



In conversation with

Martin Hartley





As an adventure photographer, Martin Hartley has made the polar regions his own. But there's more to the man than simply cold places, as he tells friend and fellow photographer Nick Smith

PREVIOUS PAGE Charlie Payton navigating his way across some fairly good ice, Arctic Ocean April 2010, Catlin Arctic Survey.

ABOVE Martin with his Leica MP during the Catlin Arctic Survey.

BELOW Ann Daniels makes her way onto some solid ice after hopping across a load of moving, very soft 'blender ice'.

OPPOSITE TOP Charlie Payton drilling through the sea ice to access the sea water to collect samples from underneath the ice.

OPPOSITE BOTTOM Dr Michael Gorman photographed outside Eureka, the most northerly weather station in the western hemisphere, on Ellesmere Island. This image was taken around midday during December, 2008, when the station is immersed in total darkness for the 24 hours a day during the polar winter.

It's a fantastic feeling' says Martin Hartley. 'I really enjoy the utter isolation, utter exposure.' We're sitting in Martin's studio in Bethnal Green and he's telling me why he keeps going back to the polar regions. As he stomps around making tea he's anxious for news about what's been going on. He's just back from photographing the highly successful Catlin Arctic Survey 2010 and he's missed the general election, the Icelandic ash cloud and the small matter of England winning the World Cup (in 20-20 cricket, that is.) As he cheerfully admits in his broad Lancashire accent, 'You can get a bit out of touch up there.'

Sixty days on the ice inevitably takes its toll, and the superhumanly fit photographer is obviously underweight. He's also got a touch of frostbite on his cheekbones and an eye infection, but apart from that, 'I'm all right', he says. As we talk, he shovels down Jaffa cakes and guzzles tea with the air of a man who's not seen either ever before. Surrounding us are the remnants of the end of an expedition: skis propped up in the corner, unpacked kitbags and the remains of an

old Mamiya 645 Pro-TL covered with silver duct tape, with an almighty dent in the lens casing.

'I didn't take that with me this time' he says, explaining, 'I keep that in the office to remind me I'm a photographer.'

I ask him why – when he's won so many awards over the past two decades – he should need to be reminded that he's a photographer. He tells me that as a veteran of more than 20 polar expeditions, he sometimes confuses people, who tend to think of him as an explorer with a camera. 'I'm not an explorer. I'd only reluctantly use that word on my business card.' This is out of respect for the people who he knows, who are genuine explorers in the old fashioned sense. 'If I was Frank Hurley or Herbert Ponting, that would be different. In my most romantic thoughts I'm an explorer and a photographer. But, in reality, I'm just someone who travels with his camera.'

Martin is best known for his iconic polar landscapes and portraiture of explorers, his book of polar portraits *Face to Face* was published in 2008 to universal critical acclaim. He's also known for getting his shots the hard way. 'There are other people that make a living from polar photography, but many of them do it by jumping onto polar cruise ships.' Doing it the hard way means man hauling sledges over pressure ridges for hours on end, setting up camp in -40C temperatures and going for days without proper food. In the face of such mindboggling adversity, for Martin one of the challenges is to get into the correct mental state for taking photographs.

'In these conditions and at these temperatures everything is difficult. Even turning around to see where your team mates are can seem like more effort than it's worth. It takes willpower to get out a camera, compose a picture, get all the technical bits right and press the button.' Curiously, even for a man of such dedication there's enormous pressure not to do that: 'I've missed plenty of good opportunities – as many as I've taken – because it's too much physically and psychologically.'

As we sit at Martin's computer screens we look









at his pictures from early on in the expedition, when there was little ambient light and temperatures cold enough to freeze your blood. 'The trouble with digital cameras,' says Martin, 'is they're no bloody good at capturing low contrast scenes where there's nothing much going on in them. The problem is you can't photograph the cold – it's invisible. What you can photograph is the effects of the cold on the human condition.'

At this point he tells me he's got to get going. There are a couple of tonnes of gravel outside his house that need moving. The deliverymen left it on the pavement by mistake.

Call of the wild

A few days later we reconvene in the garden of the Royal Geographical Society in Kensington, where we continue our conversation. It's another of Martin's natural environments. He's a Fellow of the Society and for years he's had a permanent exhibition in the main hall, and he's sometimes to be found here dispensing advice to aspiring travel photographers. Although he has gained a reputation for being a harsh critic, and never one to mince his words, he's also generous with his time and advice, especially when it comes to encouraging youngsters. I once sat on a panel with him and when asked what single thing was needed to improve a novice's photography, he replied, 'If you have money, get a good lens first and a better camera later.' Still sound advice.

Sitting in the London sunshine, Martin is keen to explain that there's more to him than simply hardcore exploration photography. 'I have two photographic lives running in parallel. The first is the expedition stuff. But, when I'm back in the UK I shoot adventure, travel, events, corporate stuff and weddings.' Weddings? Surely gruff, tough explorer types don't shoot weddings? 'Documenting weddings can be extremely satisfying', he says, before repeating – not for the first time – that he's 'all about the photography.'

Although Martin is primarily known for his polar work, he has a varied travel portfolio. Some of my favourite images come from a trip he did to Zaskar in northern India in 2001. 'It was a beautiful experience from a landscape point of view. We went to a village that's cut off for eight months of the year by the snow. The only way to get to it in winter is 150 miles up a frozen river. We stayed there for a couple of weeks and lived with the people, got to know them. They let us into their lives and that was the most fulfilling photographic experience I've had. On that particular trip I realised that the camera was the most terrific passport. A camera is



Interview

a much better tool for getting into peoples lives and getting things done. It also gives you a sense of purpose. I can't travel without a purpose.'

Martin is a huge fan of film and still shoots on it whenever he can, whenever there aren't the insurmountable commercial pressures that require the use of digital capture. 'Go and have a beer with any photographer and even now they'll ask you if you're shooting digital.' Martin first used a digital camera in 1999 and to this day he remains unconvinced on one level at least. 'If you look at a perfectly exposed, nicely lit 645 transparency on a light box, it generates an emotional response,' he says. 'I've never had that looking at a picture on a computer screen. I was raised on a diet of Kodachrome 64 and Velvia.'

He goes on to say that while digital cameras are 'Now very good, if you look at the pictures I shot on my recent Arctic trip on my Nikon D3X and my Leica MP, then there's a difference. I'm not saying it's like the difference between

white and red wine, but it's almost as different as a watercolour and a pencil sketch.'

I can't help wondering why he took his Leica MP to the North Pole. 'The Leica was my plan B. You see, electronics are unreliable when it gets cold. So having a totally mechanical camera as a back-up was reassuring. There are, of course, limitations with film, but at least you've got the picture. Better to get any picture at all, than not get one because your equipment isn't working.'

The main difficulty with the MP is you can't change film outdoors while on the ice, and so Martin was limited to shooting 36 frames per day. 'If you get a bit excited you can blow those in the first few hours', making the film camera redundant for the rest of the day. 'Getting excited' is something Martin is famous for. Everest mountaineer Paul Deegan once told me the story of how Martin and he were on an expedition in India. Martin blasted away 90 % of his film in the first two days. 'That's true', Martin

laughs, 'I ended up with a budget of six frames per day for the remainder of the expedition.'

But there's an interesting aspect to the mental process that confirms another difference between film and digital for the expeditioner. In the Arctic, Martin would ask himself, 'Is this a Leica moment or a digital moment?' He laughs as he tells me people write poems about Leicas. 'They think there's a spirit living inside them. It's hard not to be affected by that. Some of my favourite photographers used Leicas and you begin to wonder if there's a little bit of magic in there. Put it this way, my Nikon D3X lives in my studio. My Leica I keep at home.'

So what's next for Martin Hartley? 'I am still committed to photographing the parts of the world that are the most difficult to get to, and want to do at least one personal artistic project every year. I also want to spend more time photographing stories that need to be told, to get environmental messages across.' ■

PREVIOUS PAGE The ski tracks of Ann Daniels tell part of the story of North Polar navigation, where the route north often takes a last minute diversion to find a safer route across thin or moving ice. On this occasion the ice I was standing on was being shunted along in great big jerks, like standing on a train as it pulls out of a station.

BELOW Extreme 'night' drilling at 2pm!

To see more of Martin's work go to www.martinhartley.com

