

Celebrating midpoint in the polar night

By Kristan Hutchison
Sun staff

This weekend Antarctic winter crews toast the darkness rather than curse it, celebrating Midwinter's Day, a holiday of unique importance to the most southerly continent.

Solstice marks the midpoint in the long, dark Antarctic winter, when the sun ceases moving north and begins its slow return south. This year the sun will reach its northernmost point at 8:57 p.m. June 20 Eastern Daylight Time. Because of time differences and where the international dateline falls, it will be June 21 at some Antarctic stations, including McMurdo

Midwinter's Day was first celebrated in 1898 by the crew of the *Belgica*, which spent the winter trapped in ice below the Antarctic Circle. Modern research stations developed their own traditions. Scientists and support staff at the three stations run by the U.S. National Science Foundation take an extra day off, creating a long weekend. Usually they work six days a week.

"Midwinter sort of sneaks up on you," said South Pole station manager Pete Koson. "We are all staying pretty busy down here, which I think helps keep your mind off the little things you might start to miss."

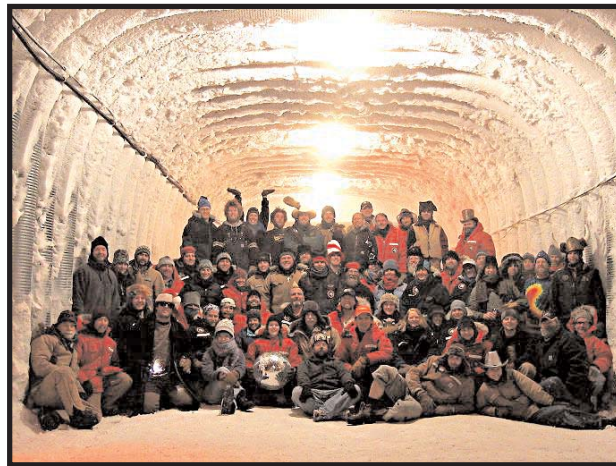
For Midwinter they trade good wishes with other stations around the continent and even the White House. President Eisenhower began the custom of sending an official greeting to the Antarctic stations on Midwinter's Day. In recent years other world leaders have followed suit, including the British and Indian prime ministers.

"People involved in Antarctic activities know the hardship and loneliness some of you are experiencing down South and have high respect for the work of all expeditionary," read a message from the

From the midwinter feast shared by Roald Amundsen and his crew below, to the cabled greetings sent between stations since the 1950s, Antarctic winter traditions continue.



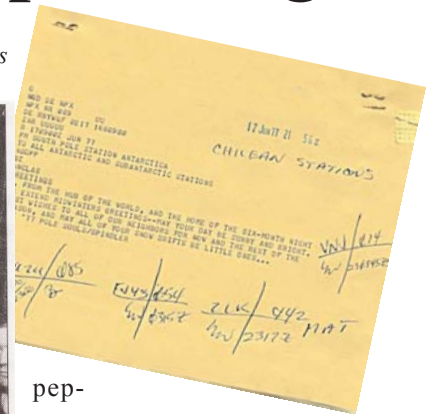
Below, the midwinter photo sent this year from the South Pole.



Brazilian Antarctic Program in 2001. "Now that the longest night has passed, let's cheer the forthcoming return of the sun and let its brightness and warmth raise our spirits."

As the early explorers did, today's winter crew dress in their best and feast in style.

At McMurdo Station the midwinter meal starts with a cocktail hour. The station managers act as waiters, pouring wine and serving an assortment of hors d'oeuvres: blackened sea scallops with tomato chili pepper and cumin aioli, roasted red



pep-

per and potato pancakes, pumpkin raviolis and sticky rice dumplings. The cafeteria is transformed with decorations and linen table cloths. The greatest transformation is the people themselves, who for one evening doff heavy parkas and Carhart overalls to appear unrecognizably refined in button-down shirts or dresses.

"Midwinter is a time of celebrating and I usually feel like 'Wow, we're halfway done already?'" said Lynn Hamann. "Last year, we had a fancy dinner in the galley with lots of starlight decorations, a dance, tablecloths and wine, and we all dressed up for the occasion."

This year the menu includes roast duckling, green lip mussels and Napoleon of halibut, crab and shrimp with saffron, garlic and thyme sauce.

"I have a very creative staff and expect a wonderful meal," wrote McMurdo chef Jan Jaspersen.

Each of the 44 Antarctic stations celebrates with its own set of midwinter traditions. A few people from McMurdo Station usually visit New Zealand's Scott Base next door for the Polar Plunge. Hardy - or foolhardy - souls jump into a hole cut in ice meters thick to dunk in sub-freezing water. The landlocked South Pole crew has its own version - the 300 Club. Joining the 300 Club can happen only on

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April 10

An emergency medical flight picked up three sick people at McMurdo Station and dropped off groceries and mail. All three recovered well.

April 16

Science technicians at ARO pressed the red WINTER button, turning off solar instruments on the roof until the sun returns in September.



April 19

A partial solar eclipse was visible on Palmer Peninsula.

April 21

Palmer residents recognized Earth Day by sending the divers down to clean debris from the seafloor beside the pier.

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days when the temperature outside drops to or below -100F ambient temperature. Then the sauna is cranked to 200F and people run from one temperature extreme to the other lightly clad. At Palmer Station, people just jump off the dock into the harbor.

For Palmer Station, June 21 is the day they wave goodbye to the research vessel *Laurence M. Gould* as it leaves them isolated for three months. The 19 people left at Palmer celebrate by sitting down together for a large meal, said station manager Rocky Ness.

“For us it’s going to be the start of our winter, where there’s one small group that’s alone together uninterrupted, but it’s also beginning to be the end of winter at the same time because the days are getting longer,” Ness said. “It’s kind of a contradiction, both the beginning and the end.”

Both are worth celebrating, said Ness, who enjoys the solitude of winter.

“I like that feeling of just kind of being on our own,” he said. “There’s less change. You know who you’re wintering with.”

Because it’s just short of the Antarctic Circle, Palmer never loses the sun completely. Even on Midwinter’s Day they get daylight from about 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., though it’s usually muted by clouds. Still, they look forward to the day when the sun rises above the mountains that blocking it from direct view in midwinter.

“At Palmer the first time the sun clears the glacier, where you can see it, that’s when people are like, ‘Whoohoo! Winter’s about over,’” Ness said.

Midwinter celebrations at Australia’s Casey Station typically start with a champagne brunch, followed by a short dip in the Antarctic water and a longer soak in their outdoor hot tub, wrote John Rich, a past station leader at Casey. The meal starts formally, then relaxes into an evening of poetry reading, music and skits.

At the British Rothera Station, the entire week before Midwinter’s Day is dedicated to preparations, with all but the most necessary station duties put on hold while people plan games, go skiing and secretly work on a handmade gift for the exchange, such as picture frames made from old



Typical winter greeting from Palmer Station. Many of the same people are back this year.

sledge runners, wrote Stuart Wallace, a past winterer at Rothera. When the day itself arrives, the BBC World Service broadcasts a special half-hour radio show for the winter crews at Rothera, Halley and Bird Island. The broadcasters read messages from the families and friends of everyone wintering, and play a song requested by each station.

The type of celebration may vary from station to station, but they all share a sense of isolation, and a comradery across the ice.

“Not everyone is cut out to be a winter-over,” wrote Lynn Hamann, now in her third winter working for supply at McMurdo Station. “It takes a certain kind of stamina. When the blanket of darkness is gently thrown over Antarctica and one has four long months of night to look forward to, it can be overwhelming for some, both physically (circadian rhythms) and mentally (depression).”

The sun set for the winter three months ago at the South Pole and two months ago at McMurdo Station on the coast. Twilight lingered about a month after, but since then the scientists, construction crews and support staff have lived in the dark, day and night. At the South Pole they can’t even turn on lamps to light their way, since telescopes in the Dark Sector rely on the constant darkness. The windows are all shuttered to keep indoor lights from polluting

the darkness.

The winter staff have quickly become as attuned to the phases of the moon as we usually are to the daily track of the sun across the summer sky. Waiting for the new moon, their eyes adjust to starlight.

“Words are not suitable to describe the clear night skies with millions of colorfully twinkling bright stars in formations we don’t see in the States, such as the Southern Cross,” wrote Hamann. “The ‘upside down’ moon is breathtaking, especially in those dark months in Antarctica in the winter. The full moon is so bright in May, June and July it seems like the sun.”

But nothing really can replace sunlight, the vital source of vitamin D that triggers our bodies’ sleeping and waking cycles. Without it, people often find themselves sleeping more and feeling sluggish.

June 20 is the turning point in the sun’s seasonal circuit, the longest summer day in the northern hemisphere and midnight in the southern winter’s night. From now on Antarcticans will be counting down until dawn, coming first to McMurdo August 21 and then to the South Pole September 23.

“I am sure that other people are reflective (as I am) about when the next time we see the sun will be,” Koson said. “But of course, the sunrise isn’t even close to the end of the winter, just another milestone of sorts, along with last flight, sunset, total dark, midwinter, first light and first flight.”

May 5

A lunar eclipse was visible at McMurdo. Palmer residents couldn’t see it, but celebrated Cinco de Mayo with a fiesta and piñata.

May 16

A storm laid waste to McMurdo Station, tearing out doors and windows, but hurting nobody.

June 20-21

(depending what side of the dateline you’re on)

Midwinter’s Day

June 21

The Gould will leave 19 people at Palmer Station, where they will be isolated for three months while the ship goes into dry dock.

July 4

The U.S. stations will celebrate American Independence Day in the dark. McMurdo usually holds a carnival and indoor parade.