



South Pole 2019 - 2020 Blog No 9: Champagne on the South Pole

Normally I just start writing my blogs, but this one will be a bit different because by the time Daan sends out this blog, I most likely have already reached the South Pole. But anyways, let's get started.

It's Monday 13 January, around ten thirty in the evening, and I had planned to be asleep for at least an hour already, but over the last couple of days we stopped much later in the evening to set up our camp because of our longer skiing time. My body is full of adrenaline, so it takes some time before I start feeling sleepy. On top of that, Paula just started snoring ... The weather during the last 3 days has been a mixture of everything – on Saturday we had a lot of fog and on Sunday the sky was almost clear. On both days there was enough visibility to navigate well. The challenge this time was the wind that came from the 11 o'clock direction, in combination with the temperature (minus 35C) so it was very cold. This also caused a small spot of frostbite on my right thumb. Nothing too dramatic so far, it's a first-degree frostbite and it will be OK after some time, but for sure I need to be cautious the coming days. Today, the weather was almost perfect with a clear blue sky and after a few hours there was almost no wind. So, all the ingredients to enjoy your last days on Antarctica you would think, but in reality, it was one of my worst days. Since yesterday I started having diarrhea which probably doesn't need any further explanation... First of all, to go "to the toilet" (read snow) several times in the morning is a real pain, but more frustratingly to do the same during the day: stopping during a pitch, taking off your harness and all layers of clothing, squatting in the snow, half naked, with this temperature and then catching up with Ryan and Paula is really far from fun. On top of that I'm walking around with an empty stomach which causes a lot of cramps. Lastly, and then I will stop complaining about my pain, Saturday and Sunday I 'only' had pain between my ribs for 1 to 2 hours but today it was more like 4 to 5 hours. So, after a toilet break, I tried to catch up with the team, which took me 45 minutes, and I was so frustrated that I suddenly got emotional for a second. Not because of the pain, but because I just want to enjoy these last days. I am aware that's its now only 3 days left to the Pole and after 49 days, it's just a matter of mindset. But it is still 25 hours of skiing and close to 75km, so I am a bit nervous for tomorrow as you can imagine. The good news is that our long days are having an effect on the distance to go: we did 75% of a degree in 3 days, which is extremely fast, and our plan to arrive on the Pole on Thursdays is most likely going to materialize. But now, I'm first going to do a second attempt to sleep because it's past 11pm already, I am starting to feel tired and Paula stopped snoring 😊.

The day before

It's 15 January and I am again in my sleeping bag, very tired but also excited at the same time. We had two good days and today we arrived at 89.505 (degrees) so we'll need to do less than 10 nautical miles tomorrow to reach the South Pole. I was just chatting with Paula and Ryan about our goal. With a mountain, you see the summit days or weeks in advance and the summit day is usually the most challenging day. In this case, we decided to wake up half an hour later and we probably 'only' need to ski for 6 hours, so today might almost be the easiest day of the 52! For sure I am not complaining about this because I want to take it all in – I will not even turn on the music during the pitches tomorrow.

Today by the way we had a strange experience. During one of the pitches, suddenly, under me, a huge plate of snow and ice sank 10 centimetres whilst making a big sound. It was so loud that Paula, who was in front of me, turned around straight away. I did not look back, but I was not sure if I just walked

over a big crevasse. Soon after this, it happened a few more times and Ryan explained us that this is caused by new layers of 'fresh' snow (up to a few years old) on top of old snow which have air in-between. Because we're walking on it, the air is pushed out and causes the sound and the dropping of the top layer. So, with that in mind, Paula and I were less concerned. Besides this, the days have been good, apart from now all of us having some toilet challenges...

YES, YES, YES, WE DID IT!

It's Friday 17 January, 2:43 in the morning and, believe it or not, I cannot sleep. For more than two hours I've been turning around in my sleeping bag. What a day it was yesterday! On the last day, we had put down our camp by half past eight and Paula started leading the first pitch. Everything felt like "oh, this is the last time melting snow to make water in the morning", "this is the last day of pulling our sled", etcetera. But we agreed with the team – *it ain't over 'til it's over*, meaning we had to stay focused all the way to the end, because it's still a serious distance, like every day extremely cold and things can happen or change before you know. So, with that in mind we started the day towards the Pole. The first two pitches went smoothly, I did my regular stretching whilst walking and we had an almost clear sky, so all the ingredients were there for a special day. Pitch number three was my turn and again that feeling 'this is my last...'. Slowly I was getting into the mindset of 'yes we are getting there' and 'this is really going to happen'. This became even more real when we saw the South Pole station suddenly appearing on the horizon. After more than 50 days not having seen any buildings, trees or other people, but only snow, ice, two other explores, our tents and sleds, it's really strange to suddenly see signs of civilization again. It all still seemed far away and for quite some time I had the feeling that we were not getting any closer. Ryan was leading the last two pitches because there are apparently quite some stringent rules on how to approach the Pole, not being allowed to cross the area that belongs to the research centre etc. The Amundsen–Scott South Pole Station is a United States scientific research station at the South Pole and houses up to 150-200 staff during Antarctic summer. Unfortunately, it is not accessible for explorers like us.

Slowly we make our way around the base and suddenly, we see the ALE camp behind it. ALE (Antarctic Logistics & Expeditions) is as mentioned in one of the earlier blogs, the organisation that organises all the logistics and has next to Union Glacier (the main base camp) also a camp spot close to the South Pole during the summer season. During the last pitch all sorts of emotions and memories are going through my mind (and my body) like a movie. I think of all the chapters of this amazing adventure, the incredible support from many people around the world, the pain and suffering, the joy and special moments we had, the realisation of knowing that I have been very fortunate to be able to enjoy the beauty of this immense continent for almost two months, but mostly the feeling ... it's really going to happen, I am going to reach the geographic South Pole! Approximately 100 meters before we are there, Ryan gives a sign and we start skiing next to each other. We make our final ski slides towards the South Pole Camp Site and when we arrive, we tick our pole sticks against each other like we've done many times during the expedition when we arrived at our camping spot. The South Pole Camp Site is our first celebration spot. The camp is less than 10 minutes away from the actual South Pole markers, but it makes sense to go here first, so that we can get our cameras, flags and other things ready for the real celebration, although we already congratulate each other at the camp site. The ALE crew members that are around plus three other explores who arrived earlier are doing the same. We first have a nice coffee break and a zip of Sprite. I have to say, they managed to set up a nice camp on the Pole with some basic, but more than convenient facilities for all kind of travellers, and good food and drinks. After the break we put on our skies and leave our sleds behind. I almost fall forward because of this. Not pulling the heavy sled is a weird feeling, but after 5 steps we slide very, very smoothly towards our real goal, the actual South Pole. Again, we're skiing next to each other and it doesn't take long before we see the flags from the countries that signed the Antarctic Treaty. In the middle is the permanent South Pole marker – a red and white pole, about 80cm high, with on top a mirror ball. With a huge smile on my face I realise I did it again. Another epic expedition and again a

successful one, which gives me a very proud feeling. After cheering and a few hugs, we start making all kind of picture and short videos, but it is so cold that my hands are freezing, so Ryan and I take the camera in turns. Due to the fact that the actual 90-degree point is moving a little bit every year by a meter or so, they also have an annual marker of the Pole, that is being moved to the correct position every year on the first of January. So, we take off our skies and walk for 2 minutes to this spot as well to take a few more pictures. After that, we make our way back to the camp to warm up. More importantly, I ask Ryan if he can set up the satellite phone so I can make a quick call before the kids go to bed back home. Although the connection is not great and I need to call back several times, it's like with other expeditions, almost the best moment. It's such a relieve to share with Daan and the kids that I made it, that we are all safe and healthy, that I can now start thinking about my journey back home. On the call, Daan, the kids and my parents, who are still in London, all congratulate me. We briefly chat about the whole experience and then little Tom tells me that I am on the South Pole, which is heart-warming.

That evening we have a really nice dinner with fresh fruit and vegetables (!) and, equally important, I manage to convince Deven, the camp leader, that special occasions always need to be celebrated with champagne. Lucky us – they still have two bottles. So, with all staff and explorers (12 in total) we raise our glasses and celebrate our achievement. I have to say that after five months with no alcohol it tastes great, but the feeling like I have been drinking all night also comes very quickly, as you can imagine. The rest of the evening we chat and share stories with each other, and I start receiving the first messages from the 'outside' world via Daan. Around 10pm I make my way to the tent, thinking it will be easy to fall asleep after a few glasses of champagne and wine and I'm looking forward to a long night's rest. Unfortunately, the opposite is true – it's 3.45 in the morning and I'm still awake, probably because of the relief and the excitement.

My last blog will be about my journey back home to Daan and the kids which, as mentioned before, is always the most important goal and will probably take another couple of days. Now it's time for another attempt to sleep because in a few hours we might already need to leave with the Twin Otter to Union Glacier Base Camp, crossing the route we have been skiing for 52 days, in just 5,5 hours of flight time...