



For some, to reach, attain or visit one of the earth's polar regions is a lifelong ambition. For me it was a goal fixed firmly onto my radar over two years ago. The span of time preceding the trip was spent building the skills necessary to accomplish the feat.

Possessing the right skills is one of three core factors needed to be safe on any expedition into extreme, unfamiliar territory. Training and having the best possible equipment are the other two. First aid, gun handling, navigation and general camp craft were the necessary

building blocks. Sat Com handling, polar bear psychology and frostbite treatments were added to our survival skills arsenal. Together, these would keep us in one piece and ensure our safe return.

The initial legs of our journey ran long — flying on aircraft large and small all the way from Edinburgh, Scotland, to Ottawa, Ontario, Canada — then heading North to Iqaluit and onward to Resolute Bay, Nunavut, via the smaller hamlets of Iglulik and Arctic Bay. Stepping off the last plane at Resolute, the change was dramatic — the mercury showed a not so balmy -30C or less. Down jackets were hastily put on over fleeces. All of us were suddenly wearing two layers of hats and gloves, trying, somewhat comically I admit, to come to terms with the fact that our nostrils were feeling quite frozen.

To reach the Magnetic Pole

Diverse group makes the journey





Most of us on this expedition were generally pampered folk, living in large cities or towns. Still, we were a diverse group with plenty of experience on other types of expeditions or extreme outdoor sports: mountaineering, ultra runners, martial arts instructors, and several who merely gravitated to the challenge. Some had devoted many months of physical training.

The first four days were spent in and around the South Camp Inn. It served as our jump-off base. There we tested the new kit, finalized logistics, test-fired the shotguns and sorted and bagged up all the food rations for the weeks ahead.

The day we left setting out on foot across the ice proved very deceiving. The sun shone and the wind had dropped to a mere whisper.

We unzipped our wind suits; we all only wore one layer of gloves. It seemed like an idyllic dream.

That comfortable calm was short lived and brutally broken only two days later however. Plummeting temperatures, fierce head-on winds and swirling snow soon enveloped us. While some ideal blue sky and sunny days were magnificent many others were harsh.

The Arctic is a very real challenge — not one to be underestimated!

In total we walked and skied nearly 600 kilometres harnessed to sledges weighing between 50 and 55 kilos. An easy day on the ice would be eight or nine hours long, but towards the end, and largely due to having been unable to move for three days, because of adverse weather, we realized that we had to considerably increase the distances we covered.

Most of the time we were walking over the frozen ocean, a reality that struck me on occasion as an unsettling thing to be doing. Other times we skirted the edges of Bathurst Island and Ellef Ringnes. The terrain in this area varied greatly from sheet ice to deep snow, ice rubble to icebergs and on the islands we saw mountains and towering rock formations.

The sky was only ever blue or white. The near total absence of both animals and trees was strangely conspicuous. On two occasions we did see seals from a distance as well as polar bear tracks and evidence that they'd been feeding on seals on the ice. Towards the end of our expedition we saw a lone wolf and only one bird. We never did see any bears.

The last few days we walked up to 13-and-a-half hours. These were utterly exhausting. Thankfully, morale was generally good in large part due to an amicable group dynamic. Great guys — every one of them.

The wear and tear experienced by our bodies, particularly our feet, evidenced mainly by huge blisters, slowed us down as well. Pulling on your boots and standing in the morning was often the greatest trial of

the day. My feet suffered terribly as did those of several other teammates.

Finally, just 0.1 miles from our goal, The Pole, we stopped and formed a line so that we could all reach it at precisely the same time. Everyone had their GPS in their hand, looking at it intently. Once the GPS confirmed we'd made it, we all unharnessed ourselves from the sledges, shook hands, hugged and took the obligatory photographs with our respective national flags.

The Magnetic North Pole is a place that will surely continue to hold its strong allure for many a future adventurer for decades to come. For all of us, to have made it to this very point on earth was without doubt a challenging adventure, but also a huge privilege that will be hard to top for many of us in years to come.

