

The Adventure Begins!

November 29, 2007



Let the adventure begin - FINALLY! Today I landed in Punta Arenas, Chile, which is the launching point of our expedition. This is the southern-most city in the world (there is actually a city in Argentina that is a tad bit more southern, but it has less than half the population of Punta Arenas, which is home to more than 120,000 people). From here, I still need to fly nearly 900 more miles to get to Antarctica.

Tomorrow I will meet the rest of the team - George from Canada, Merete from Norway, Bernice from the Netherlands, and Eric from Australia - he's the mastermind behind this trip actually, and he'll be leading us across the ice. Everyone has a lot of polar and cold weather expedition experience.

These people have completed ski traverses across Greenland and have skied from Siberia to the North Pole, etc. Sissy stuff like that (ha!). Although I feel a little intimidated (a LOT intimidated), I'm honored to be a part of this team. The way to get better at something is to surround yourself with people who are more experienced and skilled than you are. These folks are pros. I am playing in the Major League and I'm not feeling like I am ready. But, I'd rather be the worst player in the Majors than the best on the farm team.

I'll spend the next few days organizing 150 pounds of gear and trying to figure out what I can cut out. When you're hauling all of your own gear and supplies on a sled, you learn to get rid of everything that is not absolutely necessary. Every ounce counts, so comfort yields to necessity. But two months is a LONG TIME to be uncomfortable. I have a feeling the worlds I will repeat to myself most often will be "suck it up, sister!"

Preparing for the Road Ahead

December 2, 2007



The past three days were spent organizing food and gear. And I do mean the *entire* day. Saturday alone we spent 10 hours sitting on the ground preparing food bags (and after 10 hours we still were not done) - three bags per day for each of us for 55 days - so 165 bags of food per person for a total of 825 total bags. We all joked yesterday that after spending so many hours unwrapping, organizing, and repacking that we are already sick of the food.

We need to consume between 5,000 and 6,000 calories per day at the minimum. And it's not like you can just put your food and snacks into Ziploc bags as is; you have to take everything out of wrappers because during the trip you're wearing heavy mitts for warmth and you can't take them off to unwrap candy or granola bars or anything else because in 60-below weather, you'll get frostbite. And everything freezes - salami, cheese, etc., so you won't be able to slice anything once you're there, which means everything has to be pre-cut into little pieces so you can pop a bite-size morsel of food into your mouth and try to suck on it enough to warm it up until you can chew and swallow it.

In order to supplement our caloric intake we eat at least an *entire stick of butter everyday*. Yes, it's gross. But you can't afford to run out of energy during a trip like this (which is why I put on 15 pounds before I left), because when you are too low on energy you risk hypothermia and frostbite, not to mention the wrath of your teammates when everyone has to keep waiting for you because you ran out of steam and hit the wall.

Eating every hour is mandatory. You burn hundreds of calories just trying to stay warm. A typical menu looks something like this: two packs of instant oatmeal with high-fat powdered milk, butter, and sugar for breakfast. Lunch is eating throughout the day and consists of instant noodles (we'll carry hot water in thermoses during the day), a massive chocolate bar, chunks of salami, pieces of cheese, dried fruit, nuts, biscuits, granola bar, stick of butter (get it down any way you can). Dinners are freeze dried meals supplemented with butter (surprise). Dessert - more chocolate, sugar, and butter. Despite the huge amount of food we are consuming, each of us will come back from this trip weighing no more than a Backstreet Boy. DON'T HATE US, OPRAH!!

If the weather looks good tomorrow morning we'll fly out on the ice! Fingers crossed!

First Day in Antarctica!

December 3, 2007



It is December 4th and we finally made it to Antarctica after a day of weather delays! We're at Patriot Hills camp where we'll stay for a night or two before we fly on to our actual starting point on the Ronne Ice Shelf (more on Ronne once we get there). We flew here on an Ilyushin 76 which was designed in the Soviet Union (originally built for the military) and is perhaps the coolest plane I've ever been on. It's about the size of a Boeing 767, has four engines, and can carry 88,000 pounds more than 3,000 miles in less than six hours. The Ilyushin earns bragging rights for the ability to do take-offs and landings using short, rough, and crude runways.

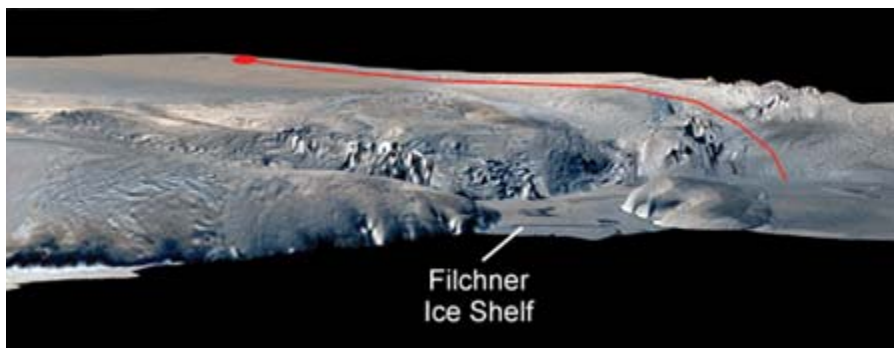
Are there runways in Antarctica, you ask? Yes, but they are natural blue ice runways so landings are tricky. If it's extremely sunny, there are people that stand on the ice and use mirrors to signal to the pilots so they know where to land. If it's cloudy, they use smoke bombs. But the biggest variable in landing the plane is always the wind. If the crosswinds exceed 20 knots, the Ilyushin can't land, which is why they always carry enough fuel to return to Chile. They could be four hours into a flight and have to turn around. Sometimes this happens several days in a row. Sometimes flights are delayed by weeks waiting for weather and never even get out of Punta Arenas.

From here, we will take a ski-equipped Twin Otter plane to the Ronne Ice Shelf, where we will start skiing. The Twin Otter can fly in much harsher conditions than the Ilyushin. It's rated to -130F, and it's the plane they used to perform a medical evacuation in the middle of winter at the South Pole a few years ago.

Chances of us getting out of Patriot Hills tomorrow looks pretty good. I still need to screw the skins onto my skis tonight (because they tend to come off after a few hundred miles of use on the ice, so adding a few screws will serve as reinforcement once the glue wears off) and make a few minor adjustments, but other than that, I am feeling ready.

Taking to the Ice

December 7, 2007



December 5. We spent most of the day at Patriot Hills organizing gear and then in the late afternoon, boarded the Twin Otter for a one-and-a-half hour flight to our starting point on the ice - the Ronne Ice Shelf. The Ronne Ice Shelf is the western part of the Filchner-Ronne Ice Shelf, which spans 267 square miles. The Ronne lies just east of the Antarctic Peninsula.

The route we are taking was inspired by the legendary explorer Reinhold Messner, who started his trek to the Pole from a similar position in 1989. But after doing some research, we have figured out that we are starting 65 miles further away from the Pole than Messner did. Since Messner's expedition in 1989, only two groups (both from Norway), have completed this route. It is seldom traveled because the terrain is considerably more challenging than the traditional route from the Hercules Inlet. We start out following the edge of the Foundation Ice Stream, which is fed by the Antarctic Ice Sheet. An ice stream is sort of like a glacier, but glaciers are in a mountain and an ice stream is a flow of ice within an ice cap. Then we'll continue climbing between the Thiel and Pensacola Mountains, then finally to the Antarctic Plateau (which was first discovered by Ernest Shackleton during his 1908 expedition). So now you know more than you ever wanted to know about our route.

Once the Twin Otter dropped us off on the Ice Shelf, we made the decision to set up our tents and get a good night's sleep, knowing that the next six weeks will take a lot out of us. The next morning (December 6), we strapped on our skis and hit the ice. We did more than 12 miles the first day, so we were really pleased we had such a strong start. But by the end of the day, every muscle in my body was feeling it - especially my upper back and hip flexors. Today, we had more of the same and covered 13 miles. Only 524 miles to go - woohoo!

Everyday is a Drag

December 13, 2007



We just finished day seven of our expedition, and dragging this sled across the snow and ice everyday is tougher than I had imagined, especially in conditions like what we have had for the past two days, which was knee-deep snow at times.

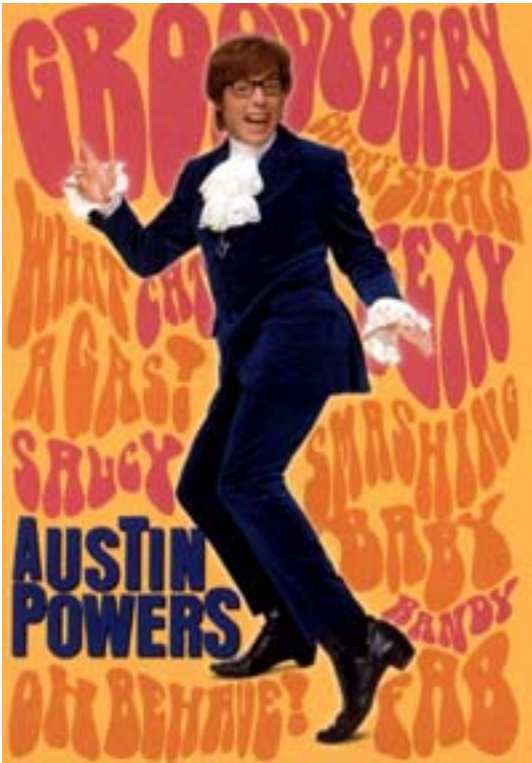
In order to train for this expedition, I tied a rope to the waist harness of my backpack and attached a tire to it and dragged it around Ocean Beach and Tennessee Valley. When CNN showed footage of my training a few weeks before my departure (for the feature, please click [here](#)), I was only dragging one tire, but I worked my way up to three before I left. This is the most efficient way to train for an expedition like this if you can't haul an actual sled through the snow.

My sled is made of fiberglass with a gel coat finish. When the snow is deep the sled feels incredibly heavy. When you're on hard ice, it's easier to pull, but the sled also has a mind of its own as for whether or not it stays in your ski tracks. And when your sled weighs more than you do, it will win the power struggle every time. I've taken a few good falls so far. Day four, I fell and bruised my wrist. Day five, I fell and bruised my kneecaps. Day six, I fell and twisted my ankle. Today was an injury-free day, although I have a couple of blisters on my right foot (but my red toenail polish is holding up brilliantly, so I've got that going for me, which is nice).

I'm definitely a little banged up, but it's nothing some Aleve can't cure. On a trip like this, you push through the pain and discomfort. You have no choice, because you have to get out there and work everyday. You have a job to do, and your team is counting on you to pull your weight. On a trip like this, you have to be like Cal Ripken Jr., and for the next six weeks, everyday is game day.

I've Found My Mojo!

December 15, 2007



It's December 15 and I've got my mojo back! The past few days have felt really good. I think part of it is the fact that I'm adjusting to the environment and the weight of my sled, and part of it is the moral support I get from you guys and from my teammates. I'm feeling 100 times more confident. The text messages you've been sending put a smile on my face every night, and although I can't text message back, rest assured I am getting your messages and am cherishing every one (Eileen L., please send me your phone number).

All the aches and pains are basically gone, other than my lower back muscles, which continue to torment me. This entire time I just assumed I was the only one feeling pain, but as it turns out, my teammates are feeling just as worked as I am - they were just smart enough to bring codeine instead of Aleve.

We've covered more than 150 miles so far, which is pretty remarkable given the conditions have been less than ideal. The past three days have been total whiteout, and most of the time we can't see where the earth stops and sky begins. Navigating in conditions like this drives everyone bonkers. Everything is white. There

is no horizon, nothing to focus on. We got a bit of a break for a short time today and were able to see the Pensacola Mountains, but then the clouds and snow closed in again.

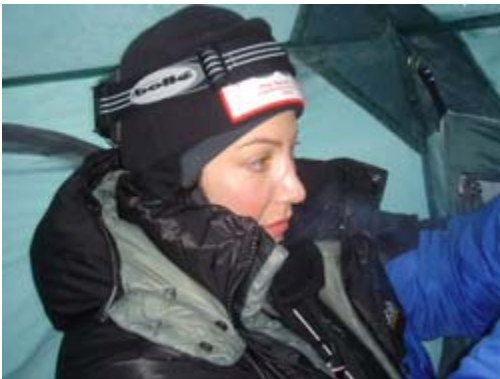
The temperatures have been pretty mild. A couple of nights ago it was actually so warm in my tent that I couldn't sleep, but all that will change once we start gaining more altitude. The warmer temperatures make the snow wet and heavy, so we're praying things start to freeze because the sled dragging is ridiculously challenging in deep wet snow.

After 10 days on the ice we're used to the daily routine. Up at 6:00 AM. Firing up the stoves and melting ice so we can fill our water bottles and throw down some oatmeal (yuck) before we break down camp. We take down the tents, pack our sleds, and hit the ice by 8:30 AM. Then we ski for nine hours with four breaks throughout the day for food and water. We usually stop skiing around 5:30 PM because we have a lot of work ahead of us to get settled in for the night. After we set up our tents, we have to dig ice bricks with a snow shovel to put around the outside of the tents in order to ensure the tents don't get blown away. I actually like doing this and I'm not sure why. I think it's because I never got to shovel snow growing up in Phoenix. After the tents are secured it's back to melting ice for hot drinks and dinner (freeze-dried meals), and then we hope to be asleep by 10:00 PM (unless we're up late working on a blog, like tonight).

Again, many thanks for the messages. I appreciate every single one of them (especially the Duke basketball updates)!

Saving Face

December 19, 2007



The UV exposure here is brutal. Antarctica has 24 hours of daylight this time of year, and the sun reflects off of the snow which makes skin protection a constant concern. I don't leave my tent in the mornings without slathering on Neutrogena SPF 70 sun block (which contains an ingredient called helioplex). This sun block is as important as any piece of equipment I have here. Having spent half my life in Phoenix and a good deal of the past decade in harsh environments, I've learned to be extremely careful about protecting my skin. A couple of members of this team look like they just finished an ultimate fighting match. Red, swollen faces, and heads that are blown up like balloons, covered in blisters and dripping puss and blood. It ain't pretty. In addition to the Neutrogena sun block, I try to keep most of my face covered with goggles and a Neoprene face mask. Of course I don't look as cool as my teammates who are skiing in glacier glasses and bare faces, but so far I'm the only one with no signs of any skin damage, so thanks Neutrogena for that!

For the past 13 days we've been traveling southwest instead of directly south in order to avoid the more dangerous crevasse fields. This adds some mileage to the trip, but is the safest way to go. We are each

carrying crevasse rescue gear, which most Antarctic expeditions that follow the traditional routes don't bother with, but our route demands it. We had to cross a few crevasse fields today, as a matter of fact, and it was pretty sketchy.

As far as the conditions of the route earlier in the week, it's been pretty rough going. For two days the snow was so deep and heavy we each had to trade off breaking trail every 30 minutes, because that was about all anyone could take before they felt like their legs were going to fall off. Yesterday we hit some steep terrain and did quite a bit of uphill climbing in our skis, which I actually enjoyed. We had the wind battering our faces most of the way which I didn't enjoy, but this is good conditioning because once we hit the Antarctic Plateau we'll experience the harshest conditions of the trip. I guess it's too late to plan a beach vacation for the holidays.

Kiss Your Crevasse Goodbye

December 22, 2007



Up until today we had been heading southwest in order to avoid some of the more serious crevasse fields. We actually had a day last week when we had to stop skiing an hour earlier than normal because the weather closed in on us and we lost all visibility while we were standing between two massively crevassed areas and didn't feel as if we could cross safely. We marked off a perimeter around our tents so everyone knew where the safety zone was and we were all careful not to step outside of it. It's pretty unnerving when you plant a ski pole in the snow and it sinks all the way down to your wrist and you realize there isn't anything below you. This is one of the reasons this route is rarely traveled (we are only the fourth team to ever attempt it). The next morning, the clouds cleared and we had a good view of what was ahead of us and we were able to rope up and cross safely.

Today is December 22, and we're finally out of the danger zone (so for the first time we've pointed our skis directly to the south). The fact that we are past the most dangerous part of the route and are now heading straight to the Pole is somewhat of a relief, but I know things will be more challenging once we reach the Antarctic Plateau. The Plateau is the highest, coldest, windiest part of this route, and this is where we'll just have to put our heads down and take a beating. We have the expedition logs from the two Norwegian teams that traveled along this route a few years ago so we know what we're in for. I'm not sure if that's good or bad, actually. Sometimes I think it's better to not know what lies ahead and that way you can go to sleep at night and not think of it. But for tonight, it's McCallan's 10-year old cask-strength scotch is doing the trick for me.

The Best Christmas in Antarctica EVER!

December 26, 2007



If you want to get away from the crowds during the holidays, this is the place to be. It's not "touristy" *at all*. Really. And you're guaranteed to have a white Christmas. If you're still not sold, here are a few facts and figures to help you get off the fence: Antarctica is the coldest, windiest place on Earth and has the highest average elevation of all the continents. It covers approximately 5.5 million square miles and is 98% ice. If all of the Antarctic ice were to melt, sea levels would rise by 200 feet. Winter temperatures range from -112°F to -130°F and the coldest temperatures ever recorded were here at Vostok (-170°F). Leave your swimsuit at home. As my teammates discovered, sunburn is a huge health concern because the UV light is reflected off of the snow. If you happen to ski with your mouth open, you'll burn your tongue and the roof of your mouth, so don't do that. I'm guessing that freeze-dried meals mixed with fried mouth skin doesn't taste all that great.

But this was, hands down, the best Christmas in Antarctica I've ever had. On Christmas Eve, Merete and I shared a tent and we had George, Eric, and Berniece over for dinner. Merete decorated our tent with chocolate Santas and it was quite festive. In addition, she surprised us by whipping up some amazing Norwegian pancakes with a special berry topping (she picked the berries herself and brought them with her). But wait...there's more...she also brought is a Norwegian delicacy that I thought she described as reindeer jerky, but upon further questioning I learned it was made from reindeer heart. Poor little Rudolph! Now, here's the really impressive part: she actually brought a gift for each of us, if you can believe that. A book of sudoku puzzles with a pen included – beautifully wrapped, each with a ribbon and a ceramic angel for decoration. This woman is a regular Martha Stewart (minus that little Imclone hiccup).

Merete really is an amazing woman. She's already skied across Greenland and she is one of the strongest women I've ever met – body, mind, and soul. She's 60 years old, Norwegian, and says she was born with skis on her feet (I certainly hope for her mother's sake that she was delivered via c-section). She is a wife, a mother, a grandmother, and is also a practicing physician. Eric told her he hoped he'd be as strong as she is when he is 50. I told her I hoped I'd be as strong as she is when I'm 42. She made it a great Christmas for all of us and I felt lucky to be her tent mate that evening (especially because at the end of the night I left the tent to make a phone call, and as I was coming back in, I somehow caught my ponytail in the tent door

zipper, and since she's a doctor and all, she was able to remove it with only minimal pain and no permanent scarring). Merry Christmas and happy holidays to everyone!

True Story

December 31, 2007



The story you are about to read is true. The names have not even been changed to protect the innocent. The past couple of days have been tough. Not any tougher than any other day, but that's sort of my point. Everyday that you're out on the ice is going to challenge you, you have to go deep to find the physical and emotional strength to wake up everyday and do it again. I knew just where I needed to go to find some inspiration – my 10-year old goddaughter, Emma Schlenker, who last year at the age of 9 set the world record as the youngest female to swim from Alcatraz to the San Francisco shore. She did this swim together with her mom Linda, who suffers from lupus and was advised by her doctor not to do it. But who listens to doctors (other than Dr. Ruth)? Emma reminded me that when she was partly through the swim she got really cold and tired, and for a brief moment she doubted whether or not she'd make it all the way. But she stopped swimming for a moment, looked around, and just concentrated on appreciating where she was at that very moment and enjoyed the scenery. She looked back at Alcatraz and saw how far she had come. She looked around and noticed the bridge and the shoreline ahead of her, and for that moment just focused on her surroundings and appreciated where she was instead of focusing on finishing. Then she pulled it together and swam her way into the record books.

Today I stopped in my tracks and tried to do the same thing. The problem was that there was nothing to focus on. Everything was the same. White all around me. No landmarks, no scenery. I turned my head around and the view behind me was indistinguishable from the view ahead and what was to the sides of me. I knew we'd come hundreds of miles already but I couldn't see any evidence of that. I knew I just had to put my head down and stay focused. Today was the coldest and windiest day we've had so far, so I knew it was going to be rough. I kept going. About an hour into the morning I stopped and glanced back again – but this time I saw an image behind me – way back in the distance.

This is where the story gets weird. At first I thought I was hallucinating. I kept skiing, and then after 10 more minutes I looked behind me again and the nondescript black image looked even larger. I still couldn't figure out what it was but I knew it wasn't my imagination. It got closer and closer and closer, and suddenly we found ourselves skiing next to the most massive, tractor-type vehicle you'd ever see. This thing was part monster truck, part trailer, and part Antarctic chitty-chitty bang-bang.

The story gets better. This thing pulls up beside us, a couple of people hop out, and then I hear a familiar Aussie voice saying, "Where's Alison Levine?" It's an old friend, Mike McDowell! Mike was one of the original owners of Adventure Network, the first company to offer logistics support to non-military excursions

to Antarctica. He's been involved in Antarctic logistics for more than 20 years. I first met Mike about seven years ago through a childhood friend, Chris Haver. Chris told Mike I was attempting to ski the Messner route, so he knew I was out here on the ice. Mike just happened to be traveling across Antarctica in the ice tractor with a group of scientists doing research on the polar environment. They will travel to the South Pole and then the Pole of Inaccessibility, which is the point furthest removed from any coast of Antarctica.

Mike knew exactly where we would be today because we call our coordinates into Patriot Hills every night, and they happened to be driving a similar route to the one we're skiing. Imagine my shock to hear someone in the middle of Antarctica call my name! I ran over to Mike and gave him a big hug. He and his group of scientists invited our team into their heated trailer to have coffee and a hot breakfast. I thought it was a dream. I mean, come on, what are the chances? During breakfast Mike let us know about some ski teams on other routes. Apparently a lot of people have been evacuated with medical problems due to cold weather injuries and malnutrition. Bummer.

After breakfast they sent us off with five loaves of homemade bread, five cartons of wine (New Years Eve is looking up), and a bunch of cigars. We waved goodbye to Mike and the researchers and got back on track to head to the Pole. The whole thing was very surreal. The last thing you'd ever expect to see in the middle of Antarctica is a group of people, and then to have one of them be someone you know is just crazy. But I swear this really happened to me today. I am telling you the truth. I swear on Coach K's job. If I am lying, may he go to the Lakers.

As they drove off to do their scientific work, I stopped for a moment to appreciate where I was and what was around me. It didn't matter that the only thing that I could see was ice. I could feel that there was a lot more there.

Happy New Year!

January 4, 2008



We're a month into this trip and the good news is that I haven't yet burned down a tent while cooking. This is a photo of the type of tent we're using. It's the Karon-4 tent manufactured by Hilleberg. This tent is well-suited for extended snow camping in extreme conditions, and the tunnel tent design makes it fairly easy to pitch and strike everyday. It's made from Kerlon 1800, which is the best and strongest of all lightweight fabrics. It's also used for hot air balloons because it holds up against the deteriorating effects of UV rays (important for us because we have 24 hours of sunlight this time of year). It would be nice to turn it into a hot air balloon and fly it out of here after the trip!

On New Years Eve, Bernice and I decided to have everyone over to our tent for wine (thanks to Mike McDowell) after dinner so that we could all celebrate together. I wanted the evening to be festive but I had no party hats, no confetti, and no horns. I was feeling a little pressure because Merete really outdid herself on Christmas when she decorated our tents with chocolate Santas. She set a pretty high bar. But, if there's one thing I've learned in my career (whatever it happened to be at the time) it's that a little creativity can

make up for a lack of substance. I know this doesn't sound good, and I'll probably deny ever having said it, but honestly, if you're creative sometimes people won't realize that you're generally unprepared. Granted, I had no chocolate Santas, but I *did* have some extra packets of chocolate-flavored GU (an energy gel). I hung them up inside the tent with signs that said, "HAPPY GU YEAR!"

The cold, dry air is definitely beating us up a bit. The skin on the tips of our fingers is starting to split, which makes it hard to do simple tasks such as using a lighter to fire up a stove, opening and closing buckles on boots and harnesses, etc. The other night, I was trying to zip my sleeping bag closed and the zipper was stuck, and I was pulling really hard and my hand slipped off the zipper and I accidentally hit myself in the face and gave myself a bloody nose. George and I laughed our heads off all night about it because the entire trip people have been telling me that I'm the only one who doesn't look like I got into a bar fight, but now I'm actually the only one who has taken a punch to the face! What a klutz.

Bernice has developed these things called "chill blains" on her face and all over her thighs. Chill blains are blisters from the cold that eventually turn into open sores. I had never heard of them before this trip and while I'm no doctor it seems to me that if they are sores that develop from the cold they should just be called cold sores. The logic I offered up on the name for this medical affliction went unappreciated.

And by the way, we have skied over 400 miles so far. At this point we're thinking we might be able to get to the South Pole by January 12th. The team is staying strong, but there's always unpredictable weather and health issues that could hold us back a bit. You can't really predict what's going to come at you on an expedition like this. The only thing I know *for sure* is that no one on this trip is Jamie Lynn Spears' baby daddy.

Please Don't Feed the Sastrugi...

January 7, 2008



They are big enough already. I'd never heard of sastrugi before this trip, but I am now more familiar with them than I'd like to be. While sastrugi may sound like an exotic animal you'd find in a zoo somewhere in Italy, they are not that type of creature. Sastrugi are wind-formed ridges of ice and snow. They can be up to a meter high and are an absolute nightmare because maneuvering over and around them makes skiing even more tiring - especially when you've got to get yourself and your sled through them. Their surface is hard and unforgiving and if you're not careful you can bust a ski on them, and REI [West Coast sporting goods store] isn't exactly around the corner.

Now I know why no one from the US has done this route - because it's *freakin' hard!* The sastrugi have been just brutal the last few days. And there's a lot more of it between us and the Pole. It slows us down a lot and it's pretty discouraging because it cuts back on the distance we're able to cover each day. But, we're still optimistic about making it all the way. After all, we're TEAM CAN DU. The name represents all of our nationalities. We've got George who is Canadian, Eric is Australian, Merete is Norwegian, Bernice is Dutch,

and I'm from the **USA**. There you have it - CAN DU. I told these guys it's a good thing we didn't have someone from Turkey or Tanzania on the team because then we'd be CANT DU. And that would be a bit of a psychological setback. Another suggested team name was South Pole Expedition Route de Messner, but the acronym for that one was somewhat questionable.

Less than 100 miles to go. Anything can happen. Huckabee and Obama can vouch for that.

Here She Is...Miss Antarctica

January 9, 2008



Don't worry. I'm not taking my eye off the prize. I'm not losing focus. But, when I haven't seen anything but white for days on end and I am also extremely exhausted, I tend to get a little punchy. Today, I decided I needed to stage the Miss Antarctica pageant. I am not allowing Bernice or Merete to compete because if I am going to the trouble of organizing this thing I want to make sure that I win.

Here you can see me in my formal wear. It took me *forever* to sew that fur ruff on to my hood (very difficult to get a needle through Gore-Tex seams and animal hide). The ruff is a must-have for Antarctic travel because it protects you from the wind and cold and helps to keep the ice off of your face. This ruff is made both of wolf and wolverine (so sorry, PETA!!!). This is an ideal combination because wolf has long guard hairs that block the wind and create a microclimate around the face, and while wolverine has a short pelt and doesn't block the wind as efficiently as wolf, the benefit is that it does not attract as much ice.

Back to the pageant. I've prepared all of my answers for the interview competition - about how I want to help all the baby penguins get a good education and how my dream is that someday the orcas and the fur seals can live in harmony together. Needless to say, I am dreading the swimsuit competition.

P.S. Stay tuned next week for Antarctica's Next Top Model.

P.P.S. Everyone seemed somewhat entertained by my antics today and thought I was reasonably funny (of course, the "entertainment bar" is fairly low right now). Then, they reminded me that in the making of my Miss Antarctica sash I wasted a good portion of my toilet paper allocation - which I thought was not so funny.

P.P.P.S. Just a quick thank you to one of my favorite clients, *Harper's Bazaar*, for putting up word of my expedition in the current issue (January 2008). And thanks, Hope S., for the shout-out about it!

Does This Sled Make Me Look Fat?

January 11, 2008



One of the most important parts of preparing for a polar expedition is putting on extra weight before the trip. And you want to put on fat, not muscle, because you need the fat to both keep you warm and use for fuel. You don't show up for a trip like this looking all toned and buff, you need to have 10-15 pounds of extra fat ready to burn. Putting the weight on before the trip was easy. And fun. I'm guessing I don't need to explain how to put on 10-15 pounds of fat to anyone out there (Kate Moss, if you're reading this, call me and we can discuss).

We've been in this extreme environment for so long now that regardless of how much we are eating; our bodies are basically consuming themselves. We're eating as much as we can, but we're still losing muscle mass. And even though we're managing to cover about 15 miles a day, I know that physically we are all getting weaker, which is why it's so imperative to stay tough mentally. Antarctica has really shown us her teeth the past couple of days. We've had 40 below temperatures and crazy strong winds coming at us to the point where it knocked me off balance a few times. My hands freeze up at every rest break and it takes me 30 minutes to warm them back up again to the point where I can use them. I couldn't even fasten the Velcro closure on my face mask the other day and had to have George do it for me. I always wear a mask because if any skin is exposed it's going to be frost-nipped within minutes. He was ready to help at every break and really saved my ass that day. Technically, I guess he saved my *face*, but at this point in the expedition I'm not sure there's much difference between the two. My hands give me problems everyday, but so far no frostbite, so I'm thankful for that. That line about, "Look ma! No hands!" is *not* something I want to say next time I visit my parents.

All of the women on this team have developed severe coughs. When I start hacking I can feel it all the way down in my quads (what's left of them anyway). For several days, Bernice also complained of a tightness in her chest while she was skiing. I've experienced that exact same thing several times in the past and usually chalk it up to an acute case of "brassierioustootightitis." This can generally be cured by a trip to Victoria's Secret (or La Perla, for all you fancy people). But, obviously that's not an option around here.

If all goes well, we're expecting to get to the Pole sometime this weekend. The update will be posted on Monday, so hopefully you'll have some good news from TEAM CAN DU. I'll also send a post-trip report once I'm back in Chile next week and can craft a proper e-mail with better details than I can over a bad satellite phone connection while I'm coughing non-stop. I've suggested to my team that perhaps we coughers all have that rare strain of extremely drug-resistant tuberculosis, but of course no one here takes me brassieriously anymore. Stay tuned...

At the South Pole!

Alison and Team CAN DU made it to the geographic South Pole on Saturday, January 12 at 12:30 PM Pacific time. More information to follow in the next 24 hours!

An All-Time Low

January 16, 2008

One of the world's greatest philosophers, Marshall Mathers (no relation to Jerry, as far as I know) once asked the question, "If you had one shot, one opportunity to seize everything you ever wanted - one moment - would you capture it, or just let it slip?"

Reaching the South Pole was certainly not everything I ever wanted - not even close, but it was indeed the goal of this six week expedition. And it was all or nothing on a trip like this. But, on January 12, 2008 at 12:30 Pacific time, our team arrived at Admunsen-Scott South Pole Station - the lowest point on Earth. 90 degrees south to be exact. We skied and hauled those sleds for 38 straight days. No rest days. We made great time and averaged 15 miles a day, sometimes more. We were on a mission to get there and we weren't going to let 50 below temperatures, fatigue, or deteriorating bodies slow us down. Arriving at the Pole seemed surreal to me. After all that blood (from my nose), sweat (from all of us), and tears (NOT from me - I know better because tears fog your goggles and then the moisture freezes and turns to ice and then you can't see anything, so no crying allowed, but apparently not everyone on the team got that memo) along the way, we finally skied up and tagged one of the most famous landmarks in history.



Many of you might wonder why I wanted to make this journey. The reason can be linked to the pictures that are posted with this blog - legendary explorers Roald Amundsen (Norway) and Robert Scott (Britain) - two of the adventurers I most admire. If you aren't familiar with these guys, they are two of the most impressive explorers the world has ever known. Amundsen led a five-man team that was the first to reach the South Pole on December 14, 1911.



While these adventurous Norwegians were making their way across the icy continent, a British team led by Robert F. Scott was also attempting to become the first to make it to the Pole, but they got there 33 days after Amundsen's team and found the Norwegian flag already flying at the Pole upon their arrival. The group was starving, exhausted, and needless to say, totally heartbroken and shocked to learn that the Norwegians had won the race to be the first to reach the bottom of the world. Here's the tragic part of the story: Scott's entire team perished on the return trip - just 11 miles from a supply depot of food and gear that could have saved their lives. They completely lost their will to survive. Their bodies were not discovered until the following summer. The race to the Pole is one of the stories that has always intrigued me. Another one of my favorite explorers is Ernest Shackleton (also a Brit). That guy has several epic, *epic* stories that also took place on the Antarctic ice (yes, Kath and Squash, more epic than our 22,000' night out with no sleeping bags - but love you sisters!!) and I have always been intrigued by his accomplishments.

Back to my reasons for this journey. We are only on this planet for a short time, so if there are things that interest or intrigue you - instead of just reading about them - *get out there and experience them*. I wanted to know what it felt like for all of these guys to be out there in those harsh elements day after day after day. I wondered how it was possible to keep a team motivated and focused on a goal when all they felt was pain and the end was nowhere in sight. Was it more mental or more physical? And for crying out loud - what was on their iPods? I have always been curious about what it was like for those early polar explorers, and have also wondered about the modern-day adventurers like Reinhold Messner, who was the first to ski our route from the Ronne Ice Shelf to the Pole nearly 20 years ago (but for the record, we started 65 miles further out than he did). And I wasn't going to be satisfied just reading about it anymore. I wanted to *feel it*. So if you want a summarization of my motivation for this trip, here it is: If there are people you admire or are curious about, go walk a mile in their shoes. Or ski 580 in them.

P.S. Post-trip report and photos coming in the next day or two, which will be my last posting. On my way home tonight. Yes!

Post-Trip Musings

January 18, 2008

So now I'm home in California. Last night was the first time I had slept in an actual bed since Dec 3rd. The crazy thing is that I woke up in the middle of the night because I was cold.



The whole trip to the Pole feels like a dream now, except that I have the photos to prove I was really there. The Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station is an American base and is run by the National Science Foundation. It's an impressive place. It should be - given it took 10 years and cost \$280 million dollars to build. Someone there told me that it is the most expensive building ever built as far as cost per square foot. There are 250 people who live and work there during the summer and 70 crazy people who are there for the winter.

Getting out of there by plane proved almost as challenging as getting there on skis. The weather was so crappy the day we arrived that the twin otter could not fly, so we could not get picked up and had to pitch tents at the Pole that night. It wouldn't have been a big deal if we had some food left, but we pretty much ate everything the previous day in anticipation of leaving that next evening, and there are strict rules at the South Pole Station that prevent outsiders (anyone who is not stationed there) from eating the food there (long story). We were allowed hot drinks and cookies from the cafeteria, but that was it. I ate 46 cookies in the next 36 hours and had 20 cups of hot cocoa.

The plane finally came and got us the next night right after it had picked up a skier from another expedition with frostbitten hands. This guy - I'll just call him John (because that was actually his name), needed medical attention because if his hands re-froze he'd probably lose all of his fingers. I can't even imagine how freaked out he must have been. Anyway, we knew the plane had to make a fuel-stop near the Thiel Mountains so it could continue flying for a few more hours back to Patriot Hills, so we expected to make a pit stop in the middle of our trip. But once again, Antarctica showed us who was the boss (it wasn't Tony Danza). As soon as we landed at the fuel stop we found out the visibility at Patriot Hills was too poor to land

the plane, so we had to camp that evening at the base of the Thiel Mountains. One more night on the ice. Luckily that guy John who was on the twin otter with us had a good supply of Pringles and chocolate with him and he shared that with us so we had that for dinner, which was better than eating dry Swiss Miss cocoa powder and Chapstick which was about all I had left as far as edibles go. I know you are questioning the Chapstick. But I would have eaten it if I had to.

When we finally arrived back at Patriot Hills we were greeted with bottles of champagne and a hot dinner. About seven hours after our arrival there we flew out on the Ilyushin, back to Chile. I knew at this point that the trip was finally over. 42 total days on the ice. 38 days of skiing. Nearly 580 miles covered. 15% of my body weight lost (all in the wrong places).

There is a saying that no one who goes to the Pole comes back unchanged. I truly believe this. I can already see some changes in myself. I went out for dinner last night and when the waiter put bread and butter on the table in front of me, I ate the butter straight up -with a spoon. Instead of drinking Evian at home I now prefer to melt ice from my freezer in order to get my water. I don't plan to wash my hair anytime soon. I can wait 43 days again. Maybe 44 just to see if I can break my record. I plan to wear a ski mask during the day – all the time now, and not just when I am robbing banks. And of course I plan to lobby the Miss Universe pageant officials in order to convince them to allow the first contestant from Antarctica to compete.

Thanks to my parents and to all my friends who supported me along the way, your text messages were a great comfort to me. Thanks to Team CAN DU for being the best damn teammates a gal could ever ask for. And most importantly, thanks to the early Antarctic explorers whose stories inspired me to make this journey. And as far as what's next?...I think I'll start reading about the early explorers of the Caribbean Islands.