INSIDE

Life Blooms in Dry Valleys/ Page 4
Water’s Mark in McMurdo/ Page 6
Siple Dome Science/ Pages 8 and 9
Anything But Ordinary/ Page 14
So good in fact, at least one South Pole resident told Skinnarmo it seemed as if he’d just come from a stroll in the park. In truth, however, Skinnarmo’s journey covered 1,150 kilometers from its start on the Weddell Sea to its finish at the Pole.

To reach his objective, Skinnarmo hauled his sled, filled with 120 kilograms of food and gear from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. every day, taking 10- to 15-minute breaks every 90 minutes. Crossing just six crevasses on the entire route and tent-bound a mere two days due to bad weather, the Swede’s journey was nearly flawless in execution.

“The route is hard at the start,” he said. “It goes up quite fast in altitude, but I had no real problems.”

His success may be attributed to years of preparation, beginning with a ski traverse in Norway and a second trip across Greenland’s ice cap. These successes emboldened the Swede to attempt the South Pole route and in November of last year he set to work gathering sponsors that include Iridium communications and Jack Wolfskin.

In total, the adventure cost more than $200,000, which has Skinnarmo looking forward to the lecture circuit and the income he hopes it will generate.

“Self-contained people do better,” she said. “You have to make your own fun. Knitting. Oh man, people are obsessed with knitting, and board games and writing.”

In truth, however, books, games and wool can only go so far and even die-hard fans of life on the polar plateau sometimes yearn for a break in the monosyllabic vista. “I love to walk from A to B, but here there’s only A.”

And for most residents of Siple Dome, point A begins and ends with Cafe De Bubba, a gourmet kitchen amidst a sea of vanilla white. Six days a week, one gastronomical delight after another appears on the counters: eggs and bacon for breakfast; herb-seasoned bread and leek soup for lunch; and a few hours later, homemade pizza for dinner. Fresh cookies fill a deep, plastic container and scrumptious left-overs are always available. If nothing else, the camp residents eat like kings of the continent.

These gourmand rewards, however, are hard-earned. “It’s always busy,” said camp manager Sarah Gundlach. “It’s non-stop from morning until the end of the night, answering a lot of questions.” And working hard. Gundlach and her crew work around the clock to maintaining the ski runway; listening to the HF radio; fueling buildings and airplanes; sorting and packaging cargo; and troubleshooting problems for scientists.

All of which happens two hours by plane from McMurdo, the closest base. “We have finite resources,” said Mark Wumkes, another Siple Dome resident. “When something out here breaks in half, you have to pull a rabbit out of the hat. That’s the fun part about it.”

Whether Wumke’s rabbit and other propitious manifestations of life at Siple Dome emanate from the people who live there, or if it is derived from the intense, surreal atmosphere they live in is uncertain. Either way, there is clearly something magical afoot at Siple Dome.