

Antarctic Journal: Halfway around the world in 96 hours

Getting to the ice is half the battle.

Matt Siegfried

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ABOVE THE SOUTHERN OCEAN

The view from the flight deck of a US Air Force C-17 cargo plane on the way to Antarctica.

Matt Siegfried

Matt Siegfried is a glaciologist on the [ROSETTA-ICE](#) field project in Antarctica. For the next several weeks, he'll be writing a [blog](#) for Nature about life in the field.

One question I'm often asked about Antarctica is how long it takes to get there. My answer, simultaneously vague and precise —“at least four days” — is often met with a quizzical look. Perhaps this requires a bit of explanation.

For Antarctic projects that are based out of McMurdo or South Pole stations, the jumping off point for Antarctica is Christchurch, New Zealand. I took off on a commercial plane from San Diego at 5:35 p.m. Pacific Daylight Time on 31 October. Three flights later, I landed in Christchurch at 12:20 a.m. New Zealand Daylight Time on 3 November. That was the first two days.

Once in Christchurch, the fun began. A shuttle came to the hotel at 8:15 a.m. (less than seven hours after I had checked in) to take me to the [Clothing Distribution Center](#) (or “the CDC”; I hope you are as excited as I am for the deluge of three-letter acronyms in the coming weeks). I had two important tasks for the morning: (1) to collect my extreme cold weather (ECW) gear, which includes boots, pants, jackets, hats, gloves, and mittens; and (2) start my trainings. Trainings and briefings will be a common theme for the next week of my life.

This first batch of training sessions were relatively straightforward, taking only about a half-hour:

- A quick medical briefing and altitude-awareness video ([South Pole Station](#) is at 2,835 metres, or 9,301 feet, above sea level),
- An introductory video called Destination Antarctica, which highlights that Antarctica is both an incredibly beautiful and an incredibly dangerous place,
- A video featuring some of the exciting science this year ([South Pole Ice Core](#), the [Dry Valleys Long-Term Ecological Research site](#), and the [Long Duration Balloon facility](#) took the honours this year), and
- A video about the logistics of clothing distribution.



Read more of [Matt's Ice Diary](#)

Scientists and staff heading to US Antarctic stations are each allowed to bring 85 pounds (about 39 kilograms) of personal luggage.

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The US Air Force has been ferrying US researchers to Antarctica for 60 years, as part of “Operation Deep Freeze.” Matt’s ride is a C-17 cargo plane.

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Accommodations aboard the C-17 are spacious, but not luxurious. This was Matt’s view from his seat.

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We then filed into another room to retrieve the clothes that the extraordinarily-helpful CDC staff had already packed for us in the US Antarctic Program's [standard-issue orange bags](#). After making sure that all the clothes fit, that we were up-to-date with our flu shots, and that our paperwork was in order, we had the rest of the day to take care of any last-minute errands before leaving the comfortable confines of civilization. Shuttles were scheduled to collect us from our hotel at 5:45 a.m., for a 6:30 a.m. flight check-in. That would have put us in Antarctica in the early afternoon of 3 November — ending four days of travel.

Don't ship the penguins

Unless, of course, the room phone rings at 4:40 a.m and you find out that your plane's broken and you're facing a 24-hour delay. (That's why I said "at least" four days).

Delays are a fact of life in Antarctica. Weather is unpredictable, planes fly their maximum number missions per week, and priorities are constantly shifting. The trick to a successful Antarctic field career is maintaining enough flexibility to roll with the changes and bring enough work (or books, or movies, or crossword puzzles) to fill aimless days.

In this case, I appreciated the delay. I caught up on sleep, finished some work, and, perhaps most importantly, went to the park for one last memory of vibrant colours and aromatic scents. I've found over my past four field seasons that the sensory deprivation of a (mostly) plantless, scentless (except for that which emanates from humans), monochromatic continent is the hardest part of an extended stay on the ice.

Thankfully, the diligent US Air Force (which has been supporting Antarctic science for the last 60 years as part of [Operation Deep Freeze](#)) made quick work of the plane repair, and we were off to the CDC the next morning. After checking in and eating breakfast, it was time for another round of briefings: 25 minutes on air terminal safety (what to do in an earthquake), an introduction from the National Science Foundation and Antarctic Support Contract, a lecture on environmental protection in Antarctica (how to throw out trash, absolutely NO packing peanuts, and don't touch — or ship — penguins), and finally a quick primer on security and flight logistics.

I'm writing this from a seat aboard an Air Force C-17 cargo plane, talking about nerdy science minutiae with my friend [Paul](#). We'll land at [Pegasus Field in Antarctica](#), drive 60 minutes into "town", and, before we can even have a snack, sit down for another set of briefings.

It's been a long few days of travelling, but the end is in sight. And I can tell you that the ROSETTA-Ice crew is itching to get started on science.

Next week: Getting your bearings in the Antarctic Circle. Until then, find me on [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), or [Facebook](#) ...

— Matt

Previous entry: [Packing for the end of the world](#) | ***Next entry:*** [Welcome to Mactown](#)

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