

Bird Island Winterers Letter - 2024



Greetings from our magical little island in the Southern Ocean! We (Izzy, George, Liz and Adam) are looking forward to welcoming you when the ship arrives. This letter is a quick introduction to the island and some thoughts from previous teams to give you some ideas, suggestions of things to bring and to introduce you to your new home.

Communications and IT

Although remote in a geographical sense, contact with the outside world from Bird Island is very good. Each wintering staff member has their own workstation with full access to the internet and the BI network. Each bedroom is also fitted with a network and internet access port, plus there is a Wi-Fi network that covers everywhere within Prince House and Pipit House, so a laptop is definitely advisable and great for unwinding with a movie in the evening and organising your personal music and photos.

The internet down here can be poor, as you might expect on a sub-Antarctic island. This is especially true in summer when up to 12 people can be trying to access the internet all at once. We use satellite internet so connecting can be patchy and slow. Happily, as of this year we have started using Starlink which has meant that downloading, video calls and streaming can be possible, even when the base is at capacity. However, expectations should still be limited and we recommend downloading as much of your music and movies etc as you can before coming down!

We recommend that you bring plenty of external memory for backing up your photographs, videos and for music. Hard drives with plenty of space (a couple of TB drives is not excessive) are definitely worthwhile, especially if you plan to take lots of video footage.

There are several telephones, all of which have Cambridge phone numbers and can be called from the UK for the price of a landline call. You can make personal outgoing UK phone calls of reasonable length, but can't call international numbers without a phone card. This will be explained to you and further details provided at the pre-deployment conference in Cambridge before you travel south. The phones are spread across base so there is the opportunity for privacy, however access may be limited – the line cannot support more than one call at once and poor weather can make the delay unbearable. Messenger apps and WhatsApp work well from Bird Island. Make sure you update these on your phone before leaving the UK as doing so here can be difficult, particularly in summer! It is also very worthwhile bringing a

spare phone with applications already installed in case you break your original one (or drop it in a bog!).



Post can be sent and received, this coming summer we should have at least one ship call near mid-summer as well as the ships on which new staff arrive in spring, and outgoing staff depart in autumn. There is usually one ship call in the winter too. Don't discourage family and friends from writing to you, as the post will make it to you eventually – even if a few months late! Opening the postbag to find letters and presents is wonderful so make sure everyone's got your new address:

Bird Island Research Station, c/o British Antarctic Survey, Stanley, Falkland Islands, South Atlantic, FIQQ 1ZZ.

Recreation

People at home often ask us whether we get bored here, especially with just the four of us during the winter, but boredom is *never* an issue. There is plenty to keep you entertained when you are not working or out enjoying the island, and work continues to be busy through the winter too.

For the DIY enthusiast there's plenty of scope for 'project' making in the workshop. We have a well kitted out workshop and a small stock of nice woods and materials provided for recreation. There are also other craft materials such as paints and pencils and a small supply of yarn for knitting /crochet. Do bring your own materials though if you have a particular passion as supplies are limited and whilst they're good for experimenting with a new hobby or mid-winter gift creations, they may not be the colours/materials you desire for a larger project.

There is a movie and TV collection on base; however, we would definitely recommend bringing down a hard drive of your favourite/the latest films to enjoy throughout the year as we have twice weekly film nights. The music collection on base is large and eclectic, but there will always be room for your personal collection, we would love some new music if you have any!

We have a good selection of books (including lots of electronic books), so do not feel you need to bring two years supply of reading material! The choice is pretty varied ranging through general interest, paperback novels, science, and polar history. BAS supply a range of magazines monthly, ranging from New Scientist and Geographical through to Trail, BBC Wildlife and Outdoor Photography.



Though note the paperboy only delivers once a year, so don't expect them to be current! We tend to dish the magazines out month-by-month, so that you get new ones regularly, but around a year late.

If you play a musical instrument then feel free to bring it down. There is an acoustic guitar and an electric piano on base. Do bring down your own sheet music and spares. There is a Wii, Switch and Xbox console and an incredible number of board games in the living area. Feel free to bring down any favourites, let us know what and we can always check that we don't already have it on station. If you have a specific idea for a project or enjoy other hobbies then please bring down your own supplies.

Skiing and snowboarding is no longer allowed on Bird Island. There are far too many obstacles, such as rocks, tussock and albatross nests, and no doctor for when things go wrong! The base does have a stock of snow shoes for walking around in deep snow during the winter. Much more likely is the chance to go sledging – there are several plastic sledges that are loads of fun. The beach in front of the base, when clear of fur seals in the winter, is a good size for kites and ball sports, whilst we have a rowing, cycling and running machine indoors. There are also free weights, yoga mats and various workout videos.

Photographs of friends, family and pets are often overlooked in people's packing frenzy, but they make excellent wall decorations. Slideshows of previous adventures make for an interesting evening's entertainment for all. Don't forget some other homey touches for your bedroom!

Sometimes we have parties that may involve fancy dress. We have a dressing up box but fresh looks are always approved of if you enjoy fancy dress and have a little space in your luggage. We also have a sewing machine if you really wanted to get creative. Face paints and hair dyes can transform any look but they are easily

used up so bringing some new items down would be welcomed. We would especially love some more temporary hair dye for a special party in the spring!

You will be here for the Midwinter's week holiday. This is your chance for a week of celebrations, games and relaxing. In the weeks running up to Midwinter it is customary to make a midwinter present for another member of the base, to be presented on Midwinter's Day. We make just one present each (the names are pulled out of a hat at the start of winter to decide who is making for who) so all efforts can be concentrated into producing one nice present. It is worth thinking of ideas in advance, so you can bring down any special equipment, materials or fixings you might like to use. Gifts have included jewellery, furniture, clocks, games, models, picture frames, tools and all manner of other interesting and original ideas.



Photography

Photography is a very popular pastime on Bird Island, with some visitors investing a lot of time and money in it. A compact, point-and-shoot camera is great to always have in your pocket along with a small dry bag/plastic bag to protect it. Your phone will also be able to capture some truly amazing shots! Make sure you bring plenty of memory and a spare battery or two as the cold drains the power quickly. Lithium batteries are not allowed in the personal boxes on the ship, so must be brought down on the flight with you.

If you are bringing a DSLR you will have the usual questions of what lenses to bring and what to carry on a daily basis. A wide angle is useful but the wildlife is very approachable so a large zoom is only necessary for trying to photograph whales, birds and seals at sea. The current team use Canon DSLRs, so if you have any questions drop us an email. If you do bring a long lens then a tripod or monopod for stability is a good idea. A smaller lens for daily use is more important (an 18-200mm is useful). A rain cover for your camera is advisable as is a basic cleaning kit. We have a printer that is suitable for printing photos but a limited supply of photo paper, so you should bring your own photo paper if you plan on printing lots of shots out.

If you have your own binoculars do bring them as they'll be very handy on the crossing over from the Falklands as well as for fieldwork on the island, but we do have a couple of pairs here for field work. There is also a decent spotting scope that

lives on base. But if you are a birder a spotting scope and tripod is definitely recommended!

Food and drink flasks have become essential pieces of kit for us this winter so we highly recommend bringing them down with you.

Please note that UAVs and drones are not allowed on South Georgia for anything but scientific and media purposes, which require licenses from BAS and the South Georgia government. These are highly unlikely to be issued to individuals.



Clothing

BAS provide everything you need to clothe yourself for the great outdoors but you will have to provide your own indoor clothing. The base is well heated throughout the year so normal indoor clothes are a good idea. Comfortable casual clothing is great for everyday use and multiple (!) pairs of slippers (go for something fairly tough like crocs) or other indoor-only shoes are a must as the carpets are very hard on socks and slippers. Definitely bring a fieldwork watch and at least one spare for the 18 month duration. For Techs, bring a couple of work t-shirts as these are not provided, work trousers and fleeces are though. The work trousers do not have outside pockets so you may want to bring your own pair.

You will be fitted for your outdoor clothes at BAS, so you can see what you're getting in your kitbag and decide from there if you need any extras. We recommend bringing any outdoor clothing that you specifically find works for you (especially gloves). If you feel the cold it would be worth bringing an extra set of thicker thermal layers or additional thick socks, though BAS supply c.5 pairs. Regardless, we recommend bringing a few extra pairs of thermals as a year and a half of daily fieldwork certainly takes its toll... Some seal assistants have invested in battery powered heated gloves or rechargeable hand warmers which they haven't regretted bringing with them for the winter. Warm gloves which you can still use a camera with are a must for Seal ZFAs, so have a good chat with the BAS clothing department when you're at your kit fitting to make sure you get issued something suitable. It is also worth bringing some dry bags as BAS do not provide these – a large one for inside your rucksack/ day sack and smaller ones for cameras/DSLR. If you wear glasses it might be a good idea to bring contact lenses as the moist cold environment here

means glasses steam up regularly, especially annoying when using binoculars or trying to avoid angry fur seals! BAS will reimburse glasses wearers for prescription sunglasses, so no need to worry about those.

There is a separate washing machine for heavily soiled outdoor gear. We can wash personal clothes any time but do pack enough items to keep you going for at least a week or two as water can be limited. Clothing, especially socks, wears out quickly, so bring enough items to keep you going for 18 months. Saturday dinner and special occasions (Christmas and midwinter) tend to be smarter/formal so a few respectable items for these nights are useful.

We have ample supplies of toiletries including, shampoo, body wash, shaving foam, razors (not very nice cheap ones), soap, toothpaste, mouthwash, toothbrushes and floss; but NOT moisturiser, conditioner or deodorant. It is always worth bringing a few bottles of your favourites down as well, as it's nice not to smell of penguins, seals or albatrosses at times! Just remember it needs to be alcohol free to go in the P-box, ensure there are no micro-plastics in moisturiser or shower products and any aerosol deodorants need to be packed separately. It is also recommended that if you want to shave bring your own preferred brand of razor as the ones on base are not very good! We do have some sanitary supplies here, there are both towels and tampons in stock but these are only there in case you run out. Bring down your own supplies and BAS will reimburse you for the costs.

There are always budding barbers and hairdressers on Bird Island and although their skills may not be up to standard of the salons you choose to visit at home it is a lot cheaper! There are hair clippers and scissors on base and most people tend to just keep their hair short, or use the isolation as the perfect excuse to grow it long!



Food

The quantity and variety of food on Bird Island is impressive, with big freezers and dry food stores stacked full of everything from almonds to courgettes. We've a wide variety of meat cuts and a range of Quorn products along with enough tinned and frozen vegetables to last years. Fresh food is limited to the frequency of ship visits, although things that keep well (potatoes, carrots, cabbages and onions) often last from one ship call to the next, and for a significant proportion of winter.

Everyone on base is on an earlies/lates rota, and you'll be responsible for cooking the evening meal and bread-making that day. The latter is something of a dark art but you will quickly get the hang of it and we have two bread makers that do the work for you if not! We have a variety of flours and different nuts and seeds to make different sorts of bread. Breakfast and lunches are help-yourself affairs, often with bread, cheese and leftovers from the previous night's feast. We eat very well, you will never go hungry!! Whilst BAS provides an excellent variety and quality of foodstuffs, you may find that if you enjoy special delicacies they will be in short supply or lacking entirely. If you have an addiction to a specific chocolate bar, coffee variety, type of tea or fondness for a magic cooking ingredient that only you know of, it is worth checking with us whether we stock it, or whether to bring some with you. We suggest tucking away a few special items in your personal box for enjoyment and celebratory events. Remember that your box has to traverse the tropics so they must be items that keep well. BAS will send you a list of what can and cannot be sent in personal boxes. We have dozens of recipe books here, and many recipes are available online, but if you have a favourite style of cooking, or favourite recipe book then there is no harm in packing it. We are very fond of cakes for tea breaks so if you have any special cake recipes they are always gratefully received.

Final thoughts

BAS provide everything on station to make your life very comfortable but we have a few little recommendations to make it a little more personal. Your own single bed linen gives a more individual look to your room, a blanket is nice for snuggling into to watch a film and one winterer even packed his own pillows and duvet and did not regret it! (Though there are plenty here). The linen cupboard has plenty of large towels, hand towels and some flannels, but often people bring their own sets as well. There are mirrors in the bedrooms and bathroom. There are plenty of plain white mugs here but a personal mug will bring a bit of colour to the kitchen cupboards. Definitely think about bringing a set of portable speakers for listening to music out on the jetty or during over-night stays at Fairy Point Hut – we all use ours. There are a few communal ones on base but a personal one is handy. There are leftover food tubs for fieldwork picnics, but if you fancied bringing your own personal lunchbox then you'll definitely find a use for it and it will mean you have a tub that will have a lid that stays on!

Field work on Bird Island is very physically demanding and the terrain is not easy to traverse. If you aren't currently fit don't worry you will be by the end of summer but hitting the gym now will help you before you arrive! Walking up and down the hills can be quite hard on the legs and so if you are prone to issues we advise to bring ankle supports (we have lots of knee supports here).

If you have any questions don't hesitate to drop us a line and we will try our best to answer. And don't worry about the packing; all you really need is normal clothes, any outdoor clothes you particularly like and anything else you enjoy having

or doing. There is plenty of packing space as you get a personal box (rigid cargo container) which is 75 x 38 x 41cm and a large kitbag for personal clothes sent down on the ship; as well as bringing hand luggage, and 50kg of luggage (which includes your BAS clothing kitbag) down with you on the plane. You can always have small parcels sent down in the post and have the option to get a 20kg box sent in on the ship for your second summer.

Bird Island is a brilliant place, lots of fun, lots of wildlife and we're all absolutely sure you will love your time here. We look forward to welcoming you to Bird Island and if you have any questions just drop any of us an email! The current wintering team are:

George Day	Penguin and Petrel ZFA
Izzy Stubbs	Seal ZFA and Winter Station Leader
Liz Holmes	Albatross ZFA
Adam Owen	Technician



A few photos of your new home...

