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WEST COAST GUIDES GIVE FUTURE LEADERS DIRECTION IN ANTARTICA

Most people would find the prospect of guiding a team of 45 experienced adventurers to Antarctica for the first time daunting, let alone a team of novices, many of whom had never seen snow or gone camping before.

But for experienced West Coast guides Dave Ritchie and Jo Parsons, escorting a group around the icebergs and wildlife of Antarctica was all in a days work.

“It was well within our comfort zone,” says Parsons confidently.

The pair - who tutor on the outdoor education programmes at Tai Poutini Polytechnic’s Greymouth campus - spent the second half of November in Antarctica where they were employed by the 2041 International Antarctic Treaty Expedition as Field Safety Managers.

It was their job to keep the 45 expedition members safe whenever they left the main vessel to go ashore.

Led by polar explorer and environmentalist, Robert Swan OBE, the first man to walk to both the North and South Poles, the expedition celebrated the 50th Anniversary of the 1959 signing of the Antarctic Treaty, which prohibits drilling or mining in Antarctica until 2041.

Parsons’ and Ritchie’s charges included corporate leaders, up and coming entrepreneurs in the field of renewable energy, teachers and students, many of whom were in their twenties. “It was people who will be in decision-making positions of power in 20 or 30 years time,” explains Ritchie.

The idea was for these current and future leaders to witness first-hand the effects of climate change in order to encourage ongoing respect for the Antarctic Treaty and preservation of the continent in years to come.

The expedition was timely too of course, preceding – just - the current talks in Copenhagen.

Because of logistics (you can't take any food onshore, for example), the group slept mostly onboard the main vessel, but two nights were spent under canvas on the ice and every day they would anchor somewhere new and Parsons and Ritchie would escort the group ashore by inflatable boats (zodiacs).

Their main challenge was icebergs, and Ritchie describes one the size of a four-storey office building that carved off the Cierva Glacier while he was in a zodiac with 10 people onboard.

"That was pretty exciting," he remembers. "Like a tsunami!"

Both Parsons and Ritchie are experienced mountain guides, but it is as rafting guides that have most experience and it was these water skills that were called upon most in Antarctica.

"Our mountain skills were secondary, which surprised us," says Ritchie.

Low visibility proved another challenge. "One of the hairiest situations occurred when people spread out over long distances when visibility was bad. We had to rely on what we had taught them and briefed them; these were the most stressful situations," says Ritchie.

Also challenging were the frequent wind changes that could blow icebergs on shore, smashing or trapping the zodiacs. "Even an iceberg the size of a desk could break the propeller. We had to make the best of a number of bad situations."

Parsons and Ritchie are appreciative of the support they got from Tai Poutini Polytechnic. They had a month to organise and prepare for the trip and they say the polytechnic supported them all the way.

"To stay current, it's important to do what we teach," says Parsons. "You can't teach students if you haven't been out there doing it recently and Tai Poutini recognises this."

Ritchie says New Zealand guides are highly regarded and sought after internationally. "Kiwis can think on their feet so can adapt quickly to a situation, improvise well and are pretty unflappable generally. We're good at making decisions in tricky situations and of course that's what we try to instil in our students."

The pair describes Antarctica as "mind-blowing" and believes 2041's message got through to the voyage-goers loud and clear.

“Everyone recognised what a privilege it was to be there and have gone home with extra zeal and a commitment to make a difference,” says Parsons. “There are enthusiastic emails flying around all over the place!”

” We believe the Antarctic is warming and if the canary is in the cage, the canary is looking pretty wobbly on its perch.”

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About 2041

2041 was founded by polar explorer, environmental leader and public speaker Robert Swan, OBE, the first person in history to walk to both the North and South poles. Swan has dedicated his life to the preservation of Antarctica by the promotion of recycling, renewable energy and sustainability to combat the effects of climate change.

2041’s mission is to inform, engage and inspire the next generation of leaders to take responsibility, be sustainable, and know that now is the time for action in policy development, sustainable business generation and future technologies.

In the year 2041 the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty could potentially be modified or amended. 2041’s aim is to work towards the continuing protection of the Antarctic Treaty “so that the last great wilderness on earth is never exploited”.

“As the last unspoilt wilderness on earth, Antarctica is currently protected by a treaty prohibiting drilling and mining until 2041. Decisions made by today’s youth will impact our entire planet’s ecosystem and the future of life on earth,” says Robert Swan.

See www.2041.com for more information about 2041 and the Expedition.

About Tai Poutini Polytechnic:

Tai Poutini Polytechnic (TPP) offers a range of exciting programmes, has had one of the highest course completion rates in New Zealand for the last 3 years, has low student to tutor ratios and great relationships with business and industry. TPP has campuses in Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Christchurch, Wanaka, Invercargill, Westport, Greymouth, Reefton and Hokitika. In 2010 Scholarships are available for most programmes (* Conditions apply)*