

Experiencing Antarctica

► ANTARCTIC & MARINE STUDIES

BY SARAH NICOL

The first students to undertake the UTAS Master of Antarctic Science degree swapped warm beaches for a trip to the icy continent this past summer.

Five masters students eagerly took the opportunity to travel on board research or tourist vessels to Antarctica to complete a research unit towards their degree.

Colleen O'Brien spent seven weeks with the French research vessel *L'Astrolabe* assisting researchers in their long-term study of the marine ecosystem. She focused mainly on fish larvae.

Two weeks of her time was spent at sea, while the rest of the time she was located at the Dumont d'Urville French base.

Colleen said reading about Antarctica was not the same as actually seeing it.

"Seeing the first iceberg out the window, it was huge, you don't expect it to be that big," she said.

"It puts everything into perspective."

It was also a chance for Colleen to put her French major to good use.

Alex Piekutowski and Tom Berli spent about five weeks on *Marina Svetaeva*, a tourist ship run by Aurora Expeditions.

Alex looked at the tourism side of Antarctica. He researched passengers' awareness of Antarctic environmental issues and looked at changes in attitudes, interests and concerns related to conservation and tourism management in the pre- and post-Antarctic experience.

While the masters degree focuses on the biological sciences, Alex said this voyage was a good chance to have a closer look at the social science side of Antarctica.

"I wanted to conduct research in Antarctic tourism because, in a place as politically and ecologically unique as Antarctica, social and biological studies can become difficult to separate," he said.

Alex said Antarctica was a special place.

"You can never expect it to be what you think, the place is incredible, it's huge," he said.

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Tom Berli looked at zooplankton with a basic biodiversity estimate.

He was also impressed with the trip and said he would like to work there again.

"If the opportunity came up again I'd go," he said.

Because Alex and Tom travelled to Antarctica on a tourist ship, they were able to take part in a few additional fun activities.

They were helicoptered to the

tongue of the Mertz Glacier and had a small game of soccer.

Rob Johnson and Simon Reeves also recently returned from Antarctica, where they were part of an *Aurora Australis* voyage.

Almost all masters students were able to travel to Antarctica as part of their degree, but they had to instigate the trips themselves.

All trips were arranged through the International Antarctic Institute.

Top: Antarctic masters student Tom Berli and the *Marina Svetaeva*. **Second from top:** Taking water samples off the *Marina Svetaeva*. **Below left:** Tom Berli takes a header playing soccer in Antarctica. **Below** Colleen O'Brien gets friendly with Antarctic penguins. Photos by Alex Piekutowski.

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