



## PENGUIN POST OFFICE



**On an island in Antarctica, there's a post office surrounded by jaw-dropping scenery & 4000 penguins. Every summer, as staff put stamps on postcards, around them gentoo penguins rush to raise & protect their young.**

**Leopard seals and killer whales prowl the water for penguins, just yards from the post office.**

**This extraordinary family drama *must* play out in four months before the sea starts to freeze, the post office closes down & the penguins leave for another year.**

*We will tell a story of the struggles & successes of a few penguin families, through the eyes of the postmen & women sharing a season with them.*

*The Post Office has four workers living in the one hut. The BBC has secured two extra places for the season & will be casting over the next few months.*

## Port Lockroy, Goudier Island

Once the sunshine melts the sea ice, Goudier Island springs to life. As Port Lockroy post office opens, so gentoo penguins arrive and the tiny frozen island fills with other creatures: curious seabirds, seals, whales and weird marine life.

Every year four volunteers are given the job of a lifetime, to run the post office and study the penguin colony. They brave harsh, often violent weather, the constant stench of penguin guano and basic living conditions in the historic scientific outpost - there's no running water, flush toilet or central heating.

*“Adult gentoo waddle past the post office studiously ignoring the human activity going on all around them. But the chicks are curious, bold and into everything.”*

## Gentoo Drama

There's no TV, but that doesn't matter, the best show in town is the daily gentoo penguin soap opera. Birds nest everywhere, but mate for life and always return to the same nest sites, so there are identifiable characters: *Dora* and her family nest by the back door; *Flora* is found underneath the accommodation bloc; and *Jack* and co live beneath the flag pole flying the Union Jack.

There's always something going on: Jack is not above stealing other penguins nesting stones; adults often row with their neighbours; all penguins face predatory leopard seals when feeding out in the bay; and *Dora's* curious chicks will run amok inside the post office given half a chance.



*“Growing chicks gang together in crèches, which erupt in mass panic when sea birds fly over”*

Normally penguin watching is one long comedy, but when *Fluffy*, the inquisitive chick that's been named, studied and admired for weeks, is suddenly picked off by a marauding skua even hardened posties have been known to shed a tear.

## Race Against Time

Gentoo have only four months to raise their young and over the length of the programme we'll show the whole breeding cycle, culminating with the last penguins fledging and leaving the island as the post office closes its doors.

Gentoos need open water to feed, so arrive from sub-Antarctic islands only when the sea ice has melted. They head straight to their old nesting site to get reacquainted with their partners.

But scavenging sea birds and ferocious leopard seals also have families to feed, and penguins, their eggs and the chicks are the easiest meal in town. Even the odd killer whale will patrol the feeding grounds looking for a snack.

*“Leopard seals are the most dangerous animal around & are known to attack zodiac boats coming ashore.”*

### Scientific Study

Port Lockrey post office is a draw for Antarctic tourists who tramp through the penguin colony to send their postcards via the red Royal Mail post box at the end of the world. It's another thing that gentoo chicks have to contend with in the struggle for survival that's a lottery every year.



In 2012/13 the British Antarctic Survey will ramp up their studies of the behaviour and ecology of the penguins, and one post office worker will be specifically recruited to run that research project. Along with the other post office workers they will be a key character in this film and we will have a say in their recruitment.

### Shooting & Talent

The BBC has reserved two extra places at the post office. One will be a self-shooting producer. The other place could be for an on-screen role, perhaps a wildlife camera specialist or additional wildlife expert.

As well as the penguin soap opera this programme will capture the extraordinary beauty of Antarctica. The season is short, but unique, with blizzards and sea ice at both ends and long weeks in between when the sun will not dip below the horizon. It lends itself to some extraordinary timelapse.

*“In the static, icy landscape surrounding the post office it's the wildlife that catches the eye. Orca, minke whale & lost emperor penguins occasionally turn up”*

## Other Animal Characters

As well as 4000 penguins, in summer the island hosts crab eater and Weddell seals. Neither are afraid of humans and 'Jabba' (a resident Weddell seal) has been known to follow staff around like a love-sick puppy. Leopard seals are less friendly. Minke whales and orca are regular visitors to the bay, the latter sending the gentoo penguins into panic.

Occasionally a lost Adelie or King penguin will turn up at Port Lockroy. Wandering around like lost souls they are viewed with utter suspicion by the gentoos.



## Lurking Beneath the Waves

Also beneath the waves, often beside the enormous skeletons of whales and the whaling boats that once hunted them, weirder wildlife is found: jelly fish with extraordinary luminous stripes pulsating up and down their bodies; and *glyptonotus antarcticus*, scuttling along the sea bed like a giant marine woodlouse - eight inches long they will eat anything, dead or alive.

Giant petrel often swoop overhead and Antarctic terns are common, but skuas are the bird bully boys of Port Lockrey. Sheathbills breed on the island in time for their young to feast on gentoo chicks and we'll also follow their stories too.



## BACKGROUND

### *Penguins*

The gentoo penguins arrived in Port Lockroy in 1985, once the permanent base had been abandoned. They are a success story on the Antarctic Peninsula having taken advantage of the diminishing sea ice caused by global warming to claim new territories. This has largely been at the expense of Adelie penguins.

After spending the winter on sub-Antarctic islands, the gentoo arrive in Port Lockrey as the sea ice retreats and the post office is opening its doors. Gentoo mate for life and use the same nesting site every year.

Nests are usually made from a pile of jealously guarded stones, which are so prized that females are not beneath offering the odd sexual favour to get a nice one. Noisy fights break out when a gentoo attempts to steal another penguin's stone, with the thief often shamed into being a better neighbour.

Parents share duties of incubating a pair of 2lb eggs. The chicks moult into sub-adult plumage and go out to sea at about 80 to 100 days. But as they learn to swim and feed for themselves are easy prey for leopard seals and killer whales.

### *Port Lockroy, Goudier Island, Antarctic Peninsula*

Port Lockroy Post office has its roots as a base for whalers, who used the place till the 1930s - enormous jaw bones and the wrecks of whaling boats lie above and below the water. During the Second World War the base was used for military operations, permanently occupied and a post office was established as a way of denying Chilean and Argentinian claims to sovereignty - to issue stamps from a place apparently still helps such claims.

After the war it was turned over to the British Antarctic Survey for scientific use and in 1996 it was renovated and turned into a museum. That and the post office are operated by the United Kingdom Antarctic Heritage Trust. It is a popular tourist destination in Antarctica.