Waiting for the Ilyushin ‘window’

Our patience is rewarded when we land in the beautiful other-worldly Antarctica

BY JOHN BALLEM FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

FEBRUARY 20, 2009

John Ballem at the geographic centre of the South Pole. The building in the background is the new scientific station.

Photograph by: Courtesy, John Ballem

Almost since the day I reached the North Pole, thoughts of its counterpart at the other end of the world began to nibble at the edge of my consciousness. That was nearly four years ago and there have been two Antarctic trips since then: one to visit the Emperor penguins in the Weddell Sea, and the other to cruise along the Antarctic Peninsula and among the adjoining islands. Antarctica to be sure, but thousands of kilometres from the Pole, high on an icy plateau in the very centre of the continent. The itch wouldn’t go away. And so I found myself, a member of the South Pole 4 program, in Punta Arenas, Chile, waiting for an “Ilyushin

window."

The Ilyushin, a Russian-made jet transport plane, is the one that flies people and supplies to Patriot Hills. The almost constant katabatic winds that blow down from the high altitude ice sheets of Antarctica, sometimes at hurricane force, ground the giant jet for days and weeks at a time.

When the katabatic winds blow, not even the Ilyushin can land safely on the blue ice runway at Patriot Hills. To make things even more exciting,the runway is at right angles to the cross winds. This clears the snow from the runway, but makes for a tricky landing. The katabatics are the reason why travellers to the Antarctic continent — the coldest, driest and windiest of all the continents — are warned to plan for delays of days or weeks.

From time to time, usually in the middle of the night, or the early hours of the morning, the winds will die down. It's not enough that they cease blowing; the meteorologists must be confident there will be enough of a "window" to permit the Ilyushin to make the 4.5 hour flight, re-load, and return safely.

Hence the expression, "Ilyushin window."

Punta Arenas, "Sandy Point," as it was called by the 17th-century English settlers, bills itself as the most southerly city on the continent. The claim is carefully worded since the Argentine city, Ushaia, is actually farther south and advertises itself as the most southerly city in the world. Since Ushaia is separated from the continent by the Strait of Magellan, both claims are valid. Punta Arenas with a population of 120,000 and Ushaia with approximately half that, are favourite departure points for the Antarctic.

South Pole 4, a group of 11 travellers, will depart from Punta Arenas. When there's an Ilyushin window, that is.

For six days the tour operator, Adventure Network International (ANI) reported, in daily, sometimes hourly, phone calls that the Ilyushin was still grounded. ANI is a remarkable outfit.

It arranges and facilitates outdoor adventures, usually of the "extreme" variety, such as skiing the last degree (96 kilometres) to the Pole, or the last 156 kilometres where Shackleton turned back, or trekking for weeks and months across the frozen land, or climbing the Antarctic mountains.

My program was considerably less strenuous; with 10 others, (South Pole 4), I was to fly 965

kilometres from Patriot Hills to the Pole in a ski-equipped Twin Otter.

The enforced delay offered an opportunity for sightseeing in Punta Arenas. I had already done quite a bit of that in a recent stay in that city, especially enjoying strolls through the Plaza de Armas with the imposing monument of the famous early explorer, Hernando de Magallenes.

Now I would take the time to visit a colony of Magellanic penguins. Driven by the exigencies of their harsh environments, penguins have evolved different ways of incubating their eggs; the male Emperor carries the solitary egg in an abdominal pouch, Adelies and Gentoos make nests out of rocks and sticks.

One of the more endearing sights in nature is to see a male Gentoo pick up a rock, preferably filched from a neighbour's nest, and present it to his mate with all the flair of a lover giving a bouquet of roses to his sweetheart. Living in more temperate climes, the Magellanic excavates a shallow burrow or "cave" to hatch the eggs and raise the chicks.

A walk along the harbour front yields another remarkable sight — hundreds of cormorants, perched on a jetty extending out into the Strait.

Finally word comes that the captain of the Ilyushin 76 wants us at the airport. He is still concerned about the gusts, but midnight finds us airborne and seated inside the cavernous jet.

The camp at Patriot Hills consists of small "clamshell" tents, each designed for two occupants, even smaller tents for the staff, and a mess tent where meals are served, briefings are held, and people gather to mingle and get warm. The camp will disappear at the end of the season.

The tents will be struck and taken away, as will the vehicles and other equipment. Some items can be stored in pits dug for that purpose, but by the end of April the surface of the ice-covered land will be immaculate, with no evidence of human presence.

Lying in a sleeping bag inside one of these tents while the wind hammers and pounds, shaking its nylon covering, is an unforgettable experience. You are sure it will take off and fly away, but the tents are securely anchored, and withstand the battering.

Before venturing out, you must don every piece of protective clothing. Which explains the nocturnal popularity of the "pee bottle."

Truth is, you can't afford the slightest mistake or miscue. Frostbite can strike exposed flesh in minutes, and death awaits the unwary.

This dictum, endlessly repeated, was brought home in a forcible, if ultimately harmless, fashion during an excursion by Tucker SnoCat into the hills. For an hour or so we marvelled at the wide valleys and mountain peaks draped with snow.

The scene stretching before us was familiar, yet somehow not. Almost as though it belonged in a different world. The spell was broken when the engine sputtered and died as we reached the top of the appropriately named Windy Pass.

The temperature inside the tracked vehicle dropped precipitously as wind and snow swirled around us.

The driver contacted the camp on the mobile phone to learn, for the first time, that there was an alternate tank.

Several times the engine caught, sputtered and died, making us fear the second tank was empty as well. Finally it caught and held, and we were once more underway.

Conditions at the Pole are ideal and South Pole 4 is told to get ready. We are to bring our sleeping bags, and the two twin Otters that will make the 965-kilometre flight, are stocked with emergency provisions and survival gear. Because of the altitude at the Pole, oxygen was available for those who might need it, as did one member of our party.

Walking out to where the airplanes are parked, I, a Calgarian, am struck with a welcome sense of familiarity. The Twin Otter, a Canadian airplane, is world renowned for being able to fly under conditions where even the birds were walking. At one stage of my legal career, I spent a great deal of time in the Arctic, and made so many flights in Twin Otters that they were practically my second home. The three of them at Patriot Hills, together with their crews, were under lease from Kenn Borek Air, a Calgary based company. Our pilot was Monica Dauenhauer from Canmore.

The Twin Otter is a STOL (short take off and landing) aircraft, and I couldn't resist a knowing grin at the other passengers as we were in the air after an impossibly short takeoff run.

Conditions are indeed ideal; the temperature is -28° C and there is no wind. We are welcomed by members of the staff of the Amundsen-Scott Station and given a tour of the now operational and nearly complete new building. It houses 155 scientists and staff, a number that will be reduced to 50 in the long, dark months of winter. It replaces the iconic

dome, now abandoned, and disappearing from sight under accumulating ice and snow.

To avoid a similar fate, the new station is built on pilings that can be jacked up and are designed to keep the snow from accumulating around them. As we are escorted through various labs, gyms and cafeterias with many of the personnel wearing shorts, I reflect on the two ends of the earth and the differences and similarities between them.

The North Pole is at sea level in an ocean surrounded by land, the South Pole at an altitude of 3,657 metres, 3,048 of which is ice, is on a continent surrounded by ocean. (70 per cent of the world's fresh water is locked in Antarctic ice).

Both Poles are on vast sheets of ice and, apart from the recent human activity at the South Pole, devoid of life.

The tour completed, we go outside for the obligatory photos at the ceremonial pole and, a hundred or so metres away, the geographical pole. Here, at the "true pole," all 360 degrees of longitude meet, and you can make a trip around the world by walking a circle around it.

The geographic Pole has a sign commemorating Roald Amundsen who reached the Pole on Dec. 14, 1911, and Robert F. Scott who arrived there Jan. 17, 1912, and found to his surprise and intense disappointment that "the Norwegian" had beaten him to the prize. The sign has a brief quote from Scott's journal which shows his chagrin:

"The Pole. Yes, but under very different circumstances from those expected."

Scott and his four companions were to perish on their way back to their base on Ross Island. Two died first, and Scott and two others died of starvation in their tent during a blizzard on March 29, 1912, only 20 kilometres from a supply depot.

Amundsen-Scott is an American scientific station and the Stars and Stripes fly over it. But that doesn't mean it's American territory. Many flags fly in Antarctica. More than a dozen nations, the United Kingdom, Chile, Argentina, and Russia among them, maintain, or have maintained, stations in Antarctica.

On the return leg we flew low to take advantage of a tail wind. Looking down at the sastruga, snow blown by the wind into furrows like waves in an angry sea, crisscrossed with deadly crevasses, my thoughts were of the explorers of the "Heroic Age" of Antarctic exploration, that was at its height a century ago. Amundsen, Scott, Shackleton, and other driven souls who sought to be the first to reach "the last place on earth." What we reached in a six-hour flight, they struggled to achieve with years of planning, securing financial backing, and

months of surviving, or dying on starvation rations as they hauled sledges over this unforgiving terrain. Our ski-equipped plane touched down at Patriot Hills at 2:30 in the morning and we trooped into the mess tent for champagne and a celebratory dinner.

The dome of the Amundsen-Scott station isn't the only foreign object that is being swallowed and made to disappear by the winds and storms that rage over the continent.

Another trip by SnoCat brought us to where a Douglas DC-6 crashed in the early '90s. Now all that is visible of this large, four-engined airliner, is its tail. Soon that too will disappear.

We arrive back at camp to be told that an Ilyushin window is expected that night. The "window" opens, the Ilyushin 76 lands at 2:30 in the morning, and an hour and-a-half later, rumbles down the runway, carrying South Pole 4 back to Punta Arenas, and ending our sojourn on this strange, forbidding, fascinating land.

John Ballem Q.C., is a Calgary lawyer and novelist who travels throughout the world.