



South Pole 2019 - 2020 Blog No 6:

A White Christmas

At the moment it's a bit of everything We still need to cover a significant distance, the view consists of snow and a blue sky and there's enough headwind, so we're breaking up the expedition in smaller steps and focus on Theo's point (85.10) instead of on the South Pole. The good news is that we hope to reach that point on the 24th of December, so my main goal has become Christmas. Theo's point is also just beyond our halfway point and by that time I hope our sled will be less heavy and we will go even faster than we're already going. So, there are many things to be excited about. Small detail is that we first need to walk another 9 days to reach that point, or actually only 7 days, because we just finished two really good days. During the last 3 days we covered 40 nautical miles which is at this stage pretty good for an unsupported expedition. The last two days have also been exciting because Paula and I started to guide pitches as well. I have to say that I was a bit nervous for the first pitch. The reason is we are making nice progress and I don't want to be the one guiding us off track by a mile or guiding us into an area with a rough surface. Paula went first and after ten meters she was in control and off she went, Ryan and I running behind her. We think it was our fastest pitch so far. It was great that Paula made a nice start, but now I was even more nervous, and it felt like I was doing the exam for my driver's licence. On my chest I am now carrying a frame and on the frame is a watch and the most important item – the compass. Although the frame is uncomfortable and far from ideal, during the first pitch it works perfectly. Approximately 30 cm in front of my chest I can now see the compass and my hands are free to hold the ski poles. Whilst making my first meters, the compass swings from left to right but to be fair, it doesn't take me long to feel in control and now I am only worried about the route and my pace. Later that day Ryan tells us that we both did a great job (we each did 2 pitches) and I have to say I am getting into it and I am feeling relaxed about it. So, from now on this will probably be our new routine – Paula and I each 2 pitches and Ryan the last 3, which will make the rest of our journey even more interesting.

Today was for sure a day that I want to forget, but probably it will stay with me for a long time. But, the good news first – we crossed the 84-degree point after a stellar 14.1 nautical miles yesterday and 13.2 today. But today, for the first time in 23 days the sky was covered with clouds. "No big deal" I thought, "because the temperature is fine (-15 degrees) and there's almost no wind". But soon after we left, I started feeling uncomfortable. Paula was leading the pitch and as a result of the poor weather all the ground visibility was gone. The surface looks completely white and flat but in reality, it's the opposite. The 3rd pitch it was my turn and it was a complete disaster. Every time I bumped into an ice hump or when I slipped away, I complete panicked. When I was 5 years old, I had my first pair of glasses, and I never felt happy with them. I even believe it impacted my self-confidence. At the age of 15 I threw them in a corner and since then I have been fine, but walking here today reminded me of that period, as well as of other occasions in the snow with a similar feeling – once during a ski trip and last year in Svalbard on a snow scooter excursion, following the guide during a whiteout. This time I am really scared and worried and all kind of emotions and memories pop up. With a tear in my eye I explain at the end of my pitch to Ryan that I prefer not to guide another pitch. He doesn't need many words and takes over from me, for which I am very grateful. The rest of the day I am down and only after a short but good chat in the evening I slowly feel better again. Reflecting on today, now, lying in my sleeping bag I think it's probably a combination of being very tired and an emotional roller-coaster over the last weeks. Having said that, I do hope we will have a blue sky again tomorrow!

It's 4:51 am and I am awake. This is not unusual because most nights I wake up around one and five. This night, around one am, I used my earplugs for the first time. I had them tailor made in the Netherlands because I knew that Ryan has this nice "snoring ritual" during his sleep 😊. This time it kept me awake. Around 5 am I felt that the tent was already warm on my side and taking my head outside of my sleeping bag, I could see a bright light in the tent, but I did not want to take the risk of looking outside and potentially be disappointed by the weather. Later that morning, when both Ryan and I are awake, sitting with a hot drink and our feet in the front vestibule, we opened the zipper of the tent and yes, we see a blue sky! It's probably no surprise that the day went very smoothly – I had my best two pitches and we made some great progress.

When I was young, I usually went to the Alps with my parents and two sisters during summer holidays. We alternated days: one day we went hiking in the mountains and the following day we stayed on the camp site, having fun, playing with our friends, swimming, playing badminton etcetera. What I remember from these holidays as well is that each time when we reached the halfway point, in our case usually after two weeks, it felt that the holiday was over. Yesterday we had our 25th expedition day and today on the 21st of December already the 26th expedition day, so with our plan of using 50 days in total, my countdown has started. This feels good, especially because in two days from now we will cross 85 degrees and then we 'only' need to cover the second part – 560 km..

The last two days we made good progress but have been very heavy, due to some snow which, believe it or not, is very rare here! Antarctica is the driest continent and on average there's only 5cm of snowfall a year. So, the challenge was that the top layer was soft – with each step we took, our sleds and sleds sank a few inches into the snow, and as a result my back hurts everywhere. I am looking forward to Tuesday when we will celebrate Christmas and take half a day rest as well. Probably my fancy dinner that day will be freeze-dried lasagne, some Dorito chips and lots of ice, but we will do our best to make it special. It speaks for itself that I will miss Daan and the kids, but I know that her mother, sister and brother including partners and kids are in our house, and I am sure that they will make this first Christmas in London very special. In general, I hope that this time of the year will be special for everyone and that many will be surrounded by their loved ones, or that they can feel the energy from those people that are not around them anymore.

Happy Christmas from Antarctica!