

Ukraine scientists navigate lockdown to reach Antarctica

May 1 2020, by Olga Shylenko



The Vernadsky research base on Galindez Island, Antarctica, where Yuriy Otruba and his team will spend the next year

Yuriy Otruba was preparing for his sixth scientific expedition to Antarctica when the coronavirus pandemic hit, shutting borders,

grounding flights and locking down countries he needed to travel through.

After repeated trips since 2009, the 34-year-old Ukrainian scientist feared this year's journey would be impossible due to strict lockdown measures imposed throughout the world to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

The journey from Kiev to the Akademik Vernadsky research base on Galindez Island in the Antarctic usually lasts a week.

Yet it took Otruba and his team of 10 a number of false starts and more than four weeks as they navigated several continents and a slew of anti-virus restrictions to reach their destination.

"I felt like our chances were getting smaller and smaller and smaller," said Otruba, a geophysicist who was leading a team for the first time this year.

"It's a very beautiful, picturesque place," he told AFP by phone from the base, surrounded by snow-capped "mountains, the nature of Antarctica, its sanctity".

"When you first get here, you are enchanted."

The obstacle for this year's expedition was "very specific," said Yevgen Dykyi head of the National Antarctic Scientific Center. "It was called the coronavirus pandemic."

"It was the longest and most difficult journey to Antarctica over the years," he said.



The Ukrainian flag flies proudly over the Vernadsky research base on Galindez Island, Antarctica

Doing 'the impossible'

Ukrainian scientists are stationed at the base for one-year stints, with new teams usually arriving in [early spring](#).

Britain founded the Faraday station in 1947, and in 1996 gave it to Kiev, which renamed the base after celebrated Ukrainian scientist Volodymyr Vernadsky.

A regular itinerary brings new teams through Chile or Argentina, and then by boat to the base in a journey that usually takes around a week.

On March 16, Ukraine's 25th expedition including six scientists and five support staff set off for Earth's only virus-free continent.

Yet at the first stop, in Istanbul, it became clear that the 10 men and one woman would not make it to Colombia, then to Chile, with both countries announcing border closures.

They headed home to mandatory quarantine and to devise an alternative route, this time with the help of Ukrainian diplomats.

Yet subsequent attempts also ran aground, with two flights cancelled one after another.

In the end Ukraine's foreign ministry "did the impossible", chartering flights and arranging permissions to enter the countries closed to foreigners, Dykyi said.

The team set off again at the end of March, travelling from Kiev to Qatar, Brazil and then Chile.



Gentoo penguins will be the Ukrainians' near neighbours for the next 12 months at the Vernadsky research base

'Mesmerising'

"A lot of hard work was done to get to Chile," which was under lockdown when the team arrived, Otruba said.

The flight from Qatar to Brazil was packed, Otruba said, and some among the expedition were afraid of getting infected and having to "call the entire expedition into question".

When the team eventually arrived at Punta Arenas on the southern tip of Chile, they isolated for two weeks in a hotel as a precaution, before

finally boarding a boat loaded with food, fuel and research equipment to Antarctica.

After more than four weeks, the team arrived on April 21.

As a precaution, they brought an oxygen concentrator and medical oxygen cylinders in case a team member developed virus symptoms.

One of the station buildings can be used to self-isolate in the [worst-case scenario](#), Otruba said.

With the pandemic left behind, the expedition, which includes a biologist, physicist and three meteorologists, can focus on their research—and the surroundings.

"We have seals here, crabeater seals, leopard seals... When we were sailing to the station, there were a lot of whales," he added.

"Few people have seen a penguin or a whale in the wild. It's mesmerising."

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