

Mike in Russia

I arrived in Moscow late in December. The snow was thick on the ground, the temperature was near to -20C and my nostrils froze as I stepped off the plane. I didn't speak Russian, not even enough to order a coffee. It was quite a daunting thought and I felt extremely isolated. I had got one good friend here though. A very good friend - Evgeny.

Securing specific permits from the Russian FSB (modern day KGB) has been an ongoing, and so far unsuccessful, task these last two years. They are nigh on impossible to obtain. Why do we need them? Because we intend to enter Russia by crossing the sea ice that separates it from America. Not the most conventional route by which to enter any country but when you understand that we would be doing so with loaded guns it's perfectly understandable why the Russian authorities are slightly nervous about our request!

Our Patron is Prince Michael of Kent (known affectionately as Kenski in Russia) and we have his support as well as that of the British and American Ambassadors in Moscow and the Russian Ambassador in London. Even with such assistance it is still not easy to obtain the ever elusive permits. For this reason the full expedition (from Alaska to Russia and back to Alaska) has had to be delayed until 2017.

The team though are not for throwing the towel in. Not at all. They are all individually training and undertaking challenging expeditions and training of various sorts. I have my own training planned and it is designed to give me far greater exposure (possibly not the best choice of word) to cold weather, equipment and survival in extreme situations. I have already been in the arctic half a dozen times. The longest expedition I have been on was a 565 kilometre ski and yomp to the Magnetic North Pole. That took 27 days so I have some idea just what toll this sort of challenge will have on my body. Last time I lost 20 pounds in weight and once home I could barely walk for several days as my lower legs swelled up. These trips are punishing to say the very least.



After just a couple of days in Moscow I took a 25 hour train trip north to the city of Kem so that I could undertake cold weather training in the region of Karelia. When we arrived it was late afternoon and already pitch black. One 4x4 and another worryingly small car were waiting for us with our drivers Igor and Sasha. We grabbed a few last minute supplies from the shop by the railway station and hastily set off into the darkness.

Five hours of poor visibility and roads that were completely covered in snow had no apparent effect on our drivers at all. We came off the main road, down a very bumpy track and we and our rucksacks were unloaded by a house with no lights. This really was going back to basics. Everyone put on their head-torches whilst we tried to get to grips with our new surroundings. We opened the door of our log cabin, brought all our kit inside and lit some candles. The first job was to start the heating system which was the Russian version of an Aga and possibly even more effective. Within an hour the place was warm enough for us to take off our hats, gloves and at least our outer jackets. An hour after that we were actually trying to figure out how to stop the place getting any warmer.

Six of us were sleeping in one large room. This room was also the living room, dining room and kitchen. The toilet was an outhouse which is always a difficult experience when the outside temperature can drop below -30C. The toilet seat has to be either wooden or polystyrene so you don't freeze to it. Being frozen to a toilet seat is not a good look for anybody!

Bathrooms up here are different to what we know in Edinburgh. A bania is similar in some regards to a sauna. This though is known as a black bania because it is fired by burning wood so there is a lot of soot at times. Thankfully the chimney was working pretty well so it wasn't too smoky when I was using it. The temperature can get so hot it becomes unbearable. I though, as the foreigner, was not allowed to leave. When I asked to get out I was promptly told to lie face down on a bench and several people started to beat my naked body all over with birch twigs. I was then told to lie on my back and they repeated the process. This took a lot of trust!

I have to confess that I felt absolutely marvellous after my beating but did not enjoy the next stage in the process. Being taken from a nice sweaty 60C to be outside in something approaching -30C and then being rubbed vigorously with handfuls of icy snow. It really hurt. I was supposed to repeat this process two more times but I only repeated it once before grabbing my towel, getting dried and then dressed. I have to say I have never slept so well as I have after a bania! I'd recommend it for any insomniac.

During the days that followed the temperature dipped to a low of -33C and we enjoyed cross country skiing, ice hole fishing and long distance walking. The longest walk I did was 26 kilometres and that was due to the fact that daylight is limited at this time of year. The upside of that though, was that we saw brilliant stars every night and the Northern Lights on two occasions.



By all accounts, I was the first Scotsman they had ever had in Voinitsa. I was invited to the family home of the man who owned the log cabin we were staying in. Only his daughter spoke any English but I shared a meal with the family and had a very good time. I had never eaten elk before. In fact I have hardly even uttered the word 'elk' since reading a book called 'Littlenose' as a child or visiting the Chamber Street Museum. The family though decided to show me the gun that had been used to kill the animal as well as the frozen carcass that was hanging in an outbuilding. It can't go off here – it's instantly frozen.

I loved Voinitsa and resented the train back south to Moscow. What followed was two months of boring meetings. But, they were meetings necessary to discuss the expedition, its aims and the experience of the team. I had to shake some hands, drink a lot of coffee and answer all sorts of strange questions.

At the very end of February I ventured back up to Karelia. I was delighted to be back here and was in fact even further north this time. Kem was in the Arctic Circle but this time I flew direct to Murmansk which is the biggest city in the Arctic Circle. I avoided the 25 hour train journey this time but I still needed to undertake a 5 hour road trip afterwards. It seemed almost obligatory.

I did get to spend 24 hours in Murmansk which, although not at all appealing to look at, turned out to be quite an interesting city. I got to ride the most northerly tram system on the planet, eat some reindeer and visit some poignant war memorials. Eating reindeer was definitely the highlight.

I am already a well-qualified diver but my aim here was to qualify as an Ice Diver and to get more experience

of being in waters that dip to -3C, more experience of dry suits and of rescue techniques too. There are not many places that you can do this. After a day of one-to-one lectures and discussion I was whisked out onto the ice by a snow mobile. After changing into my dry suit I remember standing by the edge of the small hole in the ice and my buddy and I roped ourselves together. We sat on the edge of the ice and then slipped quietly into the water and towards the darkness below. I can't deny that I was nervous but I was also as excited as you can get. This experience was utterly amazing.

In total I dived eight times here. I used different dry suits, different gloving systems, we dived to differing depths and we saw different things every time. To see an Arctic Comb Jelly radiate every colour of the rainbow as it swam in front of my face was stunning but to hold a Beluga Whale and hitch a ride really topped it all.

Every day that I was there I was cold. But more importantly I learned how to be cold, how to cope with it and how to recover from it. It was an experience that I am both fortunate and grateful to have had. Now I am returning to Moscow and then on to Yakutsk – a city few Russians visit let alone foreigners. That though will be another story to share with you all sometime soon.

Mike Laird



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