



XXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXX

Words: Caroline Kees. Photography: Jim McNeill

The polar explorer

Adventurer [Jim McNeill](#) regularly spends up to 30 days alone in the Arctic

What draws you to icy extremes?

At 16, I was sent on an outward bounds course. I loved it and read fantastic tales of the golden era of exploration in the library there. I became a mountaineer, and first went to the Arctic in 1984 when I joined the Army's adventure training unit. It's thrilling to pit your wits against the life-threatening power of Mother Nature.

Next February, you're trying for the third time to be the first person to reach the Arctic Pole: why hasn't it been done yet?

Because it's also known as the Northern Pole of Inaccessibility. It's the furthest point from land, the centre of the Arctic Ocean, 200 miles further than the Geographic North Pole [where all the lines of longitude meet] and the sea ice has become trickier to trek across. My first attempt was aborted when I got a flesh-eating bacterial disease from wearing some manky borrowed boots when I already had a blister. I felt flu-like, and a red mark on my ankle was spreading like wildfire. I needed antibiotics intravenously for ten days so I was lucky I hadn't left camp. Then, in 2006, I came across a lead of open water 50km wide so I had to hop across by aircraft, which meant the adventure was gone.

What are you doing differently this time?

I've designed a combined canoe and sledge to paddle across open water. You can even sleep and cook in it. It'll be a huge problem to reach the pole but it's important to report on the reality of climate change. Conditions are changing but no one can definitively say why. You used to get flat, stable ice. These days, southerly weather systems mean you get a freeze-thaw situation, and lots more movement in the ice.

How do you train for a long Arctic trek?

I drag tyres on sand dunes and walk up mountains with a heavy sack. I also try to get into a regime of eating a lot. I'll be eating 8,300 calories a day, and it's difficult to absorb that. In fact, I'm working with Heston Blumenthal on a version of pemmican, a foodstuff the Cree Indians came up with. It's dried buffalo meat mashed up with nuts, berries, nettles and fat. We haven't reached the stage where it's palatable.

How many calories do you burn off?

On a 30-day expedition, I'll shed a pound a day. My wife always says she gets a new man every time I come home.

On an endurance trip, what's more important: physical or mental strength?

It's 70% up in the head and 30% down in the body. I've trained people who were exceptionally fit and they crumpled under the pressure. The trick is being able to endure the discomfort and sleep deprivation.

And avoid falling through the ice. During your Arctic Pole attempt in 2006, you fell through...

I made a big mistake. I was going across solid ice, I was tired, the weather was coming in, and

I said to myself that I would sleep when I got to the edge. But instead I decided to recce a route across the broken ice. As I stepped across a mini ravine, the line on my sledge went taut and pulled me down. I was left chest deep in water. People think I'm joking but my first reaction was relief – you get so hot that it felt nice. But, obviously, it was a dodgy situation – after two or three minutes you lose dexterity, then you conk out. At the second attempt, I was able to raise my leg on to the cliff edge and get out. My feet had nerve damage but it was a lucky escape.

What were the worst weather conditions you've experienced?

The three days a storm came in and I was stuck in the tent waiting for the ocean to swallow me up. The ice was moving underneath me like a series of mini earth shocks. The sound is amazing when the ice smashes: you think you hear children screaming, sirens going, houses falling down.

Ever thought your number was up?

Yes, when we were caught out in Baffin Bay in 1995. A snowmobile was pulling two of us on a sledge. A heatwave came in and the ice was going mushy very quickly. In getting to land, the

Are there any long-term health problems from what you do? I had a metal hip put in. The top of my hip bone had worn away because of the impact of pulling large sledges.

snowmobile hit rubble, so we had to jump off and move the sledge. The other chap dived back on as the snowmobile moved off, but I was left up to my armpits in slush. I had to get myself a half-mile to the shore and my effort was so huge I didn't feel the cold. It was a milestone in my life – whether to continue with the pain or do the easy thing and perish. I thought about my family and decided I would go on fighting. When I was picked up, I was a gibbering wreck and had hypothermia for three days.

What's the coldest you've experienced?

Minus 49.6°C. And I had a very bad stomach as well, which was interesting. The diarrhoea was freezing as quick as anything and piling up like Mr Whippy. When it gets to minus 40, I get novices to make a scalding hot cup of tea, then throw it up in the air – it comes down as snow.

So how do you go for a pee in minus 49°?

Very quickly. Keep it away from wind and cover it up. I was in Resolute Bay when they picked up a guy who had frostbite on his penis. He hadn't done his fly up, which I just can't imagine. Apparently, he lost quite a bit of his penis.

Ouch. Rough weather aside, what other dangers are out there?

One is your own sweat. Most people think the difficulty is keeping warm but the difficulty is

keeping cool enough not to sweat. If ice forms in your insulation you end up hypothermic. But the single biggest threat is the polar bear. It's top of the food chain and actively hunts man. One followed us for two and a half weeks once.

What was your closest encounter?

A mother and two cubs once walked within two metres of my tent. It was extremely concerning but a fantastic experience. They just strolled on. You get this overwhelming feeling that you are in their territory and that they will do exactly what they want. When bears get edgy, they chatter their teeth. If you've got a bear close to camp, you should make noises – but gently. You might want to deploy your pepper spray, although I've never actually used it on a bear. We've also got bear crackers, which are basically fireworks, and a high-velocity rifle.

Ever had to shoot your way out?

No. I've come across hundreds of bears and, with flares and bear crackers, I've got away with it. But a friend who's a bear scientist has had to shoot two.

Have you ever been so tired that you've seen an oasis?

You see mirages anyway. There's a

phenomenon called the fata morgana, where the ocean looks as though the waves are moving even though it's solid ice.

Is there litter everywhere in the Arctic like on Everest?

No, just some fuel drums, thank goodness, because so few people go there.

Is taking huskies cheating?

Not at all. I've done thousands of miles with huskies. It's the difference between walking along the riverbank and being on the river in a canoe. It's quicker but quite tough. The critical thing is managing the dog team – in the high Arctic, they tend to eat each other, fight for position and lick you to death.

Have you ever resorted to eating one?

No, but I have eaten pretty much everything the Inuit have. Polar bear is very nice, a bit like venison. Raw caribou stomach contents are pretty revolting but not quite as disgusting as rancid whale blubber – that made me gag.

[Gear from Jim's expeditions features in the exhibition, North-West Passage: An Arctic Obsession, at the National Maritime Museum, London, until January 3. Interested in joining Jim for part of his next polar adventure? Contact him via his website, \[ice-warrior.com\]\(http://ice-warrior.com\).](#)