

No 'better' Isolation: Antarctica, the only continent untouched by COVID-19

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The outbreak of the Coronavirus worldwide has meant 'further isolation within the isolation' for the author and his team at the Bharati station in Antarctica. A first-hand account.



WHAT comes to our minds when we hear the word Antarctica? It is the coldest, driest and windiest continent on Earth. The extreme conditions of Antarctica have been a blessing in keeping the environment in a pristine shape and also making it the most isolated place to reach.

Who all are there?

Antarctica is home to around 70 active research bases belonging to different countries. These bases house more than 1000 people during the winter. They spend an entire year in isolation

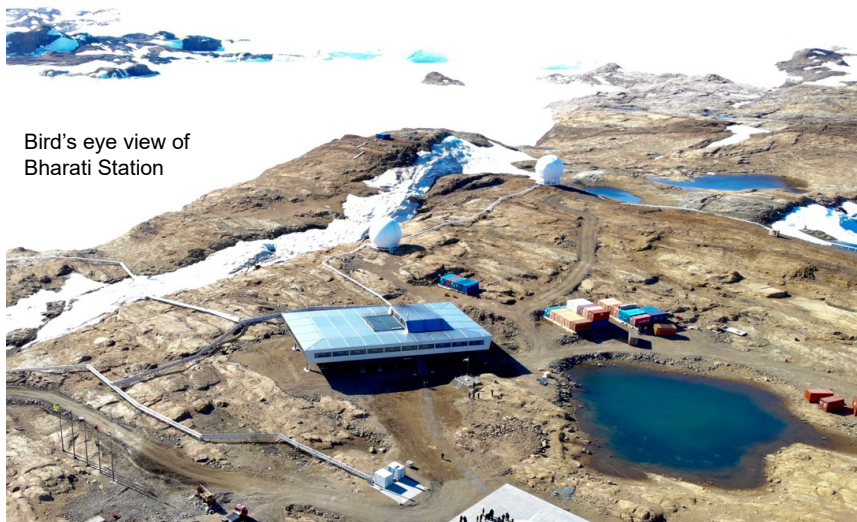
conducting various research projects on the icy continent. India is maintaining a strong presence in Antarctica since 1981. Every year members are sent to two Indian research bases – Maitri and Bharati – to spend a complete year to carry out diverse scientific studies. This year, we are 23 members deployed at the Bharati station.

Is it really a 'better' place to be safe?

Isolation, confinement and extreme climate come as a gift as soon as you put your feet on the frozen continent. There is a constant threat to life when

you are here. Vast sheets of ice are packed with hidden crevices and falling into them would make one's recovery impractical. We are already into polar winter so the temperature now can go down up to -40 degree Celsius and wind can blow as fast as 200 km/hr at our base. It will remain completely dark for almost two months during the Polar nights when the sun hides itself below the horizon.

Prior to arrival, we do get training to battle all the hardship and adversities indigenous to Antarctica. But social isolation, lack of sunlight put us at risk of developing low mood and depression.



Bird's eye view of
Bharati Station

How the virus is affecting us?

Things feel uncommon this year. What is more worrisome now is the outbreak of coronavirus in India. Back in November last year when India had just begun its 39th Indian Scientific Expedition to Antarctica, the world seemed to be in its usual state. After a month into the expedition, we started hearing the news related to the spread of coronavirus. We all are now clueless about the real situation back home. Members are worried about their near and dear ones as India is moving towards Lockdown 3.0.

We had never imagined that the world would undergo a situation similar to ours. Getting stuck within the same walls and seeing the same faces every day. Our team is concerned regarding the feasibility of the next expedition and remote possibility of spending another winter in Antarctica if the situation continues to worsen in India. Such talks are now usual over dinner and are stressful for the team. Thankfully, we have enough provisions

of food and other supplies if by any means our expedition gets extended for another few months.

Antarctica under lockdown

With the worldwide spread of COVID-19, there is always an invisible threat to the White Continent. So far Antarctica remains the only continent untouched by the coronavirus. Screening of the new members entering the continent has been in place since February. Despite being the most secluded continent, Antarctica is also facing the lockdown. Routine visits and get-togethers with the neighbouring stations have been dropped. It feels as if you are further isolated within the isolation.

Nevertheless, it makes sense to take precautions to keep the continent and those residing here safe from COVID-19. An outbreak of the pandemic in Antarctica could be disastrous. Because in a remote austere medical setup it is not always possible to manage all kinds of medical

emergencies. In the freezing winter, there are no flights and it becomes almost impossible to airlift or evacuate any sick person. So the statement 'prevention is better than cure' perfectly befits the situation here.

Implications for science and research

Antarctica plays the central role in the Earth's climate. Every year several projects related to atmospheric, glaciological and geological sciences are undertaken to unearth the hidden mystery surrounding the continent. Definitely, the spread of coronavirus will retard the progression of scientific research. Interruption of ongoing projects could hamper vital monitoring of climate change indicators.

India has already called off its scientific expedition to the Arctic region, which was previously scheduled to begin from April. There are also uncertainties looming around the next Antarctic Expedition. With the continuing threat of coronavirus, it would not be possible to approve new projects for the upcoming programme. And also as a consequence of global economic slowdown, Antarctic programmes of various nations could see a dip in operational and research funding. Science conferences and workshops related to Antarctica have already been called off as many countries are facing lockdown.

Researchers are collecting vital scientific data in harsh climatic conditions.

As our country is fighting a brave battle against Covid-19, all the members of the 39th Indian Antarctic Expedition extend their firm support to all the frontline warriors. We also salute the public for cooperating in the efforts to curb the disaster. Hopefully, we will soon be able to find a cure for the virus and defeat it. See you all next year.



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