

Poles apart

From south London to South Pole, Ben Saunders tells Rowena Carr-Allinson about life as an explorer



~~“In the beginning you grab whatever, to get into the game. You can’t get an agent until they’ve seen you in something and you can’t get a job until yo they’ve seen you in something and you they’ve seen you in something and you can’t get a job until yocan’t get a job until~~

Branded the next Ranulph Fiennes by The Times, 28-year-old Ben Saunders has three North Pole expeditions to his name and set the record as the youngest person ever to ski solo to the North Pole.

Having grown up in the West Country, Ben always loved the great outdoors, something he puts down to his imaginary “Nordic blood”. His polar ambitions were first triggered during a stint as an instructor at the John Ridgway School of Adventure in the Scottish Highlands when he was 19. “I’d always been fascinated by the exploits of people like Chris Bonnington, Ranulph Fiennes and Reinhold Messner.” He also cites Fiennes’ book, ‘Mind Over Matter’ as an inspiration: “it sometimes strikes me as a very odd choice, since that expedition sounded utterly grim!”

Far from considering himself as an explorer though, Ben sees himself simply as an athlete. “Everyone knows where the Poles are nowadays. On a personal level, I suppose I get some sort of self-definition from the challenges I set myself.”

Ben attempted his first crossing to the North

Pole aged just 23, with team-mate Pen Hadow. He admits the whole endeavour was a failure. “I ignored a lot of very sensible advice and at the time, I was way out of my depth. In fact, pretty much everything that could go wrong, did go wrong. The experience left me depressed, physically shattered, and in a staggering amount of debt. If you’d told me then that I’d make a living out of expeditions, I’d never have believed you.”

Self-belief is essential to tackle the challenges he sets himself. “Each expedition has given me a new version of what’s possible – a new lens to look at the world through. People are often fascinated by how I train physically, but the thing I’ve stretched and tested to the limit, more than any muscle, is my belief in my own ability to succeed. Self-belief is just like a muscle. If you don’t test it or stress it, it atrophies and grows weaker. The more you stretch it, the more risks you take, the more time you’re outside your comfort zone, the stronger it grows.”

In March 2004 he set out on a solo, unsupported ski crossing of the Arctic Ocean,

from Russia to Canada, via the North Geographic Pole. Although no one had ever achieved this, many had tried including a Norwegian team in 2000 and Borge Ousland in 2001. But that didn’t put the 26-year-old off. “Doing it alone without support (ie air drops of food) was seen as the four-minute mile of the polar world,” he explains. “It’s a challenge that’s at the very edge of human capability – a straight line distance of 1,240 miles over the frozen surface of the Arctic Ocean. I’m still not quite sure what possessed me to try. Borge is the Michael Schumacher of the polar world – I felt pretty impudent setting out on one of the few expeditions he’d failed to pull off.”

Things didn’t go according to plan, with bureaucratic delays in Siberia, warming temperatures and melting ice meant he never made it to Canada, but he did reach the Pole, making him only the fourth person in history to achieve that solo ski journey and more importantly, the youngest to do so by over a decade.

His family feared for his life throughout the

expedition, and with reason. Half-way through the trek he fell through thin ice into the water: “I can’t recall exactly how I got out, but I do remember my skis catching on the ice behind me and dragging me back in.” He remains philosophical about dicing with death: “In my experience when you’re in that much trouble, everything happens in slow-motion. It felt like I had all the time in the world to figure it out. Panic only really set in once I’d got out of the water and started looking for somewhere to pitch my tent before I froze.” A close encounter with a polar bear in 2001 also stands out as a touch and go moment: “the shotgun jammed five times before it finally fired into the air to scare it away.”

Today, plans are afoot for an Arctic ultra-marathon and, in October, Ben and team-mate Tony Haile are planning ‘SOUTH’, the first return journey to the South Pole on foot.

Luckily, out on the ice Ben says he never gets lonely. Thanks to a satellite phone he keeps in touch with his family, though he isn’t sure if it’s a help or a hindrance: “people assume a satellite

phone makes things easier, but it’s not always true. I had my mum telling me about Big Brother, David Beckham’s affair, and what she was making for Sunday lunch. It nearly drove me nuts. You have to be very careful, if you are struggling or feeling sorry for yourself, the last thing you want to do is phone your mum.”

However, for Ben the key is communicating and sharing his experiences which will definitely be the case for ‘SOUTH’. The pair are in talks with Yahoo! and the Discovery Channel to produce a video-diary-style documentary. And there’s a book in the pipeline too.

This should fit in nicely with Ben’s desire to educate the new generations. “I want to get more young people into the great outdoors. All the important stuff: from leadership skills to a love for the environment, I’ve derived from the outdoors. Academically, I was never inspired by anything, and it worries me that young people often don’t have the opportunities for adventure that I had as a kid.”

His dream is simple: to find a sponsor that will back him until 2009 and to set up a foundation to help young people keen to follow in his footsteps. He knows only too well that fundraising is his biggest challenge. “As our ambitions get bigger the budget spirals out of control. We are trying to raise more than half a million now. It’s an expensive way to go camping!”

The secret of his success so far seems to be his relaxed approach: “There are so many factors that are utterly outside your control in the high Arctic, that if you’re an obsessive/compulsive control freak, you’d go nuts in a few hours. It all gets very zen at times.”

Currently at home in Putney, Saunders is training for his next adventure, mostly running and cycling to reach peak physical fitness. He

laughs thinking about the thousands of laps he’s completed around Richmond Park, and the fact that he has named almost all its deer. The proximity to the parks and training facilities is one of the reasons Ben moved to the area four years ago. He likes the way the area is evolving. “I like Putney, it feels like a little town. It’s a bit more upmarket now. Coffee shops are spreading to further reaches of the town, replacing the charity shops and bookmakers that were here when I first arrived!”

Ben admits that returning to the ‘civilised’ world of west London after his expeditions is a tough culture shock. “The first couple of days are really strange. There’s so much more going on, so much stimulus. Out in the Arctic there’s nothing aside from the odd polar bear and seals, but no colours. Getting back was like watching a TV with everything turned up too far: the volume, the colour – it was really overpowering! It takes a couple of days to tune into normal stuff.”

Although the city isn’t the haven of fresh air he would like for his training, he has a strong bond to the busy capital. “London is like having a crack habit – you know it’s not doing your health much good and it burns up all your money but there’s something addictive about it,” he concludes.

The first thing he does on getting back home to Putney? Taking a bath and rushing to his favourite curry house: the Bangladesh Curry Mahal on Upper Richmond Road.

Aside from curry and a wash, people are also high on his list of priorities after his long absences in the bleak Arctic. “I remember getting back to London and doing all those things you are not supposed to, like smiling on the tube and starting conversations with people. I remember nearly getting run over several times – London’s definitely more dangerous than the arctic.” We’ll take your word for it.