

ANTARCTIC SEASON IN FULL SWING

Polar Supply Ships now down South

The summer solstice has just passed, and the height of the Antarctic season is approaching. Down in that frozen, enticing continent, the sun will not be setting for a while as the sea ice retreats, creating a window of opportunity for ships to move scientists as well as all manner of equipment and supplies to various Antarctic bases.

The German vessel **Polarstern**, then **Ivan Papanin** that transported a Belgian expedition to Antarctica, and more recently, **Akademik Federov**, passed this way en route to the ice. Built in 1990 at Kherson on the Dnepr River in Ukraine, the ice-strengthened **Ivan Papanin** was of particular interest as she is a sister to **Juvent** that became the South African Naval auxiliary **SAS Outeniqua** that also made a couple of trips down south. She was bought from the navy by entrepreneurs to lift obsolete telecommunications cables from the seabed, hardly an economically-viable proposition as the ship was expensive to operate, spares were scarce, and modifications would have been essential for the intended role.



SA Agulhas sailing for Antarctica in early December. She is scheduled for replacement shortly.

After some commercial voyages and periods of idleness under the name **Paardeberg**, she was sold to be refitted for the offshore oil industry.

The wheels of life turn in an interesting manner. In 2003, nine students from **Simon's Town School's Maritime Studies Department** undertook a training voyage to Antarctica aboard the South African polar supply ship, **SA Agulhas**, courtesy of the Department of Environmental Affairs, Smit Marine and the Alfred Wegner Institute in Bremerhaven who had chartered the ship to convey German scientists and equipment to their Antarctic base.

At the time, one of the group, Rolf Sieboldt-Berry, kept a detailed journal, and, as the ship steamed through high latitudes, he wrote :

"...It wasn't so hard to get up this morning due to the excitement that we were now inside the Antarctic Circle... Icebergs are going past regularly and we saw an iceberg approximately two miles long followed by a couple of growlers.... By 19:00 we were on the fo'c'sle watching the bow break through ice floes and bergy bits. At 21:00 our speed had decreased to about three knots as we moved through the dense ice floes...Sunrise will apparently be at 03:30 tomorrow morning and we should reach the pack ice by about 05:00...

What I saw [the next day] was unbelievable! We were making our way slowly through big and tightly packed ice which gave a tremor throughout the ship every time we hit one head-on...

Everywhere we looked there was nothing but white with a few very large icebergs...the eerie ice-shelf then soon began to come into view as we weaved our way around the large pieces of ice...At 06:00 we went up to the monkey island, watching as we came close to the ice-shelf.

...Due to the clarity of the Antarctic air, the sunset was absolutely spectacular, with the dipping sun in the background and the blue and white ice in the foreground. We are now steaming slowly towards Neumayer [the German base]... The ice today has truly been an awesome sight for all of us, something that words can't even begin to explain..."

When the ship sailed south about a fortnight ago, Sieboldt-Berry was aboard again - now a qualified navigating officer! He had completed his seetime as a cadet on tankers and, having had his appetite for Antarctica whetted in 2003, he jumped at another opportunity to head for the ice.

Indeed, during that earlier training voyage the eight lads and one lass had a unique opportunity to experience life at sea for themselves, and thus make informed vocational choices. Of the nine, six embarked on sea-going careers, while another - who might also have done so - died tragically in a road accident.

Global warming will be the subject of much scientific research in that icy continent this year, and, if reports on this phenomenon are to be believed, ships entering that remote and foreboding region should have an easier passage than those of a century ago.

Reminding me of voyages by earlier, intrepid explorers who ventured into these uncharted waters, a reader sent me a photograph of Nimrod, the stout three-masted steamer used by Ernest Shackleton during his Antarctic exploration from 1907 to 1909.

Shackleton had bought this 40-year-old Newfoundland sealing vessel that he described as "*dilapidated and [she] smelt of seal oil*". He also wrote that her masts were decayed. After a hasty refit, **Nimrod** sailed from Britain in August 1907 and dawdled to the Cape at about 7 knots.

Nimrod had a two-day coaling stop in Cape Town in October before heading for New Zealand, the staging post for the expedition's entry to the Antarctic.

For a book to commemorate the centenary of that expedition, my correspondent has requested readers to contact him (via my email) should they have any photographs of **Nimrod** in Cape Town.

Our own **SA Agulhas** is an elderly lady, although much of her time has been spent in port during winter when voyages to Gough or Marion Islands are not desirable. Readers will remember that she ventured into the ice during the winter of 2002 - a most unseasonal and indeed heroic trip - to assist **Magdalena Oldendorff**, trapped in the ice with Russian scientists aboard.

Inevitably, she will be replaced and it is possible that a joint venture will see a sophisticated vessel conveying both local and European teams to the Antarctic.

Those arranging specifications and tenders for the construction of the replacement vessel should hasten. will have her 30-year survey in 2008.