

TRAPPED IN ICE & ISOLATED FROM THE REST OF THE WORLD

After 13 months in the iciness of the Arctic, the Polarstern and its crew of scientists have now returned and found a world afflicted by a deadly pandemic. The oceanographer Dr. Janin Schaffer delivers an insight in this Arctic mission, the everyday-life aboard and how it was influenced by the Corona pandemic.



Polarstern

Imagine being cut off from the rest of the world and so far away from any civilisation that even a pandemic passes you by. Well, to most of the people this scenario might seem very familiar with the exception that they have not been spared from a pandemic. For the past 12 months now the majority of the world's population has been isolated and trapped at home with the closest family members to protect oneself from the Corona virus, that has caused millions of

deaths worldwide. No social contacts, no celebrations and events, no shopping in the city centre, excursions, holidays, basically the normal life that we used to have is not possible any more.

Like the rest of the world the crew of the Polarstern vessel was completely isolate but with the difference that they were not trapped at home but in the Arctic ice and indeed could escape a pandemic, at least for the time they were aboard.

82 scientists took part in the Mosaic expedition (Multidisciplinary drifting study of observatory for the study of Arctic climate), the biggest arctic science mission in history to collect scientific data on the progress of the climate change and get a better understanding about the region that is as rapidly changing as the world warms and therefor most affected by the climate change. One of the scientists was Dr. Janin Schaffer form the Alfred-Wegener institute. She is specialized in the field of oceanography



Dr. Janin Schaffer (second from the right) and her "Team Ocean"

and worked together with other experts in the field in the so-called "Ocean City", one of seven camps that were put up on the ice around the research vessel. By letting down different scientific instruments through a hole in the ice into the water the "Team Ocean", how the group of scientists for oceanography called themselves, could take and examine water samples. Dr. Schaffer's research interest was to study the seasonal changes of the ice and the decrease of the ice caused by the climate change and therefor unravel uncertainties of previous climate models.

She describes the working conditions as very stressful and exhausting because of the physical and mental burden. Due to the multitude of instruments and the many people working in the small tent of "Ocean city" it was very crowded and wearing the big and heavy suits protecting the body from freezing, did not make working easier.

The hostile conditions of the arctic together with the horrible and sad news about the daily death rate and the despair of the medics over how to cure the hundreds of thousand sick people really made her and the other crew members feel overwhelmed. Many people aboard were very worried about their families at home knowing they were going through a very hard time, in danger of infecting themselves with a possible deadly virus.

But they were literally trapped in ice because going back home to take care of their family was not an option. Not because it would not had been logistically possible but because of travel restrictions and the need to quarantine participants in order to make sure that the expedition is free of Covid. And so the swap of the crew, which was originally scheduled for April (2020) was firstly completely cancelled for an indefinite time. Only two months later a second fleet started to replace the scientists and technicians that had been on board the Polarstern since February. This prolonged the expedition for almost a month as the Polarstern had to leave its ice floe in order to make the transfer of the team with the other fleet possible. Of course, the overly long stay in the Arctic postponed personal plans, as it came so unexpected said Janin Schaffer. But in contrast, the Polarstern crew did not have to suffer from being lonely, like many people did in the past 12 months.



A cosy evening together with the crew

“It felt like living in a save bubble” said Janin Schaffer as she was asked, how the every-day life in the Arctic was like. Apart from the fact, that there was only a restricted access to the outside world and life was limited to the ship and the ice surrounding it, it was almost like living a normal life, including breakfasting elbow to elbow and socializing in common rooms in the evening. Although Janin Schaffer had to share her small cabin with a colleague and the space in general was quite cramped, she had felt very comfortable. Now, that everybody aboard was separated from their family, to whom each one could only talk to for a few minutes every day, they had to take care of each other and make the long stay in the ice as comfortable as possible for everyone. Evenings together with the crew, in which she has also made good friends, says Janin, but also the luxury of having a pool, a sauna and a small gym on board could distract you from the work stress, homesickness and bad thoughts. They even celebrated Eastern and the Tanz in den Mai, which everywhere else probably did not take place.

Back home and back in reality, it took some time to get used to everyday life on land and especially a life with a pandemic, said Dr. Janin Schaffer. But it would definitely had been a once in a lifetime experience. Furthermore they had come back with a pool of data and samples that would change Arctic research for a long time. It can be said, that the Mosaic expedition is a historic milestone for the Arctic research but also for what humans can achieve while a deadly virus is raging all over the world.

Sources:

Interview with Dr. Janin Schaffer

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/12/climate/mosaic-arctic-expedition-climate-change.html>

https://multimedia.awi.de/mosaic/#1616268983292_2