



FIELD STAFF NEWSLETTER



An Interview with Patrick Woodhead

Patrick Woodhead is Managing Director of White Desert, one of four IAATO member operators that offer visitor experiences in the Antarctic interior. They operate from Cape Town, South Africa, during the season.

How long have you been working in the Antarctic?

I started White Desert in 2005 so ten years have already passed!

How did your Antarctic career start?

I spent about eight years doing expeditions to places that were basically unmapped with a small group of friends. We headed off to Tibet, the Amazon, Central Asia, but soon, we turned our attention south and in 2002, I was part of a team to ski to the South Pole from Hercules Inlet.

Two years later and I came back to traverse the continent of Antarctica from East to West, covering 1,850km man-hauling and using kites in 75 days. It was a superb expedition and whilst out on the polar plateau we came up with the whole concept of White Desert. Instead of roughing it "explorer style", we wanted to introduce an element of luxury to travelling in the interior of Antarctica and so created the camp we have today.

What areas of Antarctica have you worked in?

Expeditions have led me to the Axel-Heiberg in the Trans-Antarctic Mountains, the South Pole and over by the Ellsworth Range when crossing the continent.

I currently work in Dronning Maud Land and our camp is based on a small band of rock called the Schirmacher Oasis. It is a fabulously beautiful part of Antarctica that is warm (comparatively) and brimming with life and contrast. It's a totally different place to the monotony of the High Polar Plateau.

What do you love most about the job?

I love the sense of new frontiers. Dronning Maud Land still has so many unvisited sites and I love that sense of exploration. Taking clients up unclimbed peaks or to an Emperor Penguin colony that is so rarely visited makes it always seem new and exciting.

What do you find most challenging?

Antarctica is logistics – pure and simple. And if you make mistakes, they are usually very expensive ones.

What is the biggest lesson you've learned while working in Antarctica?

Don't underestimate the weather. It doesn't matter how well you think you know Antarctica, she can often surprise you. Situations can get out of hand so quickly if your planning isn't meticulous.

What are your favourite places and why?

I love the ice tunnels about an hour's walk from our camp. They are iridescent blue and over 100m in length. They are so surreal and always remind me of all the hidden places still left to explore in Antarctica.

Any special memories you'd like to share?

In Antarctica, the really special memories come from the people you are with. I remember kiting out from the South Pole on a perfect day, powder snow underneath our skis and a great friend of mine, Paul Landry smiling across at me as we sailed effortlessly across the snow.

What do you do when you aren't working South?

I write thriller novels! I have published three books with Random House that were set in Tibet, the Congo and lastly, Antarctica. They are published in 11 languages worldwide and I find writing them a great way to counter balance all the physical energy and freneticism of Antarctica.