

FRANCE IN ANTARCTICA

Change unsettles Antarctic old hands

Dumont d'Urville

AT Dumont d'Urville, the signs of change — and the need for it — are everywhere. Here, the brand new cohabits with the ageing and the downright obsolete. It is now more than ten years since the founder of Expéditions Polaires Françaises (EPF), the distinguished explorer Paul-Emile Victor, retired. And EPF seems only now ready to disturb the imprint he left. But a continuing cash crisis makes for some odd contradictions at a time of expansion.

A year ago, France decided to boost its polar research with a new Antarctic base and a research institute in Paris (see page 302). "This summer", says Michel Engler, director of EPF and in charge of work on a new landing strip being built at Dumont d'Urville, "there are 13 science programmes, last year there were five and the year before there were two". He expects the number to increase further once the landing strip is finished.

The airstrip construction is a constant reminder that things will never be the same again (which seems against the spirit of the Antarctic Treaty, if not the letter). Perhaps the scar of the five flattened islands will heal in time, but at present the landing strip sears like a welt across the pristine white and blue archipelago.

Meanwhile, a new lease of life is being given to the fleet of traverse vehicles in preparation for the planned new base at Dome C, 1,000 km away. What one veteran calls the "Rolls Royce of the Antarctic" — a brand-new Kässbohrer tractor, complete with stereo cassette player and full heating in the cab — stands next to a handful of 1960s French-made Hotchkiss trucks. Once some of the

THE GOOD LIFE

A base marching on its stomach . . .

ON Shackleton's historic 1908 'furthest south' expedition to the Antarctic, after 1,000 miles of slogging and still more than 280 miles from the South Pole, Frank Wild wrote: "We get now less than one-and-a-half cups of pony meat a day, six biscuits . . . three spoonfuls of pemmican; a spoonful of sugar in our tea and cocoa. How is that for more than 50 degrees of frost and a heavy sledge at 14 miles a day and under-clad?" Nowadays, the French do things differently. Gilles Brébant and Christian Simonet, chefs for last year's winterover, have both cooked for President Mitterrand.

In December, direct from Paris aboard the *Astrolabe*, came *quenelles de brochet*, 120 bottles of champagne, 144 bottles of St Emilion Bordeaux, 8,000 snails, hare paté, calves' brains, lobster and 96 kg of frogs' legs. Not a single gram of pemmican or corned beef, though. But, says Simonet, "we do have 25 litres of yellow colouring that we don't know what to do with".

most modern vehicles in the Antarctic, they now stand as museum pieces, facing the South Pole. The manufacturer no longer exists and parts cannot be found.

For Michel Pourchet, a chemical engineer from the glaciology laboratory at Grenoble, the construction work on the airstrip, followed by the new base, will mean that facilities at Dumont d'Urville will be neglected. "This year we have no skidoos", he says, "so we will have to use a 40-year-old 'Weasel' that takes three-quarters of an hour to start each morning."

Patrice Godon, head of works at EPF, confesses that it is hard to keep the base up to date. "We are heading for a very tight period", he says.

Overdue new laboratories are being completed, and the dormitory for over-winterers is fairly modern. But the food store and the engineering workshop are converted accommodation from the base erected for the International Geophysical Year (1957-58). They are now so frail that fist-sized holes have appeared. Michel Engler says that, if money is not found to repair the buildings, he will close them down next year.

But he knows there is little hope of replacement in the near future. "You should see the ones at Kerguelen" (one of the French sub-Antarctic islands), says Bernard Morlet, research director of TAAF, and EPF secretary-general. EPF and TAAF have a combined budget deficit of FF20 million this year. While the money for the airstrip and for Dome C is secure, there may be only just enough for a minimal summer research programme at Dumont d'Urville next year.

But not everyone is for modernization and many 'old hands' regret the march of time. There is a definite nostalgia for the old days, when you had to be built like a lumberjack, washed yourself with snow and never complained about the hardships. The five-and-a-half day sea crossing from Hobart, Tasmania, is also part of the sense of adventure. The 65-metre supply-ship *Astrolabe* is



The latest equipment from Austria's ski slopes stands next to the lone surviving Weasel, a contraption of Normandy landing vintage donated to EPF in 1947.

regularly buffeted by 12-metre waves and force-10 gales as it crosses the notorious Southern Ocean twelve times each summer.

This year, *Astrolabe* was stuck in pack-ice for two weeks, 60 km off the coast of Terre Adélie. Last year, gales burst open a rear door, flooding equipment and personal belongings. The ship could have sunk. And, on almost every crossing, about three-quarters of the passengers are seasick for days on end.

"This is the Antarctic, it's not a package tour", say EPF staff, almost proudly. And the long, rough crossing helps to justify an airstrip. This year, before the Gulf war broke out, Prime Minister Michel Rocard was scheduled to visit Terre Adélie.

The present round trip by sea and air would have taken at least three weeks. But, making use of an existing air connection between New Zealand and the US base at McMurdo, on the Ross ice shelf, he could have left Paris mid-week, visited the New Zealand base and been back for a cabinet meeting the following Wednesday. At the end of next year, Terre Adélie will be three days away from Paris.

But even access by sea is becoming more comfortable and tourism is already a reality (despite a cost of \$8,000 for each person). Last year, an estimated 8,000 tourists visited the continent. And, in January, as the *Astrolabe* crashed through the pack-ice after a solitary and gruelling five days at sea, it was a shock to see a manicured liner, the *World Discoverer*, gliding like a swan on a winter lake. But she could not berth at Dumont d'Urville as planned. Unequipped for pack-ice, the liner stood by as the *Astrolabe* ploughed on like an overblown tug. "Thanks for putting on a splendid show", radioed the captain.

Peter Coles



Cuisine is not neglected on the French base: pastry chef Gilles Brébant (left) with chef Christian Simonet.

"Every overwinterer has to put on 3.5 kg, that's the only dietary advice we get", says Brébant. Twice a month, there is a 'grande bouffe' blowout with French wines, hors d'oeuvres, exquisitely presented meat, fish, cheeses and sumptuous patisseries. And this year's pastry chef, 'Tintin' Dumont, gets up every morning at 5:30 to make fresh bread and croissants for breakfast. Eat your heart out Frank!

P.C.