

Subject: Scholes cabin 5: Unloading at Atka ice port

29 December 2009 UTM 70.1217 S 4.0933 E

Dear Stirling,

We are unloading! The wind died down a little, the ice experts pronounced it safe, and a convoy of lighter snow tractors arrived from Neumayer. We began to swing the containers off the deck and onto a sled on the ice, using the big crane. They only do one at a time, then the tractor drags the loaded sled a safe distance away, in case the ice should crack. So it is slow work, and very cold. The wind is still strong, causing the containers to swing and spin. There are ropes tied to all four corners, and teams of men try to control it as much as they can. In the middle, an Adelie penguin wandered over to be helpful, but when the container came down he decided to skedaddle as fast as his tummy could take him!

Once fully loaded, a sled train sets off for Neumayer base, visible through binoculars across the frozen bay, but five hours away by tractor. After the empty sleds return, we reload them and repeat the process. There were seventeen big containers on the deck, stacked three layers high. When they are gone, we can reach into the hold and unload the rest of the cargo. At some stage the heavy tractors standing in the deck will need to be lifted onto the ice as well.

Unloading the stores and equipment for SANAE has not always been done this way. In previous years, Agulhas moored next to the ice shelf at the closest point to the base. The ice there is hundreds of metres thick, so it can take a heavy load unless you are unlucky enough that an entire iceberg splits off! But because the shelf towers about 70 m above the sea, our ship-board crane cannot lift the cargo onto it. A ramp has to be bulldozed into the shelf, down to a level we can reach. That is a really tricky operation - imagine working with a 28 tonne bulldozer, on a steep icy slope, straight above the freezing sea! So they prefer not to work that way.

But unloading onto bay ice is hazardous too. A few years ago, one of the tractors was swallowed up! The drivers work with all the doors and hatches wide open, so that they can jump out in a hurry if they need to.

We are doing some oceanography while we wait, but because the ship is nose-in to a sort of dock that we chiselled into the ice using the prow, we are unable to deploy the CTD sampler from the front lab. We continue to take surface seawater samples from the engine room inlet.

How are things in the Karoo?

Love,

Dad