and its nearly 2000 nautical miles to Hobart. There are water tanks, but the water would be frozen, so that could be tricky, and the food is sea biscuits. The safety equipment includes fishing line and hooks, can openers and waterproof matches. Anyway, the Aurora Australis feels very safe, so I am going to bed to sleep peacefully, zzzzzz, Alison



2nd March

Howdy everybody and welcome to any new people.

After another night of blissful sleep, rocked in my bunk by the mighty sea, I woke up early and got up on deck in time to see the dawn, streaming golden rays in the east, and big tabular ( flat topped ) bergs silhouetted against the yellow sky.

It had snowed overnight, so the deck was pretty slippery, but the sea is calm so it's not so hard to get around.



We are getting used to all the white and pale blues of icebergs so it was a surprise to see a green one close to the ship today. It was really dark green. They are called jade icebergs and it looked like a huge, smooth piece of jade, with white foam breaking over it.



Jade iceberg.

I think they are formed when the ice is a mixture of fresh and salt water. After lunch I saw a berg with a big black stripe through it; dirt and rock that had been there since the ice was part of a glacier grinding slowly over the Antarctic land.



Peter the Mate explained some of the instruments on the bridge that are used to steer the ship safely across the ocean.

One screen has a high resolution satellite image showing the ice and clouds, another is a GPS tracking system, showing exactly where the ship is ,

( one chart shows every track the Aurora has made since 1989 ) another shows all the environmental data, salinity, water temperature, fluorescence. There is so much data processed, all by computer, but just in case the power goes off and the batteries run out, there are old fashioned instruments too, like a little book called "State of Sea" that has photos of sea and descriptions of the weather so you can tell if you are a Force 5 or a Force 6 gale.

Better go, I am worn out, had to draw a car for one of the crew's birthday today and it was very hard to make it look ok, a horse would have been much easier, best wishes, Alison





March 4th

Hi everybody, this morning I slept in until 10.30am, the sea was so calm and quiet, and when I looked out my porthole it was snowing! It was very foggy all day and I didn't see one iceberg. My friend Caroline, who is travelling south to assess the state of all the old asbestos buildings, saw a huge black fin. It was probably a killer whale playing on the bow wave of the ship. After lunch I rugged up and went outside and the ship looked very eerie with snow on it's decks. The seas got rockier this afternoon and sent the poor seasick ones to their cabins. This evening four of us were nearing the end of a very close scrabble game ( the board covered with glad wrap to stop the pieces sliding ) when a huge swell sent the board sliding off the table onto the floor. It was a bit sad for Jamie, who was poised to win, but that's life, until tomorrow, Alison



March 5th

Hi there everybody, last night was a wild blizzard. A big swell coming in from the side made the ship twist and roll all night, and it was very hard to sleep. I was sliding up and down my bed like a yoyo. This morning the decks were covered with ice and snow and it was too dangerous to go out. About lunch time the storm abated and we came into an area littered with ice, lots of bergs and broken-up pack ice. The ship slowed right down, but there were still some loud BONGS as growlers ( icebergs just below the surface ) bashed into the ship's hull. The sky behind us is grey and heavy but ahead are clear skies with some high cloud. It might be a lovely sunset, so I'd better go and have dinner ( the food is still fantastic ) and get back up on deck, until tomorrow, Alison





March 6th

Hello everybody, it was a fabulous sunset last night, red, orange, yellows, streaking the sky and reflecting in the water, with ice bergs looking black against the shimmer and birds flying everywhere. It lasted for ages, the sun didn't set until about 10.30 and by the time I came inside my toes and fingers were frozen, colder than they have ever been. Today I have been wearing my special polar clothes and felt toasty all day. The outfit starts off with thermal top and long johns, t-shirt, polarfleece top, freezer suit ( an insulated jump suit which makes everyone look like a telly tubby ), thick

woollen socks, insulated snow boots ( sorells ),  
glove liners, gloves, neck warmer, beanie, and  
finally a big gortex jacket.

We expected to be at Mawson Station this morning  
but the ice is so thick that the captain is  
unwilling to go on in case we get stuck, so with  
only 25 nautical miles to go ( of a 2500 mile  
journey ) we have stopped. It's very frustrating  
looking across the ice to open water and the  
mountains behind Mawson and not being able to  
get there. I helped clear the ice and snow off  
the helideck this morning ( had to peel a couple  
of layers off ) and then the choppers came out  
and ferried the scientists ashore. I'm keeping  
my fingers crossed that I'll get on to a  
helicopter tomorrow, or that the ice will clear.  
Please wish me luck, with best wishes, Alison



March 7th

Hi everyone, I am jumping out of my skin because our ship is moored in horseshoe bay at mawson station! When I got up this morning we still stuck in the ice, going nowhere, but the wind blew and blew, and shifted the ice to make a clear passage for the ship to go through. I stood up on the Monkey Deck, the deck above the bridge, all the way in, and it was fantastic watching the ice and frozen islands. I have never been in wind as cold or fierce; I couldn't hold the camera steady and I couldn't stand up unless I was sheltering behind something ( or someone ).



Chris leaning into the wind as we approached Mawson.





From where we were stuck in the ice, the mountains behind Mawson looked like they were poking up through mist, but as we drew closer we could see that it was snow. Imagine four jagged mountain ranges, ancient spires of grey rock, sitting a bed of white snow thousands of feet thick. It seems a perfect place for knights and dragons .

The islands near the harbour have no plants at all, just plain rock and penguin poo. They are fringed with white, which at first I thought was waves, but is actually ice frozen in splash shapes.



We passed so many different types of ice today; some groaned and banged as the ship pushed it aside, and another type splintered like glass as we crashed through it. One lot of pancake ice was so soft that it didn't crack at all. Anyway, I'd better go, I need to get ready for my first day ashore, yours, icily, Alison  
March 8th

Hi everybody, and many apologies for getting so far behind but we have been having some wild times. We all bounded out of bed early and were ready to go ashore at 10.30am. There is no jetty, so just getting ashore was an adventure. We all ( about 30 of us ) lined up in the mess, dressed in our polar clothes, passed our packs

forward, and then one by one, stepped into a space where a hatch had been removed so there was a big hole in the side of the ship. We put our life jackets on, then climbed out backwards and down a rope ladder with wooden steps, on to a slippery wooden platform ( a barge I guess ) that had been tied to the Aurora Two, a little tug boat that normally sits in the bow of the ship. It had been lowered into the sea with a crane. It was very cold and windy, though not as fierce as the evening before, when the captain had brought his huge ship into tiny Horseshoe Bay in 50 knot winds, and parked it like you'd park a car. We had to crouch down on the barge so we wouldn't fall off, and the Aurora Two chugged us to shore and there I was, standing on Antarctica! We grabbed our bags and headed up the hill to The Red Shed, a huge two story building where all the Mawson people live.



The ground was very rough and rocky, with patches of snow. Thick ropes linked all the buildings ( so in a blizzard you can get from one building to another without getting lost ). It was a relief to get out of the wind but as soon as I got inside I started to feel sick and giddy, and then I realised that the building was heaving like a ship, up, down. It was crazy, I didn't feel seasick on the ship but I got seasick on land. This feeling stayed with me all the time I was ashore and I also kept wanting to push things to the back of shelves so they wouldn't slip off when the building swayed, and hook chairs to the desk with octopus straps, like we do on the ship. Anyway, the station leader, Cookie, welcomed us and told us what was what, and after we'd helped carry medical supplies into the hospital we set off to go exploring. My friend Georgie, who is going to be a ranger at Macquarie Island, and I wandered along West Arm, a low, rocky bit that curves around the harbour just like an arm and looked at the three graves there, big cairns of stone with white crosses behind them. It was sad to think that these people had come so far and never gone home. One boy was only twenty years old. We watched a fat Weddell seal scratching his whiskers with his

flipper, a beautiful little cat's face on a very fat body. All the Weddell seals I have watched here look as though they have stomach aches, they roll and wriggle and moan, as if to say "boy, I wish I hadn't eaten those last five fish'.



My next adventure was going up on to the plateau behind the station, where the ice levels out. Geoff, the station doctor, drove us in a Hagglund vehicle, two blue boxes on tracks like a bulldozer. Seven of us squeezed into the front cabin, and our bags went into the back one. It was very noisy and bumpy but went smoothly over the snow as we headed up and away from the



station, until we got to a place where the fierce winds had blown all the snow away and I realised the hill was made of pale blue, hard, shiny ice. The Hagglund's tracks couldn't get a grip on the ice, and we slipped back until we hit snow again. This happened a few times until we did one huge backwards slide, for almost 100 metres. I was looking back at the sea thinking how bad it would be to slip into freezing water when we stopped sliding and Geoff gunned it to the top, with us all cheering.



Seven of us squeezed into the front of this Hagglund to travel over the ice.

We drove for a few kilometres to where some huts and machinery,  
all on the same bulldozer tracks, were parked.  
Before we got out, Geoff gave us chains to hook  
under our boots, because the ice is so slippery.  
It's not like walking on snow, its just hard blue ice.



I walked ( very carefully ) towards  
the mountains for a little way and it felt  
wonderful to have all that enormous, empty  
landscape in front of me. Looking the other way,  
we could see the ship and the station, and out  
across an ocean littered with islands and  
icebergs. It was very cold, and when I took my  
glove off to adjust something on my camera my  
hand nearly froze.

In the afternoon I explored around the station, taking photographs and at 5.00pm it was time to go back to the ship for dinner. We were ferried back in Zodiacs, little rubber boats with an outboard motor at the back. The expeditioners working on the boats have to wear immersion suits ( like a wetsuit but with air inside ) in case they fall in.



It was good to get back to my cabin and warm up but I had to be ashore again in no time because Frances ( my cabin mate ) and I had volunteered for fuel duty from 8pm until midnight. A huge black hose had been run from the bow of the Aurora to the fuel farm, pumping

diesel into the tanks, and it was our job to make sure the tanks didn't overflow and that there were no leaks. The wind had really started to howl so I put on almost every bit of polar clothing I could find. I was so fat I couldn't do my life jacket up. When we got ashore we met Neil, from Mawson, who was on fuel duty too and he really knew what he was doing. We just had to be with him in case there was an accident. We had a little insulated hut to sit in but every half hour we climbed up to the top of the tanks and checked how full they were. It was very cold and difficult to see the diesel mark on a black measuring stick at night. The wind was blowing harder all the time and after the zodiacs took some people back to the ship at 11.00pm the captain decided it was too dangerous for any more trips.



"Ghost ship". The Aurora during a blizzard at Mawson.

Frances and I were stranded ashore!

At midnight we finished our shift and headed up to the Red Shed to try and find somewhere to sleep. It was very cold and dark and so windy that I could hardly breathe. It felt very good to get into the building and be out of danger. I found a bed in the hospital and had a beautiful sleep, but when the doctor came in he said I should not have been there, so I felt pretty embarrassed, even though he was nice about it.







Friday March 11th

The wind just kept getting stronger on Tuesday and eventually Cookie put a notice on the board saying none of the visitors were allowed outside, it was just too fierce. We all had jobs to do, as the Mawson people were busy unloading supplies and also coping with an extra 30 odd bodies. I mopped some floors, washed dishes and restocked the bar with home brew from the basement. It felt good to be doing something useful but I was very hot ( remember all the layers I had put on to keep warm at the fuel farm ). My trousers were the worst, thick polar fleece duds that were boiling. Finally a nice Mawsonite told me to go and look in the dress-up box in the basement and I found some old grey trakkies to borrow.



The Red Shed has big windows  
from all the living areas and everyone spent a  
lot of time looking out at wind whipping across  
the bay, ice and water flying together. The  
Aurora was swinging from side to side and it  
looked as though the ropes would break for sure,  
but they must be very stretchy. I couldn't help  
thinking how terrible it would be to see her  
break away and steam out the harbour. Peter the  
captain told me this morning that they had to  
work very hard with the engines to keep her  
steady in the wind. Finally the blizzard was so  
strong that we couldn't even see the ship. At  
it's strongest there were gusts of 90 knots. By  
evening the worst had passed but it was still  
too dangerous to go back to the ship, so Georgie  
and I went walking, blown along like autumn  
leaves. The floor was looking like my bed, when  
a lovely thing happened to me. Fiona, who is  
going to Macquarie Island to be the cook, said I  
could have her bed and she would share with her  
partner Damien, who is going to be the  
carpenter. What a sweetheart! It was delicious  
being in a soft, warm bed and looking out at the  
wild and icy world, cheers, alison

Friday March 11th

When I looked out my porthole at Mawson this morning it was snowing and the sea had started to freeze, turning opaque and forming into little pancakes of ice. The station looked pretty, with all the rock covered white, and the wind turbines still. I was first up on Monkey Deck - there were no footprints on the snowy deck, and no wind, everything felt very quiet. Later the crew were busy, loading last cargo, and the helicopters flew out to be stowed for the voyage. The blades were unbolted and stored in a big box, then the pilots pushed the choppers into the hanger and tied them down.



There is a big fence around the edge of the helideck that folds outwards during heli-operations and it had to be put upright again for the voyage, and some of us helped with that, pulling the panels up with a rope, then slipping bolts into the hinges to keep them there. It was a simple job made difficult by the cold and made me appreciate the work the crew were doing.



After lunch we heard the ship's hooter and felt her move, and raced up on deck to wave goodbye to the Mawson mob, who had looked after us so

well. They let off some pink flares that fell slowly down through the snowy sky as we pulled away. They won't get any more visitors until September. Last night we had a head-shaving auction to raise money for the fight against cancer. Kristian, a young zoologist specialising in seals, organised it, and he had a very special reason for doing so. His girlfriend Eve was supposed to be on this voyage, working with him, but her Antarctica medical examination detected a tumor, so she has been undergoing chemotherapy. Five men had their heads shaved and raised \$3150. Some look good and some look pretty funny, with weird mowhawks and moptops, it's a brave thing to do, bye for now, alison



Saturday March 12th

Woke up this morning to feel the ship steaming along which felt good after just hanging about for a day. I wasn't allowed to tell you yesterday, because his family hadn't been informed, but Cookie, the station leader at Mawson, slipped and broke his ankle just before we left. While his ankle was being assessed the Aurora waited in the ice, in case he needed to be evacuated. If it was really drastic he might have needed to be taken to Fremantle, but that wasn't the case. Geoff, the doctor at Mawson, fixed it, Cookie is OK and we are on our way to Casey.

At 10.30am we had a muster on the helideck, in full polar suits and life jackets. The ship was rolling and in no time all the people prone to sea sickness had to stagger back to their cabins. It must be awful for them.

Life seems quiet after the excitement of Mawson.

I had a sleep this afternoon, painted some flowers for a get well card for Cookie, and saw a nice blue ice berg that had huge waves crashing through it, bye for now,



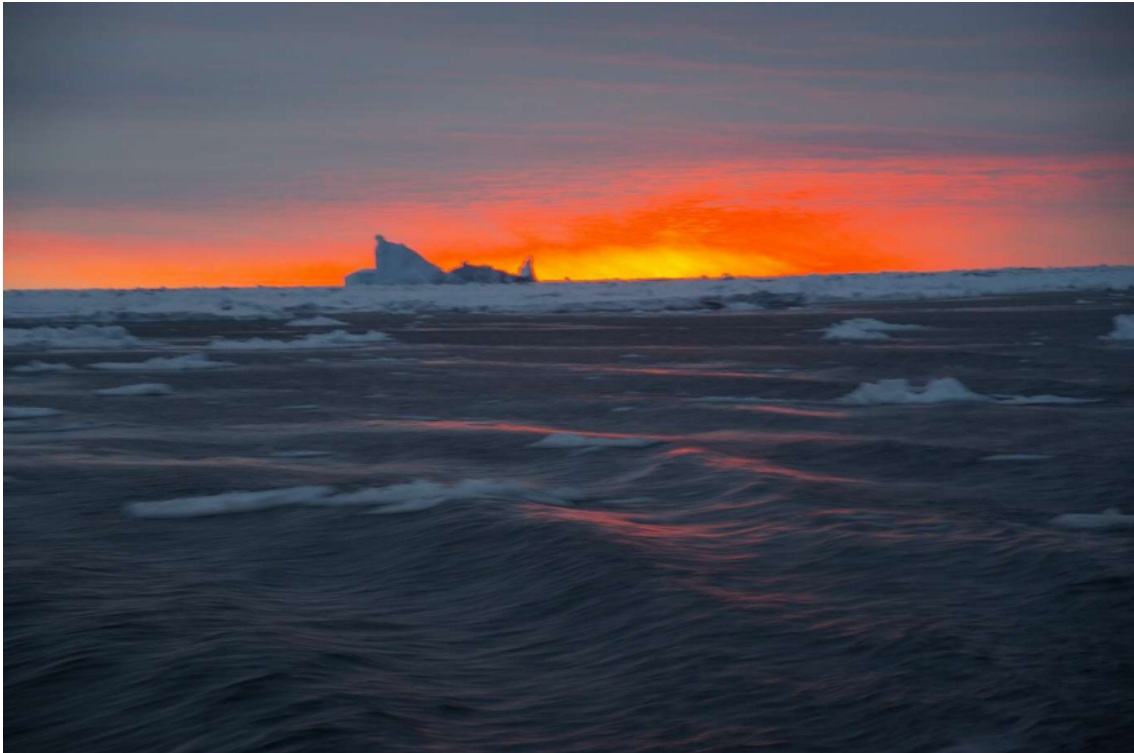


Sunday March 13th

Hi everybody, its been a quiet day today, just steaming along in fairly calm seas. Last night I went up to the bridge just before midnight and it was in darkness, with searchlights shining on the sea in front of the ship. It was very foggy and although big icebergs show up on the radar there is still danger from smaller ones just below the surface, so Tim, the third mate, was keeping a close watch ahead. It looked very eerie, the water was dark navy blue, and white petrels wheeled across the lights.

Today has been a housekeeping day, vacuumed my

cabin, washed my hair, played Jamie in scrabble (won), knitted, and then topped of the day by having TWO fillet steaks for dinner. I knew I was being a pig, just couldn't resist them. I'll probably have nightmares tonight, cheers, alison



Saturday March 14th

Last night the ship felt more than ever like a big animal, rather than something made of steel. She seemed to be meandering along, almost stopping sometimes, and the ballast system was moaning and whooshing like a whale.

This morning I went up to the bridge and Guv, the second mate, told me that there were so many

icebergs last night that the ship had to wriggle through them. That explained it.

We are passed many icebergs today but its been grey and overcast, so they are not sparkling, just ghostly.

My word I'm enjoying my mp3 player, my beautiful daughter Claire downloaded all her music on to it just before I left so I've got a huge and interesting collection.

hasta la vista, alison.



Tuesday 15th March

Smooth seas again today but the sun came out so we could see the bergs all castley again and way off to the south I could see a thin white line which was the edge of the ice. I did a tour of

the engine room this morning with Evan, the chief engineer and it was fabulous to see all the dials and knobs and valves and pipes. There are two big engines but they only use two when they are breaking ice, the rest of the time one big diesel engine drives a huge shaft that spins down the length of the ship and turns the propellers. Tonight some of us had a movie marathon and watched four movies, so now it's 4.00 am and I'd better go to bed, should be at Casey tomorrow, sleep tight, Alison



Wednesday 16th March

Hi everybody, another amazing day, steaming through ice, big chunky bits that go BONG, other

pieces so big that they tilt the ship slightly as they slip underneath her. The icebergs we passed today are sculptured and craggy, worn that way by the sun, waves and wind that have shaped them all summer. We had a ceremony today to celebrate crossing the Antarctic circle ( delayed due to bad weather ) where we had to bow to King Neptune, have a nasty mixture like porridge tipped on our heads, then kiss a stinky old fish head. It was very nice to have a hot shower afterwards. This evening we had a barbeque on the trawl deck, the deck closest to water level. It was very cold, minus 9, so standing next to the barbeque was a good idea. Broken chunks of bergs swooshed past the ship

and the sun went down in a swirl of red on the horizon,

with a massive carved iceberg beside it, red swirls reflecting in the water, until tomorrow, alison



Thursday 17th March

Hi everybody, St Patrick's Day in Antarctica, the people at Casey had green everything; spaghetti, bread, baked beans, eggs, beer, even the ice was green. Toni, who has just moved into my cabin, has been living at Casey for six months studying penguins, and is now heading home to Darwin, said it tasted the same but the colour was off-putting. I flew to Casey after lunch by helicopter, taking off from the heli-deck, and buzzing over the three km of sea in a few minutes. The station itself is a hotchpotch of different coloured buildings, like Mawson, but the landscape was very different, low rocky hills running up to the icecap and a series of broken bays and islands off-shore.





I met a friendly guy called Chris, who emailed some photographs to my web page, and another, Noel, who drove some of us up to Penguin Pass, where we could see the Aurora out in the bay, looking tiny in the vast view. I was freezing by the time we got back into the helicopter, but the pilot gave us a treat by detouring over the abandoned American station, Wilkes, so we could check it out.



Frances, polar explorer. Noel, from Inverloch, near where I live, drove us up here in a Haggland.

I could see lines of penguins

crossing the ice, and it was amazing to see icebergs from above, they have a kind of skirt, underwater, shining like a clear turquoise light.



I nearly forgot to tell you one of the best bits of the day. This morning I woke up at about 6.30am and went up to the bridge to see what was going on, and saw a lot of Killer Whales or Orcas, going past. They looked wonderful, their shiny black bodies standing out against the sea, some “spying” ( putting their heads right out of the water to look ) as we went past. It pays to get up early in Antarctica, cheers, alison



Friday 18th March

Howdy everybody, another incredible Antarctic day. This morning I got up early, 6.30am and went up on to the top deck to watch the sunrise. We were still in the bay, 3 km off Casey, no swell at all, and it was -11 degrees outside.

The sky in the east was streaked with yellow and it reflected gold on bits of unfrozen sea. In the west the sky was a soft pink, and as the sun rose it got stronger and stronger, with streaks of blue and grey through. The helicopters buzzed to shore and back all morning, delivering cargo and ferrying more people to the ship and then after lunch we began to move again. At first I couldn't work out why we were steaming straight towards Casey, but the ship turned in a big arc and blew its hooter, long and loud, to say good bye, and then we headed north through the ice. That will be our last look at the Antarctic continent, next stop Macquarie Island, in about five days. The sunset tonight was beautiful too, and as we waited for it I saw some emperor penguins and minke whales. We are still passing through chunky bergs that tip the ship slightly if we pass over them. Dinnertime is very different now, with about twenty extra people going home from Casey, we have to line up for the buffet , and all the tables are full. The food is still fabulous but there is less fresh stuff, as we've been away for almost a month now, until tomorrow, alison

Saturday 19th March

Hello everybody, today was a clear, sunny day, blue skies, flat seas and big white icebergs crouched on the horizon. The ship stopped at mid-morning to retrieve an ARP ( Acoustic Recording Package ) from the bottom of the ocean, three kilometres down. It's an underwater microphone, and had been dropped in a year ago to listen for whales. Today the technicians sent sonar pings which ran a current through and melted the wires holding it down, and it floated to the top. It took 90 minutes and we were all looking way out to sea for it when it popped up beside the ship.



After lunch it was still sunny and even though the temperature was -4 degrees, it felt pretty warm, so we borrowed Katrina's ( she's one of the cooks ) green deck chairs and took photos of people pretending to sunbake in front of an iceberg. There was about 6 people lolling about in shorts or bikinis while I was taking the photos, and we were all laughing our heads off, it looked so funny. Kristian had his t-shirt tied on his head, as though he was really hot. After we'd finished, Keith noticed a huge iceberg coming so we got the chairs out and did it all again. I'll send you some photo when we get to Macquarie Island, with best wishes, Alison





Sunday 20th March

Hi everyone, sorry this is a bit late, but you'll understand by the end of the email. This morning the sea was very rough, pitching and rolling, and I made the mistake of sitting at my computer in my windowless studio to do some work. Before I knew it I was feeling a bit queasy, so I took a sea sickness pill, went to bed and slept like a baby until mid-afternoon. It was still very rough and wild but I managed to get some work done by hanging on to the edge of the desk with one hand, and my water container with the other every time a big roll came.





There weren't too many at dinner, but it was Pepe's birthday and I got to carry out the cake, candles blazing, on a big silver tray, pretty tricky with the floor going uphill and downhill all the time.

Later I went to watch a video in the little video room, and while I was setting it up, a few monster swells hit. I was flung against the TV cupboard hard and before I could hang on to anything flung the other way, got caught up in chairs flying all over the place, fell over, got up again ( big mistake ) then shot the length of the room and bashed my head against the door.

Boy, did I see stars, but I finally managed to sit down and hang on to a bench that wasn't moving, until the worst of it passed. Keith ( the ranger for Macquarie Island ) appeared and helped me to my cabin, and Helen the doctor came and checked me out, and nothing too bad had happened. I slept like somebody who'd been hit over the head, and this morning feel fine, just sore bits everywhere. They told me on the bridge this morning that the biggest roll was 40 degrees. Gotta go, breakfast to get to, cheers,  
Alison

Monday 21st March

Hi everybody, not much to report today other than that I have got bruises EVERYWHERE. I feel as though I've been bucked off a horse. I found out this morning too, that the really big roll was 50 degrees, not 40, so no wonder I was flying around like Astro Boy. I got up early and saw the sun rise, a big yellow ball in the east over confused seas. I love that term, it seems like the sea can't work something out. It really means waves coming from all directions. We had a muster at 10.30am, everybody up on the helideck in freezer suits and life jackets and then I worked for the rest of the day in my windowless studio, painting and editing photographs. There were three birthdays today, so three cards to be made, three songs to sing, and three cakes to be eaten. No more ice bergs today, I think our sunbaking one must have nearly been the last, good luck to you, Alison

Tuesday 22nd March

Hi everybody, it's a pretty boring old diary tonight I'm sorry to say, no more bumps, though my bruises are starting to look spectacular. The ship has been steaming along all day in calm seas, in fact the sea was calm enough for us to have our porthole right open, and the air flowing in felt beautiful. I spent some time this afternoon taking photographs of Caroline's toy plastic scuba diver swinging in the porthole, so you can see there are always plenty of ways to waste time if you want to.

I did get a lot of work done too, no more birthdays, but I had to do an illustration for the ship's log and luckily I nailed it, a nice mix of photo and watercolour pencil of the Aurora in the blizzard at Mawson. It's always nerve wracking when you have to do something on the spot in case it turns out badly.



The other job I've been working on is the voyage T-shirt which has to be at the printer's in Hobart by email tomorrow night. Luckily Ken, one of the crew, is fantastic at computer graphics, so he's been doing all the hard stuff.

This afternoon I took my boots and gaiters to get cleaned and checked for seeds before going ashore at Macquarie Island and my gaiters were full of horse hair and grass seeds. It would be terrible to introduce a feral plant to this beautiful island, although it seems it is infested with rabbits that eat everything. Bye for now, I'll try and have some more exciting news tomorrow, cheers, Alison



Wednesday 23rd March

Hello everybody, sorry this is late, I was too tired last night, but it was a good thing I waited until this morning because we saw another aurora last night, another greenie. It wasn't as bright as the last one, and the moon was full, so that probably bleached some of the colour out of it, but it shimmered and waved like a neon green curtain. I was in bed but Frances came and got me and I went up and lay on my back on the monkey deck and watched it until I got too cold.

Yesterday was another day of not very much happening, painting, writing, organising the voyage T-shirt and in the evening the three artists on board, Frances, Margo and I, all gave a talk about our work. Frances is a musician, so she played us some of her music, very funky, one of her songs, By Myself, with her band Hecate, took them to the USA for a couple of years.

Margo is recording Antarctic sounds, so she talked about her work and played some of the sounds she sends to her ABC website every day ( I think her web address is on my web page ) and I showed some slides of my stuff.

Today's a beautiful day, blue skies, and the sea is so calm it feels as though we are floating

down a river, but I'll tell you more tonight,  
with best wishes, Alison

Thursday 24th March

Hi everybody, today ( its yesterday now ) was another day steaming along to Macquarie Island, in calm seas and fine weather, not nice enough for sunbaking, but ok. The most interesting thing I did all day was to play an elaborate practical joke on Keith, who is going to be the ranger on Macquarie Island. Two of the young men who'll be on Macquarie with him, Rowan and Chris, had tried to set him up with a bucket of water a couple of days before but missed, so they were keen to try again.



Peter (Tasmanian National parks) and Keith (ranger at Macquarie Island) posing for a photo, unaware that two rubbish bins of water are about to be emptied on them.



I've been taking lots of photos to use in paintings, so I asked Keith, and Peter Cusack, from National Parks Tasmania if they would pose for a photo. I went into a lot of detail about how I wanted them in their green freezer suits against the big red door on the helideck, so the vertical lines on the door contrasted with the bulk of their suits, and that red is the complimentary colour of green, etc, etc. The real reason I wanted them there was that Rowan and Chris could be hiding on the monkey deck above and tip their buckets of water from there. Francis came and videoed it, and they were quite unsuspecting, though Peter told me afterwards that Keith said, just before he got drenched, that something didn't feel right. The ship rocked a little just as the boys tipped the water, so it missed Peter completely and drowned Keith.



Bull's eye on Keith, missed Peter completely.

We were rolling about with laughter afterwards and the video is very funny, but Keith was a bit grumpy for the rest of the day and it made me think about how practical jokes are not always so funny for the people they are played on. Anyway, now I'm watching my back, I think revenge will be coming, happy easter, alison

Friday 25th March

Today was a bit of a sad day because all our friends who are staying at Macquarie Island left the ship, in fact it seemed like everybody left the ship apart from the crew and the artists. We had to stay on board while all the re-supply operations got underway and it was very frustrating looking across the water at the beautiful island and not being able to be there. Anyway, some good things happened. The first was that when I woke up at about 6.15am, Macquarie Island was outside my porthole, steep green hills falling into the ocean, scarred with landslides and gullies.



I asked someone about some patches of rock high up on the hillside and they told me they were King Penguin rookeries. What I thought were patches of stones were patches of penguins. The penguins come ashore and waddle up a gully for hundreds of metres to reach their high rise habitat. One theory about this crazy situation is that the rookeries were originally at sea level, but, as Macquarie Island is the only place in the world where the earth's crust is pushing up, and rises about a centimetre a year, they have been slowly elevated over the years. Another good thing that happened was that I saw King Penguins swimming outside my porthole and making lovely chirping noises. Finally, just before sunset, I saw a beautiful rainbow over the sea, and took a photograph of one of the helicopters flying past it, and also a nice one of a bird.



Going to bed exhausted after being lost in the cyber-woods for about two hours when I couldn't find any of my photos, not even in the re-cycle bin, finally found them in a music folder, phew!, with best wishes, Alison



Saturday 26th March

We left the Aurora at 8.00am by Zodiac, or IRB ( Inflatable Rubber Boat ) to go ashore, hooray!

Getting into the Zodiacs is tricky when the weather's bad. You have to climb backwards down a rope ladder, then, when the boat rises on a

swell, step down into it. As we zoomed towards the shore lots of King Penguins chased us, some torpedoing right out of the water. I think they chase the krill that the engine stirs up. Two mad cormorants swooped over us at the same time, so it felt pretty crazy. My friend Georgie took a group of us walking on the island today. We went up the hill beside the station first, very steep and freezingly windy, and saw a chunk of wood which is what's left from a radio tower mast that the explorer Mawson erected on his way to the south pole in 1911. Mawson did a stupendously heroic walk in Antarctica which killed some of his companions and got back to base to see his ship sailing out of the harbour. It didn't come back for a year.



Years ago rabbits were introduced to the island and it's very sad to see the damage they have done. We walked up hillsides riddled with rabbit holes, and the vegetation chewed down to nothing. A wire-netting enclosure ( out of reach of the rabbits ) held lush, metre high plants, and that's what it used to look like. A big Kill-the-Rabbit program is about to start I think.

It was beautiful sitting high on the hill in the long tussocky grass ( no snakes on Macquarie Island ) looking down at the fur seals lolling about on grey stony beaches fringed with skirts of kelp swirling in milky blue sea. The day was misty so the sea just faded into the sky without a horizon. After lunch we walked the other way and watched the elephant seals, outrageously





disgusting animals. They do everything we tell our children not to; fart, belch, dribble, stink, fight. They are huge, slug shaped and can apparently move very fast, so you have to be careful not to get too close to them because they also have very big teeth. They love nothing better than to lie on each other in big piles of blubber, making noises like an old out-board motor, and occasionally rolling in a "wallow", a huge puddle full of every stinky thing they can put into it.



It was funny to see some elegant flipper scratching and rubbing amongst the seas of blubber. We also watched Gentoo Penguins, very neat, keep-to-yourself, types, and King Penguins, who are very bold and curious. If you sit on the beach they come and investigate you, and you can see close up the beautiful combination of black, blue, orange and white that makes up their "look". I'll be seeing more of them tomorrow, so I'll tell you about it then, with best wishes, Alison



Sunday 27th March

Hi Everybody, I'm so tired I can hardly write but I have had a fantastic day. Started off helping unpack a container of frozen food into palettes the helicopters can lift, so that wasn't very exciting, but good to be useful.

After that we jumped into the Zodiacs and went ashore, met up with Georgie and some others and headed off for a long walk, south along the beach to the The Nuggets, two big rocks a few kilometres away. The first thing we saw was a huge dead elephant seal, with skuas and giant petrels feeding on it, strutting and screaming at each other, and blood all over them. One white giant petrel looked macabre with a completely scarlet neck and head.



Next we came to a colony of king penguins, and they are very curious, unafraid birds, if you sit down they come right up to you, and its lovely to be able to see their beautiful plumage close up. The beach was loose and shingled, with rocky headlands to clamber over, and piles of elephant seals to skirt around, with waves crashing in



from the other side. We came to Royal Penguin colony ( it's them that have the rookeries way up high ) and watched them milling together, though the King Penguins kept getting in the way. We had delicious cheese and salami



sandwiches ( and an Easter egg, thank you easter bunny for coming so far ) at the nuggets, then heading back into a freezing wind. When we were nearly home Peter, who knows the island, took a few of us on a detour, up a rocky gully so steep that in places there were steel ladders set into the rock, and on to the top of the island.



It was misty and very cold, and the ground wet and spongy, but as we walked along the mist lifted and we could see small lakes in the distance. The wind was nearly blowing us over but it was fun walking fast down the hillside. Now I've had a shower and I'm ready for bed, goodnight, Alison

Monday 28th March

Hi everybody, what a frustrating day. I was supposed to go ashore today and stay the night as a special guest of the station leader but the wind came up from the south and we have spent all day chugging up and down the east coast of Macquarie Island. It's too rough to get off by IRB or helicopter, so despite being ready to go at 7.00am I am still here. I did some painting this morning, helped Frances make a furry hat, finished a beanie, played scrabble with Jamie, Frances and Tina (won) and had a sleep, hmmmnn, not a very satisfying day. Tonight I heard an interesting story about sailors from one of the engineers. Apparently the reason sailors always used to wear two gold earrings is so that if they died at sea they had enough money ( in the value of their gold earrings ) to pay to send their bodies home, better go, stacks of nothing to do, yours in grumpiness, Alison





Tuesday 29th March

Hi everybody, there's always something good around the corner, and it was today! It was a ripsnorter of a day. Until I actually got into the IRB I didn't believe I'd actually get ashore, but it happened. I had a whole day watching animals and drawing and photographing them, and didn't come back to the ship until just on dark. The boat trip both ways was very exciting with big waves and howling wind, with the King Penguins still chasing us. I spent a long time this morning on the beach behind the station watching three young Elephant Seals playing in the shallows, wrestling and biting each other.



They look so sleek and graceful in the water and so obese and stinky on land. I drew some Gentoo Penguins, then found some Rockhopper Penguins, cute little dudes with yellow tassels on their heads, and took photos of them. After lunch I watched some Giant Petrels feeding on the carcass of a dead Elephant Seal, poking their heads right into it and coming out all red and slimy, very gruesome. I sketched some Elephant Seals with all their disgusting dribbles and then moved along to the King Penguins and drew them.



One poor fellow had a huge scab on his tummy where something had obviously tried to eat him, but Georgie said he would probably be ok if he'd survived so far. She said that usually if a penguin comes ashore hurt, the Skuaas surround it and peck it to death. It's a tough world down here. We pulled away from Macquarie Island at about 7.00pm. blowing our hooter and with flares going off on shore and on the ship. Once again there are some sad people who've said goodbye to the friends they've been living with for a year. The people left behind on Macquarie won't have any visitors now until October. It would be a wonderful place to spend some time, but I'm glad I'm going home, with best wishes, Alison



Letting off flares as we left Macquarie Island.

Wednesday 30th March

I did an art consultation in the afternoon.

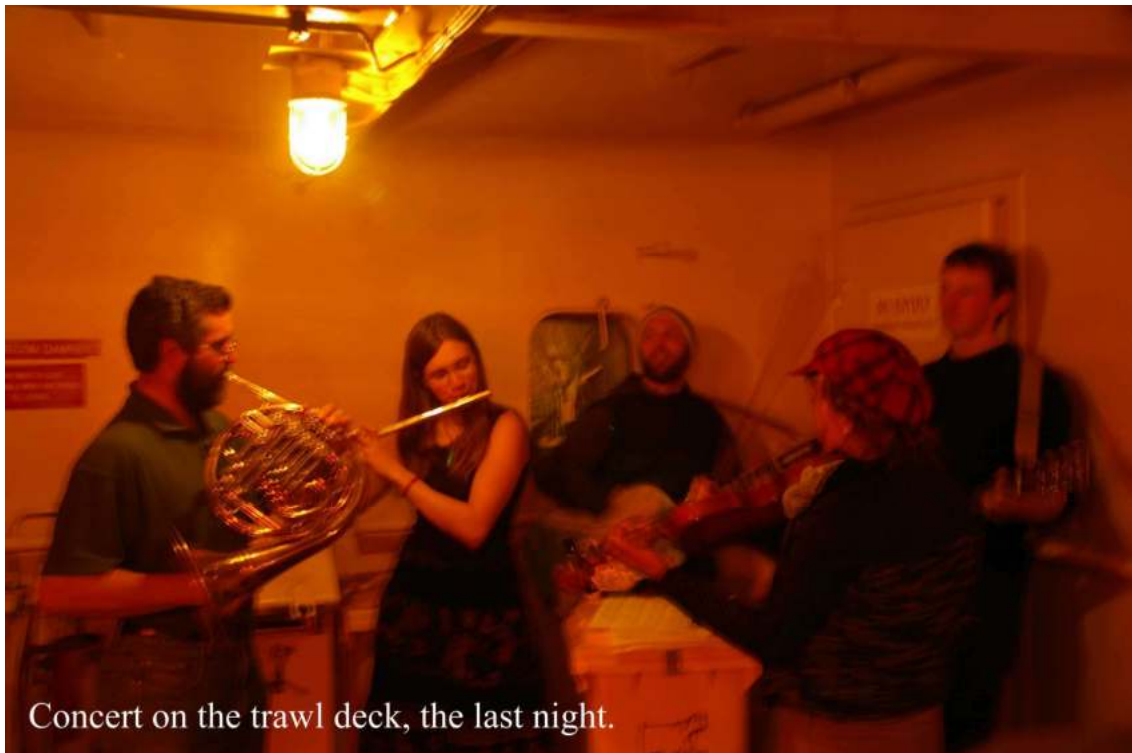
Claire, who has been on Macquarie Island for the last year working with seals, asked me to help her design a picture to go on a surfboard she made while she was there. We looked at pictures of elephant seals, king penguins, maps of the island, the southern cross, and experimented with ways to make them look good, and now Claire is thinking about it. The long winter nights at 'Macca' mean there's plenty of time to be creative and Claire showed me some beautiful stainless steel bracelets that a friend had made her. I'd love to live there for a year and go exploring every day and make things at night.



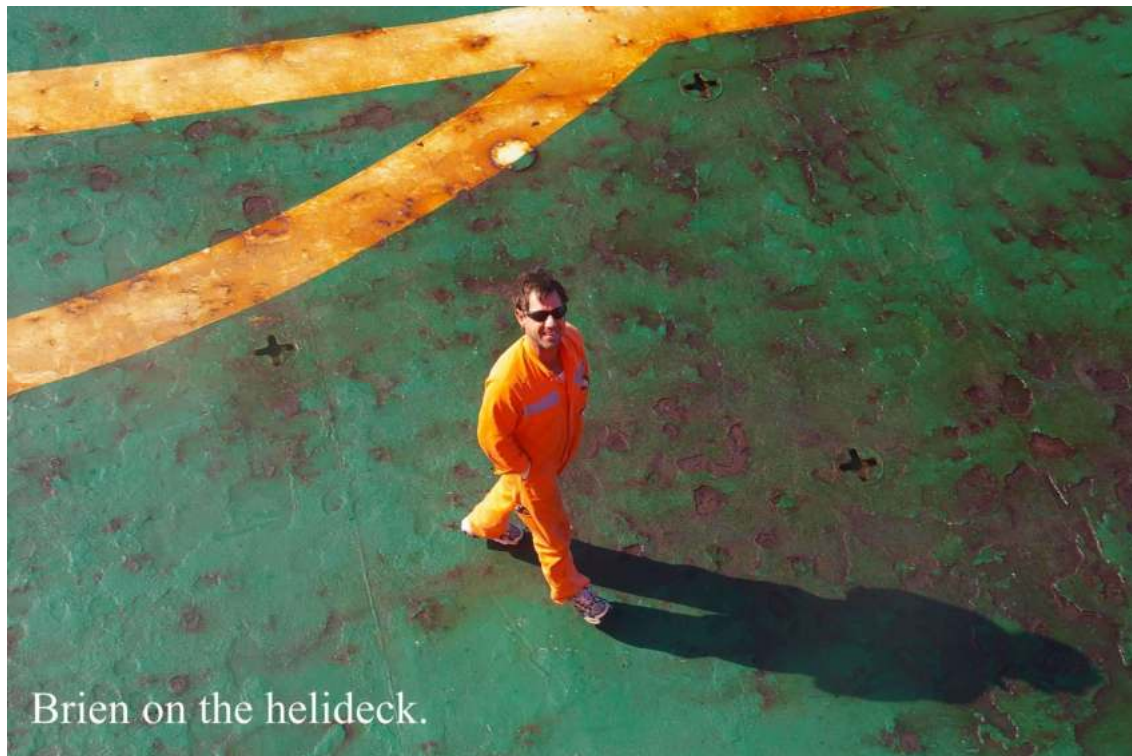


Thursday 31st March

Hi everybody, what a quiet day! Shipboard life is back to normal, steaming along through fog and calm seas, no need to look out for ice bergs. Its about 5 degrees so we are all getting around in shirt sleeves. We had a muster on the helideck at 10.30 this morning and it seemed old hat compared to what a big deal the first one was six weeks ago. I went to the gym this afternoon and got sweaty and feel much better for it, until tomorrow, alison



Concert on the trawl deck, the last night.



Later ... Thursday 31st March (Part 2)

I thought I'd write some more before bed time. Only two sleeps until we get home. Its going to be strange sleeping in a big bed after my little bunk, which rocks me to sleep every night. Today has been a busy day copying each other's photos, swapping addresses and doing the last minute jobs. I finished a watercolour for Brian, one of the crew and it turned out ok. It was from a photo I took of him crossing the helideck, with his orange overalls matching the orange lines, very graphic. I have started to paint and draw in a different way on this trip, so that's exciting, better go, with best wishes, Alison



Friday 1st April

Hi everyone, April Fool's Day, and I don't think I've had any tricks played on me. We handed all our Antarctic Division clothing back today, freezer suits, boots, goggles and sunglasses, so I guess that means it's really over. We got to keep our thermals and hats and gloves. This afternoon we had cabin inspection, just like on school camp. Our cabin was a pigsty, so it was good to clean it up.

Don't forget that today is April

Fool's day so don't let anyone trick you.



A little while ago I went up to the bridge and could see Tasmania on the horizon so we are nearly home. I think we get into Hobart early tomorrow morning. This will be the last email from the ship, so, until I email you from home, cheers, alison

