PRINCESS ELISABETH ANTARCTICA: FIVE YEARS OF MEMORIES, FIVE PLANS FOR THE FUTURE



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To mark five years of hard work, scientific endeavour and adventure at Princess Elisabeth Antarctica, we asked Base Leader, International Polar Foundation president and polar explorer Alain Hubert to share his five strongest memories from since the idea for the station was conceived, and his five plans for the future.

Five Enduring Memories

1. Arrival at Utsteinen

Our arrival at Utsteinen, the site of the new station, at the end of January 2007. We had just unloaded the ship, an operation which nearly ended with a tractor and container in the sea. After a two-day traverse through a nearly unknown territory, I was relieved when we finally arrived back, to the relief of the team waiting for us at Utsteinen. After this, I was convinced that we could live up to the challenges that lay ahead.

2. Thousands of people

The inauguration of Princess Elisabeth Antarctica at Tour & Taxis, in Brussels. The morning after finishing constructing the station, thousands of people began queuing up to see the station. This made us all realise that this projects wasn't only ours, it had become the project of the Belgian nation and of its citizens. It was now a collective project and we had underestimated its full potential. I will always remember those words from a grandmother to a young kid: "You can touch those beams, they are the ones going to Antarctica, it's the real station"

3. First visitors

In the middle of February 2008, we were finishing the roof of the station when, suddenly, we saw five tiny silhouettes advancing across the Antarctic ice from the East. Our first visitors were heading towards the station. We all stood still, none of us was saying a word. At one point, we recognised two flags attached to the skidoos, the Belgian flag and the Japanese flag. A group of Japanaese Geologists, knowing that we were building the station, arrived on their skidoos like modern Samurai. They were finishing their work in Antarctica, and decided to pay us a visit before catching a plane to go home on our newly built runway. At that time, Belgium had no government and we had very little news from home. Quite an emotional moment.

4. Wind and Sun

The first season, that Princess Elisabeth Antarctica ran as a Zero Emission prototype. Being able to build a station capable of running on the only available energies, the wind and the sun, in the middle of Antarctica, and to store that in batteries for later consumption. The collaboration with our industrial partners allowed us to build that prototype and to show that Belgium could be at the forefront in one of the central questions to be addressed in the face of climate change: alternative energy management in our modern societies.

5. An outstanding team

The efficiency and flexibility of our operational teams, and of the International Polar Foundation. I remain convinced that the unique public / private partnership formed for the creation of the station allowed us to reach that level of excellence. It is only together that we can build the world that future generations deserve.

Five Plans for the Future:

1. Internationalise

Internationalise the station to mutualise costs and enable its development. The fact that Princess Elisabeth Antarctica is commended as a clear example of how to work within the framework of the Antarctic Treaty should encourage us to go towards increased cooperation.

2. Double down on energy management

Develop the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica's activities to go even further in terms of energy management and show that Belgium in the 21st century is capable of leading the way forward. It is essential to give younger generations the confidence they will need to tackle the challenges that face the planet.

3. More science

Increase the number of scientists that can come at the station to carry out research.

4. A tool for young generations

Develop further the station’s capabilities as an educational tool to promote the importance of polar science.

5. Keep inspiring

To inspire as many people as possible.