

Inside the Antarctic research base: 'entitled men, endless beer'

An uneasy calm has settled on South Africa's Sanae IV base but news this week of a rescue plea is a reminder of the pressure on those working at the end of the world



Tensions have been running high at Sanae IV, despite the cheery team photos

[Jane Flanagan](#), Cape Town

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Claims of a violently jealous love triangle, an attack with a carving knife, free-flowing beer and sexual harassment. At the remote research stations of the Antarctic, the human condition is challenged by the most basic urges.

The recent plea for rescue over safety fears about an allegedly unstable colleague at an ice-locked base is the latest instance of dramas and abuse that are as old as Antarctic research.

An uneasy [calm has been restored](#) to South Africa's Sanae IV station, but winter is coming. Months of darkness and brutal weather will increase pressure on the nine-strong crew who are isolated until the end of the year.

"When the weather closes in, you're basically stuck in a box and left staring at each other," said Don Pinnock, a former writer in residence at Sanae IV, describing what awaits the overwintering team when the sun vanishes and outside temperatures plunge to minus 23C.

"They have their work but, understandably, it gets tense. You can literally be driven to madness by the way someone else cooks or eats their eggs. There was one guy in the takeover crew [that replaced Pinnock's team] who went at another with a carving knife."

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The six men and three women stationed in the 1979-built orange block and named on the South African National Antarctic Programme website include Sihle Mpho Lawana, the mission's doctor who graduated in 2019 and markets her own range of skin products on Instagram. Geomarr van Tonder, an engineer, posted a picture of herself with Lawana and a row of designer suitcases before they boarded the ice breaker SA Agulhas II in Cape Town for the two-week voyage south.



Sihle Mpho Lawana



Lawana and Geomarr van Tonder as they prepare to board the ice breaker SA Agulhas II

On his second overwintering season is Nivek Ghazi, the electronics engineer and deputy team leader. During his previous stint, Ghazi helped produce a low-budget horror film about an expedition team that perishes in the Antarctic wastes but returns to haunt the station's survivors. *Those That Are Lost But Not Forgotten* was submitted to the Antarctic Film Festival.



A still from the short film that Nivek Ghazi helped produce

The identities of the alleged offender and the colleague who

complained have not been made public.

South Africa established its first Antarctic base in 1959 and has Africa's only programme monitoring climate and conducting geological and meteorological surveys.

It has a weather station on Gough Island and also administers two islands, Prince Edward and Marion, between the South Pole and the tip of Africa, where personnel issues have proved hard to manage remotely. A member of a field trip to Marion Island in 2017 told The Times it had been "full of drama".

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Early in the expedition, frictions over a love triangle provoked one team member to take an axe to his rival's laptop.

“Apparently the woman involved had rejected a marriage proposal from one of the parties and he had retaliated against the other party,” read a summary of a briefing given to a parliamentary environment committee on what it called “the Marion Island Debacle”.

After clashes continued, the two men were removed from the base to a ship until their return to South Africa the following year.

This week's reported tensions at the South African base, in the era of social media, have drawn international interest in the fate of the crew, some of whom are posting about life in the ice. It has also highlighted a history of misconduct at remote sites where there is no police or protection and where much of the abuse goes unreported.



The team who are overwintering at Sanae IV as they prepared to leave Cape Town. Back row, from left: Ghazi, who made the short film, Alain Jacobs, Athi Mabope, Lawana, Nkululeko Khoza, Tumelo Seepane and Kelcey Maewashe, the team leader. Van Tonder and Lebogang Tsime are in the front row

“All the publicity that has been generated has been a positive thing in a way,” said Dion George, South Africa’s environment minister who is managing the government’s response to the complaints.

After intense mediation and fresh psychiatric evaluations things had settled, he said, adding: “It means that they know all eyes are on them and they can get the support that they need.”

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A woman who spent months at the station some years ago recalled its “incredibly machismo environment” where alcohol flowed. Recent social media posts show the team lying in the snow with bottles of beer.



Outside the Sanae IV research base

“There was a sense of male entitlement and women were in the minority, as they are in this crew. I didn’t witness any physical violence but the men strutted about and there was a constant sense of harassment towards the women,” she said, requesting not to be identified for fear of hurting her opportunities in a narrow field.

It was the same career concerns that made Jane Willenbring wait nearly two decades until she was an established academic in her own right before she became the first to blow the whistle on sexual harassment and assault in Antarctica.



Jane Willenbring

Willenbring’s abuser was so powerful and well-respected that a glacier had been named after him. In a complaint filed in 2016, Willenbring said that during her time as a graduate student on field trips to Antarctica, the geologist David Marchant had repeatedly shoved her down a steep slope, pelted her with rocks and called her a “whore”.

Her claims were echoed by a second accuser, Hillary Tulley, a retired teacher, who claimed that Marchant verbally abused her on a separate Antarctic trip.

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David Marchant

After a lengthy investigation, Marchant — who always denied the allegations — was fired by Boston University in 2019 for sexually harassing Willenbring, now a professor at Stanford University. A unanimous vote by the US Board on Geographic Names resulted in his [name being stripped from the glacier](#) in the Antarctic Royal Society Range, and it is now called Matataua, after a nearby peak.

A lawless atmosphere at the US research station McMurdo prompted Liz Monahan, a marine mechanic, to keep a hammer in her bra for protection from male colleagues, one of whom had a history of alcohol-related crime. She described feeling abandoned by her superiors after they failed to act on her reports of being threatened and sexually harassed. Part of a tiny mixed crew stationed about 900 miles from the South Pole, Monahan decided arming herself was all she could do.



Liz Monahon

“No one but myself was there to save me. And that was the thing that was so terrifying,” she said of her ordeal in 2022. “If he came anywhere near me, I was going to start swinging at him.”

Monahon made a formal complaint against her managers after returning to the United States. Subsequent research by the National Science Foundation into the experience of other women at Antarctic bases found that 59 per cent of women questioned said they had experienced harassment or assault while stationed in Antarctica, and 72 per cent of women said such behaviour was a problem on the bases.

After an online meeting with his South African team, George said he was confident that the crisis had blown over.

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Van Tonder and some of the team

“The situation is under control,” he said of the call, which included the alleged perpetrator, who has [written a letter apologising for his behaviour](#). Allegations of sexual harassment are being investigated.

The minister added: “They were in good spirits, there was some laughter and there have been no further requests to leave. They have gone through a difficult period but say they are committed to making sure they stay on track for the remainder of their time at the base.”

Acknowledging that “every expedition has its complexities”, George said he was satisfied the group had faced sufficiently rigorous tests of their suitability to survive another year on a cliff edge in the world’s harshest environment.

Wintering crews typically spend 15 months at the station, ten of them in isolation and the balance in handovers with the teams before and after them.

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