

Ultimate North

The Storm at the Top of the World

by
Tom Avery

Who was the first person to stand at the North Pole? There are many theories, but nobody knows for sure. Some believe it was Commander Robert E. Peary, who, along with the African-American Matthew Henson, four Inuit men and 40 dogs, claimed to have reached the North Pole on April 6 1909 after a journey of over 400 miles across the most hostile environment on Earth. He sacrificed 23 years of his life in various attempts to achieve his ultimate ambition, losing eight of his toes in the process but in 1909 he achieved his lifetime ambition after a journey of just 37 days.

Expecting to be hailed a national hero back home, Peary returned to New York to find that most of America had only three days previously heard the news that Dr Frederick Cook had beaten him to the Pole on a separate expedition. Although Cook was eventually proven to be a fraud (he also faked the first ascent of Mt McKinley in Alaska and would later be convicted for fraudulent business activities), the huge public scepticism that arose during the fierce Peary-Cook controversy never really died down.

It became clear to me that the questions would continue to be asked until somebody tried to recreate Peary's final expedition as closely as possible and show that the travel speeds he claimed really were possible.

Training began in earnest in February 2004, when our team (3 Brits, 2 Canadians) got together in Baffin Island, high in the Canadian Arctic, for a three-week intensive dog driving programme. At the time, 188 people had reached the Pole since Peary and nobody had come close to repeating his time of 37 days. The fastest time that anyone has managed since 1909 was 43 days by a Canadian party in 2000. Typically an expedition to the North Pole takes 60 days and only one in four attempts to reach the Pole end in success.

To press his case as strongly as possible, we set out to simulate Peary's journey as closely as we could. Peary used the Eskimo Dog from northwest Greenland on his 1909 expedition. Like Peary, we travelled with the Eskimo Dog and used eight dogs per sled. We took a total of 16 dogs, which were selected from a larger squad of 22 animals. The Eskimo dog is still considered the best expedition dog in the Arctic, although there are less than 500 pure breeds left in the world and their future remains uncertain.

Peary and Henson were expert navigators. They spent several years surveying for a proposed sea-level cross-isthmus canal through Nicaragua under the auspices of the Maritime Canal Co. in association with the U.S. Government. The Inuit who traveled with Peary were also highly skilled navigators themselves. Traveling in the Arctic was in their blood and Peary learnt to adopt their techniques. Like Peary, we were able to maintain our course by traveling with sun, shadow, wind direction and sastrugi, and by checking our compasses in overcast or snowy conditions.

Peary built wooden sleds that resembled those used by the Inuit for travel and hunting, reinforced to withstand the rugged terrain of the sea ice. We built two sleds from Canadian Spruce of the same dimensions and design to the Peary sleds. Just like Peary's sleds in 1909, the loads never exceeded 500 pounds.

The flight from the weather station at Eureka (the most northerly community on Earth) to Cape Columbia was utterly spellbinding as we floated over an Arctic landscape of glaciers, high mountains and vast ice caps. For over two hours we saw not a trace of human civilization – not even a road or a telegraph pole. Located on the northern shore of Ellesmere Island, this is the place from where Peary launched his final attempt on the North Pole. Here he established a base camp called Crane City, which we replicated, but on a smaller scale. This gave us a day or two to rest the dogs before setting off and the chance to explore some of this historic coastline.

To the south of our camp lay a seemingly impenetrable fortress of icy peaks, stretching as far as the eye could see to the east and west. We were hoping to find some evidence of him being here, but nothing could have prepared us for the treasure trove that we discovered hours after our arrival at the Cape.

Armed with some old photographs from Peary's 1909 expedition, we found the location of Crane City by lining up the existing terrain with two recognisable mountains in one of the photos. We began searching through the snowdrifts and a small scree slope at the foot of one of the peaks and soon began unearthing wooden crates, tin cans, fuel canisters and even an old sledge runner. Having been researching this fascinating character for the best part of two years, I could scarcely believe that we had actually stumbled across his base camp. Nobody had been there since Peary and his men packed up camp for the final time and returned to civilization. It felt as though they only left a few weeks earlier.

Three miles to the west of Crane City, we spotted a wooden signpost on a headland below the twin peaks of Mount Cooper Key. As we headed towards it, it quickly became apparent that it had been built by Peary to mark his attainment of the North Pole in 1909. With lines of galvanized iron securing it firmly to the ground, it was still standing proud and the writing was exceptionally clear. We stared at it in silence, completely overwhelmed. It was a very moving experience.

Global warming has transformed the Arctic ice pack since Peary's day and the early arrival of the Arctic summer means that it is no longer possible to make the return journey to the Pole and back to land. The ice pack has reduced in thickness from an average depth of twelve feet in Peary's day to less than eight feet today. And some time in the next decade, thin ice will make it impossibly dangerous simply to make the one way journey from land to the North Pole. So we may well find that ours is one of the last successful North Pole expeditions in history.

We left the Cape on 20 March 2005 on a bitterly cold morning. Nothing could have prepared me for the frigid temperatures we encountered during those first three terrible weeks. The mercury never rose above -32°C , but typically it hovered around the -40°C mark. This is far colder than we ever experienced during our two-month expedition to the South Pole in 2002. Little works in those temperatures and for much of the time you are forced to stop in your tracks to thaw out your fingers by swinging your arms around like windmills.

As the ocean currents and winds drive the ice pack against the coast of Ellesmere Island, it buckles up to form giant pressure ridges that guard the route to the north. These often took more than twenty minutes to negotiate, particularly if the snow was soft as the sled would end up getting buried or jammed behind solid ice boulders. Lots of digging with shovels, chopping chunks of ice with the axe and encouraging the dogs meant that there was often a lot of effort involved for very little distance gained. This was made all the more challenging with fully laden sleds. But the excitement of at last being underway, and with Peary's spirit watching over us, our morale remained high.

Forty miles off the coast of Ellesmere Island we found ourselves in what can only be described as a war zone with chunks of thick blue ice piled high wherever we looked. Like Peary, we adopted the practice that if you can't see an alternative route to the left or to the right without going off and looking for one, you just go straight ahead and hope for the best. It never ceased to stand up to the constant battering. several occasions the sleds back down the other side of a next wall of ice. As the sleds had to take avoiding action and handles hit us on its way through lines. Incredibly, none of these being evacuated from the ice.

Like Peary, we built the sleds used in their construction which through the uneven terrain.



to amaze me how our replica Peary sleds And the dogs just never gave up. On actually left the ground as they hurtled pressure ridge before crashing into the careered down a pressure ridge, we often most of us sustained injuries as the sled's or we became entangled amongst the dog injuries were serious enough to warrant We were extremely fortunate.

with rope. Not a single nail or screw was allowed them to flex as they glided

As the temperatures inched their way up to the minus twenties, the monster pressure ridges we encountered over the first few weeks gradually began to give way to large pans of ice, interspersed with leads of open water. As Peary had experienced in 1909, this became a threat, not only to our northerly progress, but also to our very survival.

At first it was the dogs that fell through the thin ice. Then it was the sleds. Even though the sleds contained all our food and equipment, we had grown so close to the dogs that on Day 22 when Marvin, Zorro and the first sled fell through a lead, we all rushed over to pull the drenched dogs out before we did anything else. To prove just how hardy they are, the dogs just shook themselves dry, rolled around in the snow to soak up the salt water and then carried on as if nothing had happened.

On Day 27 we came to a narrow lead of no more than eight foot in width and we set about trying to build a temporary snow bridge which we could use as a crossing point. Not realising that the piece of ice he was standing on was overhanging, George suddenly disappeared from view as the ledge gave way, dunking George underwater. At -22°C , human beings can only survive for a few minutes in the icy water of the Arctic Ocean and we had to get him out of there as quickly as possible.

The first thing the rest of us knew about it was the loud shriek we heard from inside the lead. With over two miles of ocean beneath him, there was no chance of him touching the bottom. After bobbing about in the water for a few moments, George managed to clamber out to safety. If getting out of the swimming pool was ever made an Olympic sport, his panic-induced exit from the water would have broken many records.

Thankfully the wind had died down, so after changing George's outer layers of clothing, we were able to continue travelling, his sodden boots squelching with every step. In this type of situation, it's much better to keep moving and try to maintain some warmth than to stop. The body would cool down dramatically, frostbite and hypothermia could set in quickly and things would rapidly turn into a battle for survival.

On some days we encountered 40 or 50 open water leads and everyone got at least a leg wet. It's a strange sensation when you go in. Your initial feeling is one of surprise because the water feels abnormally warm. But things soon begin to chill and your trousers quickly turn solid as the water freezes. Most of us suffered some degree of frostbite – mostly to

the face and fingers. And three months after our return from the ice, my big toes are still numb.

After successfully crossing a giant lead of nearly two miles in width on Day 34, we thought we had reached the Promised Land - pan after pan stretching all the way to the northern horizon with and no signs of open water. The perfect travel conditions continued for the next three days – no pressure ridges, no leads, just flat hard-packed snow and the occasional frozen lead meaning we have really been able to up the pace. When Peary made his 5-day 133-mile dash to the Pole from Bartlett Camp in 1909, these were just the conditions he described in his journal. It was now very easy for me to see how he could have made the big distances he claimed.

But what Peary didn't have in 1909 were the strong headwinds that plagued us since we crossed the giant lead. The northerly winds caused the ice pack to drift south at an alarming rate of over seven miles a day.

Had there been no drift, our daily mileage for that final stretch would have been around 27 or 28 miles a day. This is all part and parcel of travelling in the Arctic and Peary himself would have suffered from negative ice drift, but to happen so close to the Pole felt like daylight robbery. We were all going through a real emotional rollercoaster during those final days – pleased to have such a great surface to travel on and to have the Pole almost within sight, but intensely frustrated to be drifting south so quickly. Each morning we would wake up to find that the Pole was three miles further away than it had been the night before.

In order to match Peary's time (37 days and 2 hours to be precise), we needed to arrive by 11.20am on 26 April. With a healthy twelve hours left on the clock, just three miles separated us from the Pole. But you should never take anything for granted in the Arctic and just as we were beginning to get excited about our imminent arrival at the top of the world, the clouds rolled in and just above the horizon we could see three thin black water clouds, indicating that open water was not far away.

Sure enough, the flat pans days disappeared and we soon ice and our first leads in over a quarter of a mile wide but the ice was just thick enough to safely across.

But Sedna (the Inuit goddess of the sea) had one final surprise for us. We crossed a coming to one of no more than unfrozen in the centre. It we could see, completely were all completely exhausted we needed all our powers of patience as we searched for a way across.



that we had enjoyed over the last few found ourselves in an area of rough 50 miles. The first of these was over even though it flexed with every step, support our weight and we were soon

goddess of the sea) had one final few more freshly frozen leads before 50 yards in width that remained stretched from east to west as far as blocking our path to the Pole. We by this stage, the dogs included, and

We started by looking to the east, but soon gave up when it became clear that the lead splintered off into a series of fresh open leads. So we turned back on our tracks and headed off in the other direction wondering if we would ever find a way to the Pole at all.

Our first attempt to cross nearly ended in disaster when Raven's team broke through the thin ice, all of them ending up in the water in the centre of the lead. Amazingly the sled did not go through and with the five of us calling to them from the near bank, the dogs were able to haul themselves out of the water, turn around and pull the sled to safer ground. It was a heart-stopping moment but the dogs soon dried off and were able to carry on as normal.

After what seemed like hours, we finally made it across a stretch of slightly thicker ice and soon we were making our final steps to the Pole, which was located on a small flat area of snow, no larger than a tennis court and surrounded by pressure ridges. We counted down the last sixty feet to the Pole on the GPS side by side and arrived just after 7.30am local time. We hugged, laughed and cracked open the champagne. We had done it.

There were times when I genuinely believed that we might not make it, but to be standing at the North Pole, the centre of the Earth's axis, looking south in every direction, felt absolutely incredible. It was the fulfilment of a dream I had harboured for many years.

The admiration and respect which I hold for Robert Peary and his men has grown enormously since we set out from Cape Columbia. Having now seen for myself the terrain across which Peary travelled, and used the same methods of travel and navigation as he did, I have no doubt whatsoever that Peary was capable of reaching the Pole in the time he claimed and was the true discoverer of the North Pole. Driving dogs is the most efficient way to travel up there, and whether you are resupplied by air drops or by support parties on the ice, the travel speeds that Peary claimed to have achieved seem highly reasonable. If our motley crew of amateur adventurers could make it to the Pole in 37 days, then of course Peary's team, with all their many years of dog driving experience, could have done it too.

I hope that our journey has finally brought an end to the debate.

The Barclays Capital Ultimate North Expedition Team



Tom Avery was born in December 1975 and brought up in Sussex, England, Brazil, and France. His passion for adventure began when he was eight years old and first read about the exploits of Captain Scott. From that day he knew that one day he had to go to the Poles.

Tom's outdoor career began at 16 with a series of rock and ice climbs in Wales and Scotland. At university he organized and led mountaineering expeditions to the Andes, New Zealand, the Alps, Tanzania, Patagonia and Morocco. The pinnacle of Tom's climbing career was in 2000 when he led a pioneering British expedition to a previously unexplored 20-mile mountain range close to China's western border. His team scaled nine unclimbed and unnamed summits up to 6,000 meters high.

On 28 December 2002, just days after his 27th birthday, Tom Avery walked into the record books by becoming the youngest Briton to complete the perilous journey to the South Pole. Tom's team managed to break the South Pole speed record by using state-of-the-art kites to power them across the ice and covering the last forty-seven miles to the Pole in a marathon 31 hours. Tom has now accomplished the biggest challenge of his polar career. The Barclays Capital Ultimate North Expedition has solved the greatest polar mystery of all time - Commander Robert Peary did discover the North Pole in 1909 in a record 37 days.

Hugh Dale-Harris (32) is a teacher and musher (dog-sledger) and lives in Thunder Bay, Ontario with his partner Amy and their 20-month-old daughter Wynne and his dog team.

In 1996 Hugh started working for the Canadian Outward Bound Wilderness School. Eighteen months later he took part in his first dog-sledging trip and has never looked back. Since then he has led dog-sledging trips for Outward Bound as well as accumulating hundreds of solo dog-sledging miles in Northern Ontario and Quebec with his own team of Canadian Inuit Dogs.

The highlight of his mushing career to date took place in 2004 when he took part in a groundbreaking 3000-mile dog-sledging journey across Canada's frozen north. The expedition lasted over five months, recording important climate data for NASA.



Andrew Gerber (29) lives in London and works as a management consultant. While living and working in Sweden he became a proficient cross-country skier, but in 2002 left to join Tom Avery on the Commonwealth South Pole Centenary Expedition.

On 28th December 2002, the team managed to break the South Pole speed record by using state of the art kites to power them across the ice, covering the last 47 miles to the Pole in a marathon final 13 hours. Following the success of their South Pole expedition, Tom asked George to join him on The Barclays Expedition - traveling to the North Pole with dogs and sledges. Being raised in South Africa, Andrew spent much of his childhood outdoors, but prior to the South Pole he had little experience of cold weather!

Matty McNair's passion for Polar travel is amazing. In 1990 she traveled 4000 km around Baffin Island by dog sled. 1997 saw her leading the first woman's expedition to the North Pole. In 2000 she led an expedition across Ellesmere Island through Sverdrup Pass. Then in 2003/04 she led two ski-all-the-way expeditions to the South Pole, and in May/June 2003 crossed the Greenland Ice Cap with her children Sarah and Eric by ski-kites with dog sled support.

Coincidentally, like Peary, she was born in Pennsylvania (though now holds dual American/Canadian citizenship) and is now the same age as Peary was when he discovered the North Pole in 1909. Matty started skiing at age 2, qualified for the national whitewater slalom championships when she was 15, biked with her family across Europe, competed in Cross Country ski races throughout Colorado in the 70's, climbed in Peru and Bolivia in the 80's, and moved her family to the Canadian Arctic in the 90's.



George Wells (28) grew up in Suffolk, Oxford, and Bristol. A passion for climbing and exploration started with trips to the Alps. This led to adventures on mountain ranges around the world, including the High Atlas and the Andes. George met Tom Avery in 1996 - a meeting of similar minds which was destined to result in great adventures. George joined Tom on the Silk Mountains Expedition in 2000 - a pioneering British expedition to a previously unexplored 20-mile mountain range close to China's Western border. Over a six-week period, the team scaled nine unclimbed and unnamed summits up to 6,000 meters high in the Eastern Zaalay Mountains of Kyrgyzstan.

Just when life was threatening to fall into a routine, Tom asked George if he would like to join his team on one of the greatest adventures of his career to date - The Barclays Capital Ultimate North Expedition - traveling to the North Pole with dogs and sledges. A period of training on Baffin Island in the winter has led him to wonder why he said yes so quickly!