

Going Where A Lot of Other Dudes With Really Great Equipment Have Gone Before

The call of the pseudo-wild.

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Peary became aware of a wooden feeling in his feet. When Henson ripped off the sealskin boots he saw that the explorer's legs were bloodless white to the knee. As he tore off the undershoes, two or three toes from each foot clung to the hide and snapped off at the joint.

"My god, Lieutenant!" he cried. "Why didn't you tell me your feet were frozen?"

"There's no time to pamper sick men on the trail," Peary told him, and added, "besides, a few toes aren't much to give to achieve the Pole."

—Pierre Berton, in "The Arctic Grail," describing the outcome of a dog-sled trip on Ellesmere Island in 1898.

I spent much of my first night on Ellesmere Island thinking about Robert Peary's toes. Our expedition — 4 women, 9 men, 16 sled dogs — arrived late in the evening, aboard chartered skiplanes that deposited us on a frozen lake flanked by white mountains and a mound of blue ice a half-mile high. With the midnight sun shining and the temperature around zero, it was a balmy spring night in the High Arctic. But even after I carefully burrowed my sleeping bag into a snowbank to get out of the wind, I was too cold to get any sleep.

I told myself that it could be worse — at least my feet could still feel pain. I reminded myself what Peary did on this island after the feeling returned to his lower extremities. He was still 500 miles from the North Pole, and the pain was so excruciating that he couldn't even stand, but as he lay recuperating in a frigid hut, he is said to have scrawled a line from Seneca on the wall: "I shall find a way or make one." If he could persevere here, if he could lose toes and keep slogging across the ice, what kind of a wuss was I to complain?

But it was no use. By 4 in the morning, I no longer considered Peary an appropriate role model. By 5, I was wondering if my medical insurance would pay for a rescue plane if I faked appendicitis. By 6, I was ready to pay for the plane myself. How was a New Yorker who hated camping going to endure the next two weeks?

We were supposed to sled and ski across the mountains and between the icecaps of Ellesmere, Canada's northernmost island, to reach the coast where Peary and other explorers experienced what was probably the highest misery-per-visitor ratio of any place on earth. Those expeditions went up Ellesmere's eastern coast, where the island is separated from Greenland by a band of sea ice leading to the Arctic Ocean, hoping to chart new land and set "farthest north" records; they ended up freezing, starving, drowning, succumbing to scurvy and insanity, occasionally killing themselves and one another.

Their obsession was hard enough to understand, but what about ours? The only specific goals we had for this 100-mile journey were to take an especially tortuous route (which had long been avoided by sensible travelers) through the mountains and end up at the ruins of Starvation Camp, where a 19th-century U.S. Army expedition had been

reduced to cannibalism. Why, now that there were no new places to reach, no fame and fortune to be won, were a bunch of middle-aged Americans on vacation paying to relive the tribulations of the old explorers?

We had been seduced by an odd modern phenomenon, the glorification of exploration at a time when the entire planet has been mapped. The Age of Exploration has been succeeded by the Age of Explornography. Like pornography, explornography provides vicarious thrills — the titillation of exploring without the risk of actually having to venture into terra incognita. In its classic hard-core form, explornography is the depiction of genuine voyages of discovery, trips to uncharted regions where there was no way to summon help when disaster struck. Today's audiences are going back to the old texts, and there has been a recent rash of books and movies about Peary and Dr. Frederick Cook, Richard Evelyn Byrd, Lewis and Clark, Stanley and Livingstone and Heinrich Harrer (the explorer portrayed by Brad Pitt in "Seven Years in Tibet"). Connoisseurs have been especially gratified by the revival of Ernest Shackleton, the explorer who never reached his goals but always produced splendid stories. Like many explornography addicts, I first got hooked on "Endurance," Alfred Lansing's book about the 1914 Shackleton expedition, which was marooned in the Antarctic. Originally published in 1959, "Endurance" resurfaced this year on best-seller lists; Tristar is about to make a big-budget film of the adventure.

But the old stories are not enough to satisfy demand. The explornography industry needs fresh material to fill magazines like *Outside* and *Men's Journal*, to make programs for the Discovery Channel and the Outdoor Life Network, to sell outdoor gear and adventure-travel packages. Today's soft-core explornographers, like pornographers who shoot erotic scenes in which no sex actually takes place, have the skills and technology — minicams, satellite linkups, Web pages — to wring drama from voyages of nondiscovery. Mount Everest, which has been climbed hundreds of times, is a bigger media star than ever. The new film about Everest is setting box-office records at IMAX theaters; Jon Krakauer's "Into Thin Air" has spent more than a year on best-seller lists.

Thanks to a surge in corporate sponsorship of expeditions, there are probably more professional explorers today than at any time in history. Membership of the Explorers Club in New York is at an all-time high, and the National Geographic Society has created the oxymoronic position of "explorer in residence." The pros and their sponsors have a new monthly publication, *Expedition News*, which reports on the benefactors who are offering money and the explorers who are looking for it. Jeff Blumenfeld, its publisher, estimates that corporations' annual support of expeditions has risen from \$10 million in the mid-1980's to more than \$200 million today. *Expedition News* chronicles industry gossip (like the recent controversy over the "Women of Climbing" calendar) and tracks the increasing number of quests for increasingly arcane grails: the first ascent of the southeast face of North America's second-highest peak; the first male-female team to cross Antarctica; the first team of breast-cancer survivors to scale Mount Aspiring in New Zealand; the first skier to reach both the North and South Poles in one year; the longest sea journey out of sight of land (three years).

But the biggest boom has been among amateurs, who are now able to go anywhere and produce the explornographic equivalent of a home stag movie. In Peary's day, exploration was so costly and time-consuming that it was limited to professionals and their gentlemen patrons; our trip to Ellesmere required only \$5,000 and three weeks, one of them spent training with the sled dogs in northern Minnesota. As we were arriving on Ellesmere with our journals and cameras, fellow amateurs with even less training were embarking on their own journeys into the known.

Adventure-travel outfitters will let you retrace Shackleton's footsteps, backpack in the Amazon rain forest and kayak rapids in Nepal. You can cross Middle Eastern deserts by Land Rover or Mongolian steppes by horseback. In America, the epicenter of the boom, the number of adventure-travel outfitters has tripled in the past decade, to more than 8,000. Their clientele is increasingly older (the average age is about 50) and more heavily female. Sales of outdoor equipment have quintupled since the mid-1980's, to \$5 billion a year, partly because more Americans just want to dress like explorers (sneaker companies are hurting because fashionable urban youths have switched to hiking boots), but also because so many are going into the wilderness. In the last five years, the number of companies making snowshoes has risen from 4 to more than 30. Some people thought that the recent deaths on Everest might be bad for the climbing business, but the publicity has only inspired more people to head for the peaks. One reason the rangers at Mount Rainier in Washington have been so busy this summer — last month, 1 climber was killed in an avalanche and another 18 had to be rescued — is that there are more people than ever trying to climb it.

I had long been content to sit out this trend. Reading about the old explorers was enough; their miseries excited me because it was the kind of thing I couldn't imagine doing. I couldn't understand how they so cheerfully put up with the constant little hardships — how, after Shackleton's ship sunk with all the toilet paper aboard, the men casually used snow and ice as substitutes.

As I worked my way through the hard-core literature, I fixated on the journals from Starvation Camp because of the unremitting suffering. That Army expedition in the 1880's, in which 19 of the 25 men perished, became infamous when The New York Times revealed that some of the corpses had been cannibalized — "The Shame of the Nation," The Times called it — but who could blame the guys? They froze all winter in a hut, crammed three to a sleeping bag, and their food ran out because their relief ship hadn't arrived. Their journals contained entries like, "Sealskin gloves for dinner." One crazed soldier spent his days writing up menus for gargantuan feasts. Another was executed after he stole leather sled straps that were to be used for making stew.

My obsession with Starvation Camp eventually got the best of me. When I heard about a dog-sled expedition headed there, I couldn't resist the chance to go along, even though it meant graduating from explornographic voyeur to participant.

But now that I was actually sleeping in the snow, the thrill was gone. Between my meditations on Peary's toes, I recalled the words of another Arctic hardy, the pilot of the Twin Otter skiplane that had dropped us here. After the plane threaded its way

through the mountains of Ellesmere to an unnamed lake where no one had ever landed, the pilot calmly checked out the winds and the lake surface during a low pass and then bounced the plane to a landing across the ice and snow. This was not a safe way to make a living, but he was accustomed to ferrying expeditions all over the Arctic. There were more and more every year: hikers clambering across glaciers, skiers man-hauling sleds over mountains, pilgrims from around the world traveling on everything from snowshoes to motorcycles.

“What’s the craziest expedition you’ve ever seen?” I asked.

He thought about it for a moment, and I wondered if he was trying to be polite. “Well,” he finally said, “they’re all crazy.”

“Have you ever gone on one?”

He smiled. “Oh, no.”

Across Lake Wintergreen: The Gear Fetish

Have special pair of “Peary North Pole” snowshoes made...Have Henson make pattern “Peary North Pole sledges.” ...North Pole coats, suits, tents, cookers at Sportsmen’s Show with male and female attendants in Eskimo costume.

—Plans for marketing a new brand of gear, outlined in Peary’s journal as he headed toward the North Pole in 1909.

On the first morning of the trip, I commiserated with the other unhappy campers. Only our expedition leader, Paul Schurke; the 37-year-old photographer with me, Per Breiehagen, and two of the vacationers had ever been in the Arctic. There were stock-brokers, people in the computer industry, a high-school administrator, a graphics designer and other desk jockeys. We were mostly in our 40’s and 50’s. We had trained for the trip, but few of us were in spectacular shape.

As we stood around the stove at breakfast, throwing chunks of butter into instant oatmeal to add calories, we grumbled about the relatively light sleeping bags Schurke had brought for us. Even Per, a veteran of photo shoots at both Poles, was concerned. “I should have brought my own bag,” he said. “The wrong gear can be a real drag. I’ll never forget the tent we got stuck with on Will Steger’s Greenland expedition. We were freezing out there on the icecap during a seven-day storm.”

Looking for comfort, I asked him, “On the first night of that expedition, before you got used to it, did you find yourself lying there wishing you could just be beamed back home?”

“The first night? Try every night.”

Our leader tried to rally the troops with an after-breakfast speech. “I know some of you slept cold last night,” Schurke said. “I did, too. It’s part of the Arctic challenge, learning to sleep warm. We’ll do a better job tonight. I could have brought heavier

bags, but I have no idea what's ahead on this trail, and I don't want to be trying to push a sled that's loaded like a pregnant tuna."

No one was about to argue with him. Schurke unquestionably has the Right Stuff. Last year, Backpacker magazine proclaimed him the "King of Cool," a title based on his having spent more nights in subzero weather than anyone on earth, although it is also not a bad description of his style. He looks like a leaner, handsomer David Letterman and has the same wry aloofness. Schurke, who is 43, gave up a journalism career to run tours in northern Minnesota with a dog-sledder named Will Steger. In 1986 they made their names with an expedition toward the goal for which Peary sacrificed his toes, and which he probably never attained.

Although Peary claimed that he finally reached the North Pole in 1909, he provided no credible proof, and historians and later explorers have built a devastating case against him: he took so few sextant sightings that he couldn't have navigated his way to the Pole, and he didn't have enough time to cover the distance he claimed to have traveled. Like his rival, Dr. Cook, who told an even more unlikely story of reaching the Pole, Peary apparently lied. He couldn't find a way, so he made one up.

Schurke and Steger took their dogs to Ellesmere's coast and persevered north for two months, becoming the first confirmed expedition to reach the North Pole under its own power. After a National Geographic cover story and a best-selling book, "North to the Pole," Schurke found corporations to sponsor a 1,200-mile expedition from Siberia to Alaska. Then, he said: "I got tired of shaking the corporate money tree. To get sponsorship, you always have to come up with a new 'first,' and you have to cut it mighty thin these days to do anything new."

Schurke went into business for himself by building the Wintergreen Lodge in Ely, Minn. It has the world's largest kennel of working Inuit dogs, which he uses on tours of the frozen lakes nearby and expeditions elsewhere. His wife, Susan, who had sewn much of the clothing used on the North Pole trek, started a store and catalogue selling Wintergreen clothing. While it wasn't required dress for our trip, most of us were gladly wearing Schurke's brand. To explornography buffs, it was like suiting up with Michael Jordan.

Schurke assigned each of our two sleds to a team of six people who rotated responsibilities — two people riding the sled and mushing the dogs while the other four proceeded on skis. My team was led by one of the Arctic veterans, Julia Bent, a 50-year-old veterinarian and freelance outdoors writer from Seattle. She was one of the few expedition members whose family and friends back home were not worried. She was a taut outdoorswoman — she had been a ski instructor and had led kayak trips — to whom I'd taken an instant dislike when we met back in civilization. Julia looked at my Polartec vest and snapped: "Take that off! It's too hot to wear indoors!" I had visions of being bossed across the Arctic by a maternal drill sergeant.

The other sled was led by Lon Constantini, 50, a not-so-taut stockbroker who had been on a couple of Arctic trips with Schurke. Lon, a former Army Ranger in Vietnam, had turned one of those trips into a slide show and speech, "A Gentleman's Adventures

on the Ice,” which he presents at luncheons back home in Las Cruces, N.M. His first meeting with Julia was worse than mine. He told her about his last Arctic trip and said, “What I really liked about that trip was that it was all male.” Relations between Julia and Lon were strained the rest of the journey.

We loaded the sleds, filled our water bottles and stuffed our pockets and packs with granola bars, dried fruit, chocolate and sticks of cheese, taking care to keep the food and water close to our bodies so it wouldn’t freeze. Then we set off across the two-mile-long frozen lake. It had no name on the map, so we voted to christen it Lake Wintergreen. In the spirit of the old polar explorers, who named places after their patrons, we were using the landscape to honor the animating force of exploration in our age: gear.

Outdoor-equipment stores are the fetish shops of explornography. Even I, who dreaded the prospect of an Arctic trek, loved shopping for it. The Wintergreen store was my favorite because of its huge totem hanging on the wall, a 16-foot sled used on Schurke’s North Pole trip, but I happily spent hours in other gearhead bazaars fondling smooth layers of Capilene and Polartec, agonizing between Gore-Tex and Supplex, picking out gloves and gauntlets, glacier sunglasses and a chronometer with a built-in thermometer, barometer and altimeter that I absolutely had to have. As I walked across Central Park in April to train on a cross-country-ski machine at my gym, I exulted in my monstrous new leather-and-rubber LaCrosse pack boots guaranteed to 100 degrees below zero. How manly! Take that, Nature! Just to be safe, I also bought a pair of Steger mukluks for \$135. When the guy selling me the North Face climbing pack told me that it had a loop for an ice ax, I barely resisted buying an ax.

It can’t be just a coincidence that the sex most interested in exploration is the sex most obsessed with acquiring gear. When *Homo habilis* fabricated stone tools 2.5 million years ago, his immediate impulse was probably to lead an expedition across the savanna looking for an excuse to use them — and then sell the gear to the rest of the clan. Peary was perhaps the first to glimpse the full range of commercial possibilities, but he never followed through on his plans to market his own brand of gear. Once again, it remained for Schurke and Steger to realize his dream.

For their trip to the Pole, they received \$100,000 from Du Pont to use its new synthetic insulation, wear its logo on their sleeves and do promotional stunts like appearing in New York with a sled dog wearing a Du Pont cape. The company meticulously measured the publicity it derived from the extensive newspaper and television coverage of the trip: a total of 240 million “brand impressions” that would have cost \$6.7 million to buy as advertising. Soon the rest of the gear industry was looking for expeditions to sponsor.

Schurke himself, however, is a gear ascetic. He had by far the cheapest footwear of anyone on our trip, a pair of \$12 nylon mukluks. He didn’t even have a watch, let alone one with an altimeter. He took pleasure in telling us about the \$2,400 Rolex chronometer that had failed on the North Pole trip, a potential disaster (like the old polar explorers, he was navigating solely by sextant) that he had averted by using a

\$20 Timex. I couldn't understand his attitude until we crossed the lake and entered a canyon, whereupon the downside of gear fetishism became painfully apparent.

Up Sverdrup Pass: The Lusty-Sled-Dog Conjecture

Two dogs had frozen during the storm. All were buried in the edge of a drift that was piled 15 feet. An exploration of the canyon showed other falls and boulders impossible for sledge travel. A trail was picked over the hills to the side.

—Dr. Frederick Cook, in “My Attainment of the Pole,” describing the canyon in Sverdrup Pass he was forced to detour around during his 1908 journey.

Schurke's reaction to that canyon was a bit different from Dr. Cook's. As far as Schurke knew, everyone ascending Sverdrup Pass — including Otto Sverdrup, the Norwegian discoverer of the route in 1899 — had made a detour around it. For Schurke, that was all the more reason to go straight up.

Several miles along, the dogs were finally stymied on the slope of a snowdrift. Schurke took a walk up the canyon and came back whistling — a dangerous sign, although we didn't realize it at the time.

“How does it look up ahead?” I asked.

“It's a team-builder,” he said.

As the canyon narrowed and the trail steepened, it was hard enough just to climb the frozen waterfalls, boulders and snowdrifts, but we now had to help the dogs haul two sleds with more than a half-ton of supplies. There were a few close calls when the sleds tumbled off the slopes, but somehow we all managed to jump out of the way.

“Was your trip to the Pole anything like this?” I asked Schurke.

“Well, the vertical stuff is very similar,” he said. “We spent our days pushing sleds up and down over pressure ridges. But here there's no glare ice and wind and minus-60 temperatures. We've got beautiful scenery and great weather.”

Most of us were not in the mood to appreciate the 15-degree weather or much else, especially when we had to go back to retrieve the food and gear from the sleds that we had been forced to unload along the way. We made dozens of trips up and down the canyon, hauling the stuff on our shoulders and setting up rope relay systems to lift it up the steepest parts. My infatuation with gear quickly disappeared.

A few hard-bodies kept going as the rest weakened, but they, too, were starting to wonder what they had got themselves into. When I asked Pat Richard, a 39-year-old stockbroker and marathoner from Minneapolis, how he could look so content climbing an icy slope with a 50-pound sack of dog food, he said: “The way I figure it, this is better than carrying someone out on a stretcher. That's what I'm really afraid of with this group.”

After eight hours on the trail, it was Advil time in camp. I washed down five of them with a cup of hot Tang and examined the thumb I had mangled trying to keep the sled from slamming into a boulder. Was it broken or just badly sprained? Well, I thought, that's the beauty of Arctic exploration: nothing to be done about it either way. I buried the thumb in the snow to stop the swelling and sat there with an expression that was best described by Julia. In her journal that day she despaired at the bumlbers under her supervision: "John is still pretty stunned — he's acting a bit like a deer caught in the headlights. We're a long way from New York City. He's good-natured and seems strong and coordinated, but so far I think he's just trying to stay alive, uninjured and warm."

The temperature dropped to 5 below that night, but we all managed to get some sleep — partly because we were adapting to the cold (bundling up tighter in the bags, doing exercise before bedtime to build up body heat), but mainly because we were so exhausted. The next morning, we traded explornographic tidbits about Starvation Camp to remind ourselves that it could always be worse.

After breakfast and some more team-building — we constructed a 30-foot ramp up a snowbank and then moaned in unison when the sleds plunged off it — we emerged from the canyon onto the plateau that formed the saddle of Sverdrup Pass. Schurke led the way on skis, gliding along effortlessly in front of the dogs, while I and the other mediocre skiers lagged far behind. Around 6 P.M., when my water bottle was empty and my only desire was to relax in camp with a cup of hot Tang, Schurke pointed to some tiny brown dots on a hill off to the side. He turned the sleds on their sides to prevent the dogs from following, took off his skis and sprinted up the slope.

We wearily slogged after him — he was now known among some of us as "the [expletive] Energizer Bunny" — until, after a half-mile, we saw his quarry. Cornered on a slope next to a glacier wall were three musk oxen, which looked like refugees from the last ice age, cow-size versions of the woolly mammoth. They had curved horns, long strands of fur hanging to the ground like scraggly beards and strangely delicate hoofs. They huddled defensively, pawing the ground and staring at us, just as their ancestors had done, to no avail, when Sverdrup and Cook passed through here. Those explorers had slaughtered the herds to feed their men and dogs; we confined ourselves to oohing, aahing and snapping pictures.

We hiked back to the sleds, where the dogs were barking with their usual inexplicable passion. They had just spent two days hauling the 700-pound sleds up to the summit of the pass, without any idea of where they were going or why, and now they were jumping up and down, straining at their harnesses, desperately hoping to...pull the sleds some more! As they happily raced off in pursuit of Schurke, I was marveling at their beastly simple-mindedness until it struck me that we were doing the same thing: eagerly hauling gear across the mountains in pursuit of Schurke for no immediately obvious reason. Was this what he meant by team-building — building us into a team of sled dogs?

Mawson, the young alpha male dog who ran at the front of the lead team and fought off any dog who got near his food or a female in heat, was motivated by the same imperatives that evolutionary biologists ascribe to explorers: food and sex. Exploration, like war, is a high-risk activity traditionally carried out by males, particularly young single males with the least status and access to food or sexual partners. They are primed by their hormones (and by cultural traditions requiring young men to prove their courage) to take risks and endure the hardships of leaving home because their survival has depended on finding new lands and resources so that they can win wives and feed children. The classic explanation for exploration, “Because it’s there,” could be more accurately phrased, “Because I can’t get it here.”

Today, even though there are no new lands or resources to exploit — you need a special permit to hunt musk oxen — the male biological impulses remain. The explornography business taps into these impulses, and men respond as automatically as the sled dogs. When I asked the guys on our trip why they had come, they tended to talk about the need to prove themselves as tough as the old explorers. “You feel like such a wimp when you read journals from Starvation Camp,” Lon said. “We’re complaining about light sleeping bags in May, and they were shivering through the winter in bags of wet, rotting reindeer hide.” He reminisced fondly about the rigors of Vietnam and said that he got the same sort of satisfaction out of his Arctic trips (especially the all-male ones). Once, when Lon and I were by ourselves, slowly trudging along on skis, he threw up his arms and shouted: “You know why I do this? At this moment I feel alive!” Part of me thought he looked ridiculous — he was an even worse skier than I — and part of me knew exactly how he felt.

There were, however, some obvious problems with the male/sled-dog theory of explornography. It did not account for the four women on our expedition. They didn’t talk as much about proving themselves — they said they had come more to be with the dogs and see wildlife — but on the whole they were easily as competent as the men. Julia patiently taught the guys in her group how to ski faster. (Now that I needed instruction, she no longer seemed like an evil drill sergeant.)

The sled-dog theory also failed to account for our alpha male. Schurke may have had the Right Stuff, but he didn’t like high testosterone levels on the trail. “I always try hard to include women on the expeditions,” he said. “When it’s all guys, they form cliques and the he-men make fun of the wimps. They start hooting and hollering like it’s fraternity rush week and taking crazy risks — skiing across thin sea ice, hiking across glaciers without checking for crevasses. When there are women, the group dynamics are completely different. The trips are much happier and healthier. If the old explorers had brought women with them to the Arctic, the body count would have been a lot lower.”

Today’s explorers no longer set out to acquire territory, subdue nature or tame savages (or, like Peary, father children by the native women). They go forth in the name of saving the environment, protecting indigenous cultures, building teams and finding personal enlightenment. Peary was a proud imperialist who claimed the North

Pole for America; Schurke and Steger talked about global unity and the problems of the poor. Steger later wrote how, thanks to the diarrhea that debilitated him for most of the trip, “I gained a deeper understanding of the frailty of the human body and I felt greater empathy for people the world over for whom hunger and ill health are daily facts of life.”

When we camped in the saddle of Sverdrup Pass, I conducted my daily inventory of woes — besides the sprained thumb, I now had blisters on my heels and a black toenail about to fall off — and found that I was still unable to feel any greater empathy with the third world. Still, I was becoming more sympathetic to the idea of low-testosterone exploration. After dinner, Julia put on a hilarious one-woman show, playing the great Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen and his traveling companion, Hjalmar Johansen, as they made their manly way across the Arctic’s ice floes in 1895. After two years together, they still weren’t on a first-name basis and used the formal form of “you.” Julia played them with puffed-out chests, talking in the Norwegian equivalent of an Apollo astronaut’s monotone:

“Mr. Johansen, it seems my chronometer has stopped. Do you have the time?”

“Why, Mr. Nansen, my chronometer has also stopped. Now we have no way to determine our position.”

“So it seems, Mr. Johansen. Let us proceed.”

The saga was continued by Per, a Norwegian native who had been reading Johansen’s journals. “One day,” Per recalled, “Johansen fell off an ice floe into the water. When he got out, he was freezing and worried about frostbite, so he wanted to stop to change clothes. Nansen looked at him and said, ‘Come now, we’re not ladies, are we?’ They kept going, but Johansen wouldn’t speak to him for the next four months.”

They could obviously have used a woman along. Some of the immature men in our group, like me, later couldn’t help quoting Nansen’s line whenever anyone failed to be sufficiently reckless. It was hard not to marvel at yesterday’s alpha males. But I was glad not to be traveling with them.

Down to the Sea Ice: The Grail of Tears

Complaints have been made that in the darkness of night, after the Eskimo lamp is put out, someone has been in the habit of scraping the rancid oil out of the lamp and eating it.

—Lieut. Adolphus Greeley’s journal at Starvation Camp, 1884.

We’re almost out of Tang. I think the others blame me for hogging it.

—My journal, en route to Starvation Camp, 1998.

The descent of Sverdrup Pass took two days and resulted in the first bloodshed of the expedition (the first human blood, that is — the dogs had already taken nips out

of one another). The victim was Hans Hageman, the 40-year-old administrator of a high school in East Harlem who was training to lead students in an expedition to the North Pole commemorating Matthew Henson, the black explorer who accompanied Peary. Hans was careening down a valley covered in slick green ice, riding a sled that was fishtailing wildly as the dogs raced around boulders and over hummocks in the ice. The sled smashed into a boulder, flinging Hans onto the rocks and leaving him with a deep six-inch gash below his knee. In the spirit of Peary, he didn't mention it until we reached the bottom of the pass and camped that evening on a fjord off the island's east coast.

We gathered around him on the sea ice, sorry for his injury but excited at the drama, as Charlene Abernethy, a 46-year-old obstetrician from Acme, Mich., prepared to stitch the wound. The anesthetic in her kit was frozen solid, and Hans told her to go ahead without it. "How much can it hurt?" he said.

"A lot," she replied, and insisted on defrosting the bottle of lidocaine in a pot of boiling water. She injected the anesthetic and stitched him up while we debated how to glamorize the injury once we got back to civilization. I favored blaming a polar bear, but Hans didn't think anyone would believe it. "I'll just say it happened when I ran out in the middle of the night to protect the dogs from a pack of wolves," he said.

There were large bear tracks at our campsite that night, and we chained the dogs in a protective perimeter around the camp — a polar-bear early-warning system. Schurke went to sleep with a flare gun and a rifle propped next to him. In the middle of the night, Per was awakened by the footsteps and heavy breathing of an animal approaching his sleeping bag; his next sensation was of hot breath coming through the opening of the mummy sack. "I figured that this expedition was over for me," he said later, "until I looked out and saw it was a dog that had slipped off its chain." The next day we saw a polar bear and her cub in the distance and came across the crimson remains of a seal they had just finished eating.

At the mouth of the fjord, our exit was blocked by a large pool of open water stretching between two high rocky cliffs sheathed in ice. Schurke headed up one of the cliffs, disappearing into a jumble of ice, and we soon heard an ominous sound. "He's whistling again," said Pat Richard, the Minneapolis stockbroker. "I'm afraid this could be another team-builder." This one involved dragging the reluctant dogs across a three-foot-wide crevasse and guiding the sleds along a ledge of ice hugging the cliffside. The team-building process suffered at one sharp turn, when Lon was in the back urging the dogs on while Julia was in front screaming: "Whoa! Whoa!"

"Don't you ever address me in that tone of voice!" Lon shouted at her.

"I was addressing the dogs!" Julia snapped back.

Most of us, though, were getting along well. It was surprising to see how thoroughly we had adapted to the cold and grubbiness. Putting on frozen boots became part of the daily routine; you weren't even aware of the stench of your clothes until you unzipped your sleeping bag in the morning and caught a concentrated whiff. In my journal I

proudly noted one parallel between our expedition and Shackleton's: "We've run out of toilet paper, but nobody is complaining about using snow."

After a week on the trail, we were now able to cover more than 20 miles a day in what Schurke called expedition mode: 2-hour marches with 10-minute breaks in the morning, 1-hour marches with 5-minute breaks in the afternoon. As we headed down the sea ice along the coast, I was amazed to find that I could stay ahead of the dogs. At one point, I actually led the procession, breaking trail as we wended our way around the hummocks and icebergs, and I couldn't remember feeling such undiluted satisfaction since I had made the basketball team in grade school. The feeling remained even after Schurke, who was using a ski that had been nearly broken in half during a sled accident, casually glided by, back into the lead.

That evening in camp we had a strange apparition: a lone figure skiing toward us, towing a sled. When he drew near, we invited him to dinner. He was a photojournalist from Toronto named Jerry Kobalenko, a singularly devoted explornographer. He had been visiting Starvation Camp and the haunts of Peary and other explorers for a book about his own journeys and the history of Ellesmere. After five weeks by himself, man-hauling his fuel and supplies, his cheeks were frostbitten and his broken ski bindings were held together with wires. Kobalenko was such a purist that he didn't even carry a radio.

"So if you break a leg," I asked him, "you have no way to call for help?"

"That's why I don't break a leg," he said. Over the years he had covered more than 2,500 miles of the island on foot, and had so far avoided any serious mishaps. His worst moment came when a polar bear charged him and got to within 40 feet before Kobalenko could get off a shot, which missed but scared the bear away. The author in him was a little rueful at his track record. "What the book could really use," he joked, "is a killer avalanche and a trip like Krakauer's, where some people die." Just as we had thrilled to Hans's injury, Kobalenko knew that it would be excellent for his career if, say, a few members of an expedition like ours fell through the ice. Great explornography requires pain.

The grail for glory-seeking explorers has always been the excruciatingly bad trip — Ulysses would be unknown if he had taken the easy way home — but it is becoming more and more elusive. How can anyone go to Ellesmere today and compete with the old stories? Modern explorers are often dismissed as puny imitations of yesterday's titans, but watching Schurke, I could see that their problem is just the opposite. They're too good — too well equipped, too experienced, too skilled and fit. They're like the best of the old explorers, the Norwegians like Sverdrup and Roald Amundsen (the winner of the race to the South Pole), whose books didn't sell because the authors lacked the British and American flair for blundering into trouble and exaggerating their accomplishments.

Most of the famous old polar explorers could never keep up with Schurke and other modern professionals, like the skiers in recent years who have made astonishing trips across the Arctic Ocean and Antarctica man-hauling all their supplies. Robert Scott

was an inept skier; Shackleton was a heavy smoker with a heart condition; Peary couldn't ski and had a hard enough time walking. They often showed appalling ignorance in their equipment and plans, like Scott's decision to use ponies instead of dogs. Shackleton actually tried to drive a car on a South Pole expedition. (It didn't move an inch.)

Today, the best dramas still come from the least-competent travelers which is one reason Schurke prefers taking them along instead of going on corporate-sponsored expeditions with fellow professionals. "Trips are too predictable when everyone's a veteran," he said. "It's much more interesting to watch a bunch of people who are still trying to figure out what to do."

The most successful recent explorographic work, Krakauer's "Into Thin Air," would not have been possible without the incompetence of amateurs — although Krakauer has not shown them the proper gratitude. He, like many of the professional climbers, reacted to the 1996 Everest disaster by saying that amateurs shouldn't be intruding on their turf.

The critics would have said the same thing about us if anything had gone wrong on our trip. They complain that these amateur trips can be foolhardy and self-indulgent and might require expensive rescue attempts — all of which is true. But aside from the expense, which could be mitigated by requiring everyone to carry insurance that would pay for a rescue, what's wrong with allowing amateurs to take the same risks as the old explorers? Looking around at the gearheads in our camp, it seemed to me that we were as well prepared for the Arctic as most of our famous predecessors. Didn't we have just as much right to an awful trip?

A Glimpse of Starvation Camp: The Afterglow

Even his griefs are a joy long after to one that remembers all that he wrought and endured.

—The "Odyssey," circa 700 B.C.

Why did I have such a good time freezing my [expletive] off in a barren landscape eating weird food in dirty dishes while being surrounded by polar bears?

—Post-expedition E-mail from Dr. Charlene Abernethy, 1998.

Our expedition came to an abrupt end the next morning, after eight days on the ice, when we awoke to find everything beyond the edge of the camp a white blur. It wasn't what Schurke considered a whiteout — "It's not a whiteout if you can still see your feet," he explained — but we decided not to go on because there was no hope of reaching Starvation Camp in the snowstorm. Kobalenko had told us that the ice down the coast had broken up early this year, and we didn't have enough time to make the

long detour around the open water. The old explorers had the leisure to deal with the vagaries of the ice — Sverdrup placidly spent an extra year on Ellesmere when his ship was frozen in — but we had a plane coming the next day to take us home to our jobs.

I climbed back into my sleeping bag and happily slept until afternoon. It was easy to rationalize defeat. I had read enough explornography to know that not getting to the goal was part of the Arctic experience. The goal never mattered anyway. Ours was just as arbitrary and meaningless as the old explorers'. The original justification for exploring the Arctic, finding the Northwest Passage, disappeared when it became obvious that there was no commercial route to the Orient, but the explorers kept going. They invented goals of no practical significance — setting the record for farthest north or farthest west — and then, when they didn't come back, other explorers would use the disaster as an excuse to lead rescue attempts (which generally failed, too).

Even Schurke had no practical reason for being on this trip, because he wasn't making money on it — the fees we paid just covered the cost of the charter flights. Schurke explained the trip as treatment for his own addiction. As we lounged on snow benches late in the afternoon, he talked about his first trip to the Arctic 14 years earlier, when he had been training for the Pole. "We were supposed to be fine-tuning our equipment," he said, "keeping track of how many ounces of fuel we were burning each day and what kind of gang line worked best with the dogs, but I was just intoxicated with the grandeur of the landscape — the vast expanses, the variations in light and color. I'm pretty much in a dreamlike state the whole time I'm here. I just can't imagine the day when I don't have a chance to come back. I need my fix."

I had no fear of becoming a junkie. "It's been a great trip," I told Schurke, "but I've had enough Arctic to last me a lifetime." The most exquisitely pleasurable moment of the expedition for me came on the flight home. The pilot circled over Starvation Camp, and we saw a stone rectangle in the snow, the walls of the makeshift hut the men had constructed by using their boat as a roof. Inside, they had to lie down or kneel since there wasn't enough room to stand. I thought of them huddled there through the sunless winter, of the scenes just before the rescue ship arrived: the two men who shared their sleeping bag with a corpse because they were too weak to move the body; the night another man begged for opium pills to kill himself; the day a spoon was tied to the stump of a man whose fingers had fallen off, so he could feed himself stewed sealskin if he was the last one alive.

I was never so grateful to be in a plane: a warm and dry enclosure carrying me off to more warm, dry enclosures with unlimited amounts of unfrozen water and food. At that moment I thought I saw the unifying theory for all explornography, from the journals of Starvation Camp to the snapshots we were taking home with us. The climax comes when you contemplate past misery, count your toes and say to yourself: As God is my witness, I'll never be cold again!

But now I'm not so sure about this theory, either. As soon as I got home, I went back to my hard-core stash, thinking that the books would be even better now that I had an idea of what the old explorers had been through. For some reason, though, the

books aren't doing it for me. I put them aside, pull out the soft-core pictures I've been exchanging with my Ellesmere comrades and think about the moment when I was at the front of the pack heading into an expanse of untrodden snow. Now that my thumb has almost healed, I've even started fantasizing about an Arctic sequel, and in these weak moments I can't resist indulging in a new vice. I go into the kitchen and make myself a delicious cup of hot Tang.

The Ted K Archive

John Tierney

Going Where A Lot of Other Dudes With Really Great Equipment Have Gone Before
The call of the pseudo-wild.

July 26, 1998

The New York Times, July 26, 1998, Section 6, Page 18

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