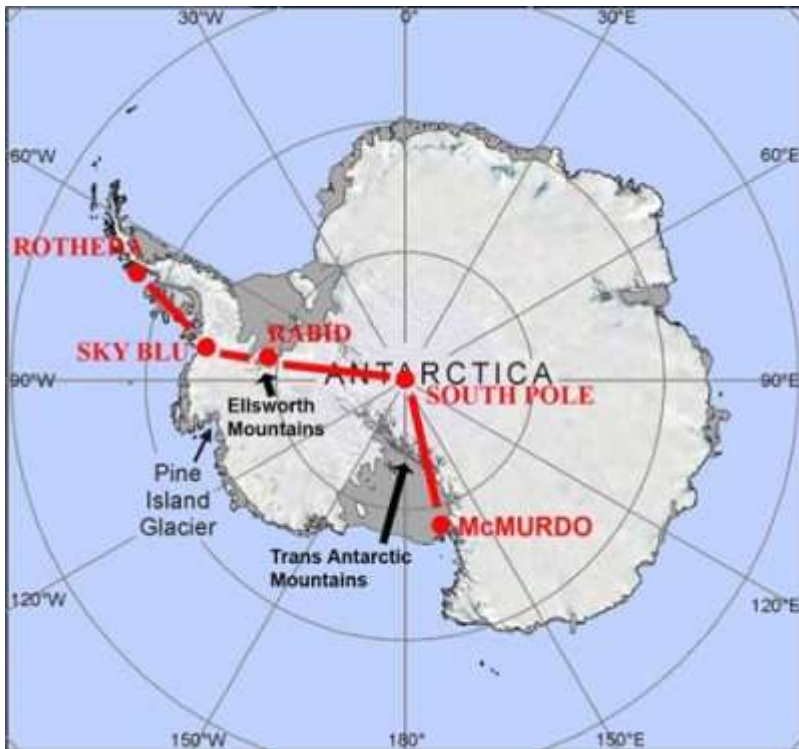


When I last wrote we were still at the AGAP South field camp.



We finished survey flying & left there on 16th January. Initially going to the American base at McMurdo Sound. Where we removed the survey equipment from the aircraft, & said good bye to our science team. Who returned to UK via New Zealand. They will be engaged in analysing the data collected at AGAP for at least 2 years. However I understand that they have hopes of publishing initial findings in Nature & New Scientist in the near future.



With our science equipment & scientists gone, & an extra fuel tank fitted inside the cabin, aircraft & crew returned to the British base of Rothera on the Antarctic Peninsula. A 3 day trip with a planned over night stop at South Pole Base, & an unplanned camping stop by the Ellsworth mountains. Made necessary when the weather deteriorated at our next fuel stop at Sky Blu.



Not too bad a place to await improvements further down the line.

We got back to Rothera on 21st January.



Which is quite an attractive place to regard as home for half a year. Even if I'm not actually home for much of that time.



The runway bisects the base. Fuel storage & the hangar are on the near side. Whilst on the far side are the laboratories, accommodation, dining & social facilities.

The buildings are all double glazed, well insulated, & well heated.





Bedrooms have bunk beds, & most have en-suite toilet & shower. Those staying over winter get a room to themselves. Whilst in summer most people will be sharing two to a room.

Perhaps the greatest privilege of spending time at Rothera is the close proximity of so much wildlife. The only land based predators in Antarctica are the Skuas, which hunt chicks & weak birds but generally leave the fit alone. So most wild animals have little fear on land, & are much more approachable than those at home.





Our only year round large creatures are the Weddell seals. As they alone have the ability to chew at the winter sea ice to keep their breathing holes open. On land & without pups they are of an extremely sleepy disposition.



Of rather different appearance & character are the fur seals which arrive mid summer.



The ones that come to Rothera are all young males, still too small to fight for a place in the breeding colonies. They are territorial & quite keen to practice aggressive tactics to chase off intruders. Although called seals they are more closely related to sea lions. Rather than belly hauling on land like most seals they can walk (run) on their flippers. Which makes them really quite fast & agile on snow.





The first human visitors to the Antarctic Peninsula were not scientists but sealers, & their principal targets were fur seals. Which were taken right to the brink of extinction by the end of the nineteenth century. When the trade stopped, as the lack of seals made it no longer economically viable. Recovery has been quite a long road. Researchers in the 1970s & 80s considered themselves lucky to see 5 in a season. More cheerfully they have now bounced back. An evening's walk around Rothera in late summer now will reveal in excess of 200 on the local beaches.



As well as seals we also have penguins around the base in summer, predominantly Adelies.



They don't breed here, but seem to regard Rothera as a good resting place part way through fishing trips. They also come here in large numbers at the end of the summer to moult. The Adelies are sociable & curious little characters, they often wander around the buildings on the base.