

News



At Longyearbyen City Center with statue of Longyear



Checking out their tents and gear



Walking into town (Longyearbyen)

The Polar Spell

By Paul Legall
 The Hamilton Spectator
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Expedition leader Doug Stoup warned his team mates about a unique virus that strikes in the polar regions and holds its victims like a spell.

It's a sickness of the soul, rather than a physical condition, and it doesn't distinguish between seasoned travellers or first-time arctic trekkers like the six local men accompanying Stoup to the north pole.

"The midnight sun, the pack-ice and special quality of light will infect most people with the polar bug, a life-long and incurable affliction," Stoup wrote in the briefing material for his current polar expedition.

Over the centuries, the polar spell has fired the imagination of dreamers, fortune hunters and professional explorers and doled out equal measures of triumph and tragedy to its captives. For every Peary or Amundsen who had an island or bay named after him, there have been hundreds of nameless souls lost and forgotten.

Describing himself as a "dreamer", Stoup knows the obsession well and embraces it with the vigor and panache of a California dude. A former professional soccer player, he has trekked to the south pole and the high arctic, climbed the sixth highest mountain in the world and snowboarded down the highest mountain in Anarctica.

He's leading a seven-man team from a Russian ice station on a 100-kilometre trip across the pack ice to the geographic north pole.

The trek includes five area men: Paul Hubner, 45, Stoney Creek; Fred Losani, 41, and Peter Turkstra, 42, of Hamilton; and Steve Stipsits, 43, and Scott, 35, of Burlington."

If they reach their destination in the next 10 days, they'll be among fewer than 100 people who've trekked or dogsledded to the top of the world. (The folks who fly in for a quick champagne toast don't count.) By contrast, several hundred people have made it the top of Mount Everest.

The local adventurers each forked out about \$20,000 to follow the footsteps of the great polar explorers and escape the humdrum and hassles of day-to-day life.



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"As I sit in my shabby office, it's a great draw to get outside and challenge yourself in a way you'd never get an opportunity to do locally," Hubner told the Spectator.

He said the voyage will also afford an opportunity for quiet contemplation away from cell phones, BlackBerries and other distractions of the business world.

Hugh Dale-Harris, 34, who reached the north pole with his dog sled last year, suspects the great explorers like Roald Amundsen and Robert Peary were also victims of the polar bug.

"For me, a big part of the attraction is just being out there; it's an incredible place and incredible landscape, awesome in its beauty and magical," he gushed during a telephone interview.

A modern day musher, he fell under the arctic spell seven years ago when he left southern Ontario to teach school in Igulik, Nunavut. Two years ago, he made a 3,000-kilometre dog sled trek across the arctic. Last year, he was part of a five-man British team that tried to duplicate Peary's dog sled trip to the geographic north pole in April, 1909.

According to his own unsubstantiated account, Peary, his assistant Matthew Henson and four local guides completed the final dash for the pole across 153 miles of shifting ice, pressure ridges and open leads in 37 days.

It was his third quest for the pole and he became an instant celebrity. But his star has dimmed over the years as critics challenged his ability to cross the pack ice and another explorer, James Cook, announced he'd reached the pole a year earlier. (Cook is generally discounted as a fraud).

In order to determine whether the feat was possible, Dale-Harris and his crew built wooden sledges similar to Peary's and set out from the same camp he had used on Ellesmere Island 96 years earlier. As it turned out, they covered the last leg in 37 days and proved Peary's claim was technically possible.

Less than two years later, on Dec. 14, 1911, Roald Amundsen - the first man to sail across the arctic ocean - sealed his reputation as one of the greatest modern explorers by leading a five-man Norwegian team to the south pole. The modern-day Vikings were the first humans to set foot on the bottom of the world. They beat out an English team led by Robert Falcon Scott who was forced to turn back and died several hundred miles short of his goal.

Dale-Harris suspects it wasn't just the magical beauty of the arctic that drew the great explorers. Many were self-promoters, fortune hunters and outright fraudsters driven by greed, glory and ego. They sometimes concealed their true motives, however, by pretending to do scientific research or waving their national flag.

Like elite athletes, they tended to be more competitive than collaborative among their peers. Amundsen, for example, had originally planned to take a run at the north pole. But when he heard Peary had already been there, he aborted the mission, ignored the wishes of his financial backers and sailed to the south pole instead.

"Above all, Amundsen was a man who wanted to make a splash," author Sara Wheeler wrote in her book about English explorer Cherry-Gerrard.

He also wired Scott, who was in Australia, announcing his bid for the south pole. It was like a crack of the starter's pistol sparking one of the greatest races marathon races in history.

Amundsen won the race but he was eventually done in by his arctic obsession. After becoming the first person to fly over the arctic pole in 1926, he disappeared during another arctic flight two years later and his

fate remains unknown.

Hubner or his peers would never compare themselves with the likes of Peary, Amundsen and Scott. But as an amateur adventurers, they're susceptible to the polar bug too. Even before leaving on the current expedition, Hubner was musing about doing the south pole as well.

"Let's see what it's really like before I start thinking about the south pole," he said the day before he left.

"It'll either give me the bug or cure me."

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