



What's it like to work in Antarctica?



Tanya Maddison worked as an observer at Casey research station in Antarctica in 2018 and 2019. She found opportunities for diverse skill development and experienced unique weather, wildlife and community camaraderie.

As I begin to write I am sitting in the Meteorological office watching snow whizzing past the window and listening to the sound of the wind rumbling. We are experiencing a blizzard with a steady wind speed higher than 60 knots. Welcome to Antarctica, an experience unlike any other.

Having worked on Australia's icebreaker ship (the *Aurora Australis*), for many years, I have visited Antarctica many times. The ship would glide through a seemingly mirror-like pond between icebergs and floes or battle through the ferocious, angry seas for which the Southern Ocean is famous. Seeing my first iceberg was amazing and something I'll never forget. Transporting expeditioners (as Antarctic staff members are known) to stations sparked my interest and curiosity about life on a base and spending a winter in Antarctica.

An observer normally stays in Antarctica over winter, spending 12 months at an Australian Antarctic or sub-Antarctic station. As I wasn't already employed by the Bureau, I did an observer course in Melbourne, followed by station training with the Australian Antarctic Division (AAD). This entailed search and rescue, quad bike, survival and firefighting training to learn the required skills for isolated-environment living.

Working in Antarctica is not dissimilar to an observer role on mainland Australia. My tasks include performing synoptic, aviation and upper-air observations, and aerodrome weather reports. Working in a self-sufficient, isolated environment

allows you to develop and enhance skills you may not have otherwise had the opportunity to. I have learned to grow food and manage a hydroponics facility, become part of a firefighting team, assisted in food preparation and helped prepare an ice runway for the first incoming flight of the summer season, among many other things. On a station, people pull together and work as a community to meet deadlines and achieve the necessary outcomes.

Working in an isolated environment is not for everyone and not without challenges. You're away from family and friends, and the usual conveniences and freedoms of day-to-day life. There's little vegetation and little sunlight in winter, and you're living in close, communal quarters. Yet this environment presents many unique opportunities. Spending a year in Antarctica, you can experience the changing of the four seasons, from the 24-hour endless daylight to dark blizzards at the height of winter. Auroras light up the starry sky and, in the spring, life returns to the continent. Seal pups are born, penguins and other birds arrive to reproduce, and the continent edge teems once again with wildlife.

Aside from amazing scenery and weather phenomena, you have the opportunity to participate in different activities. I did a mid-winter swim in sub-zero temperatures, walked/skied on the sea ice and participated in a winter traverse 100 km inland so a weather station could be serviced. Over the course of a year with 20 or so others, we developed a strong sense of camaraderie and forged lifelong friendships along with memories that will last a lifetime.