



P-p-p-pick up a penguin

Rachel Hazell must have one of the most unusual jobs in the world: postmistress and penguin counter on a remote Antarctic island. By **Carolyn Locher**



Part of Rachel's job is counting the Gentoo penguins, which make their nests on Goudier Island

SITTING IN THE WORKSHOP of her three-bedroom apartment in Leith, Edinburgh-based book artist Rachel Hazell is oblivious to the noise drifting up from the pub-lined bus-congested street below. She is methodically hand-stitching the last spine on the diaries she will take on her journey to Antarctica.

"When I told my family that I was going to work as Assistant Postmistress and Penguin Monitor at Port Lockroy, my sisters thought it was a great opportunity," says Rachel. "My stepfather was worried that I would lose my mind!" she laughs and chokes as the chocolate Penguin biscuit she has been eating goes down the wrong way.

Port Lockroy is the most popular stopping-off point for tourist vessels cruising the Antarctic Peninsula.

On a clear summer day, shards of mountains and a flotilla of icebergs welcome visitors to the glacier-fed bay that surrounds Goudier Island, the temperature sitting around 0°C.

Rachel Morgan of the UKAHT says, "In order to fill this role, we were looking for someone who had complete enthusiasm for Port Lockroy's history and what it is now about. We needed someone that could live in rudimentary conditions, personable enough to talk to up to 350 tourists a day and yet be able to do repetitive tasks like hand stamping and franking up to 70,000 pieces of mail."

When not travelling through Scotland, teaching children and adults how to make their own books, self-employed Rachel makes paper-based book-sculptures for exhibition, inspired by her two >

previous trips to Antarctica. In 2004, she semi-circumnavigated the continent for a month as 'artist in residence' for Quark Expeditions. In 2006, as the Arts and Science 'bridge' on the Education and Outreach Committee for International Polar Year, Rachel spent a month on the Royal Naval vessel HMS Endurance.

So how does one prepare for five months in a deep freeze with two teammates who are virtual strangers? After obtaining special Foreign Office permission to take the role, Rachel attends a briefing weekend learning how to live in cold, basic conditions and how to cook on a propane camping stove.

On the 15-day 'commute' from Buenos Aires to Port Lockroy (aboard the Nordnorge cruise ship) the team study Health and Safety documents and prepare Risk Assessments for working at height (painting the roof and windows on the original hut, Bransfield House) and what to do if the wooden huts burn down. Rachel learns how to count penguins. They all learn how to limit the spread of guano in and around the museum. If the dust is inhaled over long periods of time, penguin poo is toxic. Good weather permits the team to land on October 29th on the snowy outcrop that is Goudier Island. Rachel is delighted to be back in Antarctica for a decent duration.

The team's accommodation is basic. They cook, eat and sleep in the 5 x 4 metre Bunk Room. From the depth of their Tog 24-sponsored sleeping bags on sheepskin-covered bunks they look through double-glazed windows (adorned with retro gingham curtains) at the sheath-bills that tap constantly throughout the lengthening Antarctic summer days. "We have a room with a bucket, which is our toilet. The walls are covered in 1940's and 1950's graffiti and posters of buxom girls."

In the 'living museum' there are remnants of an old flag, a sign reading 'Crown Land' and snowshoes worn by the original members of Operation Tabarin, Britain's secret World War II



expedition.

And then there are the Gentoo penguins, which build nests out of stones. Penguin study sites are roped off so that the human impact on control colonies can be monitored.

"There were around 600 Gentoo nests last year. I count the numbers

"At dinner time, even tins of food whose frozen contents have thawed to a mush taste like nectar of the gods."

at the beginning of the season, again when the eggs are hatched and finally to see how many chicks have survived. The first egg was laid two days ago. It will take a month to incubate and I have been monitoring it daily. If a leopard seal leaps out of the water and grabs a

penguin off the rocks, we are not allowed to intervene."

The souvenir postcards, books, t-shirts, baseball caps, key rings, stickers and postcards of the sub-Post Office shop and the contents of the two large metal trunks containing 100,000 stamps and First Day Covers (picked up en route at the Falkland Islands) are lovingly arranged in the Generator Shed under the watchful eye of a crudely-painted 1950's Marilyn Monroe.

The shop opens from 7am to 7pm, seven days a week. Yachts, research vessels and up to two cruise liners may make radio contact each day, firstly to ask Fanny and Pickle (the name this season's postal staff have been given) if they are there, then politely request permission to land. The first inflatable boats arrive at 8:30 am.



"Ice in the Gerlache Straights has prevented some of the scheduled vessels from landing. So far we have seen an average of 100 visitors a day. They send between three and 50 postcards. A lot more ships are scheduled from now on."

Once their visitors have left, the shop is restocked. Rachel begins the repetitive task of hand-stamping, franking and bagging mail. The mail will eventually be shipped back to Stanley and then freighted on to the UK, where it is sorted and re-distributed around the world.

Days are scheduled to include vital maintenance to ensure that the huts survive for another season. The team warm up by dancing the Gay Gordon to Jamiroquai and the Dixie Chicks as they sand and paint the Generator Shed and the Science Room. "The only time our clothes

freeze is when we sweat. The one good thing about it being so cold is that we can't smell ourselves."

Luckily for Rachel (who has packed a fleece-lined sleep mask and two weeks' underwear) larger cruise ships can't always anchor close by, so they take a mobile shop to the ship.



Goudier Island is so small that people can walk right around it in just ten minutes

"We shower once a week, have our laundry washed every two weeks and eat with the guests. We are on hand to answer questions after the team leader has given his talk on the history of the Peninsula and Port Lockroy."

The team takes it in turns to cook. "The highlight is morning porridge. At dinner time, even tins of food whose frozen contents have thawed to a mush taste like nectar of the gods." When the ships cannot land, the team use ice axes to chip glacier ice off in blocks to provide 'lightly salted' water for tea and washing up, under the wary gaze of a resting battle-scarred elephant seal.

"The hardest part of our daily routine is waste disposal." Stringent environmental guidelines mean that time is spent sorting and bagging food scraps, packaging



and personal waste into the appropriate containers ready to be 'packed-out' on a passing vessel.

Christmas will be spent in the shop with possibly the only tree in the Antarctic, brought down especially for the occasion.

"We will be working, wearing Santa Claus hats and singing Xmas carols very badly. Last year the weather was awful. The team were due on a ship for Xmas dinner. At 9:30 pm the ship finally gave up trying to anchor and left. We ate baked beans on toast and went to

"I do miss things like lacy underwear, young men with big calves and broadband"



bed early." Water temperatures permitting, Rachel may dip her toes in the water on New Years Day.

"This year has seen unusually low temperatures and heavy ice conditions. There is slightly more snow than in recent years. I saw two avalanches, one on Mount William and one on the Fife Range: the snow-smoke was amazing. We can get bad storms; the time I dread most is when we could be holed up for days and we don't get to see anybody else. You would have thought that it would be respite from the relentless work, but work keeps us busy."

The team live, work, eat and sleep together on an island that at high tide takes just ten minutes to walk around. They are preparing to see up to 350 people a day. Does it ever get too much?

"We don't really get much leisure time but I do write postcards, type my blog, take photos and sing. My fitness routine involves yoga, skipping and lobbing rocks out to sea. If I want time on my own I can go outside and watch the penguins under the midnight sun. I do miss things like poetry, lacy underwear, lots of pairs of socks, young men with big calves, and broadband. What worries me is arriving back and not being able to reintegrate after being in such an otherworldly place."

Rachel and the team leave in

Rachel poses with the other members of her team in the shop where visitors can buy souvenirs and postcards of their visit

March 2008. She will return to debriefing meetings and to compile a wildlife report on the numbers of seals (Leopard, Weddell and fur), birds (a Giant petrel, blue eyed shags, a pair of skuas, Antarctic terns, albatross and sheath-bills) whales and the occasional Chinstrap and Adelie penguins.

"Small things give me pleasure here, like peeing into the sea first thing in the morning and 'cancelling' the mail. At the end of the day, I like being utterly quiet and still in the most beautiful place in the world."

Further information

- Port Lockroy was built on Goudier Island by the Royal Navy in 1944. It was the 'Base A' during Operation Tabarin (a government-sponsored wartime spying operation) and the earliest example of a British scientific research station on the Antarctic Peninsula until it was abandoned in 1962.

- In 1996, the British Antarctic Survey began a programme of repair and conservation, which was taken over by the charity UK Antarctic Heritage Trust (UKAHT) in 2006. During the

Antarctic summer months (November - March) they employ a team of three staff to inhabit the fully restored 'living museum'. Once there, the team run a sub-post office/souvenir shop and monitor the impact of humans on 600 breeding pairs of Gento penguins.

For further information on the UKAHT:

<http://www.ukaht.org/>

To follow Rachel's Port Lockroy blog: <http://rachel-hazellisaway.wordpress.com/>