

Level 4 Non-fiction – Science on the Ice

Two sets of merino underwear, two fleece jackets, a windbreaker, a puffer jacket, five pairs of gloves, a hat, a balaclava, fleece pants, fleece-lined boots, and lastly – a set of extreme-cold weather gear (called ECWs by those in the know). My kit is issued at Antarctica New Zealand’s Christchurch headquarters, and I’m told to return the following morning at six. I’m to wear my ECWs for the flight south.

The next day, I’m woken by my phone buzzing in the dark. It’s 4.45 a.m. “Ice flight delayed twenty-four hours due to weather,” the text says. The same message arrives five mornings in a row, and I learn my first lesson about Antarctica: dates are only estimates. On the sixth morning, no text arrives. I head for the airport, where I board a plane along with eighty other passengers, most of them scientists. We’re ready for temperatures as low as minus 40 degrees Celsius.

In just five hours, I’m transported from the spring warmth of Canterbury to Scott Base and a frozen world, much colder and brighter than I’d imagined. I’m a photographer, and I’ve come to Antarctica to document the set-up for a science project, starting with a deep-field traverse. This is a fancy term for lugging a huge amount of science equipment many kilometres across the ice. Usually this is done by plane, but this time, a convoy of tracked vehicles will drive deep into the polar region. The vehicles can cope with many more tonnes of equipment than a plane. They can also travel in almost any weather.