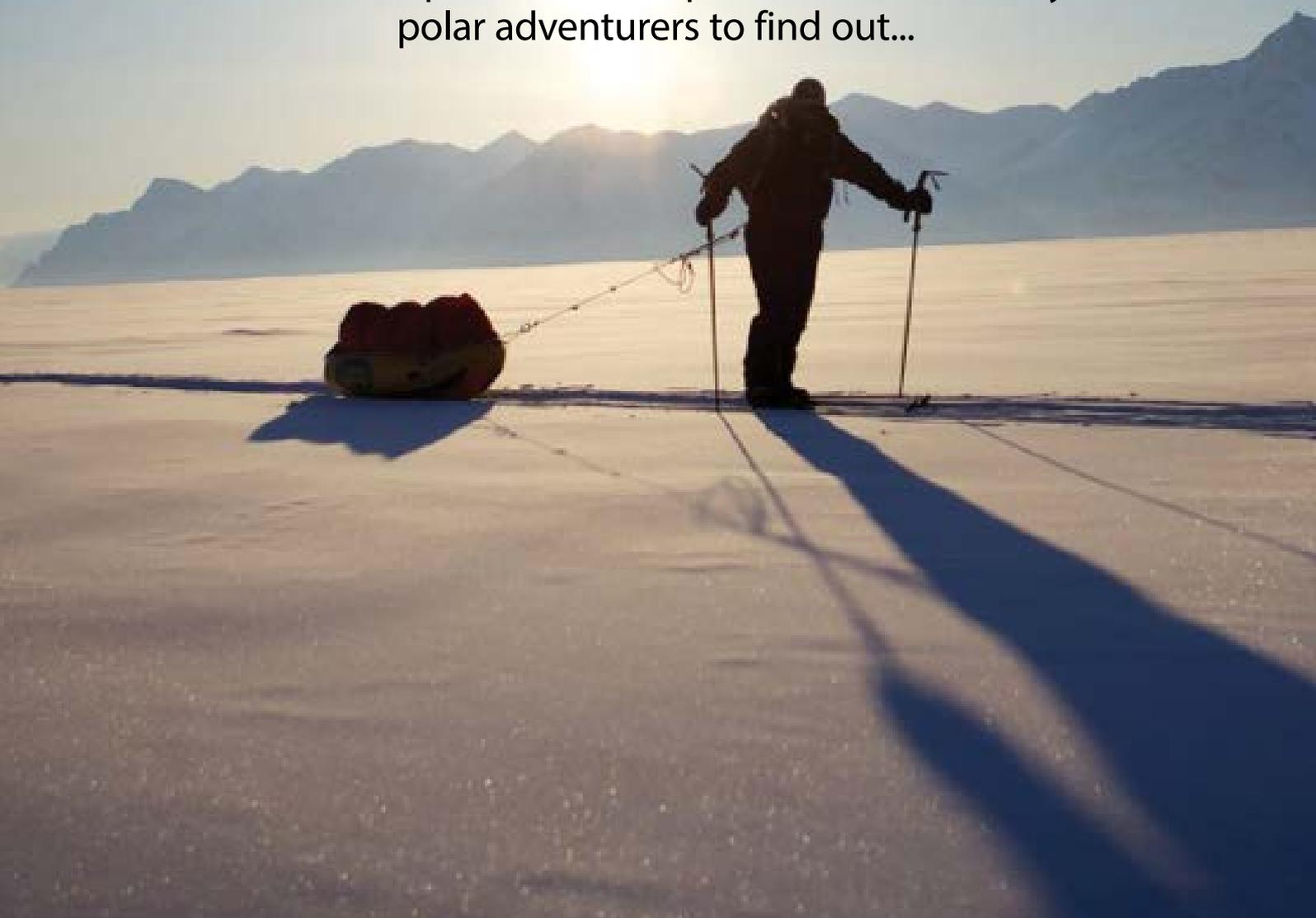


# MAGNETIC POLES

Why do the polar regions still exert such a strong pull on adventurers a century after the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration? We speak to some of today's polar adventurers to find out...





This page: Richard Parks in training for his Project X Antarctic challenges



**E**xploring the vast, pristine wildernesses at the ends of our planet has come a long way since The Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, thanks to advances in transport, communications, clothing and equipment. Travelling to Antarctica and the Arctic is no longer just for the likes of Amundsen, Franklin, Scott, Shackleton, Mawson Nansen and Nordenskjöld; men on daring, dangerous and yet pioneering expeditions.

These days visiting the frozen continents can be done in relative comfort and safety in two weeks, rather than the two years Ernest Shackleton spent there, after his ship *Endurance* was trapped in the ice during his infamous expedition. But this doesn't mean the end of ground-breaking expeditions. The endurance of body and mind pushed to its limits and the complete self-reliance required when traversing the polar desert with no back-up is still a challenge for its explorers. This much we discovered as we talked to some of today's leading polar adventurers to understand the attraction of the most brutal and isolated environments on earth.

The sky is the limit for anyone with a trip to the poles as their dream goal. If the permits can be secured, logistics sought, there is a commitment to planning and preparation and the funds are available, then within the bounds of human capability, theoretically anything can be done. But what draws people to these wildernesses anyhow?

Sir Ranulph Fiennes is the first person to have reach both poles, (as well as achieve the world record for unsupported northerly polar travel in 1990, and a world first in 1992/1993 by completing

Sir Ranulph points out that there is also a separation between people doing expeditions 'per se' and people who are genuinely happy calling themselves tourists, who are on holiday with a specialist travel company to get to the North or South Pole by whatever means. "You can have a very enjoyable holiday to the poles, just by seeing the coastline," says Sir Ranulph. "If you leave the coastline where there are black rocks visible, it is all white, and inland it can be day after day of nothing but snow – which really isn't worth the expensive holiday. What you really need to see is the coast and you can get there by ship. Then you can choose to go climbing or trekking on cross-country skis to Mount Vinson for example, which is a nice journey."

### POLAR TOURISM

Next February Ryan Waters and Eric Larsen will begin traversing the Arctic Ocean from Northern Ellesmere Island to the Geographic North Pole, unsupported, with no resupplies, in what's been dubbed 'the most difficult expedition on earth' (travelling by skis, snowshoes, and at times, swimming through the semi-frozen water, team members will pull nearly 350 pounds of food and gear in lightweight Kevlar sleds that can be 'rafted' together for open water crossings). Ryan agrees that the growth in opportunities for tourists is a good thing; "from an adventure standpoint, people see that trying to reach one or both of the poles as a really amazing opportunity to visit an extremely unique place and there are several ways to do it; from flying in and landing near a pole, to skiing the last degree, to attempting a full expedition, so there are options out

"There is far greater variety in polar adventure today than there has ever been before. A 'holiday' in Antarctica comes with a pricetag but *is* now an option; while the scope for more traditional polar expeditions remains," **Ben Saunders**

the first unsupported crossing of the Antarctic Continent, the longest unsupported polar journey in history) and is described by The Guinness Book of Records as "the world's greatest living explorer." He has also summited Everest and compares the 'honeypot' attractions of the world's highest mountain, to the lure of the poles; "In the 1920's, Everest still remained to be climbed by humans, so people couldn't go there as tourists. But eventually that world record was dealt with and from that moment on, people in increasing numbers would follow suit and do it. It's like Piccadilly Circus and that's good; I'm glad that it is, and lots of people will enjoy it, the same way they can enjoy places like Kilimanjaro. It's a positive thing."

But he does see the days of ground-breaking polar expeditions as largely over, with the 'firsts' that are had as mostly gimmicks; "There are no longer any of that type of geographical challenge or record to be broken for the first time, because since 1909, when Robert Peary claimed to have reached the North Pole, all that's left is repeats performances. So after that the records were reaching it as a group, then solo, then who would be the first to reach it from the North American side as a group, and then solo – those are genuine first records and the same would be true on the Siberian side. And then you can have it unsupported by aircraft, for example; that would be a genuine record. After that any 'firsts' would be the oldest, the youngest and so on. But it does get a bit gimmicky when you talk about, for example, the first person on a pushbike, or camel."

there for all types of tourists to adventurers", and this increasing interest in visiting the poles "has probably been stimulated by a growing concern with climate change and how that is changing these places."

British adventurer Ben Saunders agrees that the Arctic and particularly the Antarctic are becoming increasingly accessible, with facilities popping up to cater for a growing range of needs. "There is far greater variety in polar adventure today than there has ever been before. A holiday in Antarctica comes with a pricetag but is now an option; whilst the scope for more traditional polar expeditions remains for those who seek them." Ben is one of only three in history to ski solo to the North Pole (and the youngest to do so by more than ten years), and also holds the record for the longest solo Arctic journey by a Briton. He is currently out on an expedition to Antarctica to complete Scott's 1,800-mile return journey to the South Pole on foot. He says that whilst "more and more people are able to enjoy the Arctic and Antarctic, it's still a relatively tiny number. What's really changing is the extent to which people can experience the polar regions without leaving their home through the blogs, images and now video available online."

Rab-sponsored athlete Richard Parks also says polar travel is not yet 'like Everest'. This December, he is embarking on a solo, unsupported expedition to the South Pole, in an attempt to beat the speed record currently held by Christian Eide of just over 24 days. "The amount of people who have skied from a coast to the pole is very low and those who have skied it solo is still

in the twenties. When you put that into perspective of the Everest summit... the amount of people who have skied solo, it's a very small list of people who have the inclination, that have been lucky enough to do that."

But Ryan Waters says this change in accessibility of polar travel can be compared to the changes that have developed in the adventure travel industry as a whole, and specifically to mountaineering: "Just two decades ago, going to climb in the Himalayas was limited to very experienced climbers and it required a whole lot of knowledge and planning to prepare for the trips. As the guiding industry has grown, it has opened up trekking and climbing in the high mountains to a much wider population of the public. This has slowly happened to some extent in the polar world too, as more options have been developed for people with novice skills to join a guided expedition to these places. My own mountain guiding company has even expanded to offer trips to the poles and Greenland because we see the growing demand, and want to be the option for adventurers to do both climbing and polar ski expeditions."

**RISING COSTS**

Ed Parker is the co-founder of Walking With The Wounded and the mastermind behind the charity's high-profile expeditions. His latest project is organising three teams of wounded servicemen and women to race across 3° to the Geographic South Pole. Ed agrees that whilst "there are very few 'firsts' left, many people are still drawn to the top and bottom of the world

has been a bit of an explosion. There's Arctic Ultra marathons to the North and South Poles, there's a race in Greenland this year, the Greenland Iceman – these events offer entry into polar travel as usually they have an element of training beforehand so you can pick up the skills very quickly."

Felicity says that whilst most of the 'firsts' have been done, there are still lots of really exciting expeditions out there to do. "A lot of people are very fond of saying there is nothing left to discover and yet, pull out a map of Antarctica and there are vast areas that no-one's ever been to or maybe someone went there surveying in the 60's and have never been back there since. People say the spirit of adventure is gone, but, no, just because you've got satellite phones and GPS doesn't mean we've lost that sense of adventure, it just means we can push it harder and do it better than we ever did before."

Ed Parker points out that technology actually makes travel more intrepid; "As clothing, equipment and communications gets more and more efficient, it allows a far greater element of risk to be taken. It is so difficult to compare what we all do today with the past. The early explorers were stepping into the unknown, with no back-up, and limited experience to draw on. There was no evacuation plan, no HQ team watching over you. Clothing is the obvious comparison people make, but to me it is the difference in nutrition that makes the biggest difference for us today. We know we are getting the right balanced diet, whereas many of those a century ago suffered from scurvy, or maybe even died from it."

"People say the spirit of adventure is gone, but just because you've got satellite phones and GPS doesn't mean we've lost that sense of adventure, it just means we can push it harder and do it better than we ever did before." **Felicity Aston**

to challenge themselves against nature and to experience the sheer scale and beauty of the places." But he says that "while modern technology makes both poles more accessible, the logistical costs are getting higher and higher, making it harder to take the first step.

Felicity Aston is the first woman to ski across the Antarctica alone. (she also led the Commonwealth Women's Antarctic Expedition involving a team of eight novices skiing to the South Pole, led the first British women's expedition to cross Greenland, a 700km winter crossing of Lake Baikal and an expedition to trace the footsteps of Victorian explorer Kate Marsden in Yakutsk and North-East Siberia). She is about to set off on 'The Pole of Cold Expedition' to chase the onset of winter across Europe and Siberia as far as the 'Pole of Cold', the coldest place in the world outside of Antarctica. She suggests that if you want to make our first steps into polar travel then "do your own research and don't be afraid of doing your own thing".

"There are two routes to go," she says. "You start small and build up your own skill base or you join an organisation or expedition and have someone else do that for you. One of my first expeditions was an organised race to the Magnetic North Pole – it was an endurance race, so that taught me a lot of the skills about going fast and lightweight and travel in the polar regions, but I had a safety network behind me. The next expedition I went on I organised completely myself because I had that experience behind me to back me up. There are lots of endurance events now; there

**MIND OVER MATTER**

Ben Saunders adds that the reasons for polar travel have changed since the Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration. "Originally the purpose was to reach, explore and map the North and South Pole and the vast Arctic and Antarctic continents. As we have become increasingly familiar with the polar regions, there is less of a need for 'exploration' in the traditional sense, and it's now more about people's own personal exploration – physical, human or technological."

For polar photographer and Montane-sponsored athlete, Martin Hartley, it's the personal exploration side that attracts him; "The motivation is to get as far away from human habitation as possible and to be as remote as possible and as far from rescue as possible, because when you're in that environment all sorts of scenarios open up, it's a really exciting place to be when a big hand can't reach out to grab you. It's a completely unique experience, a feeling of adventure which is a bit of a drug that calls you back again and again. There's no environment like it."

Richard Parks is also attracted by the history of travelling to the poles; "I find it incredible having learned of the stories of the incredible people who pioneered and opened up the continent, and relatively recently – just over a hundred years ago. I find the history of the continent really captivating and I feel really privileged to continue to have the opportunity to perform there. It's not for everyone; it's really hard to articulate it, it's



This page: Ben Saunders in training for his Scott Expedition





Felicity Aston enjoying a perfect polar evening



Felicity Aston 'tweeting' on an Iridium phone

one of the most beautiful and hostile places on the planet and being self-sufficient within that is not only a challenge but a privilege, and despite the solitude and the vastness of it, there are a lot of incredible people who operate down there, whether it be scientists or logistics – people who seem to congregate at the bottom of the world.”

“For a long time [polar travel] has been seen as the exclusive area of super human,” says Felicity Aston, “but over the last few years what’s come to the scene is that it’s more to do with what’s in your head rather than the amount of muscle you have on your body. As with all endurance sports, so much of it is mental, not just physical, and from a woman’s perspective there are women in the polar

climate change, before taking on a world record attempt to become the youngest male ever to ski unsupported to the South Pole. He describes the challenges he needs to prepare for; “The isolation, the pain, the cold, the general discomfort, potential conflicts with your teammate, knowing that you’re being watched all the time, the repetition, lack of scale, lack of ability to tell scale because everything’s flat when you get onto the plateau – there’s lots of different things that need to be addressed. You can’t just show up, There needs to be a responsible and balanced approach to mental training as well. For me, I need to have strategies for dealing with different things, breaking down distances and avoiding a ‘countdown’ mentality.”

**DO IT YOURSELF**

So how would you go about dipping your toe into polar exploration without joining a full-blown expedition? “There are lots of really accessible places,” says Felicity Aston. “The big thing is that if you want to go to the South Pole, don’t go straight out there as it’s very expensive and, if you don’t like it, you’re not experienced enough or you have a terrible time, it’s a lot of money down the drain. So it’s worth investing going on an adventure somewhere like Iceland for example. The glaciers up there are accessible and very polar, but the weather is pretty serious. Or there’s Greenland. And you can have a real polar experience in Norway – so go and pick up some skills and see what you think. It’s perfectly fine to get up there and be in -27 and think ‘this is miserable – I don’t like this!’ It’s a lot better to be like that after a week in Norway that’s set you back

“If you’ve got the courage to really listen and to look inside yourself it’s a real privilege to have that time, because in today’s society we’re bombarded with so much information every day that we just don’t get the opportunity” **Richard Parks**

regions doing incredible stuff and – as is the case with all endurance sports – the gender gap is closing. Now we’ve got better nutrition, better understanding of how to prepare ourselves physically and mentally and we can easily push this and move things on. There are still people that go out on polar expeditions today pouring olive oil on their porridge and eating lard, and you don’t have to do that anymore – we’ve got modern nutrition and modern understanding of what exactly it is we need to help us do great things.”

Referring to his own Antarctic expedition, Richard Parks agrees that it’s really more of a mental game; “The nature of performing in Antarctica is that you do spend a lot of time in your own mind, a lot of time being introspective because of the nature of the environment and the nature of how simple and methodical your days are. So it is a tough environment to work in and not for everyone, but I personally think it’s a real privilege to not only be in the continent – because Antarctica is somewhere that’s really touched me – but, if you’ve got the courage to really listen and to look inside yourself, it’s a real privilege to have that time, because in today’s society were bombarded with so much information every day that we just don’t get the opportunity.”

Teenage polar explorer and climate change campaigner Parker Liautaud is taking on his biggest adventure yet when he sets off on a 397-mile trek from the coast of Antarctica to the Geographical South Pole. The 19-year-old will team up with global risk adviser Willis to collect snow samples which will contribute to studies on

£1000 rather than a couple of days in Antarctica that’s set you back £100,000”. But she adds; “I find it so sad after talks that there will be at least one person saying they’ve always wanted to do something like this and I feel really frustrated as there is nothing stopping them – it’s just making a start, saying ‘right, this is it, this is what I’m doing’... and start. Once you’ve told everyone you’re going to do it, things work out – it’s just that initial decision that’s really tough.” **T&M**



Parker Liautaud in action (main image and above, inset)



**MORE INFO**

Thanks to everyone who agreed to be interviewed for this article. You can find out more about these amazing people and their adventures at their websites below:

- Felicity Aston** - [www.felicityaston.co.uk](http://www.felicityaston.co.uk)
- Sir Ranulph Fiennes** - [www.ranulphfiennes.co.uk](http://www.ranulphfiennes.co.uk)
- Parker Liautaud** - [www.willisresilience.com](http://www.willisresilience.com)
- Ed Parker** - [www.walkingwiththewounded.org.uk](http://www.walkingwiththewounded.org.uk)
- Martin Hartley** - [www.martinhartley.com](http://www.martinhartley.com)
- Richard Parks** - [www.richardparks.co.uk](http://www.richardparks.co.uk)
- Ben Saunders** - [www.bensaunders.com](http://www.bensaunders.com)
- Ryan Waters** - [www.ryanwaters.net](http://www.ryanwaters.net)