

Ice Capades: Mountaineering and Living on a Glacier in East Greenland

Wallace Watson Award Lecture

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Last year, on the very same evening, I was listening to Sallie's phenomenal talk about her adventures in Africa. It gave rise to an ambivalent feeling inside of me, on the one hand, I would love to receive the award and go on an expedition myself, on the other, I was almost dreading the thought of lifting the legacy. Today, I am here and still left with that same feeling, *especially now following Rachel's equally impressive presentation* [added in the course of events].

Tonight, I want to take you on a journey from Oxford to Iceland to East Greenland and back again. As the title on the slide suggests, it is primarily an account of a mountaineering expedition that I undertook this summer along with my brother, who I am fortunate enough to have present here in the room, and a small group of adventurers. The pictures you are about to see were taken by all of us. Before delving more into the specific details, I would like to highlight something that is often neglected in the account of a successful journey, i.e. the preparations.

When you go to the arctic, every single detail must be thought of and planned in advance. There is little or no room for mistakes of any kind. In our case, we worked with a professional, experienced guide, yet the time spent obtaining funding, all the right bits and pieces of equipment, the right insurance and, of course, getting fit add up to hundreds of hours.

Speaking about preparations, those of you who spent the summer in Oxford, I am sure you will recall, it was very hot. If you happened to come across a guy, walking around in the sunny weather, wearing a big black backpack and a pair of boots tested down to minus 60 degrees Celsius – I admit it – that was me; breaking in the equipment and preparing for heavy load carrying. I also tested the full climbing equipment in my backgarden. Ever since, my neighbours started giving me strange looks. **CLICK**

In order to get to East Greenland, you need to fly in from Iceland, and that is where my brother and I met with the rest of the expedition crew, with whom we had only been in contact over the internet. I could talk for hours about our 4 days in transit here, but I shall delve into a few details only:

CLICK

Iceland is a fantastic place. I would like you to imagine the roaring noise in this place called Gullfoss, which translates into Golden Falls. It is Europe's largest volume falls and, rightly so, considered one of the most spectacular natural wonders of the world.

CLICK

We found a place to jump the fence and get close enough to touch this beast of divine forces. Here is another picture from a bit further away

CLICK.

CLICK Iceland also stands out in terms of its unspoiled, volcanic landforms. It is, quite literally, a place torn in half with the North American tectonic plate, on the one side, and the Eurasian, on the other. **CLICK** Perhaps this explains why Icelandic people, despite living on a remote island in the Atlantic, are extremely culturally sophisticated. If you want to know what is hip, you would be better off going to Reykjavik than London.

CLICK Other impressive elements are the geysers and the steaming hot, thermal pools **CLICK**.

In addition, **CLICK** I should not forget to mention its rare bird nesting sites. **CLICK**, however, if you are not in possession of an appropriate zoom lens, it remains very difficult to get close to the puffins **CLICK** .

On a final note, **CLICK** Iceland served as the perfect place to break in our boots. We were often jumping from one place to another in anticipation of the hard work it is to get a firm grip with the crampons on. I am pretty happy, though, that my neighbour from Oxford did not have to endure that sight, too.

A few hours prior to going to Keflavik airport, we finally got to associate the people behind the emails with faces and personalities. Having feared the worst, we were glad that we got along well from day one. **CLICK** The expedition members were: Matt Spenceley, the expedition leader and a world-class climber, who divides his year between Switzerland and

Greenland. Will Kumar, a doctor and a keen rock climber from Cornwall, but now residing in New Zealand. James Brains, the very definition of a gentleman and an officer in the Royal Navy. Robert Rowley, officially an American actor, but first and foremost a professional adventurer. The Greenland expedition was Robert's fifth that summer and previous years saw him at both Everest and Mount McKinley. And then, of course, my brother and myself, both DPhil candidates, respectively in neuro-biology in Sweden and management studies here at Oxford's James Martin Institute for Science and Civilization. In terms of expertise, with no real experience in the Arctic, I don't really know what we added, except, perhaps, for a deeply held disregard for limitations of any sort. As Mark Twain famously stated: It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog. That goes for most things in life.

CLICK

Although, Kulusuk, our entry point in East Greenland is only a 1,5-hour flight away from Iceland, it's a world apart. On the plane I sat next to a tourist from Taiwan, who was part of a travel party doing Europe in one week. She had spent the morning in Copenhagen, the early afternoon in Reykjavik and now she was going to Greenland for one night only in order to see what an iceberg looks like. I think this epitomises the very opposite of our travel aims. Unfortunately for her group, we could not see the icebergs when we flew in due to heavy rain. Nonetheless, as soon as we set foot on the ground, there was no doubt about the almost magic properties of this strange place. Here is a brief on Greenland. **CLICK**

Kalaallit Nunaat, the indigenous expression for Greenland means "Land of the Kalaallit" or land of the Greenlanders.

The total coastline of Greenland is 39.330 km (24,430 miles), or about the same length as the Earth's circumference at Equator

East Greenland, which in Inuit language is known as Tunu, is one of the most desolated areas in the world. Out of the total Greenlandic population of 56000 people, only 3800 people live here. The population is scattered across two towns and a smattering of settlements on a small fringe between the ocean and the ice cap. The ice cap covers 81% of Greenland's surface. Nearly all Greenlanders live along the fjords on the southwest of the main island, which benefits from a milder climate.

The price of daily necessities is largely the same, regardless if you live in a central West Greenland town or a settlement in East Greenland. This is known as the solidarity principle and is subject to much discussion. There is little doubt, though, that most fringe communities in Tunu would die out if they were to pay the actual price of imported goods. The red ship on the slide is known as the Denmark ship and it brings supplies four times a year. We passed it on our way out.

Historically, until around 200 AD, Greenland was home to a number of Paleo-Eskimo cultures, after which the island seems to have been uninhabited for 8 centuries. Interestingly enough, no-one knows why the population disappeared. Around the year 982, Scandinavian settlers arrived in the southwest, yet again, they simply vanished after 450 years of habitation for reasons that remain unknown. Denmark-Norway, which at that time was one country, reasserted its claim to the colony in 1721, to cope with competition from Dutch whalers. Despite this, North East Greenland was not mapped until the early 20th century and many places remain largely unexplored. During WW2 the northern parts of Greenland were strategic key points. Setting up weather stations as far north as possible made it possible to predict and respond to the weather conditions in Europe. There exist some incredibly interesting accounts of these arctic encounters between the Germans and the defence unit known today as the Sirius Patrol.

Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, but since the introduction of Home Rule in 1979 it has moved towards independence.

Inuit culture is not something I can delve into here, but it is a remarkable story of survival and beliefs in some of the most hostile regions in the world.

CLICK

Anyway, we arrived in Kulusuk where we spent our first and last nights with an Inuit family who were clearly much better adapted to the environment than we were. **CLICK**

On returning from hunting, Georg, our host, stripped down to his underwear and opened all the windows to cope with the heat inside the wooden house.

CLICK

Since there is no real road system in Kulusuk, many houses in the village were surrounded by a howling choir of chained dogs, eagerly awaiting the coming of winter, where dog sledges are the most common means of transportation.

Georg and his sons are hunters and they live off seal and whale catching. The hunters, like Georg, live with nature and follow the natural seasons. This trade may seem savage to outsiders yet, as Westerners, just because we rarely see the consequences of our living style, I don't think we are in a position to take the higher moral grounds.

It was an absolute joy to stay with Georg and his family, although I gave up on trying to figure out how everyone in the house was related to each other. The Greenlandic definition of a family is much looser than what is the case here.

Inuits don't fear silence as we do. Even when they have guests over, it is perfectly OK not to say anything but just to sit. As members of what Americans would call a 24/7 culture, this was wonderfully refreshing.

CLICK

It was a deliberate choice not to take too many pictures inside the house, but you should meet this toddler, Mario, who is the youngest person in the family circle and the strongest 2-year-old I have ever met. I have no doubt he would make it to the Blues boat if he tried out tomorrow.

CLICK

After sorting out our gear and food rations, we were ready to set off for the Karale Glacier in an area known as the Schweizerland Alps. We got up that morning at three am after no more than a few hours of sleep. With the arctic sun shining above us at half three in the morning, we were all terribly excited and, personally, I don't think I have ever felt more alive.

CLICK

It was not until we set out in two small hunting boats and saw Kulusuk fading away behind us that we realised what we had signed up for.

CLICK

Georg and one of his sons demonstrated excellent boating skills, zigzagging between the icebergs at high pace, as we made our way through the Sermilik Fjord system. **CLICK** It was just incredible to watch this strange world of ice and rocks unfolding right before our very eyes.

CLICK

When landing from the sea within the vicinity of active glaciers you have to stay very alert. **CLICK** The massive chunks of ice breaking off can create enormous waves out of the blue. Even worse, and this is

something Inuits are very afraid of, some glaciers calve underwater, which means you can have an iceberg erupting from below in a matter of seconds. Not even the biggest steel ships would withstand such impact.

CLICK

At around 6am we reached the point where our Greenlandic friends left us. The plan was for them to pick us up 9 days later at the exact same location. You can imagine the excitement we felt when we had our first cup of tea, alone, very alone, in this pristine kingdom of vastness.

What we noticed first was that our 25-year-old map and the landscape did not really match. **CLICK** These two pictures show you what is going on: To the left you have the map we used. On your right, you see a recent satellite image, illustrating clearly how far the Karale Glacier has receded. It is estimated that the Arctic regions experience the rise of temperatures at five times the impact of the rest of the globe. I will return to the topic of arctic fragility later.

The main objective of the expedition was to gain a better appreciation of the area and, secondly, to climb as many peaks as possible. When things get really busy in Schweizerland there is approximately one expedition per year. Prior to arriving, we had identified a location that would serve as a base camp from which to reach the chosen summits. It is marked with a yellow dot on the map to the right. On our way to base camp, we set up our tents in the red dot.

CLICK

The first day was spent carrying our equipment up as far as possible. The foot of the glacier is too rocky for sledges, which meant there was no way we could carry everything in one go. **CLICK** In expedition language, load carrying means walking the same distance three times: You walk up with half of your kit, then you walk back to collect the rest and, finally, you walk up again. **CLICK** Needless to say, this can be quite exhausting, but I think the spectacular setting and the distant thunder of ice plunging into the ocean all genuinely enchanted all of us.

CLICK The first campsite was set up a few kilometres from a very active glacier, which you can see in the background of this picture. The sounds of this constantly avalanching monster and the fact that the weather went from bright sunshine to dense fog in a matter of minutes prompted immediate respect on my part. I couldn't help thinking that this was nature's way of telling us who's in charge here. On a more speculative note, I am less hesitant to write off the Inuits' belief that spirits preside over the mountains. **CLICK**

The fog was still there when we got up the following morning, and we knew we had a tough day ahead of us **CLICK**. As we got further up we knew that the weather would get colder and the crevasses would be hidden under a layer of snow. **CLICK** Fortunately, we no longer had to do load carrying, triple the distance, yet it required technique and concentration to keep the sledges from tipping over and falling into the cracks. **CLICK** The further up a glacier you go, the whiter it becomes, thereby appearing deceptively safe **CLICK**. Eventually we were able to put on our skis, but we knew that the glacier was still crevasse-ridden.

CLICK

In this picture you can see an example of a crevasse and the mystical world underneath. They can be more than a hundred meters deep and have taken many lives. When we walked and camped on the glacier, we often heard the sound of running water, sometimes stemming from small streams on the surface and other times from rivers running underneath us. Unlike many other things in life, on a glacier, you really don't want to be where the action is. Having said that, it was made clear from the outset that we would fall through sooner or later. It was not a matter of if but when and how. Faced with such a challenge you can choose to be taken by surprise or you can be prepared. I guess I was both taken by surprise and prepared the two times I fell through. I shall never forget the mantra: keep the rope tight. **CLICK**

We reached the site of our base camp in the early evening and started building a protective wall of ice immediately. The last thing you want to happen is for your tent to blow away, although the really powerful storms rarely occur in August. In an expedition account from North East Greenland in 1906, the weather was so bad that the sledge dogs were literally blown away¹. **CLICK**

As you can see it was also a priority to make sure that we did not camp on a crevasse, you do so by meticulously probing the area with a long stick. **CLICK**

At this point in time, I was starting to feel like a zombie. I had made the unfortunate decision of only bringing one sleeping mat, which wasn't enough to keep the cold out of the sleeping bag. Remember that camping on a glacier is basically like staying on an enormous ice cube. This, in combination with the close to 24-hour daylight, meant that I hardly slept for the first couple of nights. Now I know what it feels like to be the only person awake in the whole wide world. We managed to sort it out,

though, by building a small mountain of clothes upon which I slept. Similar arrangements have been spotted in college rooms. I have been told.

CLICK

Insomnia is not the worst thing to suffer from with views like these though **CLICK, CLICK, CLICK, CLICK**

Here is the view from the world's most beautiful loo. Unfortunately, I couldn't bring it back home with me. **CLICK**

Struck by the beauty of the place, even brushing your teeth becomes a sheer joy. We were fortunate enough to see the northern lights one night, too, although vague. **CLICK**

From basecamp we identified and studied the most compelling peaks in the vicinity, which we set out to climb in the following five days. Each of these mountaineering days would follow a relatively consistent pattern: Up at around 6am when the surface of snow was hard frozen. **CLICK** After a hot drink and a quick breakfast, usually consisting of nuts, dried fruit and one of those tasteless things called breakfast bars, we would walk for an hour or two to reach the base of the mountain.

CLICK

Having done that we would embark on the ascent, which usually involved some pretty steep slopes of ice and snow.

CLICK

Whilst this may not be the most technically challenging job in the world, it does require experience and skill to avoid the crevasses, **CLICK** especially when you can hear melting water running underneath you.

CLICK

Although we encountered very few vertical walls, **CLICK** you really need to be sure that you kick in your crampons as hard as you can and keep your upper body in balance with the ice axe.

CLICK

In case you start rolling down one of these sides, the chances of survival are not the best due to the fact that you will either hit a rock or fall through a crevasse.

CLICK

Once we made it up the icy bit, there would be a rock face between the top and us.

CLICK

At this stage, we would sit down for a bit, enjoy some food, and try to figure out the best ways of making it to the summit.

CLICK

Although the rock climbing may have been the most physically demanding part of our mountaineering days, **CLICK** we would already be high on the thought of the views from the top and, of course, to see whether we were the first ones to make it up there.

CLICK

These pictures should give you an idea of how fantastic it felt reaching the top.

CLICK

We enjoyed unspoiled views over the enormous ice cap, the glaciers, the ocean, the icebergs and the mountains.

CLICK

A sight so unbelievable that it forces you to shut up and let your ears be filled by the purest sound of silence you could ever imagine. **CLICK** Simply astonishing. **CLICK**

It is difficult to capture altitude on a camera, **CLICK** but these two pictures might serve as an indicator. To the left is the view from smallest of the peaks we climbed. If you look closely you will notice a small black dot in the lower half. To the right I have magnified it in order for you to see that it is actually our camp. In total, the expedition crew made it up to five summits of which 2 were virgin ascents.

CLICK

The few times we would pass a flower on the way to a summit, we would ask ourselves how something so beautiful could survive under such hostile conditions and make every effort not to step on it.

CLICK

Similarly, the only sign of life we came across whilst living on the glacier was a couple of ravens. The Arctic is an incredibly fragile ecosystem, which we noted on several occasions.

CLICK

At one point we passed by these holes in the snow. Curious as to what had caused them, we noticed that they were leftovers from an expedition in the same area two years ago. Apparently, they had left a bit of waste, the wrapping from a Mars Bar, for example, which absorbed the heat of the sunlight, thereby causing these growing craters. On another occasion we found three pairs of skis, abandoned at the foot of the glacier. Judging from the design, they were army skis from the 1970s. The mystery behind this strange finding remains unsolved.

CLICK

One common characteristic of arctic expeditions is: hunger. When you are active in the cold you build up a never-ending appetite. Back in basecamp we certainly produced small culinary miracles, for example, I wrote in my notebook that: “tonight we had soup, pesto pasta, shrimp noodles, chocolate, nuts, biscuits and tea - it was great”. Another key feature is thirst, which, perhaps is not something you normally associate with snow. The Danish painter and explorer, Achton Friis, describes the arctic thirst, a combination of extremely dry weather and hard work, as one of the worst things about expedition lifeⁱⁱ. Few people know that Antarctica and North Greenland are among the driest regions in the world with less precipitation than in Sahara. Food and drink are about more than sustenance though. When Nansen, the father of modern polar exploration, and his ship were trapped in the ice for 2 years, he invented Polar champagne in order to cheer up the crewⁱⁱⁱ. This was a delicate mix of baking powder and spirits.

On another not so serious note, last year, Sallie Burrough gave some interesting examples of expedition hairstyles, and I thought it would only be fair if I added to this little emerging collection with a couple of pictures documenting Arctic madness in the making:**CLICK** this is the first picture taken of the rare species known as *Arcticus Rastafaris* in an equally rare rendition of **CLICK** “*I Shot the Sheriff, but I did not shoot the polar bear*”. Home made entertainment is always preferable, but I doubt it will result in a record contract.

CLICK

In line with the exploratory aim of the expedition we chose an alternative route out.

CLICK

After removing all possible signs of human activity, we embarked on the two-day-trip to an alternative pick up point.

CLICK

In doing so, we skied down another highly impressive glacier and camped on what looked like an instantly-frozen stormy sea, surrounded by hanging glaciers. **CLICK** The temperature dropped significantly **CLICK** and once again I praised the inventor of the unique sleeping-on-top-the laundry system.

CLICK

It was not until the next day that I were to fully understand the words of wisdom by Apsley Cherry-Gerrard, a student of Christ Church and a

member of Scott's fatal South Pole expedition. He famously stated that: "Polar Exploration is at once the cleanest and most isolated way of having a bad time which has been devised" ^{iv}

CLICK

The surface of the glacier made it impossible for us to ski any further nor could we pull the sledges behind us. Having had enough of load carrying in the first couple of days, we decided to carry everything in one go on our bag.

CLICK

Hence, we set out looking like ladybirds from Mars, each person carrying around 50 kilos of equipment in his bag. We were not exactly the most prolific smilers at this point, but things were to get worse.

CLICK

We made it down the glacier and as we walked alongside the rivers of melting-water, a lush valley formed in front of us. It was wonderful and deeply strange to have a desert of ice and rocks behind us and this green haven in front.

CLICK

We were exhausted, but started to feel optimistic again.

CLICK

At least until we realized that we had to traverse one of the streams to make it to our destination. We took off the boots and our trousers and started to cross one by one.

CLICK

Walking barefooted on rocks in an ice-cold torrent is not something I would recommend to anyone, but we made it and felt good once again. Soon were we to realise that the first crossing had only served as an appetizer.

CLICK

In front of us we now had a 45-metre wide river: it was deeper and the current was much stronger. I remember thinking: "you are going to do this, you are going to do this" as I stood out there without feeling my legs anymore, praying that I wouldn't slip on the slippery stones. There was no way we could have struggled against the river if we had slipped with 50 kilos of heavy equipment attached to the back. We finally made it over and joked that this would be great stuff for the lecture. Our smiles disappeared soon again though. Matt had gone further up the river and it seemed we were now trapped on an island with an even wider river to cross in front of us.

CLICK

Another 60 metres of pure hell with water reaching up to where a relatively tall guy like my brother would say: "Ooh, it is really cold!" One member of the crew refused to walk any further with his backpack on and

the rest of us were not to keen on progressing. We did get over. I would lie if I could explain to you how, but it might have to do with a chocolate reward.

CLICK

No, the person in this picture is not Gollum, it is me asking my brother where my legs went because at this point I could hardly feel them.**CLICK**

Soon we were up and running again, and an hour later we set up the tents in what felt like paradise on earth **CLICK**. Just lying in the vegetation felt so good: the smells, the sounds, the return to life was so overwhelming.

I am sure you agree that you don't find many campsites like this one.

CLICK

A couple of days later, Georg and his son came and picked us up. Despite the short stay out there, we returned to civilization as different people. I don't think I am speaking for myself only when I say that I caught the Greenlandic bug.

CLICK

I could give a separate presentation on how and why expanding your horizons on expeditions like this one have benefited myself and would, no doubt, be worthwhile for others. It is only by seeing what is different that you come to realise what is normal. It is only by experiencing the absence of life that you can learn to fully embrace your own and that of those who are near you.

My best friend couldn't be here today because he is undergoing chemo therapy. What I have learned from him, what I have learned from my expedition and what I have learned from the rationale behind the Wallace Watson Award is that life is not a given – and you should never treat it as such – it is a privilege. I would like to thank you, the Watsons, for having enabled me, Rachel and others to go out and celebrate life. I think you will agree with me that that is what expeditions are about: going to remote regions, going mountaineering, going beyond the normal all serve the same basic purpose: celebrating life. And this is where my talk stops.

I owe a big thanks to a number of other people besides the Watson family, including Sara Ward from the James Martin Institute, Maike Bohn and Emeline Tissot from the Said Business School, Matt Telfer for kindly lending me so much gear and the Oxford University Society

Lastly, I would like to thank all the expedition members for a truly unforgettable trip.

Thank you for listening.

End notes

ⁱ Friis, Achton (2005): “Danmark Ekspeditionen til Grønlands Nordøstkyst 1906-1908” København: Gyldendal.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bang, Ole: “Tre år i drivisen” Forlaget Rhodos.

^{iv} Cherry-Garrard, Apsley (1922 [2003]): “The Worst Journey in the World – Antarctica 1910-1913” London: Pimlico.