

Tai Poutini Polytechnic Media Release

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No such thing as a typical day in Antarctica for Polytechnic tutor

Hägglunds, Adélie Penguins, search and rescue and ski trips – it's all in a day's work on the ice for Tai Poutini Polytechnic Ski Patrol Tutor Paula Roberts.

Paula recently returned from her fourth summer season as a Field Training Officer for the Australian Antarctic Program's Casey Station in East Antarctica. Paula says there is no such thing as a typical day on the ice and she harnesses all her skills – many of the same ones she teaches her ski patrol students – when working in Antarctica.

Her role includes training and field safety, search and rescue coordination, and leading and supporting research groups working in the field.

“One day we're in on the station, preparing to go into the field. The next day I might have driven a Hägglund all day, provided survival training, or trained out in the field. A typical day was not a thing! Each day was varied.”

The mighty Hägglund is the chief method of transport in Antarctica, and Paula provides training for the program expeditioners to drive the all-terrain vehicles, which can be challenging in an unforgiving landscape of ice and snow.

“In whiteout conditions you have to trust the GPS. There are no points of reference, you're following a line of waypoints and looking at a small screen to find your way. Looking out the window doesn't help at all!”

Casey Station is in East Antarctica on the north side of the Bailey Peninsula, and hosts scientific research such as geological and glaciological processes, the Adélie penguin, or the influence of climate change on mosses endemic to the continent. Paula transported scientists around to do their research and ensured their safety in the field. Serious responsibilities, but her most-loved duty was leading activities on Sundays, the day for rest and recreation.

“I got to take the expeditioners to some of my favourite places – places they would otherwise not have seen. Making that happen was a highlight for me.

“I go to Antarctica, not just for the work, but to experience Antarctica. Casey Station is on the coast, so we'd go to the Browning Peninsula, and the Vanderford Glacier where it flows into the ocean. It's a six-hour driving mission, an 11-12 hour round trip, but one of the most spectacular places in Antarctica for the views and the wildlife – Emperor penguins, elephant seals and weddell seals at the special time of year when they were coming out to molt”.

Recreation time also allowed for skiing on the Casey Station cross-country ski loop, a popular pastime with expeditioners under Paula's watchful eye.

Another highlight was living and working with a group of people in an isolated community, and Paula emphasises the importance of people skills to those interested in seeking work in Antarctica. She uses the same leadership and teamwork skills she teaches her ski patrol students to help things run smoothly on the ice.

“Teamwork is really important, as you live in a community of people, you help everywhere — cleaning toilets, helping the chefs, you get to work with some fantastic people, and you have to be able to get on with people!

“You won’t like everybody, and that can be challenging. It’s all about your personality and how you deal with people, and react to the things they do.”

There are jobs available for skilled people with both the Australian and New Zealand Antarctic programmes, and, while the job market is competitive, Paula says that with the right experience a season on the ice is not out of reach.

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