

Greenland Icecap Crossing 2005 – Expedition Diary

Introduction

In May 2005 I completed a long-standing dream – to ski across the Greenland icecap. Here are some extracts from my expedition diary.

Our international team consisted of:

- Einar Torfi Finnsson (lead guide)
- Fridjon (Freon) Thorleifsson (assistant guide)
- Michael Gatehouse, (Australia)
- David Sinclair (Australia)
- John Clark (New Zealand)
- Sumiyo Tsuzuki (Japan)
- Arnold Witzig (Switzerland/Canada)
- Louise Scott (Scotland)



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Day 1 - 9th May

After two comfortable nights at The Red House in Tasiilaq we were transferred to the ice cap to begin our journey.

As we are a party of eight, the helicopter made two journeys transporting four people per trip along with all of our equipment and supplies.

I was in the first group transported to the Hahn glacier, arriving at 1535 hours. We were dropped at an altitude of 923m in beautiful clear conditions. It was an amazing feeling to finally arrive – I haven't just waited a couple of days to get here, I've waited for years!



Once we were all on the glacier along with our supplies for the journey, we began to pack-up our pulkas (pulka is another word for sled). We would haul our own pulka containing our kit and equipment, plus a share of the central supplies, such as food bags, tent, shovels, stoves, kettles.

We have 32 individual food bags – enough for 28 travelling days and four storm days. The food bags were split between seven of us with the fuel transported in the eighth pulka. After packing up our pulkas we put on our skis and set off with Einar expertly navigating through the crevasse fields and keeping us free from any dangers. We skied for a couple of hours to our first camp at an altitude of 1,114m.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	5.36 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	5.36 KM
Day time temperature	-1C
Night time temperature	not known
Altitude	1,114 M

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Day 2 - 10th May

Our first day went well. When we set off we could not see the mountains but the weather soon cleared and we enjoyed comfortable conditions of -6 to -11 . In another couple of days we will be too far into the ice cap to see the mountains on the horizon, that is until we are greeted with the sight of mountains on the west coast.



We travelled 14.5km in five and a half hours and tonight we're camping at an altitude of 1,232m. The wind is beginning to pick up but the sky is clearer than it was this morning.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	14.5 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	19.86 KM
Day time temperature	-6 C
Night time temperature	-11 C
Altitude	1,232 M

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Day 3 - 11th May

I had a very unsettled night's sleep due to the sound of the strong wind, which didn't seem to let up all night (I'm sure it's a sound I'll be used to by the end of the trip). Fortunately the weather sounded worse than it actually was and we put in a good six hours of skiing. Throughout the day the winds were moderate and the sky was a little cloudy, temperatures fluctuated from –6 this morning to –4.5 at the end of the day.

Our routine generally consists of four x 1.5 hour sessions. In between each session we snack on chocolate bars and biscuits, and drink hot tea or energy juice (Gatorade). We drink approximately two litres of fluid during the hours we are trekking. Regardless of the weather conditions, sled hauling is hot work and you need to keep your body well hydrated. Lunch consists of dried fish with butter, savoury biscuits, cheese and salami; followed by a helping of sweet biscuits. As I gnaw my way through the dried fish I often think of my cats – Chester and Pigpen – wondering if it's a delicacy they would enjoy.



As we settle down for the night I can hear the soft sound of snow falling on the tent. It's a gentle, peaceful sound, if you edit out the sound of snoring coming from the other tent! We're camping at an altitude of 1,335m tonight.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	15.5 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	35.36 KM
Day time temperature	-5 C
Night time temperature	-4.5 C
Altitude	1,335 M

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Day 4 - 12th May

It has been snowing all night and this morning we set off in whiteout conditions. As the day wore on the sky gradually cleared and this evening we were treated to one of the most beautiful sunsets.

We're all pleased to have covered 18.1km today - the conditions were great as the snowfall has made the sastrugi (wierd and wonderful ice formations) less undulating and so easier to haul your pulka across. We are camping at an altitude of 1,425m but there is still plenty up-hill hauling to come.



Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	18.1 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	53.46 KM
Day time temperature	-4 C
Night time temperature	-5 C
Altitude	1,425 M

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Day 5 - 13th May

It was a warm day today, 4 degrees really is too hot to be sled hauling when there are only so many layers of clothes you can take off. The sun is relentless, making the snow soft and wet, increasing the difficulty of breaking trail. Unfortunately I forgot to cover all exposed flesh with my factor 45 sun block so I am now sporting the weirdest-looking sunburn. I have burnt hands, wrists (outside of left wrist and inside of right one) and right right side of my neck!



Today we had the unusual experience of seeing other people on the ice cap. Well, we didn't quite see them but we saw the helicopter come in and airlift them off the glacier. Sadly for them, their attempt to cross the ice cap has ended prematurely. We continue onwards confident that we will have better fortune.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	18.2 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	71.66 KM
Day time temperature	4 C
Night time temperature	3 C
Altitude	1,566 M

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Day 6 - 14th May

The going was tough today due to the warm weather and soft snow. Temperatures ranged from 2.5 to 4 degrees although it did not feel quite as intense as yesterday due to a reasonable amount of cloud cover.

There was no wind at the start of the day but it got pretty strong from mid-morning for the rest of the day. My face now feels completely weather beaten (and resembles a swollen tomato) after exposure to the intense sunshine and strong winds.



However, we've gained another 150m in altitude and in another few days we will reach the summit and the steep hauling will be behind us.

I'm pleased to note that my feet are blister-free, just a couple of hot spots but nothing to cause me any concern or discomfort. I've had some rubbing on my shins but as soon as it started I applied some tape and the discomfort subsided. I have no idea how John continues to ski for hours on end with blisters on his heels that look like volcanic craters. His blisters emerged on the second or third day and show no signs of letting-up. He must have an incredibly high pain threshold, or maybe he's developing one out here.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	17.2 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	88.86 KM
Day time temperature	2.5 C
Night time temperature	-1 C
Altitude	1,717 M

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Day 7 - 15th May

Shortly after setting off this morning I began to feel fatigued. This surprised me as I was not particularly tired when I woke up – maybe I had not eaten enough breakfast. Anyway, tired or not, stopping is not an option. The next few hours involved an interesting internal dialogue full of positive encouragement and motivation, pushing myself on to the next break when I would drink and eat to hydrate and energise. After lunch I felt strong again and enjoyed the afternoon listening to Maroon 5 and Franz Ferdinand.



We had the unusual experience of seeing some wildlife on the ice cap today – two barnacle geese. They waited until we got close enough to identify them, then flew away, obviously not interested in spending any time with this group of travellers.

This evening we celebrated breaking through the 100km barrier - we have now travelled 107.06km.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	18.2 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	107.6 KM
Day time temperature	4 C
Night time temperature	0.5 C
Altitude	1,874 M

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Day 8 - 16th May

A good day's work today: we covered 18.7 km and are camping at an altitude of 1,983m. Once we get to 2,100m the ascent should flatten out making the last 400m marginally less arduous. Temperatures continue to be unusually and uncomfortably warm ranging between -1 and 3 degrees.



Our daily routine looks something like this:

Wake up at 6am and begin melting snow for our breakfast and flasks for the day. Freon and Einar take care of all the snow melting and manage the stoves. We take 2½ to three hours to have breakfast and dismantle the camp. We set off for our first session of the day. At present we ski for 1½ hours then stop for a break. During the break we eat chocolate bars and drink tea or Gatorade. We then set off for the second 1½-hour session and when we stop we have lunch (as described on 11th May). After our third 1½-hour session we stop to drink more fluids and eat more chocolate, including chocolate Hobnobs and chocolate chip cookies. Finally, we ski for the fourth and (usually) our last 1½-hour session of the day. At the end we have a snack and a drink before starting to set up camp.

As we continue across the ice cap we will gradually increase the length of time that we are travelling. At the moment we are only just over a week into the journey and we are all still acclimatising to the routine and the environment.

David achieved a personal best today that really deserves noting – he ate 10 chocolate bars in one day!

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	18.7 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	125.76 KM
Day time temperature	2 C
Night time temperature	-1 C
Altitude	1,983 M

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Day 9 - 17th May

Today we increased our trekking time to 6.5 hours. We've also broken through the 2,000m mark and are camping tonight at 2,102m. The weather has been a little cloudy today with moderate winds and temperatures around -5.

I notice a change in the terrain. The sastrugi are much bigger and more frequent but we continue to make good progress. Tomorrow we will increase our hours again and hopefully notch up 25km.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	21.4 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	147.16 KM
Day time temperature	0 C
Night time temperature	-5 C
Altitude	2,102 M

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Day 10 - 18th May

I noticed a big change in the terrain today. It has really flattened out compared with the conditions of the last week. We cut or removed our ski skins this afternoon – a milestone in itself as this means our ascent is not as steep and soon we will reach the plateau. We didn't reach our goal of 25km but did achieve 22.9km and are camping at an altitude of 2,206m.



It felt much colder today although the temperature was only –6 this morning and the same this evening; the moderate amount of wind, and presumably the fact that we are closer to the summit, makes it feel much colder. Today there was not a cloud to be seen in the sky, a beautiful shade of blue – even lighter than usual. I never get tired to looking around and appreciating the amazing beauty of the ice cap.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	22.9 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	170.06 KM
Day time temperature	-2 C
Night time temperature	-6 C
Altitude	2,206 M

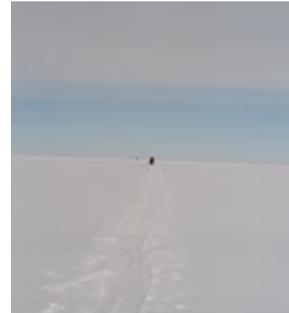
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Day 11 - 19th May

It is our 11th day on the ice cap. We have a snow bunting that visits us regularly for a snack. Michael has grown pretty partial to chocolate Hobnobs so it says a lot for his generosity when you see him sharing them with this pretty little bird.

We enjoyed wonderful conditions today. It was 'comfortably cold' (if there is such a thing) with temperatures ranging between -7 and -10 . We made good progress today and are excited at the prospect of reaching the summit of our crossing in the next day or two.

We have now covered 193km and are well into our daily routine.



Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	23.1 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	193.16 KM
Day time temperature	-7 C
Night time temperature	-10 C
Altitude	2,330 M

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Day 12 - 20th May

It's day 12 of the expedition and various parts of my anatomy are beginning to feel fatigue from the constant, daily exercise I've been putting them through. Lower back, thighs, knees and my calves all needed a nice warm bath to relax in tonight. Instead I followed my usual routine – I washed my feet in the snow, administered some massage oil to legs and upper arms and went to sleep with a large helping of positive energy. A hot meal and a good rest will set me up ready for a new day.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	22.3 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	215.46 KM
Day time temperature	-9.5 C
Night time temperature	-12 C
Altitude	2,427 M

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Day 13 - 21st May

Today we had some boot repairs to take care of before leaving camp. As Einar took on the role of cobbler to fix the boot in question, I benefited from some ski instruction from Michael. We already have a standing joke that I take two steps to everybody else's one and it's actually not far from the truth. So at 5' 2" it's important that I get maximum glide when I ski – a technique that I need to practice and, let's face it, what better opportunity than here on the ice cap.

We covered less mileage today due to our late start but nevertheless progress was good once we got going and tomorrow we will reach maximum altitude and then start to descend.

The weather conditions were amazing. It was –12 without any wind this morning. As we commenced our third session of the day (just after lunch) the sky disappeared, it started to snow and visibility diminished considerably. These conditions are incredible. I feel like I'm skiing in a tunnel when, in reality, there is a massive expanse of land in every direction. I loved travelling in this. For us, it's such a contrast to the clear conditions we have been fortunate to experience for most of the journey.



The temperature rose during the day to –6 and by evening it had dropped again to –11.5.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	20.9 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	236.36 KM
Day time temperature	-6 C
Night time temperature	-11.5 C
Altitude	2,484 M

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Day 14 - 22nd May

Celebrations all round! Today we covered 25.1km. We have also passed the summit and are camping tonight at 2,451m. We have now completely removed the skins from our skis and are covering more distance in the same time. This should increase as we continue across the plateau then into our descent.

I had an extra reason to celebrate today – I treated myself to a change of socks, and base layer thermals!

It was a glorious day today – blazing sunshine and a flat white horizon in every direction. There was very little wind, which was a blessing as the temperature started at –17, warmed up a little to –11 during the day and dropped again to a biting cold of –22 this evening.



Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	25.1 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	261.46 KM
Day time temperature	-11 C
Night time temperature	-22 C
Altitude	2,451 M

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Day 15 - 23rd May

It was cold during the night and we woke to a temperature of -20 . It quickly warmed up however and reached -4 during the day. The sky was clear with almost no clouds and light wind. We improved on our performance from yesterday, covering more distance. It was hot work, even at -4 . We continue to trek for four sessions but we have increased our time to $1\frac{3}{4}$ hours for each one. We are starting to drop altitude – tonight we are camping at 2,385m.

My sleeping routine is always interesting. To make sure that I have dry socks, gloves, neck gaiter and any other essentials for the morning, I always sleep with various items of clothing wrapped around my body in order to dry them



out. Generally I will have my gloves over my shoulders, my socks (two pairs) lagging my thighs (inside my thermals), my neck gaiter or balaclava around my middle, and finally the insoles from my inner boots tucked in around my hips. It may be marginally uncomfortable, and particularly unglamorous, but it beats putting your feet into frozen socks in the morning, or wearing damp gloves.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	26.4 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	287.86 KM
Day time temperature	-4 C
Night time temperature	-12 C
Altitude	2,385 M

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Day 16 - 24th May

Yet another superb day! The weather throughout the whole trip has been incredible and we continue to make fantastic progress.



We clocked up 27.7 km today in weather that was similar to yesterday only a little bit cooler. We woke to a chilly -21.5 degrees, but this rose to -5.5 during the day and this evening we are 'basking' in a modest -12 degrees while camping at an altitude of 2,293m. In addition, we have broken through the 300km barrier with an accumulative distance of 315km behind us. We anticipate reaching our next waypoint (the Dye 2 radar station) in a couple of days.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	27.7 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	315.56 KM
Day time temperature	-5 C
Night time temperature	-12 C
Altitude	2,293 M

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Day 17 - 25th May

Today we had the odd experience of 'bumping into' another group crossing the ice cap. It is truly bizarre to meet other people on this vast expanse of ice so when we saw four folk kiting across the ice, gliding along at a speed we can only dream of doing, it was awesome. They turned out to be a group from North Winds (Paul, Eric, Sarah and David) kiting east to west across the ice cap in a record-breaking attempt. We subsequently found out that they did indeed achieve their goal, completing the crossing in seven days (the previous record was eight).



We achieved our own record today, notching up more than 30km. The weather was good with temperatures between –12 (this morning) to –16 (this evening).

I had a 'little mishap' tonight. I lost my balance as I was climbing into the tent, fell against the stove and knocked it over. Without even thinking, I picked up the stove and burnt my fingers. It was a reflex action when I saw that the stove had set fire to the tent! Fortunately the burnt hole in the porch area of the tent was not very big and could be temporarily fixed with tape. Meanwhile I sat with my fingers immersed in ice to cool them down. They're looking ok, a bit charred but not blistered. The tent has been taped up and will be fixed properly when we are inside Dye 2 tomorrow.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	30.1 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	345.66 KM
Day time temperature	-5 C
Night time temperature	-16 C
Altitude	2,172 M

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Day 18 - 26th May

We reached Dye 2 today and spent a few hours there looking around. What a weird experience that was. The station was decommissioned in 1988 and it looks like the people were simply spirited away. It remains full of mechanical and food supplies and whilst some areas look like they have been turned upside down, other areas look like people have just gone off for a tea break. We toured around the whole place – from the living quarters to the control room.



This was one of the few days that I really felt the cold. It wasn't a particularly cold day (-4 to -8 during the day with a moderate wind) but you don't generate any heat touring around a radar station. It wasn't until we got back on the skis that I started to warm up again.

As we spent a few hours at Dye 2 we travelled less distance today.

To date we have travelled 365 km. If we continue at the same rate we could reach the end of the ice cap in five days!

I'm pleased to report that my fingers have not blistered and I'm confident they will heal well.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	19.8 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	365.46 KM
Day time temperature	-4 C
Night time temperature	-8 C
Altitude	2,073 M

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Day 19 - 27th May

We woke to a mild, snowy day with poor visibility. However, conditions cleared by lunch time and temperatures stayed around -5. The heat made the snow heavy so we travelled at a slower pace than anticipated.



We've dropped to an altitude of 1,914m and it's snowing. I love going to sleep listening to the sound of snow falling on the tent. It's incredibly peaceful.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	29.9 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	395.36 KM
Day time temperature	-5 C
Night time temperature	-15 C
Altitude	1,914 M

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Day 20 - 28th May

Temperatures were mild overnight and this morning (-8) but much of the day was a mixture of whiteout and snow flurries, and the sky was overcast and cloudy. We did 4 sessions of 2 hours today. This evening we're settling down to another mild night with temperatures at -6 and camping at 1,728m. We have 112km to go to the edge of the ice cap. It's incredible to think that in a few days' time we may be celebrating our success with a beer in Kangerlussuaq.



Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	33.1 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	428.46 KM
Day time temperature	-3 C
Night time temperature	-6 C
Altitude	1,728 M

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Day 21 - 29th May

Weather conditions were similar to yesterday and we covered 37.2km with a descent of almost 300m. The terrain is really changing – it's much more downhill and the snow has a windswept look about it with far less sastrugi.



I felt like I was skiing through treacle for most of the morning. This got considerably better after lunch time thanks to Arnold kindly waxing my skis for me. We're still on track for completing the crossing in a couple of days. Once we reach the end of the ice cap we plan to hike back into Kangerlussuaq (approximately 45km) over a couple of days. Completing the journey in this way seems much more appealing than jumping in a car and driving into the town. Regardless of how much I would enjoy a cold beer, I would still prefer to spend another few days hiking through the hills spotting wildlife such as musk ox, reindeer and a range of birds as we go.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	37.2 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	465.66 KM
Day time temperature	-1 C
Night time temperature	-5 C
Altitude	1,447 M

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Day 22 – 30th May

I cannot believe that we are probably camping on the ice for the last time on this journey. Now I'm thinking I'd like the expedition to last another week. The end is nigh and I'm not sure if I'm ready for that yet.



Time is often a strange phenomenon but I've found it even more intriguing during these past few weeks in Greenland. There are moments when a minute seems to last an eternity yet here we are in Camp 22 and I feel that the last two weeks of the expedition have gone by in a flash. I imagine tomorrow will go faster than ever.

The terrain will be even more downhill tomorrow, which should be interesting considering my very basic skiing skills!

We set off in windy conditions this morning so although temperatures hovered between -1 and 1 , it felt much colder.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	37.7 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	503.36 KM
Day time temperature	1 C
Night time temperature	-1 C
Altitude	1,082 M

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Day 23 - 31st May

WE DID IT!

We have crossed the Greenland ice cap in 23 days.

We joined arms and collectively set foot on land at approximately 9pm this evening. Oh, what a feeling of elation.



We had an epic journey today. We covered 38.1km and dropped about 600m in altitude. My downhill skiing has been truly tested and I have to say, there's a lot of room for improvement!

Today was full of anticipation, some frustration and lots of hilarity. The land and the mountains were getting bigger and bigger as we got closer. We were surrounded by the most amazing of landscapes – glacier lakes and ice formations of breathtaking beauty. In



keeping with the rest of the trip, the weather was kind to us with temperatures ranging between -1 and 4 degrees, a few clouds in the sky and light winds.

It is a fantastic feeling and an incredible privilege to have completed this journey with a terrific group of individuals. Tonight we will make camp on the land and tomorrow we will begin our hike through the hills into Kangerlussuaq, 45km away.

Daily Summary

Distance Travelled	38.1 KM
Cumulative Distance Travelled	541.46 KM
Day time temperature	4 C
Night time temperature	not known
Altitude	509 M