

man on a MISSION

When you read this, Perth-based polar adventurer Tom Smitheringale will be just over halfway through a one-man epic: 60 days hauling a sled over 800km to become the first Australian and third person ever to walk to the North Pole solo and unsupported.



WHY? WHAT SET YOU ON A COURSE TO THE NORTH POLE? There's no clear answer. This is about the kid with big dreams and outsized ambitions who thinks he can pull off something grand and, against the protest of concerned adults, does. For me the dream is real.

ADVENTURE LEGEND REINHOLD MESSNER RECKONS WHAT YOU'RE ABOUT TO DO IS 10 TIMES MORE DIFFICULT THAN CLIMBING MT EVEREST?

The difficulties and hardships of a journey to the North Pole are too complex to be summed up in a paragraph. Extreme efficiency in every move is essential within such dangerously narrow parameters and you have to risk death every day, then at least you have a chance. By the end of each day there's not one muscle fibre that remains unbeaten.

BLIZZARDS, BEARS AND BROKEN ICE. TALK ME THROUGH THE DANGERS.

Getting to the North Pole is like landing at Mayfair on Monopoly. Everything conspires against you. The Arctic is like a gigantic slurpee, and swimming across 'leads' (cracks in the ice) will be a daily occurrence. The survival suit is worn over the top of your gear to protect you from the frozen ocean; fall into the water without it and you're dead. This is the harshest environment on the planet and the smallest mistakes can have big, big consequences. The human body isn't designed to function in these sorts of temperatures and it's hard if you haven't experienced it to fully understand the pain of cold. It is a total inundation; a complete suffocation and you devote every moment of your consciousness to fighting it.

YOUR SUPPORT CREW THINKS YOU'RE NUTS. DOES IT TAKE A SCREW TO BE LOOSE TO TAKE ON A MISSION LIKE THIS?

They think someone should throw a net over me. I don't know what crazy is. What people say about me and think about the things I do is at the very top of the list of things I care about the least. I couldn't give a rat's arse. Some people think I'm losing my mind but I wonder if I'm getting it back. I'm the world's champion believer and I have the belief that anything is possible. If that makes me crazy then throw me in the nut-house.

DAY 29, UNDER HALF WAY, YOU'VE DONE 360 CLICKS, EXHAUSTED, WEATHER'S SHABBY – TALK ME THROUGH YOUR LIKELY MENTAL STATE AND YOU'LL GET TO THE HALFWAY HURDLE.

Negative thoughts make your sled heavier. I like to keep my mind busy and positive, and routine helps take the stress out of hardship. The 'halfway hurdle' is when I'll celebrate my 40th birthday on ice and it brings with it joy and happiness.

YOU DON'T JUST DECIDE TO HAVE A CRACK AT THE POLE ONE MONTH, FLY TO NORTHERN CANADA TO STEP OUT ON THE ICE THE NEXT – HOW MUCH

PREPARATION HAVE YOU DONE? I travelled to the Pole twice last year with [Norwegian polar explorer] Børge Ousland. There is no substitute for experience gained at the 'coal face'. I was in Norway in December and have had a month of pre-training and acclimatisation on the ice in Iqaluit in northern Canada. I have a very clear vision of what I want and I'm giving myself the best chance of getting it. There is a general perception that Olympic level fitness is required to travel to the Polar Regions, but that's not true. Success can be determined by what happens above the shoulders and you need the mental effort required to levitate a beer truck. There are also lots of great people who toil away behind the scenes who are all an essential part of the mosaic.

HARDCORE EXPEDITIONS AREN'T RECEIVING MUCH CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP THESE DAYS – WAS IT ANY DIFFERENT BACK IN PEARY AND AMUNDSEN'S DAY? No different. You still have to make a showman of yourself and the only way an expensive expedition is remunerated is by lecturing and publishing books.

YOU'VE CHOSEN THE BURNETT INSTITUTE AS YOUR CAUSE – WHY? While serving in the military in Africa many years ago, I witnessed immense suffering amongst the African people, and vowed to one day do something for those whose lives are devastated by infectious diseases such as HIV, malaria and TB. Knowing that some of the leading medical research into these diseases is done right here in Australia by the Burnet Institute was added inspiration for me.

GEAR – WHAT DO YOU LUG WITH YOU? A haul of bounty not seen since Cook left for the New World in search of land. 160kg of mega calorie astronaut food, fuel, firearms, camera equipment, cold weather gear and self-belief, packed like Tetris.

WHAT HAVE YOU GAINED FROM YOUR OUTDOORS LIFE THAT WILL HELP CONQUER THE POLE? There are many attributes required: 1. Tell it like it is. Beating around the bush using cute language is a lie. 2. Silliness is a very undervalued expedition quality. Take yourself too seriously and you won't be having fun. 3. Patience. Some long-dead holy fucker said patience is a virtue. And it is. Above everything else you have to want to be there.

HOW DO YOU PLAN TO CELEBRATE YOUR ARRIVAL – MARK YOUR TERRITORY LIKE A HUSKY, LEGGED COCKED, OR TAKE A NIP OF WHISKY? I'll make a few phone calls and dance a little jig. There's going to be a media contingent from Channel Seven coming out to collect me along with Børge who has been commissioned to guide them and, fingers crossed, my Mum. They're under instructions to bring with them a bottle of Penfolds Grange

1996 and a fat cigar. My odour will be industrial strength and you will be able to see colours coming off me.

WHAT'S HARDER – GETTING THERE OR GETTING BACK? I'm not sure what the answer is but I look forward to finding out. Maybe it's like Dante's idea of hell where, according to the poem, once you punch through you find yourself.

THERE ARE SOME MANNED 'DRIFTING' STATIONS UP NEAR THE POLE – WILL YOU TRY TO HEAD TOWARDS THOSE IF YOU GET INTO TROUBLE? Barneo's Russian ice camp is my ticket out. It provides a runway and support facilities for scientific research and a base camp for North Pole expeditions – or clandestine Russian military operations depending on your politics. The bearded Russians that call Barneo home pass the days drinking, puking and getting totally wiped. From the Pole it's an hour's heli flight to Barneo and I'll strip the place of food like a swarm of locusts and drink brain-shattering cups of vodka.

WILL YOU ENJOY OR ENDURE? Enjoy! This idea that you resign from life and settle down depresses the absolute shit out of me. There's a sweet spot I'm in where I can really celebrate life. It's the opposite of complacency and over-programmed routine. The experience gives my life purpose and direction that is its own reward and if it provokes thought and challenges accepted norms then the good is enough to suffer the bad.

WHY NOT THE SOUTH POLE? The idea of man hauling a sled over a featureless landscape for 100 days bores the marrow right out of my bones. That said, I think kiting it would be cool. But right now this is all that occupies my horizon.

THERE SEEMS TO BE MORE POLAR EXPLORERS THAN THERE ARE GOOD BARISTAS IN MELBOURNE – WHAT'S THE ATTRACTION, WHY NOT CONQUER SOME UNTRACKED JUNGLE? I think challenge is one of the greatest motivators you can find and nothing challenges man more than the fear of death. I like maximum variety and the pucker factor. I need to be afraid. I need to be intimidated. Nobody gives their best effort if they're not asked for it, and my grave will have to wait a long time before it claims me.

SO, LET'S SAY YOU MAKE IT, WHAT THEN? I've haven't told anybody this but I'm going to be a fashion model. I'll come back looking like a well-carved chess piece and if I can walk to the North Pole I think I can walk down a catwalk. Why not...why the hell not?

Follow in Tom's sled tracks at onemanepic.com.