

## **Empty Horizons**

**By Malcolm McMillan**

*I'm lost in a world of silence. A land that stretches into the blue distance forever. A world of no blunt horizons, just gentle mergings of ice and sky*

I've been cast adrift in a land flooded by oceans of ice, rolling towards me under a gentle swell until the breaking waves crash silently against the coastal mountains, rushing down the glaciers in turbulent, distorted cascades. I'm lost not physically, but mentally. How can a mind that has been conditioned to coping with a modern, urban reality comprehend the vast beautiful and brutal emptiness of Greenland? I've realised over the past few weeks that, for me, this is where I really feel content. I hope that these mountains soon forget our brief visit. As the expedition has gone on I have increasingly felt the need to leave no trace of our journey. Our tracks will soon disappear and leave the mountains, for the time being, in splendid ignorance of the damage that man can inflict upon the environment.

For the last time I walk up to a small knoll overlooking the ice-cap. With the sky in my hair and the wind at my feet, I silently sit, staring out over the inland ice, and try to permanently imprint this beautiful panorama on my mind. I take a photo, knowing it will never capture the essence of what it's like to be here – photos are always pale representations of reality – but hoping that it will act as a prompt to help me remember how I felt inside. It's the first time in three weeks that we've had an afternoon off – no sledge-pulling or load-carrying for the remainder of the day. I'm lost as to how to occupy myself. A nagging sense of guilt at being lazy ticks round inside my head; only four hours' exercise today.

I let my mind wander back over the past weeks. It's a lifetime ago that we set off from Iceland, waving goodbye to the luxuries of hotel double-beds and fresh food, eager to start our attempt to make the first unsupported ascent of Shackleton Bjerg, a remote peak in northeast Greenland. Excitement as the great unknown of Greenland revealed itself through the window of our tiny plane. Alpine mountains rising proud out of the sea, ice-bergs stalking the coast. Landing at the barren airstrip at Mesters Vig I remember feeling the cold; the worry about how much worse it would be on the icecap. Now it seems normal – constantly wearing hat and gloves as unremarkable and routine as wearing shoes. I think back to setting off in our rubber dinghy: nomads, with all our worldly possessions crammed around us, heading off to a new world. The 24-hour daylight seemed strange at first; the realisation of how much we're governed by our watches as we stick to normal meal-times and sleeping patterns for no good reason other than routine. Slowly we made our way through fjord systems. Always the droning engine, the smell of petrol – feeling slightly out of place, wishing for the quiet noises of sailing instead. Always something to marvel at – the iceberg shapes: lions and eagles serenely gliding past; tracing improbable lines up imposing cliffs or mentally picking my way over the knife-edge ridges and summits we pass beneath.

After 3 days of boating we reach the head of Dickson's Fjord. Feet on solid ground yet still my body rises and falls with the ingrained motion of the waves. We sort out food rations – endless amounts of chocolate and flap-jack, dried milk and silver packets of dehydrated delights. Two days later we are waving goodbye to the fjord and staggering up towards the initial glacier. Bent double under the weights on our back, eager to reach snow so we can shed our loads on to sledges, worrying if our bodies will accept weeks of this abuse. The first days are hard. No time to enjoy the views, yet all the time in the world with head down, eyes fixed on the sledge in front, forever thinking "why?", but always deep-down knowing. The terrain is much worse than we had envisaged; hundreds of melt-stream ditches cross our path – an intricate defence system devised to prevent our progress. Jump ditch, ease sledge over the lip until its momentum takes it crashing down into the stream, strain at the leashes to haul it up the opposite bank. It's not just our bodies that are finding it hard, the sledges are also taking a battering. A day of white-out is spent patching up broken sledges and shafts, wondering how much more abuse they'll take before they're beyond repair. A growing fear that we may have to turn around and retreat before we've made proper inroads into our objective.

Slowly the weather clears, slowly the terrain improves, slowly our spirits rise. By the time we reach the icecap proper and can finally strap on skis we are becoming used to our new 9 'til 5 routine. Blue sky days filled with exercise and eating, finding time to enjoy our amazing surroundings and to enjoy feeling fit and strong. Forever dragging our sledge-homes behind us, our snail-like existence is at times monotonous, but mostly it is strangely satisfying. All we need for life contained within our sledges; no room for the unnecessary clutter of our normal materialistic existence. Shackleton Bjerg slowly grows day by day, but it's hard to judge distances when there's nothing to judge distances against – everything is so vast. Sometimes we seem to slog all day, only to find that the views are the same as when we set out; as though we're unknowingly walking the wrong way along a giant travelator. Some days though the invisible travelator speeds us on our way and we shoot along until soon Shackleton Bjerg rises up in front of us. We pick our route – the south-west ridge – a straight-forward climb. The next day we set off promptly, eager to make the most of the current stable weather, which is now showing signs of breaking. Vast expanses spread out around us as we gain height. Mountain upon mountain jostling for position near the sea, but inland; nothing. Vast, empty, stillness. A sudden urge to ski off into the void, to a place where time will slow and then stop; to a place of immutable peace. Looking up, the ridge narrows as it leads onto a summit thinly veiled in cloud. Soon we're there, the racing wind tearing holes in the cloud and allowing glimpses of the world below; of enticing peaks to climb in the days ahead and of our journey home. The deteriorating weather chases us back down to our tents. In the face of a biting gale we hurriedly build a protective snow wall around the tent – the realisation hitting home of how alone and vulnerable we are here – without our tents we are nothing; we stand no chance of survival.

The next few days dawn clear and bright, although shredded by a searing northerly wind. With our main objective complete, we are free to investigate the surrounding area. I'm a child discovering a huge playground of unknown peaks to explore; an excited dog free from the leash of my sledge. Skiing feels like flying without the constant drag from behind; gliding over the cloud-top surface of the ice-cap. The indescribable excitement of picking an enticing peak, an inviting ridge and then heading off, unaware of what lies above and out of sight. In these wonderful days we climb several of the nearby peaks but soon it is time to leave this place and begin the long journey back to the boats. Days ahead are spent retracing our steps; the uncertainty of our outward journey replaced with a calm assuredness of feeling at home in this environment.

A breath of wind catches me unaware and chases me back to reality. I'm still sat on the knoll but now it's time to leave. A final look over the icecap; a quiet goodbye to mountains we've climbed and others we haven't. I trace our path back from the edge of the ice-cap to the distant pyramid of Shackleton Bjerg on the horizon: a journey of forgotten footsteps and unforgettable memories. I've come to realise that the climb itself was not the real point of the expedition. It was good to reach the summit, to be able to hail the expedition a success. But the real point, as with life as a whole, lies in the journey; the beauty we've witnessed, the arguments we've resolved, the sledges we've held together with duck tape, snow stakes and string, and the chance to push ourselves to see how far we'll go.

I turn my back and head down towards camp, sad to leave it all behind but peacefully content.