

“Hey Brendan, you enjoy hiking back home, right?”

We were both working the summer season at Casey Research Station in Antarctica, when Amy asked me the question over dinner.

“Would you like to do a hike off-station this weekend?”

“Heck yes!” I replied enthusiastically. I say yes to any opportunity for recreational trips during our time off down here!

And so we began to make arrangements for our hike. The plan was for a small group of us to head off-station in a Hägglunds (snow tracked vehicle) on the coming Saturday, spend the night at a field hut, then hike back to Casey Station the following morning. There are no trees down here – only snow and ice, plus moss and lichens on the rocks – so we agreed to call it a hike as opposed to calling it a *bushwalk* which would have been our term back in Australia. We finalised our plans and got our packs ready for the weekend.

The Hägglunds vehicle parked at Wilkes.

Driving to Wilkes

With everything packed in the Hägg, we rolled out from our base and started making our way along the designated over-snow route. The field hut we were staying at is only 7km away, but as the track can be rough in places, we took our time and it was an easy-going 45-minute drive.

Antarctica’s ‘Hilton’ is a bit more adventurous than the others around the world.

We pulled up outside Wilkes ‘Hilton’ hut, one of the most popular destinations for Casey expeditioners eager for a weekend away from the station. The building was once a radio transmitter hut that formed part of Wilkes Station. Wilkes was built in 1957 by the US Navy for the International Geophysical Year (IGY) program in Antarctica, and was transferred to Australian operations from 1959 until it closed in 1969. The radio transmitter hut is the only remaining building now that the others around the old station are covered by decades of snow and ice. Sometime after Wilkes ceased operations, the old radio gear was replaced with bunks and a small wood stove, making it very homely and charming.

The Antarctic cheeseboard tradition continues!

Compared to the three other field huts along the coastline near Casey Station, Wilkes ‘Hilton’ feels like quite a luxury, with plenty of space to stretch out, some scrap timber to burn in the stove, and even a dartboard! At some point, someone has also supplied a few slippers and hotel robes, more for a bit of a joke, but it’s still a nice touch for that hotel-style indulgence. Any recreational field trip in Antarctica involves the essential tradition of a cheeseboard and our excursion was no exception! Settling in for the night we had a terrific spread complemented with great company and conversation.

Ready-set-go! Layered up and ready to depart Wilkes Hut and begin our hike to Casey station.

Hiking to Casey Station

We were up early the next morning for our hike back to Casey Station. While the crew in the Hägg took some of our gear, the rest of us – four including myself – either carried or sled-hauled our survival packs over the snow. These backpacks contain anything you'd ever need in an emergency, including warm clothes, an ice axe, and even a chocolate bar stashed in the top.

After checking our maps and GPS once more, we did final adjustments on our gear before getting on our way in the -3°C morning. A fresh inch of soft, powdery snow had fallen overnight and made walking fun. Although, the icy breeze was certainly a jolt to the system as we headed off on our journey.



The Adélie penguins are one of 5 species of penguin that inhabit Antarctica.

As the track dropped down over a small rise, the nearby hills fell away revealing sweeping views over Newcomb Bay and the multi-coloured Lego-like buildings of Casey Station off in the distance. The fresh tracks of Adélie penguins 'tobogganing' on their bellies in the snow meant we had just missed the sight of these cute little creatures making their way through the valley.

My body warmed rapidly as we ascended the plateau. Working outdoors in Antarctica is a delicate balance of having enough layers to keep warm, but also not too many to make you sweat, as the perspiration freezes. As we continued trekking up the hill, I fine-tuned my neck buff, beanie, and various jacket zips to ventilate just the right amount.



There were four of us in our hiking group – myself plus Amy, Bec, and Kylea.

On we went, making a right turn and following the contour of the plateau while keeping a good pace. We had plenty of stops along the way too, not missing an opportunity to snap a picture or just enjoy the vast cold, clear surrounds of the Antarctic coastline. Casey Station continued to grow larger as we traversed the final over-snow route, known at the 'A-Line', and then we had one last stretch before arriving back to our Lego-like home.

The final approach to the station is a sharp rise, named Penguin Pass. It's a bit of a slog getting up the hill, but the views of the icebergs floating off in the bay make it very worthwhile. The final few hundred metres brought us along the main road off-station and to the front door of our accommodation building.

We all agreed it was a successful trip out to the hut followed by a terrific hike! There were a few sore legs from the effort but what a rewarding experience to be able to enjoy the vast Antarctic wilderness.



A Terrific hike left us with sore legs and hungry bellies, ready for a big Sunday brekky.

The chefs on-station are always busy whipping up a feast on Sunday mornings and we were greeted with a fantastic menu of bacon and eggs in the kitchen, along with many other brunch treats to fill us up after our weekend away. The walk this morning sure had made me hungry!

A big thanks to Amy, Bec, and Kylea for sharing this amazing hike with me, and Dan and Nick as our support Häggglunds team.



Is Antarctica on your bucket list?