

A long way from home

If -40°C doesn't stop your camera in its tracks, then it just might cause your fingers and toes to drop off – oh and, by the way, there's a load of pictures that need taking too... after you've had a swim and fed the dogs. It's not all fun being an adventurer you know

Martin Hartley is a photographer-adventurer *par excellence*. He's been to the North Pole, on foot, and with dogs – that's something that not many people can say they've done, and not with the added responsibility of taking pictures too. Most recently, Martin was part of the 2010 Catlin Arctic Survey. In the bitter cold and the most cutting winds, survival is foremost in the minds of most, but Martin must operate in this harshest of environments, and hence is at the most risk of injuries such as frostbite unless he's on his toes... Clearly there is a trade-off at work here – you want the best, awe-inspiring pictures of a unique part of the planet, and you want a photographer who can balance up the risk and reward, and go back home with all his fingers and toes. Martin's a very experienced operator, however, with more than 20 polar assignments to his name and has a highly developed sense of when to take the shot and when to focus on life itself. This is no environment for the inexperienced.

The Catlin Arctic Survey last year trekked for 483 miles and was on the ice for 60 days between March and May. Martin worked with the explorers Ann Daniels and Charlie Paton on the second year of this research effort into the effects of carbon dioxide on the Arctic Ocean. The premise is this: when carbon dioxide dissolves in seawater it forms a weak acid. The rate at which atmospheric carbon dioxide is increasing is overwhelming the oceans' ability to accommodate these changes, leading to ocean acidification. And because cold water absorbs CO² more effectively than warm water, the Arctic Ocean is a beacon for how these changes could affect the world's oceans.

Ann, Charlie and Martin braved the difficult Arctic winter to spring conditions to collect vital water samples and measure sea ice thickness. After a day of hauling a 120kg load in temperatures





Image © Martin Hartley



→ as low as -38°C , they then had to manually drill through ice up to five metres thick. Their epic trek culminated in a 'Hole at the Pole' – a hole drilled through the ice at the North Pole for their final collection of water samples.

Our cover image this month was taken 11 days before the Geographic North Pole, approximately 83.5 miles South of the Top of the world. 'If that sounds like slow going,' says Martin, 'we were drifting backwards (south) at 0.3 mph – that's 7.2 miles per day. So if you were standing still you would be 79.2 miles further south after 11 days. That's another 32 kilos of food and fuel just for standing still. The only way around it is to only stop to eat and drink (not to sleep, otherwise you miss your flight home).'

The risks involved in such an expedition are many and varied and not lost on Martin: 'There are no shortage of moments when you wonder if you might not make it back home – the chances of being plucked off the ice by a rescue mission are slim. On one occasion we didn't eat for nine days as we waited for a plane to bring a scheduled supplies and equipment drop.

Of course, it wasn't meant to be that way, but the weather was such that the aircraft couldn't land.' On the 2009 expedition, Martin was woken by the sound of the ice breaking up around his tent: 'It's one of the worst things that can happen – if you're zipped into a sleeping bag and the tent is zipped up too and the whole lot falls through the ice, you don't have much chance of survival.' In the dark at 3am, Martin, Daniels and Pen Hadow shifted camp to an area where the disintegrating pan met a steadier floe. By the morning the ice had broken into areas the size of Ping-Pong tables. Martin comments:

'I totally accept all the risks of any expedition before I leave the UK and there is a clause in my contract to the extent that, if a dangerous situation comes about, then photography comes first as long as there is one other person to reasonably deal with the issue at hand. The fact is that many of the best images come about when there is stress and strain and difficult scenarios in progress. I have to make a decision as to when to put the camera down, but my primary role is to be the photographer.'

The other side of the coin, however, is that the photographer must be entirely self-contained: 'I have to deal with any situation that comes about, and much of the time on my own. You can be miles away from others in your team and must deal with your problems. For example, I hate having to swim in the Arctic between the ice floes but you have to do it because it might take a day to go around. If you think it'd be a problem to spend four months of the year going to an outside loo, this would not be for you.' The Arctic is by far the most difficult of the two poles to deal with. This is mainly



Image © Martin Hartley

due to the fact that if it's -40°C outside of the tent, it's pretty much the same inside – everything is frozen apart from the layer of clothing next to the skin. 'At the southern pole,' Martin explains, 'you can be sitting in your boxer shorts inside a tent simply due to the solar effect. The Arctic doesn't see much sunshine in the winter to spring period when it's possible to go.'





→ Working on a project like this takes its toll on mind and body: 'Yes, there is a significant physical aspect – and you do lose weight and can come back half the man you were when you set out. You tend to pick up bugs and even when you're back it takes one or two months to return to some kind of normality from a psychological point of view. If you factor in a good month and a half's worth of activity in advance of the expedition, before you know it half of the year has gone by. Communications are not "normal" and you can't spend hours chatting to the girlfriend, and then you're a bit of a wreck when you get back. It doesn't really fit too well with civilised life. I've been to the Arctic 24 times now

and every time I go I say I'm not going to go back again... I'm heading back to the Arctic again in a few weeks' time. You enjoy expeditions retrospectively and you wish you were home when you're not.'

Shooting in such conditions has meant some nifty solutions. There's not enough sunlight for a portable solar panel to recharge batteries and digital cameras aren't designed for these extremes. Previously, Martin's Nikon D2X had its battery replaced by a heater and lightweight Lithium batteries were kept warm in a holster under Martin's arm, connected to the camera with a cable running down his sleeve, so powering the camera and heater. The solution was generally good for -40°C and these days Martin carries enough battery power for three months' shooting. 'Nowadays cameras are very robust, especially the digital ones,' he says. 'They work right down to -25 degrees. But lenses struggle below -30 – the electronics start to slow down and the mechanics shrink. You can't use autofocus and you can't use a light meter. I recently took a Leica MP that was specially made for me and cold-weather tested in Germany. It's entirely mechanical... -43 is not "that cold" but it's enough to stop a digital camera.'

Right now the only 'cold' Martin's dealing with is one picked up on the 'plane on the way back from Mali. He was working on an expedition led by



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→ Bernice Notenboom – the adventurer, explorer, writer and filmmaker who used to work 60 hours a week for one of the world’s leading software corporations but jacked it in 15 years ago for wanderlust with a reason. Martin’s job was to photograph the impact of climate change on communities along the River Niger. It was more of an investigative journalist-type assignment, talking to farmers and fishermen and attempting to gather evidence on how their environment has changed. This is not so easy, however, because seasonal variations throw data to such an extent. For example, the last year in Mali was the wettest on record, but that followed the driest. ‘The river

Niger is the main artery of the country,’ Martin says, ‘everyone fishes, and the one fact on people’s lips is that there’s a whole lot less fish in the river. In turn, this is causing a dramatic decline in the bird population and next comes the people. They know they are fishing themselves out of existence. By their own admission, they are only filling the plate today.’

Martin’s working life might seem all-action and interest, but it’s not free from ‘office politics’. He explains: ‘The best experiences I have had were not necessarily in the most interesting of places. You may well be in a team you respect enormously but difficult political situations can create great pressure to keep your mouth shut. It’s quite possible to go out on an expedition the best of friends but come back with none. This side of the work can be more difficult than the environmental hardship. However, it is amazing to go away with totally driven people – they become your pier group and your friends – their passion to work towards a specific goal rubs off on you and the whole team.’

There’s no doubt that Martin has, himself, a great reputation in this niche of work, but it’s just not possible to gain that overnight. His first ‘time out’ came about by winning a writing competition organised by the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme to mark the 40th anniversary of the first ascent →

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→ of Everest. In 1994, he found himself at Everest Base Camp as a member of the expedition that culminated in Rebecca Stephens becoming the first British woman to reach the summit. 'Being paid to do a job on an expedition was a big pressure. I took some medium-format gear, some 35mm and some compacts – the only equipment that worked were the compacts – it was a very hard first lesson and I came back with three shots that I liked. At the time I thought I was quite a good photographer, but I was not up to professional standards. I knew I'd never let something like that happen again.'

In 1999 Martin went to Kyrgyzstan and the un-conquered peaks of the Eastern Pamirs. Martin continues: 'It was a Motorola-backed expedition to climb a range of mountains that hadn't been climbed before. Motorola had just launched its satellite telephone; we were the first Westerners to visit that range. In those days that was enough to get the funding – we were not producing any kind of scientific paper. It was the closest you get to old-fashioned "exploring" so in that sense it was epic and special. The whole trip was based on one crappy photograph and we didn't know what we were getting into at all. However, now I try to get involved with projects that go somewhere to do something – going without a purpose doesn't really excite me and I'm not in this to say I have the T-shirt. Getting to places you want to go to is far easier now, and you can buy a "package holiday" to meet indigenous people these days.'

But with a recognised name, and many awards, it's still no easy ride: 'You go out with a shot list from the sponsor and that comes first. They want pictures for their corporate social responsibility programme and internal marketing. They're involved to gain an association with something that has integrity. I do have a lot of responsibility to take good PR shots – it could be something active on the expedition or it might be set-up with a sense of the environment and what is being achieved. When that's out of the way you can be creative and really work for the pictures. But you don't always want to be there. Once I was part of a team invited by the Indian government to assess whether or not tourism should be developed in a remote area where Westerners hadn't set foot since the 1940s. The local people treated us like royalty. On our departure the local chief said: "Thanks for coming, but don't hurry back." I felt terrible, an imposter, that we shouldn't have been there in the first place. The team advised "no" and was duly ignored.'

Martin admits to running parallel existences: 'It's a bit like having two separate lives: the "adventure" work and my daily corporate photography. I wouldn't feel happy if I was just doing one of those two things. With the adventure projects there's a hook to look forward to even though you know it's going to be hard. When I'm away I look forward to coming home, going to the pub and getting on with normal work – doing the normal things. My everyday life is therefore a lot more enjoyable. It's not possible, physically and mentally, to do expeditions 12 months of the year, even you were mad enough to want to.' **tP**



