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An expedition unfurls. Late in the afternoon on February 2, 2007, after everyone and just about all of their bags made it on board, Polarstern left the refueling pier in Punta Arenas. With the aid of current and tailwind, we flew like a water-skier through the Strait of Magellan and into the Drake Passage, towards our first station (identified on the ship's monitors as "pick me up Mabel", ETA approximately one week). Although we had embarked in his stormiest latitudes, Neptune greeted us with the utmost benevolence.

The first instrumentation to be deployed on this expedition was a bolt cutter. There was a padlock for which the key had remained at home. Behind that door lay kitbags whose contents promised their designated owners warm limbs and uncrushable toes. The first snowshoes were to be tested by a morning stroll on deck. Upon seeing the large stock of shoes standing orderly and at attention, our meteorologist, "They've probably got half a meter of snow up on the sounding deck." But we are actually quite far from that point yet. The first measurement and water collection activities anxiously awaited the crossing of the 200 mile line (into international waters). The bathymetrists threw a cautious "ping" into the deep to test the echo.

In big, little, official, and personal meetings, we learned how to behave around helicopters so as not to lose our heads and acquainted ourselves every day with a new face or two at the dinner table. There will only be new faces on board for a little while. They must be enjoyed while they can.

The unfurling of the expedition is multifaceted, intensive but coming in discrete packages, like the opening of a nestled Russian doll. The ship holds cargo vans that are stacked floor to ceiling with shipping crates that are themselves full of cardboard boxes containing a multitude of sundry bits of equipment for sediment coring, water sampling, and geophysical data collection. Of course only properly trained personnel should turn on newly freed equipment. Pushing unfamiliar buttons is frowned upon, especially up on the bridge.

The echo sounders have marked themselves with their stubbornness. For example, in the art of persuading the trusty electronics on board to share their data, displaying it on the monitors as colorful plots of seafloor topography. Every bit of this information will be used on a new map of the Southern Ocean; one of the purposes of this cruise is to fill in some of those extensive white spaces, reducing by a bit the amount of seafloor which is still off the charts.

Sample bags bartered against mouse pads. Meters of black refractory tubing (the "air hose" of the seismic guns) snake themselves over planks and are wrestled into submission by blue overalls and yellow tape. Did the blonde girl with the yellow detector find the "ocean bottom seismograph" pinger hidden behind the forklift? (The test was for the detector, not the girl!) The MABEL crew already had a test dive. With any luck, these mysterious sentences will fill you with enthusiasm for the things to come in future bulletins.

Although we are mainly a seagoing expedition, we've got landlubbers on board who are using Polarstern mainly as a taxi to their field sites. They are using the journey time for the testing of equipment and the packing of gear and supplies. Are the doors to the Tomatoes tight? (to those not in the know, a Tomato is a portable bright red round igloo) Can the new big tents hold up against the katabatic winds? Should double portions of potatoes be fried at the evening meals? One can ask at the

Chinese station if they will give us a little barrel of benzene, but other than that the nearest supermarket (or hardware supply store) is more than a thousand kilometers away. Did we forget the Bologna sausage? Perhaps the ship's cooks can help us out. A stock of granola bars and tea is another requirement for a successful geological expedition, not just a geologic hammer for every man and woman. (But, dear reader, you would be right to surmise that a few other things are necessary for a multiweek stay on land in the Antarctic)

Colloquially, the sea on the first days of the cruise was a duck pond (well, a duck pond with ice and penguins instead of ducks). Then on the 5th of February we arrived in the Antarctic proper. We crossed the 60th latitude at 8:15 in the morning and shortly before dinner the first official greeting committee appeared, in full tux and tails, debuting themselves upon a handy iceberg that was floating by. Blue ice equals old ice, rounded, turned over, banded with blue and white, and full of caverns, tunnels, columns, and shining turquoise lagoons (ah me, but were the water warmer...). History-bearing mountains equivalent to a month's supply of drinking water for a small city. Icebergs. Some of us have seen so many of them during our travels down here in the Southern Ocean, yet each time they are something new and fascinating. But for old hands, ice bergs cannot be photographed. The family has forbidden it. The Weddell Gyre turns right hereabouts and everything within it will turn course as well until they beat a hasty retreat north of the Antarctic Peninsula and the icebergs melt.

And then the ducks are gone. We are in the southern hemisphere and cyclones rotate in the opposite direction of their northern counterparts. One depression, with its center over the Weddell Sea and one arm reaching all the way up to Brazil, rolled us like dice. The tranquil days were blown away and wet, heavy snow smacked its way horizontally across the ship. The outside decks were devoid of humankind because the captain closed them to all personnel and, anyway, the waves washing over were ice cold. Neptune's test to see if you are seaworthy is a normal part of crossing polar seas.

Every evening there is a meeting in the cinema room not only for the chief scientist to summarize the activities of the past day and for the meteorologist to let us know what is in store for the next, but also for the project leaders to give us an overview of the research programs their groups are carrying out on this expedition. That way we are all well informed about the things there are to see and the things there are to come.

Very hearty greetings from a sound and cheerful expedition team!