

Subject: Scholes cabin 5 (p): The windscoop

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Dear Stirling

We got to SANAE IV at about 1400. After a tour of the base itself, we went outside for orientation. Since the site is surrounded on three sides by cliffs hundreds of metres high, it is essential to know where you can and cannot go. To go outside you need to don full polar gear. You must be in pairs or more, have a radio, and sign out.

We had a braai for dinner! There is a little balcony on the north-west side, mostly out of the wind, and with a fantastic view. There they made a charcoal fire in two half-drums, and soon the steaks were sizzling. You take your beer out warm, and it gets cold as you drink it! By the time that was over it was after 2200. To the windscoop!

The base is on a high flat-topped buttress. There is a second buttress to the north (separated by a valley called the butt-crack!). The north buttress is a protected area. The winds, mostly from the south, have packed a gentle ramp of snow to the southern side, up which the snow-cat road reaches the base. But on the downwind side, the swirling gales have hollowed out a deep icy bowl called the windscoop. That is where the inhabitants of SANAE IV go to have fun.

The thrill starts with the journey down. You ride on skidoos, like motorcycles with caterpillar tracks, towing passenger sleds. The passenger sleds have no suspension, and the snow kicked up by the skidoo blasts the first passenger. The last passenger is hanging on for dear life as you race across the bumpy surface, half airborne!

The floor of the windscoop is 'blue ice' - the hard heart of the Antarctic ice cap itself. The walls are high, snowy and steep, especially the one backed up onto the buttresses, from which they are separated by a deep crevasse. We trudged up that side, in the rose-coloured glow of the setting sun. Then you turn on your back, with your head pointing downhill and two people hanging onto your bent-up knees. They let go, and you rattle off over the *sastrugi*, very disoriented. Like having a back massage with a ten-pound hammer!

Next we zoomed high up onto the lip of the scoop in the skidoos. One by one, we sledged down into the bowl, riding on the smooth plastic cushion taken from one of the sleds. What a rush! The side of the bowl has an S-shape. You start off fast but apparently in control, on your belly facing downhill, gripping the cushion in front and with your legs out back as rudders. Then you get into the steep part of the S, and it is as if someone lit a rocket on your back. No time to think, or even to yell, just hang on! They have clocked the riders at over ninety kilometres per hour. With your face about 10 cm above the snow, it feels like Mach 1. You are semi-blinded by the rush of icy wind and

the acceleration. You zoom out onto the icy floor of the bowl, which is hard and slippery, but not entirely smooth! I thought I was going to take off. You end up halfway up the bowl on the other side, breathless and dying to do it again.

It was 0200 when we got back to the base. That is the advantage of no real darkness. Since it was the last night for many of last-year's team, and one before the first of many lonely nights for the next team (who we got to know well on the voyage from Cape Town), and the OutSite team were celebrating the successful end of their work, a big party followed. After breakfast and another quick trip outside, we flew back to Agulhas, where I am now. We are busy loading containers (iceberg B15 crashed into the shelf just west of us, and there were some concern about the stability of the shelf.

Love,

Dad