

Antarctic history: facts and fiction

- A measure of controversy surrounds who actually “discovered” the Antarctic Continent. The Russian Admiral Thaddeus von Bellingshausen sighted part of the coastline of the continent on the 27th of January 1820 without actually realising what he had seen – he described it in his log as being an ice-field ‘which seemed to be covered in small hillocks’. Three days later, on the 30th of January, a small sailing ship chartered by the British Admiralty and under the command of Edward Bransfield sighted land at latitude 64 degrees South. Today we know this to be the Antarctic Peninsula.
- The first expedition to reach the South Pole was led by the Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen. They achieved their goal on the 14th of December 1911 and returned safely to their base a few weeks later. A British expedition under Captain Robert Falcon Scott arrived at the Pole on the 18th of January 1912, but all five members of the party perished on the return journey. The US base at the South Pole is named Amundsen- Scott in honour of the two rivals.
- The first team to fly to the South Pole was led by Richard Byrd of the United States. The flight took place in November 1929. Byrd was also responsible for the development of two-way radio communication and tracked vehicles as tools of exploration on the continent. The first person to fly across the continent was another American, Lincoln Ellsworth, in 1935. He covered some 3 700 kilometres during his flight.
- The first woman to land on the Antarctic Continent was Mrs Mikkelsen, the wife of a Norwegian whaling captain, in February 1935. She went ashore at the Vestfold Hills on the east coast of the continent.
- The first successful overland crossing of the continent was completed by the Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition in 1958. Two parties, one under the leadership of Sir Edmund Hillary (of Mount Everest fame) and the other led by Sir Vivian Fuchs, departed from bases on the Ross and Weddell Sea coastlines respectively. Hillary reached the South Pole first, having established a line of depots, which Fuchs then used to complete the crossing – a journey of 99 days. A South African meteorologist, J J (Hannes) la Grange was a member of Hillary’s party, and took the South African flag to the Pole.
- J J la Grange led the first South African Antarctic Expedition (SANAE 1), which left Cape Town in 1959. Having reached the Fimbulisen ice-shelf early in 1960, the team took over the former Norwegian Base (“Norway Station”) in Dronning Maudland (Queen Maud Land) after the Norwegian Antarctic Expedition had vacated it.
- The first woman to over-winter in Antarctica as a member of a SANAE team was Dr Aithne Rowse. She reached the continent in February 1997 as the doctor of SANAE 36, returning to South Africa the following year. This was the first team to over-winter in the SANAE IV base. (SANAE bases are identified by Roman numerals. SANAE I was the former Norwegian base, while SANAE II and III were constructed by members of the Department of Public Works in 1971 and 1979 respectively.)