



One of the many auroras Shayne and his cohort have seen since sunset.

Dark skies

'This is as close to 100 percent dark as you are going to get without a blindfold'

Story and Photo by Shayne Clausson

The sun has been down since late March, and it has been completely dark since late April. We are approaching June 21, which marks our Winter Solstice, and the point that the sun will be heading back toward the southern hemisphere. Until then it just keeps getting darker and darker. When we have storms, and a lot of cloud cover, this place is pitch black. We have almost zero light pollution, so this is as close to 100 percent dark as you are going to get without wearing a blindfold. It is great to experience, but of course comes with its drawbacks.

When we get weather like this, it is hard to see your hand in front of your face, and impossible to see the ground that you are walking on. This wouldn't be half bad, except that we have a very uneven terrain, one that is constantly changing due to blowing snow. It seems that whenever there is a pressing need to travel a fair distance from station, we are having one of these dark days.

Last month I was heading from the dome out to our main satellite dish, about a mile each way. Before the sun set, we stuck hundreds of bamboo poles into the snow, with flags on top. These flag lines run out to the various buildings around station. I had a hard time finding the flag line out to the satellite, so I decided to head off in the right direction, figuring I would find it soon enough. We have an area called "the berms" which is a series of high snow walls with various cargo stored on top. The berms lie right in the path that I was walking. Without knowing I had unintentionally wandered on top of one, and the next thing I knew I found myself plunging four or five feet to the ground. Despite having a headlamp, I could not see the ground, or the drop off in front of me. Anyway, no harm done, and I was able to find the flag line shortly after my fall.

The winter has been a great experience so far. There are those days that seem to drag on, but overall time is really flying by down here. We have a great crew of 58, and we've not had any of the quarrels that I've heard of in previous winters. Of course we still have five months left on the ice, so anything is bound to happen.

One symptom of living above 10,000 feet is memory loss. The lack of oxygen seems to take its toll on everyone. It mostly affects your ability to recall simple words or phrases, people names, etc. All of a sudden you'll forget someone's name that you have seen everyday for the past eight months. It's what we call becoming toasty, and it is only going to get worse the longer we are down here.

Memory loss affects everyone. Other conditions like extremely dry skin and lips, only seem to affect certain people. The client is just too dry for some to adjust to. Everyone seems adjusted to the cold though. I can stay outside for a few hours with the proper clothing on. This is something I could not do in the summer, even though the temperatures were warmer. I am also able to make short trips outside with nothing more than my normal clothes plus a jacket and gloves. This is a good thing as it will be good practice for the 300 club.

Every year the 300 club recruits a host of new members. Membership is quite simple, all you need to do is sit in a sauna that is +200F and then run to the ceremonial South Pole and back, wearing nothing more than the shoes on your feet, on a day when it is -100F. Sounds simple, but we've yet to have a day that cold. We got down to -98F last month, and we were getting the sauna ready to go, but it never dropped the two degrees that we needed. Anyway, I am getting ready for the day that it does.

In all it's been a great time down here, and something that I will never forget. Five more months to go, and I plan on enjoying them all.