

LEVEL B2

I Spent a Winter in Antarctica

Two Months Without the Sun at the Bottom of the World

Connor from Scarborough spent the 2025 winter at Rothera, a British research station in Antarctica, as one of forty-one people with no easy way out. He tells Olivia about two months without the sun, a very special midwinter and the day a lost emperor penguin turned up.

Key words

- | | |
|---------------|------------------|
| ● twilight | ● comforting |
| ● in theory | ● isolation |
| ● poke around | ● carve |
| ● numb | ● drill |
| ● sample | ● spray |
| ● squeeze in | ● pick up |
| ● appetite | ● keep an eye on |

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How to use it

1

Listen to the episode on YouTube.

2

Read the transcript and learn the key words.

3

Do the activities, then check the answer key.

Includes the full transcript, key words, activities and answers

Listen to the episode on the Aprendos YouTube channel

Key words

These words appear in the episode.

Key words	Meaning	Example
twilight <i>noun</i>	The soft, weak light in the sky just after the sun goes down or just before it comes up.	<i>We walked along the beach in the twilight, when the sky was turning dark blue.</i>
in theory <i>phrase</i>	Used to say what should be true or should happen, although reality may be different.	<i>In theory, the train takes forty minutes, but it's usually closer to an hour.</i>
poke around <i>phrasal verb</i>	To look through a place slowly and with curiosity, often touching or moving things.	<i>I love poking around in old bookshops on a rainy Saturday.</i>
numb <i>adjective</i>	Unable to feel anything in a part of your body, often because of cold.	<i>After an hour of waiting for the bus in the snow, my toes were completely numb.</i>
sample <i>noun</i>	A small amount of something that is taken so people can test or study it.	<i>The nurse took a blood sample and said the results would be ready on Friday.</i>
squeeze in <i>phrasal verb</i>	To fit people or things into a space that is really too small for them.	<i>Six of us squeezed into my cousin's tiny car to get to the concert.</i>
appetite <i>noun</i>	The feeling that you want to eat, and how much food you want.	<i>My grandfather is ninety, but he still has the appetite of a teenager.</i>
comforting <i>adjective</i>	Making you feel calmer and less worried or alone.	<i>It was comforting to hear my sister's voice after a long day in a new city.</i>
isolation <i>noun</i>	The situation of being far away from other people or places, with little contact.	<i>Working from home every day, some people start to feel a sense of isolation.</i>
carve <i>verb</i>	To cut wood or stone carefully in order to make an object or a shape.	<i>My uncle carved a little wooden bird for my daughter's birthday.</i>
drill <i>noun</i>	A practice of what to do in an emergency, such as a fire.	<i>The alarm rang during the maths test, but luckily it was only a fire drill.</i>
spray <i>noun</i>	Very small drops of water that fly through the air, for example from waves.	<i>We stood at the front of the ferry and got covered in cold sea spray.</i>
pick up <i>phrasal verb</i>	When the wind picks up, it suddenly becomes stronger.	<i>We had to take the tent down quickly when the wind picked up in the night.</i>
keep an eye on <i>phrase</i>	To watch someone or something carefully to make sure they are safe or all right.	<i>Could you keep an eye on my bag while I buy a coffee?</i>

Full transcript

I Spent a Winter in Antarctica: Two Months Without the Sun at the Bottom of the World

- CONNOR** The ship gave us one long blast on its horn. We were all standing on the wharf with red flares in our hands.
- OLIVIA** Like a party?
- CONNOR** Sort of. Then it went round the point and disappeared...
- OLIVIA** ...and that was it?
- CONNOR** That was it. Forty-one of us, and no easy way out until October.
- OLIVIA** So what did you do?
- CONNOR** Stood there for a bit. Then somebody asked who was making the tea.
- OLIVIA** Tea? At a moment like that?
- CONNOR** Tea means dinner where I'm from.
- OLIVIA** This is Aprendos English, level B2. I'm Olivia. My guest today spent the whole 2025 Antarctic winter at Rothera, a British research station on an island off the Antarctic Peninsula. Connor is twenty-six and grew up in Scarborough, on the Yorkshire coast. For almost a year and a half, he was the station's marine assistant.
- CONNOR** Hiya, Olivia. Cheers for having me.
- OLIVIA** I have to start with the darkness. Six months of total night, right?
- CONNOR** That's the South Pole, which is a very different place.
- OLIVIA** Oh. So how long did you get?
- CONNOR** Rothera is just south of the Antarctic Circle, so **in theory** the sun only disappears for a few weeks. However, there are mountains on the northern side of the station, and they hide it for much longer. Ours went down behind them in May, and it didn't come back over the top until July.
- OLIVIA** So about two months. That's still a lot.
- CONNOR** It is, although it's never completely black at midday. You get a few hours of grey **twilight**, a bit like a wet Tuesday afternoon in Scarborough in January.
- OLIVIA** Honestly, that sounds worse.
- CONNOR** Some days it was worse. On clear days, though, the sky turned pink and purple for hours, as if the mountains had lights inside them.
- OLIVIA** I grew up in Bellingham, in Washington State, where it's dark by half past four in December. I used to think that was tough.
- CONNOR** With respect, that sounds like a lovely holiday.
- OLIVIA** Rude. Okay, the job. What does a marine assistant actually do?
- CONNOR** My main job was a project called RaTS, the Rothera Time Series, which has been measuring the sea there since 1997. Roughly once a week, whatever the season, we take a small boat out into Ryder Bay, right beside the station. Then we lower an instrument called a CTD almost to the bottom, about five hundred metres down.
- OLIVIA** And CTD stands for...?

- CONNOR** Conductivity, temperature and depth. Conductivity basically tells you how salty the water is. We collect water **samples** as well, so scientists can see how the ocean is changing from one year to the next.
- OLIVIA** Five hundred metres of cable. There's a motor, I hope?
- CONNOR** There's a hand winch.
- OLIVIA** By hand? Five hundred metres?
- CONNOR** Down and back up again. By the end of the winter I had the strongest right arm in Antarctica, and a very ordinary left one.
- OLIVIA** So how does a guy from Scarborough end up on a boat in Antarctica? Let me guess, your family were fishermen.
- CONNOR** Close, but no. My dad runs a fish and chip shop on the seafront...
- OLIVIA** ...that's the most British thing I've ever heard.
- CONNOR** So I grew up surrounded by fish, just not live ones. I spent every summer **poking around** in rock pools under the castle. After that I studied marine biology at Bangor, in North Wales, and got my diving qualifications.
- OLIVIA** Wait, diving? You dived there too?
- CONNOR** All year round, from little inflatable boats, and in winter the water is about minus one point eight degrees...
- OLIVIA** ...minus? How is water below zero and still liquid?
- CONNOR** It's the salt. Seawater freezes at about minus two, whereas fresh water freezes at zero, so the sea stays liquid for longer.
- OLIVIA** I'd last about four seconds.
- CONNOR** You wear a very thick drysuit, so your body is actually fine. After a few minutes, however, your lips go **numb** and your hands feel like they belong to somebody else. Once in winter I heard Weddell seals calling under the water, and they sound like an old science fiction film.
- OLIVIA** Seals, lovely. Please tell me there were penguins as well.
- CONNOR** Not in winter, sorry. The Adélie penguins leave when the sea starts to freeze, which proves they're cleverer than us.
- OLIVIA** No penguins at all? That's so disappointing.
- CONNOR** Hold on to that thought.
- OLIVIA** Okay, the people. How many of you were there?
- CONNOR** In summer there are well over a hundred, scientists and pilots and builders all **squeezed in** together. Normally somewhere between twenty and thirty people stay for the winter...
- OLIVIA** ...so you were twenty-something.
- CONNOR** We were forty-one. They were finishing a huge new building called the Discovery Building, so builders stayed on as well. It was the biggest winter team the British Antarctic Survey has ever had.
- OLIVIA** I'd have guessed ten.
- CONNOR** Forty-one is a lot and not very many at the same time. After a month you know how everyone takes their coffee, and after three months you know exactly how everyone chews.
- OLIVIA** Okay, who was the chewer?

- CONNOR** I'm not naming names. He might be listening.
- OLIVIA** So who else was there? I'm picturing scientists in white coats.
- CONNOR** Far fewer than you'd think, because in winter it's mostly people who keep the station running. We had a doctor and the chefs, and field guides, who are basically professional mountaineers. There were also plumbers and electricians, and everyone had a proper job. If the boiler breaks at midnight...
- OLIVIA** ...there's nobody you can call.
- CONNOR** Exactly, you are the person they call.
- OLIVIA** And if someone gets really sick?
- CONNOR** Then it's down to our doctor, who has been trained for almost anything. Before they go, the doctors even do training in emergency dentistry.
- OLIVIA** Wait, the doctor pulls out your teeth?
- CONNOR** If they have to. That's why they check everybody's teeth so carefully before you're allowed to go. Flying in the Antarctic winter is seriously dangerous, and as a result a rescue flight is the absolute last option.
- OLIVIA** Okay. Take me back to that wharf with the flares. When was that?
- CONNOR** The seventeenth of June, which is incredibly late. Usually the last ship leaves long before winter. That year, though, the RRS Sir David Attenborough stayed on for some science in the bay. It was the latest ship visit Rothera has ever had.
- OLIVIA** Wait, the Sir David Attenborough? Isn't that the ship the internet wanted to call Boaty McBoatface?
- CONNOR** Same ship, yes.
- OLIVIA** I remember that. In 2016 there was an online vote, and Boaty McBoatface won...
- CONNOR** ...by miles.
- OLIVIA** By miles! And the government named it after David Attenborough anyway. Then, as a kind of apology, they gave the name to a little yellow robot submarine that travels on the ship.
- CONNOR** And half of Britain has never forgiven them.
- OLIVIA** I'm with half of Britain. So the ship leaves, you have your tea. What changes the next morning?
- CONNOR** Surprisingly little at first, because everybody still has work and the meals are at the same time every day. The quiet is strange, though, because in summer there are planes landing all day long. Suddenly all you can hear is the wind and the generators.
- OLIVIA** And when did the darkness start to get to you?
- CONNOR** Sleep went first, even though I was tired all the time. I'd wake up at three in the morning and just lie there listening to the wind until breakfast. A few weeks later my **appetite** went strange as well. Some days I didn't want anything at all, and other days I could have eaten a whole packet of biscuits...
- OLIVIA** ...and the biscuits won.
- CONNOR** The biscuits usually won. It happened to loads of people at the same time, which was oddly **comforting**. You'd find three of us in the kitchen at midnight, all pretending we'd only come in for a glass of water.
- OLIVIA** I've read about something called the Antarctic stare. People who spend the winter there sometimes go blank for a moment, and some researchers link it to...

- CONNOR** ...oh, the stare is very real.
- OLIVIA** They link it to a drop in a thyroid hormone called T3, which your body uses up in the cold.
- CONNOR** I didn't know about the hormone, but I've definitely seen the stare, and I've probably done it too. Somebody would ask you a simple question at lunch, and you'd just stare at the salt for ten seconds.
- OLIVIA** So how do you fight it?
- CONNOR** I had one of those very bright lamps for winter depression on my desk. I sat in front of it for an hour every morning, and I went to the gym even on the bad days. Honestly, the gym helped more than anything else.
- OLIVIA** And could you call home, or was it letters and radio?
- CONNOR** We had Starlink.
- OLIVIA** No way. Antarctica has Wi-Fi now?
- CONNOR** Pretty decent Wi-Fi, actually. I video called my parents every Sunday, while my dad was frying fish in the background.
- OLIVIA** Okay, that feels like cheating. The old explorers had nothing...
- CONNOR** ...the old explorers didn't have central heating either, and I'm keeping that too.
- OLIVIA** Fair. But is it really isolation if you can see your dad's chip shop?
- CONNOR** That's the funny part, because it still is. You can see home on a screen, but you can't go there, and nobody new walks through the door for months. You can phone your mates whenever you like, but you can't pop down to the pub with them.
- OLIVIA** Tell me about midwinter. I've heard it's basically Christmas.
- CONNOR** Down there it's bigger than Christmas. It's the twenty-first of June, the shortest day of the year, and almost all work stops for a few days. There's a special breakfast, then presents, and then a six-course dinner in the evening.
- OLIVIA** Presents? Where do you buy presents in Antarctica?
- CONNOR** You don't, which is the whole point. Weeks before, everybody draws a name out of a hat, and you make that person something with your own hands.
- OLIVIA** Let me guess. You made them a little penguin.
- CONNOR** Worse. I carved a wooden spoon.
- OLIVIA** A spoon.
- CONNOR** A spoon, for our station leader. I spent about sixty hours on it in the workshop, most evenings for weeks.
- OLIVIA** Sixty hours for one spoon? And?
- CONNOR** It looked like a potato on a stick. She says she uses it, though, and I've decided to believe her.
- OLIVIA** That's love. What did you get?
- CONNOR** One of the electricians made me a little lamp from an old diving torch and a piece of wooden packing crate. It's on my bedside table right now.
- OLIVIA** So he wins.
- CONNOR** He wins easily. Then in the evening everybody sits round the radio for the BBC World Service midwinter broadcast. Our families had recorded messages weeks before...
- OLIVIA** ...wait, you have Starlink. Why do you still need the radio?

- CONNOR** Because it's tradition, and because it feels completely different. Forty-one adults sit there in total silence, and then your mum's voice comes out of the speaker. Suddenly half the room is crying.
- OLIVIA** Were you crying?
- CONNOR** I had something in my eye.
- OLIVIA** Of course you did. And then you all watch a horror film, right? I've heard about this.
- CONNOR** Try me.
- OLIVIA** The Thing, from 1982. An alien monster gets into a research station in Antarctica, and the men there don't know who to trust. For some reason, that's what everybody chooses to watch together in the dark.
- CONNOR** Every single year. For weeks afterwards, whenever someone was quiet at dinner, somebody would lean over and ask, "Are you still you?"
- OLIVIA** That's horrible. I love it. So what was the scariest moment of your winter? Let me guess, a fire.
- CONNOR** Good guess, because fire is what everybody fears most down there. In 2001 the old science lab at Rothera burned down in the middle of winter, so we did fire drills constantly. My worst moment was on the water, though.
- OLIVIA** On a CTD day?
- CONNOR** On a CTD day in August. There were three of us in the boat, and the forecast looked fine, so we went out to the deep site. I had about four hundred metres of cable out when the wind suddenly picked up...
- OLIVIA** ...and you're still winding by hand.
- CONNOR** Still winding by hand. The waves were getting bigger every minute, and the spray was freezing onto everything it touched, including my gloves.
- OLIVIA** Couldn't you just cut the cable?
- CONNOR** We could have, but the instrument costs thousands of pounds. Losing it would also leave a gap in a record that goes back to 1997. The boating officer looked at the sky and gave me five minutes. After that, we were going home with it or without it.
- OLIVIA** How long did it take?
- CONNOR** About four and a half, which is the fastest I've ever moved in my life. By the time we got back to the wharf, the whole boat looked like it was covered in sugar icing.
- OLIVIA** And your famous right arm?
- CONNOR** My right arm didn't speak to me for three days.
- OLIVIA** Okay, earlier you told me to hold on to a thought. The penguins.
- CONNOR** Right. One day in winter, a young emperor penguin turned up at the station completely on its own. Emperors are rare at Rothera, so we think it was lost...
- OLIVIA** ...stop it. An emperor penguin?
- CONNOR** It stayed for about a week. We weren't allowed near it, so the whole station kept an eye on it from a distance, like proud parents.
- OLIVIA** I take back everything I said about penguins. And when did the sun finally come back?

- CONNOR** In July, and there's a little ceremony for it called sun up. We stood outside with hot drinks while someone read a poem, and then we raised the flag. The sun only showed above the mountains for a short time, but people cheered as if England had just scored.
- OLIVIA** And then the planes came back in October.
- CONNOR** And the planes brought the freshies.
- OLIVIA** The what?
- CONNOR** Fresh fruit and vegetables, which we hadn't seen for months because we'd been living on frozen and tinned food. When the first boxes of apples came off the plane, people were holding them up to their noses and just smelling them.
- OLIVIA** What did you eat first?
- CONNOR** A tomato, like an apple, standing in the corridor.
- OLIVIA** And coming home in the spring. Was that hard?
- CONNOR** Harder than going. On my first day back I walked into a big supermarket in Scarborough, and I had to walk straight out again. There was too much noise, and there must have been forty kinds of breakfast cereal.
- OLIVIA** Forty-one, surely.
- CONNOR** It could easily have been forty-one.
- OLIVIA** Would you go back?
- CONNOR** Tomorrow. I've already applied for another season.
- OLIVIA** Seriously? After the darkness and the frozen boat?
- CONNOR** Probably because of them. It's the only place I've ever been where every single person around you matters, and you feel it every day.
- OLIVIA** Okay, quick-fire before you go. One detail you'll never forget.
- CONNOR** The Weddell seals singing under the water. Pure science fiction.
- OLIVIA** Mine is the potato on a stick. That poor station leader.
- CONNOR** She loves that spoon.
- OLIVIA** Okay, listeners, imagine yourselves down there. Could you spend a winter at the bottom of the world with forty-one people and no easy way out? And what would you make for your midwinter present? We read every comment, so go ahead.
- CONNOR** Just please don't say a spoon.
- OLIVIA** You can download our whole chat, word list included, as a PDF. It's free, and it's just underneath this video. Connor, this was brilliant. Thank you.
- CONNOR** Cheers, Olivia. Mind how you go, everyone.
- OLIVIA** And if you'd like more conversations like this one, subscribe to Aprendos English. See you soon!

Did you understand?

Choose the correct answer.

1. Why did Connor have about two months without the sun at Rothera?

- ☐ Rothera is at the South Pole, where the night is very long.
- ☐ Mountains on the north side of the station hid the sun.
- ☐ Heavy clouds covered the sky from May until October.

2. Why were there forty-one people at Rothera that winter?

- ☐ Builders stayed on to finish the new Discovery Building.
- ☐ The last ship couldn't leave because of the sea ice.
- ☐ Extra scientists came to study the emperor penguins.

3. What does Olivia remember about the RRS Sir David Attenborough?

- ☐ It was the first ship to stay at Rothera all winter.
- ☐ It carries a submarine that the government named after Attenborough.
- ☐ It's the ship the internet wanted to call Boaty McBoatface.

4. What did Connor make for his midwinter present?

- ☐ A little lamp from an old diving torch.
- ☐ A wooden spoon for the station leader.
- ☐ A small penguin carved out of wood.

5. On the windy CTD day in August, why didn't they just cut the cable?

- ☐ The boating officer said it was against the station rules.
- ☐ The cable was frozen solid to the side of the boat.
- ☐ It's expensive, and losing it would leave a gap in the record.

Exercise 1. Real or fake?

Each word from the episode has three definitions. Only one is real. Find it.

1. twilight

- ☐ A very bright lamp that people use to fight winter sadness.
- ☐ The weak light in the sky just before night or just after dawn.
- ☐ The thin blanket that researchers keep in the station's emergency boxes.

2. poke around

- ☐ To wake someone up by pushing them gently with your finger.
- ☐ To catch small fish from the rocks with a long, thin stick.
- ☐ To look through a place slowly and with curiosity.

3. comforting

- ☐ Making you feel calmer and less alone.
- ☐ Warm and soft to wear, like a very thick drysuit.
- ☐ Talking a lot at dinner because you feel nervous.

4. carve

- ☐ To want one kind of food very much, often late at night.
- ☐ To cut wood or stone carefully to make an object.
- ☐ To cover a boat with a thin layer of ice, like sugar icing.

5. keep an eye on

- ☐ To stare at the salt at lunch for ten seconds without thinking.
- ☐ To close one eye so you can see better in strong wind.
- ☐ To watch something carefully to make sure it's all right.

Exercise 2. Word partners

Match each phrase with the key word that often goes with it. Two words are extra.

1. to lose your _____
2. a fire _____
3. to take a blood _____
4. the wind started to _____
5. a feeling of _____
6. my fingers went _____

- a) appetite
- b) carve
- c) drill
- d) isolation
- e) numb
- f) pick up
- g) sample
- h) twilight

In the dark months Connor's appetite went strange, and on winter dives his lips went numb. Use one pair in a sentence about your own life.

Exercise 3. Your turn

Could you spend a winter at Rothera with forty other people and no easy way out? What would you make for your midwinter present? Write three or four sentences. Use at least two words from the list.

Answer key

Check your answers after you finish the activities.

Did you understand?

1. Mountains on the north side of the station hid the sun.
2. Builders stayed on to finish the new Discovery Building.
3. It's the ship the internet wanted to call Boaty McBoatface.
4. A wooden spoon for the station leader.
5. It's expensive, and losing it would leave a gap in the record.

Exercise 1. Real or fake?

1. twilight: The weak light in the sky just before night or just after dawn.
2. poke around: To look through a place slowly and with curiosity.
3. comforting: Making you feel calmer and less alone.
4. carve: To cut wood or stone carefully to make an object.
5. keep an eye on: To watch something carefully to make sure it's all right.

Exercise 2. Word partners

1. to lose your appetite
2. a fire drill
3. to take a blood sample
4. the wind started to pick up
5. a feeling of isolation
6. my fingers went numb

The last time I had the flu, I lost my appetite for a whole week, and even my favourite biscuits stayed in the cupboard.

Exercise 3. Example answer

In theory I would love it, but I think the isolation would be hard for me after a few months. I would go to the gym every day and keep an eye on my appetite, because I know I'd eat all the biscuits. For my midwinter present, I would try to carve a small seal out of wood. It would probably look like a potato too, but I hope it would still be comforting.