

Northern EXPOSURE

For her next big challenge after Everest, **Bonita Norris** chose to ski to the North Pole. Here's how she got on...

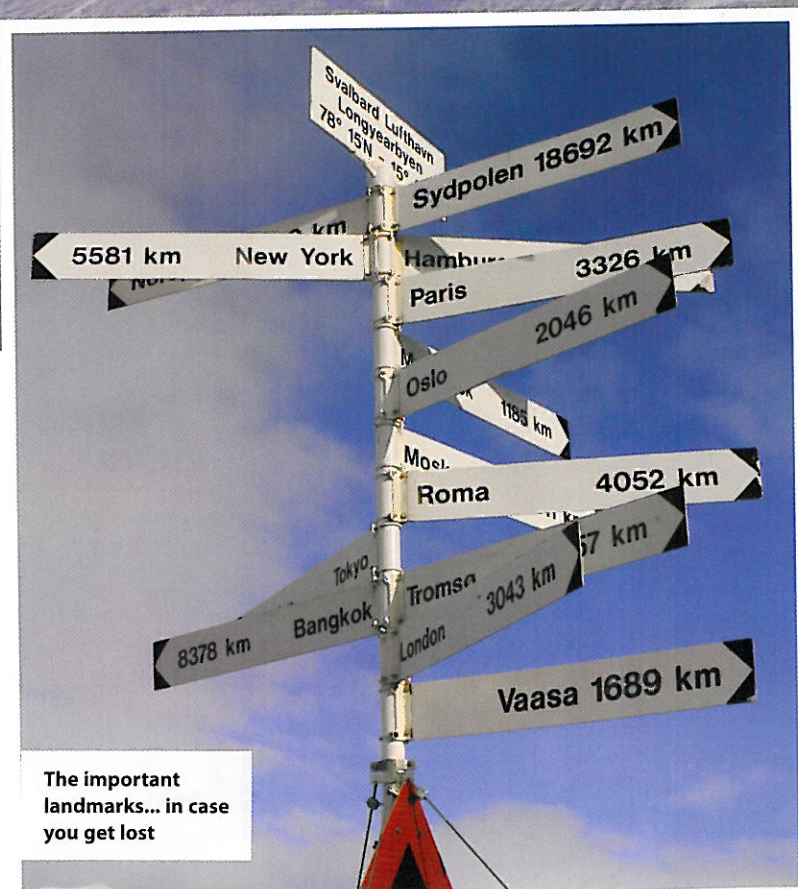


MEET THE AUTHOR...

Bonita Norris has already climbed two 8,000m peaks – Manaslu and Everest – and will be trying for a third in the next few months. While not on expedition, she has a busy lecture schedule.



"In every bar, every guest house and in every aisle of the co-op is someone involved with, or embarking on, a polar trip of some sort..."



The important landmarks... in case you get lost

If there's a moment from my recent North Pole expedition that sticks in my mind it's when I stepped off the Oslo flight to Longyearbyen at 78° North. I gulped down the fresh air as we were herded onto the tarmac, and it was that first breath that sent a shiver of fear down my spine.

Like swallowing a thousand knives, the bitter air at minus 23°C was in complete contrast to that in the warm aircraft, and I choked at the shock. Within seconds of stepping off the plane I felt I was in the coldest environment I had been in my life. Even Everest didn't seem to compare.

My mind reeling, all I can remember thinking was 'what on earth am I doing here?' The thought of heading even further north onto the barren sea ice seemed ridiculous, impossible even. But, it is

testament to the adaptability of the human body that within a day my team of intrepid skiers and I were walking around town in 'little more' than thermals and Karrimor windproofs. We even began taking our gloves off! And yes, Everest reaches far lower temperatures, but when heading into the death zone you are often more prepared for the cold than when stepping off a plane.

THE LAST DEGREE

78° North is an odd place; the sun doesn't set until 2am and even then it leaves behind a scar of orange on the horizon. There are no stars. The community is even odder; it's expedition season and so in every bar, every guest house and lingering in every aisle of the co-op is someone involved with, or embarking

Team mates Alan and Luca survey sea ice from the Russian chopper



on, a polar trip of some sort. Gossip is rife, especially when a place like Longyearbyen becomes host to Prince Harry, who's here supporting the Walking For The Wounded expedition, and the world's media. I even bumped into a Chinese chap in the equipment store who stood on the summit of Everest the same day as me. We had never met but had stood on top of the world almost together, and now again next to the jet boilers and Sparks.

I was a member of a team lead by Alan Chambers MBE. Chambers was the first Briton to reach the North Pole unsupported from Ward Hunt Island in 2000 and his MBE is in honour of that expedition. Our trip was organised through an operator called Charity Challenge, who also organised the Comic Relief celebrity Kilimanjaro expedition in 2009, and is sponsored by VocaLink.

Our team was an eclectic mix, all wide-eyed at the prospect of reaching the top of the world. We waited with baited breath for the ice and weather to settle so that a camp and runway could be established at 89°N. After a week of organising team kit, packing and re-packing sledges and tent drills the call finally came: 'be at the airport tomorrow morning'. Not exactly a scheduled flight, but credit to the Russians – they get things done.

I wish I could say that that flight went smoothly, but it didn't. The Russian Antonov plane crammed full of sledges and people was moving steadily towards the ice runway when just before the last ground checks were made the ice began to move and a 3m wide crack in the runway appeared, exposing the black depths of the Arctic Ocean beneath it.

The drama hit the world's press and within hours the web was full of stories of the plane landing and nearly crashing through the ice. The flight onto the ice is the most dangerous part of the expedition and the media hype only served to make us even more nervous.

STUCK ON ICE

We returned empty handed to Longyearbyen. Harry remained stuck out on the sea ice. Perhaps this was a sign of things to come; many scientists believe that in the near future

Bonita and her team taking the last step onto the top of the world

MORE INFO:

Follow Bonita's updates at:
www.twitter.com/bonitanorris

Charity Challenge:
www.charitychallenge.com

VocaLink:
www.vocalink.com



karrimor
www.karrimor.com

"Karrimor is synonymous with the Great British outdoors- ever since I first ventured into the hills of North Wales I have seen how trusted Karrimor is as a brand by both hill walkers and mountaineers alike. To be invited to become a brand ambassador for such an iconic brand is a dream come true"

Bonita Norris
Youngest British female to summit Mt Everest

Bonita

field & trek

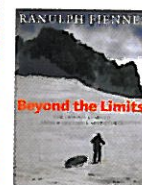
www.fieldandtrek.com

NORTH POLE **BONITA NORRIS**

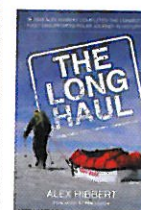
Flights were suspended after a 3m wide crack opened up on the runway at Camp Barneo



BOOKS TO INSPIRE



■ **Beyond the Limits**, by Sir Ranulph Fiennes
published by Little Brown.



■ **The Long Haul**, by Alex Hibbert
published by Tricorn Books

ski expeditions such as ours simply won't be able to take place as the ice is now melting at such a rapid rate.

A week later we finally landed safely at our start point on the floating sea ice at 89° North. The Russian chopper lifted off in a whirlwind of white and then, quite suddenly, we were left to survive in a eerily silent landscape like nothing that I had ever experienced before.

The landscape in all directions appeared a never ending jumble of ice. Not flat ice, but undulating and whipped into peaks like meringue, then shattered into blocks like cubes of sugar, scarred with black streaks where the freezing ocean had broken through. Expanses the size of football fields where nothing lived or breathed – just the spindrift of snow blowing over the groaning mass to give some semblance of life to the dead environment. The huge ice formations took the shape of weird and wonderful creations – polar bears and space ships, lions and frogs.

To have compared us to breadcrumbs on a white tablecloth in this space would have been over-exaggerating our presence many times over. We weren't even a speck on the Arctic Sea ice as it stretched from Russia to Canada. Experiencing this utter wilderness was completely different to the thrill of seeing the jagged peaks of a mountain range or the romanticism of the crashing ocean on a beach. It is total serenity, a vacuum for emotion – it is, simply, peace.

STARTING OUT

As we kicked on our skis for the first time and set off the excitement amongst us was palpable. All the training, all the fundraising and worry was over – now it was time to actually 'do'.

My weight on my toe, I pushed down into my ski and began to glide, my back foot taking the weight then sliding forward and my weight being transferred back again. It's a beautiful technique if you can get it right – but I was pretty diabolical to start with!

As soon as we began moving the most horrendous ear-splitting screech broke the silence. As the ice took the pressure of our weight and sledges it began squealing in protest. The echoing from below was a threatening sound, as if the ice was telling us we shouldn't be there.

Regardless of whether I was scared of the sounds emanating from the ice below, the expedition had begun and there was now no turning back. Within hours of skiing we were setting up camp. The sun was skirting around us – never rising or falling, just encircling us – and offered little warmth as we struggled over the endless white.

That first night must have been one of the coldest of my life. My sleeping bag simply wasn't up to the job of keeping me warm. I didn't freeze, but I didn't stop shivering either. With my bobble hat pulled down tightly over my eyes and cuddling a hot water bottle, I must have managed a few hours at least. 'Man-up', I can

BONITA NORRIS NORTH POLE

"The cold really does sap the life out of you, and it's worse at night when trying to sleep..."

remember telling myself, though not really taking on the advice.

DAILY ROUTINE

The routine of the day was always the same; breakfast, pack, tents down, ski, snack breaks, tents, food and then sleep. It can get monotonous. We were efficient – a 10-day expedition was quickly reduced to four days as we skied for long hours, took few breaks and kept a strong pace.

I had thought that the serenity of the landscape around us and the long hours spent skiing in silence would be a perfect opportunity to have clarity of thought and process any of my worries and stresses from home. Instead, I would go into a trance for hours and think about the most ridiculous and pointless things. Absolutely nothing of any value was processed in my brain during the expedition – perhaps the vivid and colourful thoughts were a way of the brain helping the body out, an endless stream of nothingness to help numb the pain of living in -30°.

The cold really does sap the life out of you. It is worse at night when trying to sleep – I would have a boiling hot water bottle scalding my tummy in an effort to keep warm, whilst my back and arms were constantly goose pimpled. Sleep would finally end the discomfort, only for me to wake suddenly a few hours later in the broad daylight wondering what on earth the time was!

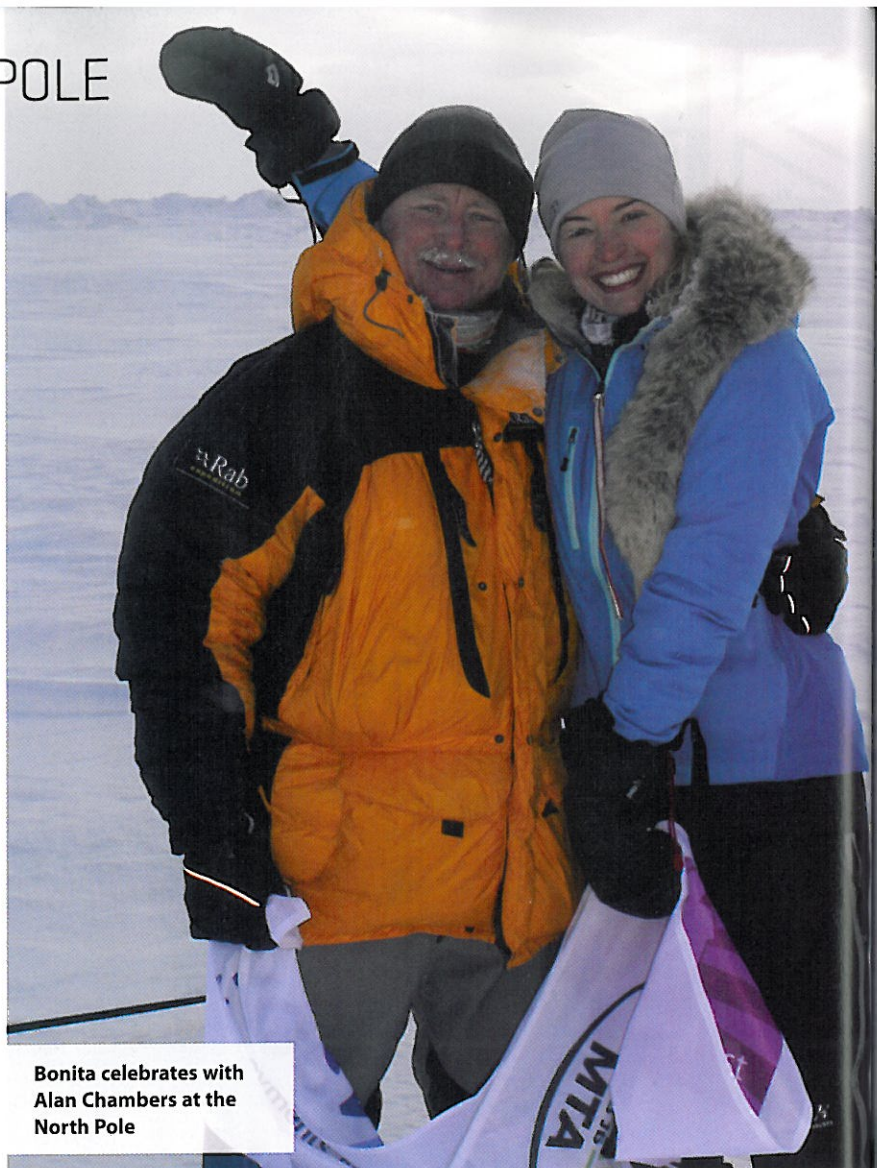
Despite the general discomfort, the ice and weather had been good to us. By the final day it felt like we were home and dry, but like heading towards the summit of a mountain, I kept telling myself 'it ain't over 'til it's over' – anything could happen right up to 90°N, and in fact, it did.

FROZEN LEAD

At one point crossing a frozen over lead (channel of open water) a sickening crunch split the graceful polar silence. We froze in fear but the ice had begun to move. Water suddenly appeared, bubbling menacingly around one of my team mate's skis. He was halfway across the lead and the solid ice he has stepped onto was now morphing before our eyes into liquid.

We retreated as fast as we could on skis with heavy sledges. Looking back to where we had tried to cross the landscape had completely changed. This happened twice that last day to the Pole – we really were 'on thin ice' as we covered those last few miles. The spring melt was on its way and where we stood would soon be ocean. It was time to reach the Pole and get out of there!

The moment finally came after a long day. Our team lined up on the crest of a small ridge and surveyed the flat plain of ice beyond us. I imagined all the lines of latitude gathering in this small area – this was the point



Bonita celebrates with Alan Chambers at the North Pole



where all time zones met, where you can 'walk around the world' in a matter of seconds and where for a moment or two you can stand with the entire planet beneath your feet. But first we had to find our goal of exactly 90° North.

The sea ice was moving fast and so we seemed to skirt on the edge for some minutes. Finally Alan got the exact reading on his GPS – this was it! We hugged, we cheered and I think some even got teary-eyed. A toast was made and as the shot of Cognac hit the back of my throat it burnt like fire – the liquor had almost congealed to syrup in the cold.

The night was spent drinking hot chocolate and whiskey and calling friends and loved ones on a satellite phone. One of our team mates nearly set his sleeping bag on fire in the excitement and could have died in an inferno, which would have been quite ironic considering where we were.

I managed to wish my dad and stepmother good luck as they went into labour with my seventh and hopefully final sibling! Olivia Norris arrived a few days later. As the oldest of eight I can't help imagining what each of my brothers and sisters will grow up and challenge themselves to do in their own lives. Every place I have visited – from the summits of 8,000m peaks to 90° North I have taken them with me in some way. Their names are etched in ice and rock in some of the most far flung places on Earth.

Finally, the moment came the next morning as we stood in silence scanning the horizon. A speck appeared in the distance, almost a trick of the light. Then the most beautiful sound; the beating rotors of the Russian chopper growing louder and louder. The experience was over nearly as fast as it had begun. After a quick heli ride to the Russian base Barneo, we jumped on a flight off the ice runway back to Longyearbyen and were back in the UK within days.

HOME COMFORTS

Back at warmer longitudes the lush green of the UK is almost an exotic place in contrast to the white and grey of the Arctic Circle. As I drove home from Heathrow I realised I hadn't seen as much as a blade of grass or a leaf in three weeks!

Now, I am missing being on expedition already. These environments really are accessible if you can save hard, train hard and are willing to suffer a little. The things you see you will never forget – the sun surrounded by a halo of light, the infinite expanse of white and blue and the transformation in yourself as you adapt to life at -30. Finally, I think expeditions to the mountains and to far flung places only make you appreciate what you have at home already – family, friends and the perfectly mild weather.

So now it's time to grab the swimsuit and head to the beach, as anything above -5C feels positively balmy!T&M

Bonita's expedition raised over £10k for the Forces Children's Trust. To donate, go to www.vocalink.com

NEED TO KNOW: NORTH POLE

Essential info for getting there...



Bonita celebrates reaching the Pole

THE ARCTIC SEA ICE:

It's only possible to ski to the North Pole at certain times of the year. During the winter the sun sets completely meaning that the Arctic Ocean freezes. From the moment the sun rises again in Spring the 'big melt' begins and it is a race to reach the Pole before the ice turns to ocean once more.

THE GUIDE:

Alan Chambers MBE beat Sir Ranulph Fiennes to claim the first full length British North Pole expedition from Ward Hunt Island off of Northern Canada in 2000. Chambers spent 70 days on the ice with his team mate Charlie Paton and between them they lost over 5 stone. To date only a handful of people have managed what is arguably 'the hardest journey on Earth'.

THE LAST DEGREE:

Bonita's expedition was organised by Charity Challenge (charitychallenge.com). The trip is 2-3 weeks long during Spring and the aim is to ski 60 nautical miles to the North Pole, which takes on average 8 days. Teams are fully self sufficient-carrying their own supplies and tents with no outside support. An expedition such as this one is a true test of team work and being able to handle pressure. There is no escaping the freezing temperatures or physical hardness of doing simple tasks, thus potential members should begin their training well in advance of the departure date.

DRIFT:

In the past, last degree teams have had to deal with incredible amounts of negative drift which in some cases has meant that expeditions have had to be abandoned. The ice is floating on water and so it is not uncommon for teams to go to sleep in one spot and wake up five kilometres further away or (if you are very lucky) towards the Pole. Alan Chambers has experienced negative drift of over 20km in one night before, which must be quite demoralising!

NAVIGATION:

Navigating at the North Pole is pretty straightforward – take a bearing, find a landmark such as a prominent lump of ice and head towards it. GPS' are then used the rest of the time to make sure teams stay on track.

FACT 1:

There is only one sunrise and one sunset a year at the North Pole.

FACT 2:

Don't confuse the moving sea ice of the North Pole with the land mass of the South Pole. The open water, negative drift and pressure ridges found in the North are not a problem in the South. However, the south is arguably colder and windier than its counterpart.