

Eton College

Greenland Expedition 2012

In August, EJNR, NPTL and two mountaineering instructors took 13 Etonians and 1 recent OE to arctic Greenland for the adventure of a life-time. The main aim was to undertake a genuinely exploratory mountaineering expedition in a remote arctic area with the specific objectives of climbing some unclimbed peaks and experiencing Inuit culture.

On arrival in Constable Point, the magnitude of the task became clear. The two year build-up had not prepared the team for the miles of ice and mountains which could be seen from the plane window. Everyone was struck by the scale and remoteness of the wilderness environment. After another kit and food sort, the team were transferred across the fjord to Liverpool Land. This alone was quite an experience. The 24hr day meant that the transfer occurred at 2.00am when the water was calmest. As we were in open top ribs, we had to wear full immersion suits. Mercifully no-one could see the Eton team of tellytubbies being dropped off on the beach to begin 18 days of expedition life.

The first few days were the hardest for many. We were essentially walking up a valley to establish a base camp, but were carrying loads which included 8 days of hydrated food each, mountaineering kit, camping kit and a small armoury. This was also our first taste of 'Greenland time and distance'. Because of the clarity of the light and the lack of trees to establish scale, distances which looked 15 minutes' walk away could take 3 hours! This was a hard lesson which was never fully learned.

From the Kalkdale valley, the team undertook some training in the use of axes, crampons, glacier travel and crevasse rescue. A short foray to the north provided the team their first glacial experience and two peaks with stunning views. The rough plan was to travel South with some time being based on an ice-cap for peak bagging. Consequently, Day 6 was another tough day with big loads to transfer to Camp 3. On arrival, the team was not quite prepared for the camp in the moraine (read boulder field) where a further few hours was spent building sleeping platforms in a sort of giant, rock jigsaw. This was originally to be a staging post before setting up the main ice-cap when the news reached us that the ship carrying the rest of our food was stuck in ice. Half the team then had to undertake a massive 16 hour journey to pick-up some dehydrated foods which a mining helicopter has been persuaded to drop off on a glacier to the north. These new supplies would see us through a further two days in which we moved to the high camp and took in another peak.

Camp 4 was probably the most impressive camp location; perched on the side of a magnificent glacier, surrounded by peaks with a glimpse of the sea ice down some valleys. A helicopter dropped off the rest of our supplies just in the nick of time. A well-earned rest day eating vast quantities of food was enjoyed by all. Four peaks were climbed from Camp 4. We think two were unclimbed (certainly unclaimed), but the high point of the expedition for most of the team was the second highest peak in

Liverpool Land. This involved another huge day, ascending a hanging glacier at the end of the range and walking up a long ridge before a scramble to the summit. Following this, a day was spent ice-climbing in a giant crater and then a load transfer to another camp towards the west of the range. The plan was for the boats to pick us up and transfer us round the coast to allow us to walk into Ittoqqortoormiit. However, sea-ice again scuppered our plans as the boats could not get through.

Another day was spent exploring the coast-line to try to find a way round. Unfortunately the mountains dropped straight into the sea so we ended up having another two-day walk back to the east coast for pick-up. However, the coastline was spectacular and gave us our only sighting of polar bear prints. A few hardy Etonians decided they needed a quick dip in the arctic ocean and swam to some floating ice. By now, expedition life was routine and the whole team was very fit. The journey back to the East coast was much easier than expected and we camped overlooking the fjord with views back towards Constable Point awaiting pick-up the next day.

Two days were spent in the Inuit village of Ittoqqortoormiit which offered some much desired relative comfort. The isolation and way of life of the local people was hardy to say the least – one food delivery/ year and 800km from the nearest village! Polar bear skins were hanging out to dry and fresh seal seemed to be the plat du jour. The team then moved back to Constable Point and eventually Reykjavik where a large, celebratory meal was consumed and the waters of the ‘Blue Lagoon’ turned a questionable colour.

EJNR