*ANTARCTICA – SANAE 15*

*Antarctica is a place that leaves one with lasting impressions and a passion for this unpredictable beauty.*

*Imagine a place that is 11 times the size of the RSA- it is the seventh continent , the 5th largest continent and boasts  various world records –none of which is comfortable for homo sapiens ....and just as well, or otherwise it also would have been on the brink of destruction. It is the highest ( due to the enormous amount of ice that has accumulated  over millions of years – over 4 kilometers thick in places), the driest ( therefore often referred to as the white desert with an average precipitation of only 10-12 cm per year ), the coldest ( holding the record low temperature of minus 88 degrees Centigrade at the Russian base Vostok ( not a USA base , funny enough!!) , an average annual temperature of – 57 C  at Vostok and more than 20 C colder than any other place on earth, as well as being the windiest ( with winds blowing in excess of 240 Km / hour for days on end when catabatic and cyclonic winds combine!! )*

*Imagine a place that has trapped 90 % of the worlds fresh water in the form of ice . Man has still not reached the level of expertise required to utilise this untapped resource for the water shortages else where on the planet.*

*It is as though Antarctica  is protecting itself from human invasion....and it is doing a sterling job !!*

*Why do I say that ?*

*Well, lets look at a few more Antarctic facts :*

*Antarctica is surrounded by the Roaring 40’s, the Screaming 50’s ( also called the filthy 50’s )and the Tearing 60’s .... the terrible southern ocean  where the Atlantic, India, Pacific and the Southern Antarctic waters meet. A wind swept area where the average annual wind speed is almost 40 knots ( gale force conditions all year round registering on average Force 8 on the Beaufort Scale  and wind speeds in excess of 100 knots at times ) , with monstrous swells, 400-500 meters from crest to crest  and 15  to 20 meters  or more from crest to trough ....not a nice place to be , even on today's big ice breakers.*

*Then the ocean is strewn  with growlers ( large chunks of ice , the size of houses and bigger) , big enough to seriously damage a ship  and even sink it, yet too small to detect on a ships radar. This necessitates the crew to keep a vigil at night when  flood lights are utilized to spot these floating “rocks”  on the ocean.*

*On top of this Antarctica throws out its big white skirt for 100’s of kilometers all around the continent , not allowing any ships near it for 10 months of the year. I am of course referring to the sea freezing over, up to 3 and 4 metres in thickness , impenetrable even for the biggest American and Russian nuclear driven ice breakers. And beware the ship that gets trapped  in the sea ice ...it will have to stay down there for an entire year before it will be able to break free in January  the following year .....and that is if it is an ice breaker, strengthened for the ice conditions , as any other ship will be crushed to pieces by the force of the ice .*

*Antarctica allows human visitors  only during January and February  of each year when the frozen sea ice breaks up into pack ice ( drifting blocks of ice blown about by the ever present wind) , resulting in tricky navigation for the captain of a ship  to negotiate the easiest route through the pack ice.*

*The continent is also clad in its own armour .....the ice cap ( up to  and even over  4 km in thickness  , as mentions earlier)  with ice shelves ( glaciers pushed out onto the ocean) of up to 400 meters in thickness that stretch out onto the ocean for hundreds of kilometers . Ice bergs break free from the edge of this ice shelf and pose a serious danger to any ship moored against the ice shelf , as it will obliterate all in its path.  Icebergs of up to 130 km ‘s in length have been recorded . Some of the larger icebergs will drift in the cold Antarctic waters for decades.*

*Antarctica then throws in various other little ingredients to make it uncomfortable for homo sapiens :*

*The temperature can drop to as low as -88 C in winter ( -57 C at the S.A. base SANAE) and even as low as -30 C at night time, in summer.   Because of the extreme temperatures nothing functions properly : batteries have 10-20% of their normal capacity, vehicles battle to start and the engines and oil have to be warmed up before even attempting to start them, cameras and equipment malfunction, etc.*

*Methylated spirits will only ignite after first warming it, frost bite is a constant reminder that us humans are not adapted to this environment at all. Visibility can diminish to a mere meter or less without warning when drift snow is swept up by strong winds.*

*White outs can occur at any stage when overcast weather is experienced and the suns rays  obliterate all shadows  through the multiple reflection of the suns rays  between the snow surface and the cloud cover.The experience is the same as being in total darkness, with the only difference that it is blinding bright white all round. There is no horizon and nothing can be distinguished  on the surface from this perfect white blanket. Even walking becomes difficult as you lose your balance and have to shuffle forward like a blind person. Yet , visibility can still be a 100%  and every detail on a vehicle  a 100 meters distant is visible. Such a vehicle will appear to be floating  in the air !l*

*To cap all this Antarctica forfeits the sun to the north pole during the 6 winter months when a seemingly endless night sets in. At the S.A base the period of darkness is only about 88 days  ......still  nearly 3 long months when time tends to stand still and there seems to be no light at the end of the tunnel ..... no pun intended !!*

*Then the continent is strewn with crevasses varying in size from man eaters ( 1 or more meters wide )  to the snow tractor hungry giants of 6 to 8 and even more meters in width. , lying in ambush of the unsuspecting visitor.*

*These crevasses pose a constant danger , especially , as they usually have snow bridges that perfectly obscure detection  on the surface, yet , may collapse under the slightest weight of a person  or a vehicle. The crevasses often have a second bridge  further down , but beyond that , only a dark abyss lies in waiting, some 200 metres deep. Numerous incidents normally occur during expeditions every year and reminds one of the Great White Shark that roam our own shores  and may strike at any stage without warning .*

*In Antarctica one experiences the worst radio communications possible , due to magnetic storms distorting the ionosphere and static electricity building up on antennae  as a result of drift snow.*

*Antarctica was once part of Gondwanaland .... when South America, Africa , Australia , India and Antarctica formed a super continent. It is a fact that Antarctica is rich in minerals  and  even oil reserves. But  it is the almost impenetrable thick ice sheet , that is still making mining impossible , even with today's technology and protecting the continent from exploitation !*

*Antarctica is also a place of exceptional beauty , with unbelievable sunsets, breathtaking contrasting ice landscapes , the brightest star and moonlit evenings  imaginable  and then of course , the spectacular phenomena of the dancing lights....the Aurora Australis  or Southern Lights . Its well adapted bird life , seals  and the Adelie and Emperor penguins ( only along the shores of Antarctica) complete the picture of this icy world , in stark contrast to the rest of planet earth .*

*Antarctica’s hostility towards human life is also paradise  in some weird sense , as there are no viruses, no hay fever, no mosquito’s, no flies , no cockcroaches, no snakes, no weeds , no lawns to mow and no squatters or vendors  or window cleaners or robbers.*

*In contrast to the rest of the world Antarctica is still ( almost) virgin as its Creator meant it to be. It is so pristine , the air is so crisp and so clean  and visibility so perfect on a windless day  that distance to any object cannot be guessed at all.*

*I was indeed blessed to have been one of a very limited number of human beings who had the privilege  to visit this vast and almost forgotten place , literally  at the end of the world  and to have experienced an unforgettable  year on this fascinating continent .*

*May Antarctica forever succeed in keeping the greedy and the exploitative at bay .... long love Antarctica in all its splendour and beauty.*

*From the pen of an avid admirer , thanks for listening.*

*Lennis*

*P.S. Is it not sad that mankind ( or perhaps it should be man-unkind) may still indirectly be responsible  for Antarctica’s ultimate demise through its reckless living and the effects of Global Warming.*