



## South Pole 2019 - 2020 Blog No 10:

### Journey back home including a British Airways surprise

It's 20 January and I am finally in the Yllusion on my way to Punta Arenas, on my way to the 'normal' world. To be honest I am in many ways a bit nervous. First and foremost, to see Daan, the kids and my parents but this of course is also combined with excitement. The other reason to be nervous is more related to the fact that it will take time for me to adjust to a 180-degree different life again after 10 weeks of silence, emptiness and mostly being responsible for just myself. Daan already mentioned that I have a few hundred reactions and that even the press picked up my achievement which is great, especially if it creates awareness for Make A Wish. But what will happen after that period? I recognize this feeling from my Everest expedition and to be fair, instead of being worried I should be excited because that experience gave a boost to my life journey in many ways.

After waking up on Friday we enjoyed a nice breakfast, but I realized that I forgot to do two important things on the Pole. First, I should have made a short video for Daan, Lente, Iris en Tom and secondly to take a picture of my GARMIN, showing exactly 90 degrees South. With this in mind I asked a staff member at camp if I could borrow one of the fast bikes (a mountain bike with thick tires for better grip in the snow) and after covering myself in many layers of clothes (because it's again minus 38 degrees and with wind close to minus 45/50), I make my way back to the Pole. It's not even a 10-minute bike ride but probably because of using different muscles than the last 52 days or because I have switched to a 'relax' mode in combination with poor sleep I am out of breath by the time I arrive. The good thing is that in the end I managed to make a great picture with even 5 zeros behind the 90 on the Garmin, which is almost impossible because every centimetre you move the device jumps to 89 point something. The downside is that it takes me more than 20 minutes and that my hands are so extremely cold that I am very, very frustrated with myself that I have taken this risk for just a picture. Luckily, I make it to an information shelter where I am able to warm up again, but I need more than a half an hour to do that. I go back to the Pole and now with even more layers on and facing with my back towards the wind, I quickly make my "thank you" video and then I jump on the bike back to camp for some hot drinks.

At the same time that I am back in camp we receive the news that the plane will not come today so the first 24 hours delay of our journey back home is a fact. In the evening this time no champagne but again we have some great chats with the crew and Richard from Wales, James from England and Wen from China who all did a solo trip. The number of people this year doing a full "coast to Pole" crossing is only 15 so I feel extremely proud to be part of this number. Secondly, it's now a fact that I am the second Dutch person in history to complete the Explorers Grand Slam (the highest mountain on each continent plus the North and South Pole) which is of course very cool.

My second night on the Pole is for sure not much better but at the same time I feel ok, knowing it will hit me at some point, so I don't bother too much about it. Because they need to put down this camp, we combine breakfast and lunch into a brunch and at the time we start, the last 3 South Pole travellers arrive, and we give them a warm welcome. Not much later we receive positive news that the Twin Otter is on its way, so we start packing all our stuff so that we will be ready when it arrives. With seven people and sledges we are like sardines in a can and it does not take long before we all start sweating heavily and for sure not heavenly. To make it even more challenging for myself I noticed this morning that my diarrhoea problems are fully active again, so I feel a bit nervous and with 2 tablets of Imodium I hope that everything will be fine.

During the flight I am looking outside of the window overlooking the pristine landscape and once in a while I even see our tracks which is really difficult to grasp and to realize that we did this crazy distance.

Halfway the plane needs to refill and we have the opportunity for a toilet break which you understand I am making use of.. A little bit before 10pm we arrive at Union Glacier and they even have hot food for us. We can also use one of the camp tents, so we don't need to use our own tent anymore which is great. Still with enough energy we decide that some wine might help for more hours of sleep and if not, then at least we will have a nice evening.

Let' take a shower.

It's 5am and I am looking around. Paula is still fast asleep and Ryan as well, so I do a few attempts but when my watch hits the 7, I make my way to the showers. Look, for sure this is not the kind of shower I will be having back in Punta Arenas, but I have to say that you can do a lot with 10 litres of hot water. I soap myself 20 times and use the water very efficiently. After 10 minutes and thinking it has been 57 days since my last real shower (for sure my record) I feel almost reborn! The potential flight back to Chile today is not going to happen and even for tomorrow it is not certain yet. Knowing that Daan did a great job in rebooking my flight to the 21<sup>st</sup> I slowly start landing some messages that this might need to happen again.

The relaxing hours in Union Glacier are slowly passing by. We're having too many snacks and great meals that they serve us, and I'm trying to cope with the noise and number of people around me, which I find difficult I have to say. The evening, night and morning are similar to the previous 24 hours with the exception of a quiz-night that the ALE staff have arranged for all guest, but because our brains had too much down time, the South Pole team ends last.

Yes! It's on the notice board 'Today around 3pm the Yllusion will arrive'. From previous occasions I know that this is only a fact when you are really in the plane, although even then it can still turn around just before taking off, but I am getting excited with this news and enjoy my breakfast even more. I have the feeling that for sure I already gained 2 or 3 kilos with all this food and no physical activity, but that's not a problem.

Now, sitting in the plane (yes, we are leaving Antarctica) I slowly transition into each of the following challenges. The first one will be if ALE managed to get a room for us in one of the hotels we recommended, but to be honest that's the least of my worries because arriving around 10pm and leaving to the airport again around 8 in the morning does not give me much time to sleep, repack and take that long shower. The good thing is I don't need to shave myself because Iris asked me to keep my beard until I am back. Not that I am 100% happy with that but it's also sweet that she asked for it. I am more concerned about all my luggage that needs to arrive at my hotel before I depart again. The way it works with this flight is that after arrival they will drop you as soon as possible at your hotel and then they unpack the plane and start delivering all items to each of us. Knowing that there are 60 people in the plane and probably divided over 15 hotels I am slightly concerned, but Ryan reassures me that it will be ok, so I try to put this aside and try to take a power nap in the plane.

My next plane journeys

So, it's about 15 hours later and I am again in a plane. This next step of my journey home will bring me from Punta Arenas to Santiago in a bit more than 3 hours. The arrival yesterday evening late in Punta was good. A nice breeze and mild temperature, my luggage arrived on time in the hotel and I'm staying in the same hotel as I stayed before (Kran Kréen). Although we arrived there at 11pm they were still willing to make some nice burgers for us. Before eating though I first took serious shower. I also had to look for my credit card, but I was unsuccessful which was of course not the best news of the day.

With a nice red wine, this time not from a carton box, and a very nice burger, we sit around the table and have a small celebration dinner before we all go to our room. I sort out all my gear and initially I have the idea to put 'smelly' items separate from the others, but very soon I come to the conclusion that hardly anything smells good, which makes packing much easier. Daan, or actually the media, asked me to send some high-resolution pictures for the press release, ideally today, so for a couple of hours I am pretty busy with going through 700 pictures before I am able to send a few via WE-transfer. The result of this time-consuming activity is that it's already 3:30 in the morning, 6:30 back home in the UK and I give Daan a call with WhatsApp. It's strange to suddenly see her again after more than 10 weeks, but for sure it must be even stranger for Daan than for me because of the way I look, especially

with my beard. It does not take long before Tom is in the room and besides being very cute, I can see in his eyes that he is a bit overwhelmed with my looks. Soon he starts talking about his South Pole cupcakes that he took to school to celebrate my achievement with his classmates. Both Iris and Lente have the same observations that my beard looks much longer than they would have expected but overall, it's really great to have short chat with them, as well as with my parents.

During my last breakfast, Ryan and I have a short chat with a lady next to us about our adventure and, lucky me, she is on her way to a job very close to the airport and offers me a ride, which saves me the hassle to bring my luggage to a taxi spot in town. But of course, I first say good-bye to Ryan and Paula. I am really happy that we all completed this expedition safely and I am equally happy with us as a team. A big component of this epic journey is to have a strong and balanced team and with no doubt this was for sure a successful team in many ways.

After a short drive I make my way to the airport, but although I have bought one ticket with BA they still want me to collect all my bags in Santiago and check them in again, which is far from ideal. Knowing that Santiago airport is not that efficient this can take quite some time, which I don't have a lot of to get onto my second flight to Heathrow. But first, I'll try to catch up with sleep after another night with only 2 hours.

I think the power nap on my way to Santiago made me even more tired, but I am really pleased that my luggage is arriving quickly, and I make my way to the check-in desk for my BA flight to London. For some reason I decide to skip the queue and make my way to the priority check-in and I am a bit surprised that the lady is helping me without asking for a frequent flyer card. I am even more surprised that I don't need to pay for my additional luggage, but I don't feel the need to ask for it. After spending my last Peso's on a lunch, I make my way to the gate for a 14-hour journey to the family, and I am lucky. When I arrive at the gate and show my boarding pass to the British Airway crew, they ask me to wait for a minute. With a big smile, one of them is handing me over a new boarding pass and when I have a look at it, I see seat 6E instead of 16. In a small plane I would have not paid attention to it, but now I start to think... maybe, maybe I am very lucky. Walking into the plane two minutes later, the maybe converts into a YES!! What a great surprise and it's for sure 100% appreciated that business class and a flatbed for the night is way much more comfortable than economy, but who made this possible? After texting Daan a few times it's clear. She contacted British Airways, told them about my achievement and asked whether they would consider giving me an upgrade to Business Class, which they did! So, with a very nice glass of champagne, my feet up and with a big smile I relax and start watching my first movie.

Emotions on arrival

As expected, the flight was in many ways very relaxing and walking out of the plane, I am thankful for BA's great service and this special gift. After a quick toilet break, some deo and a toothbrush moment, I collect my luggage and make my way to Arrivals. I know already that my parents, kids and Daan will be there waiting for me and I have been thinking about this moment so many times during the expedition that it does not take long after I walk towards them that I feel that I am becoming emotional. Tom, Lente and Iris are within a second in my arms which is an indescribable feeling of joy, happiness and at the same time a relief, because now the expedition is really over and successful. I give Daan a big kiss and my parents a big hug whilst we make our way to the car. Daan and Lente drive together ahead of us and my father is driving the other car with me, my mum, Iris and Tom.

It's great to see the house but I'm even more happy with the very big banner that Lente and Daan are holding up in front of it "Explorers Grand Slam, you did it! Congratulations Jaco!"

After tasting the South Pole cupcakes, it's time to share my stories, walk the dog and to unpack my bags with dirty clothes, but mostly to start relaxing and to look back at an incredible adventure.

A last few comments.

- 24 hours after my arrival I flew to the Netherlands for a TV and radio interview – for the Dutch readers who have not seen it, below is the link.

<https://www.rijnmond.nl/nieuws/191249/lk-zat-52-dagen-in-ee-diepvrieskist>

- For reference. They have added me this week to the Explorers Grand Slam list (nr 19 globally and as mentioned the second Dutch person).

<https://explorersgrandslam.com> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Explorers\\_Grand\\_Slam](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Explorers_Grand_Slam)

Last but not least I would like to say thank you to many people. Mostly to Daan, Lente, Iris and Tom but for sure also to my parents who stayed with Daan in the UK 8 out of 11 weeks and to Nel (my mother in law) and her partner Willem who covered the other weeks. Without a doubt I would also like to thank a huge circle of family, friends, teachers and all kind of people around us. I really look forward to seeing you all soon and like mentioned before all the messages, emails, congrats etcetera that I have been receiving, before, during and after the expedition have been amazing and gave me (and are still giving me) a huge amount of energy and pride.

**Thank you for reading my blogs!**

**Dare to Dream – Jaco**



Link to Make-A-Wish donation page:

<https://makeawishnederland.org/actie/1343/expeditie-naar-de-zuidpool>

Link to Beyond Summits website:

<http://www.beyondsummits.nl>