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### **Britons are finding employment in the most unlikely places**

Tony McLaughlan plays bass guitar in a band and enjoys skiing, quiz nights and photography. "I'm an ordinary electrician from Luton," he said. He pursues his hobbies alongside his job; the difference is that when he finishes the afternoon shift he emerges into a world where it is snowing and seals are playing on the beach in front of ice cliffs.

In November, McLaughlan, 49, left Luton and joined the British Antarctic Survey at the Rothera research station on the Antarctic peninsula.

Each year the British Antarctic Survey recruits up to 40 technical support staff, including carpenters, chefs, electricians and plumbers, to join scientists doing research at the five British bases. The organisation has been operating in the region for 60 years, and has a staff of 400 studying marine biology, geology and wildlife.

Jill Thompson, who heads technical services based in Cambridge, said a good candidate needed a sense of adventure and an open mind, combined with excellent practical skills – and the willingness to cope with unexpected situations. "You can't go out and order a part if something goes wrong," she said. "We are our own emergency services."

McLaughlan said that "being able to work together harmoniously in a small team is very important". He applied to work with the British Antarctic Survey after separating from his wife, but said that the Antarctic was no place to run away from personal problems. "It's not like joining the French foreign legion. You don't go there to reflect on the things that have gone wrong with your life – it's too extreme for that."

These days the British Antarctic Survey actively recruits more women and a greater age range. Thompson said: "We've found the teams are better balanced when they have women and a range of people from young men in their twenties to older people in their fifties. But most of the staff are still men, and under 35."

Marine biologist Katrin Linse said that gender had never been a problem in the 10 trips she had made to the region over the past 13 years. "There are more women now than there used to be, but for me one of the good things about Antarctica is that those points of conflict that arise between men and women, and between scientists and support staff, are dissolved by the sheer harshness of the conditions. If we didn't all pull together we wouldn't survive."

Linse said the experience was tense, difficult and inspiring – and one that could never be replicated. "I had never seen an iceberg before. I had never seen a penguin. You get off the plane and you can actually hear the air blowing around you. The sunset was in colours that I could not have imagined – and in the evening you play darts over the radio with people from the other international bases. The friends I made have become my friends for life."

People soon become immersed in the world of the base and divorced from life back home. "They miss trees and grass, but they tell me they don't miss mobile phones, cars or politics," said Thompson. "How Gordon Brown is doing in the opinion polls becomes somewhat irrelevant."

The starting salary for technical staff joining an Antarctic base is £23,000 and may be tax free under certain circumstances. Food, transport and accommodation are provided, and contracts can be for anything between 4 and 32 months.

While recession-hit Britain shivers in a wintry economic climate, Thompson said the British Antarctic Survey offered the chance to Go South. "It is an intense opportunity. We think it offers good terms and conditions, but nobody goes to the Antarctic for the money. It's an experience, rather than a job."