

PRIZE-WINNING REPORT 2012 Extreme Arctic – two months in Svalbard

by Katherine Pears,
traveller 2011

When I signed up for the expedition in early 2010, I could not have imagined what it would be like to fly over the sea ice and land at 2 am in Svalbard, with the 24 hour sun pretending to set behind the mountains.

Our team consisted of ten young explorers and seven leaders including a doctor. On the first day we were divided into two groups but these were mixed round throughout the trip and we were often all together at the base camps.

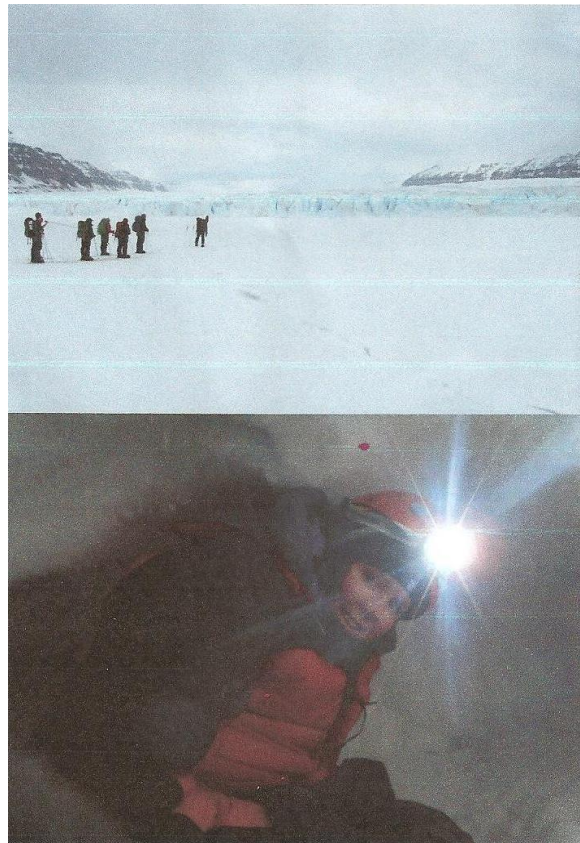
We spent just a day in Longyearbyen, the only major town in Svalbard, before setting out the next day towards base camp 1.

The first phase of our trip was one giant lesson in arctic survival: learning how to set up camp (complete with bear wires and a dug out loo), ski whilst pulling a heavy pulk, and melt enough snow to stay hydrated and well fed. We also learnt to shoot a rifle in case of polar bears, how to walk with crampons, how to rope up for glacier travel, and basic first aid.

After our induction to arctic life we had an expedition phase where we decided our own journey and got our first taste of developing skills such as leadership and navigation.

As a team we managed to summit two mountains (Tronfjellet and Hallwylfjellet), cross three glaciers, and travel an extreme 27 km in just one day. It was certainly challenging but when you're living in a place of such wild beauty it's impossible to have a bad day. At the end of the phase, on the way to base camp 2, we also built a giant snow hole and spent one night sleeping under the snow.

The next three weeks were the science phase. We spent half the time at science camp doing a detailed study on slush flows. These are fast-moving surges of water saturated snow which can occur on slopes from as gentle as 3 degrees, common in the arctic during the melt. My group also travelled to the



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Tunabreen glacier in order to map the snout but we were forced to turn back because of a crack in the sea ice. Luckily we were still able to complete our other work: visiting a Fulmar colony in order to continue a long term population study, and mapping an ice cave.

The ice cave was found two years ago but on the arrival the entrance was inaccessible. However just nearby we discovered a completely new ice cave which extended 89 metres back into the mountain. All over the ceiling the light from our head torches reflected off millions of ice crystals, beautifully formed but incredibly fragile.

It was absolutely freezing cold whilst we were completing the numerous measurements which required dextrous fingers, something that is not easily obtained when these have gone numb and/or are hidden in giant mitts. It made us realise that we really were only guests in this magical place.

From base camp 3, the other group had been carrying out their own science projects and also been visiting the goose hide and nearby bird cliffs regularly. It was great to be reunited for a short while, before choosing how we wanted to spend our last part of the trip. I was really keen to walk all the way back to Longyearbyen rather than take the boat across the recently melted Adventelva River, and after a short mountain phase we set off on the long walk. We switched the day around, travelling at night and sleeping in the day to take advantage of the harder snow. With the onset of the melt, getting anywhere became difficult meaning we often had to cross rivers and carry the pulks across large areas of tundra.

The landscape had completely changed since the beginning of the expedition. Adventdalen, where we had taken our first steps, was now a large river. It was my day to lead when we made the crossing; luckily we found one spot that wasn't too deep. We bivvied out every night and also managed to squeeze in a 12 hour solo where we were able to have time alone to reflect on the trip. I even saw an arctic fox. Walking back into Longyearbyen hand in hand on the 14 June was very emotional for everyone.

Coming back from the Arctic was probably one of my hardest challenges of the trip. After two months



living in the wilderness it was very difficult to leave a place where I had adventures every day, made amazing friends and fitted into a way of life most people never experience. I would like to say thank you to the British Schools Exploring Society (BSES) and my sponsors including the CoScan Trust Fund for making it possible.

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