



Ann Daniels

Adventures with the
Ice Queen

Skiing to the North Pole

There was a loud bang and a rumble like thunder. The ice beneath their tent lurched and shook. Ann woke with a start, rolled out of her sleeping bag and unzipped the tent door to look outside. She was shocked to see that less than ten metres away – closer than the length of three cars – a frozen blue-white cliff had appeared where the flat ice had cracked. It towered four metres high – taller than two people – and was still slowly rising. The ice around their tent was also starting to crack.

‘Quick – we’ve got to get out of here!’ Ann told the others. If they didn’t move, the ice beneath them could split open and they would fall into the freezing water. Quickly they packed up their camp, threw everything on to their sledges and skied away as fast as they could. Only when they were a safe distance away did they dare to look back.

It was March 2002. Ann Daniels and her friends, Pom Oliver and Caroline Hamilton, were in the Arctic. They were skiing to the North Pole, trying to be the first all-female team to ski to both the North and South Poles. They had reached the South Pole two years earlier, skiing through Antarctica, a frozen continent surrounded by wild, icy seas. But the Arctic,

on the other hand, is actually a frozen ocean: a collection of ice sheets surrounded by the land masses of Russia, Alaska, Canada and Greenland. These ice sheets constantly shift, crack and grind against each other as they are moved by ocean currents and the wind. This was why the ice had cracked earlier that morning.

The women had started their North Pole trip at Ward Hunt Island in Canada, high in the Arctic Circle. Their goal was to complete the 500-mile route in seventy-five days, pulling all their own food and camping gear. This is known as sledge hauling.

The record-breaking attempt was Ann's idea. Ann is a mum of four – and Britain's first female North Pole guide.

'As a girl I never imagined that I would one day be an explorer,' Ann explains. 'I grew up in a city with four older brothers and we never visited the countryside. We played in the street and in the park. My only adventures were climbing trees and walls!'



Ann left school at sixteen and got a job in a bank, before getting married and having triplets. When she was thirty and the triplets were eighteen months old, Ann's husband showed her an advert in the newspaper looking for 'ordinary women' to join the McVitie's Penguin Polar Relay to the North Pole – where five teams would each ski different sections of the 500-mile journey as a relay.

'I had never carried a rucksack, skied or slept in a tent, but I thought that if I could look after three toddlers then I could do anything!' Ann says. She had given up her bank job when her babies were born and she was ready for a new challenge. If she were chosen to go, she thought it would be an amazing adventure, so she filled out the form and sent it off.

At the first selection weekend on Dartmoor, Ann was one of over 200 women, many of whom were outdoor leaders, PE teachers or simply very sporty. For two days they hiked across boggy moorland and camped out, mostly in the rain. It was so tough that after the two days every muscle in

Ann's body hurt and she cried in frustration. Despite this, she still wanted to be picked for the team.

For nine months Ann trained hard for the second and final selection weekend. She went to the gym, did military-style exercises in the garden when the triplets were asleep, and took them running in their pram. Her friends taught her how to read a map, use a compass and pack her rucksack properly. When Ann returned to Dartmoor, the instructors were amazed to see how much she had changed. She was much fitter, and she showed them how well she got along with others and worked as part of a team. Ann was thrilled when she was told she had been picked as one of just twenty women chosen for the polar relay.

The expedition took place in spring 1997 and Ann's parents looked after her children while she was away. On that first trip to the Arctic, Ann set eyes on the most magical landscape she had ever seen.

'Everything was dazzling white,' Ann remembers. 'The ice glistened blue, green, red and purple in the sunshine. It was covered in ice rubble, with ridges and folds where the ocean had crushed the ice sheets together. In places it had cracked open to reveal the black ocean below, then frozen over again, creating frost flowers – beautiful clumps of ice crystals. In the sky, I saw rainbows that encircled the sun, while beneath us the ice groaned and moved as if it were alive. We were literally walking on water!'

Along with two guides, Ann's team successfully completed the first leg of the relay – skiing fifty-six miles. When she got home, she watched the fifth – and final – team on TV as they reached the North Pole. On the trip



she had fallen in love with the world of ice and expedition life. She felt like she had finally found her place in the world.

The following year Ann and her husband got divorced. Soon she was living alone with her triplets. Despite being a single parent to her four-year-old children, she set her sights on a new challenge. She and four women from the original relay got together to organise, raise money for and attempt a 700-mile expedition across Antarctica to the South Pole, to celebrate the millennium. On this trip there would be no guides. Once again her parents took care of the triplets while Ann and her team skied across the windiest, highest and bleakest continent on Earth. They battled extreme weather conditions, including eighty-mile-an-hour winds, and faced dangers like crevasses – deep cracks in the ice that they could fall into. Finally, in January 2000, after sixty days on the ice, Ann and her friends became the first British all-female team to ski to the South Pole. They were overjoyed!

After Ann returned, she was asked to lead a team of ten people on a 'Last Degree' expedition, which is where you ski from the latitude of eighty-nine degrees north to ninety degrees north at the North Pole – a distance of sixty-nine miles. It was an all-male team, and during the expedition Ann began to dream of reuniting her South Pole team to sledge-haul the whole way to the North Pole. If they succeeded, they would be the first ever all-female team to reach both the North and South Poles.

While thousands of people have climbed Mount Everest, up until that time, fewer than seventy expeditions had reached the North Pole all the way from land because it is one of the most dangerous journeys in the world. The bumpy ice rubble, high ridges and changing areas of open



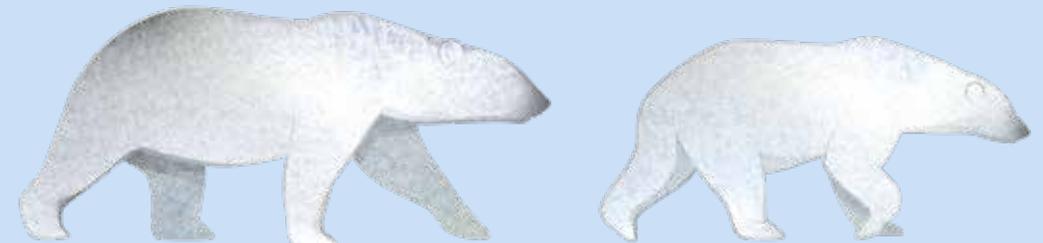
water make it much harder to reach than the South Pole. And while Antarctica has cute penguins, you might meet scary polar bears in the Arctic! When Ann had been on another North Pole expedition, she was followed for three days by a curious male polar bear – she had to make a loud noise to scare it off. Luckily, it eventually went away.



But for our three explorers the biggest danger in the North Pole was going to be the cold. 'We started our journey in mid-March, which is at the end of the Arctic winter,' says Ann. 'But it was still -56°C . That's three times colder than your freezer at home! The cold made it hard to think clearly. I often felt as if my brain was freezing like a bag of peas. Once, pulling my sledge, I thought I'd gone blind, only to realise that my eyelashes had frozen shut! And we always had to be very careful to stay wrapped up to avoid frostbite on our fingers, toes and noses.'

Their sledges were twice their own weight, and carried everything they needed for the journey. They had a tent, food and two camping stoves to share, and a sleeping bag, pencil, notebook, mug and spoon each. They didn't bring toilet paper, but used wedges of snow instead. *Brrrr!* They didn't wash or change their clothes for the whole eighty-day expedition. Can you imagine doing that? Luckily, they were wearing four layers of clothing so they couldn't smell each other!

It was also freezing cold inside the tent. Each evening the wind howled outside while the women huddled in their sleeping bags and boiled water to rehydrate their dried meals, which included things like chicken curry



and rice, or potato and beef stew. In the mornings they had porridge and made hot drinks on one stove, while melting snow on the other to provide enough drinking water for the day. This usually took around three hours. As they skied, they had a break every hour for a drink and to eat nuts, biscuits and chocolate chips to give them energy. (You can't take chocolate bars to the Arctic because the chocolate freezes so hard it would break your teeth!) The women were burning 5,000 calories a day and needed to eat nearly three times as much as they would normally. In freezing temperatures our bodies need more food than usual to convert into fuel and energy to stay warm and to function properly.

Whenever Ann found skiing hard, she chanted her children's names – *Lucy, Joseph, Rachel* – to remind her of home. Every two weeks she called them using a satellite phone. They were now eight years old and whenever she phoned they were usually more interested in telling her about school than asking her about the expedition!



When it was sunny, the three explorers loved looking at the spectacular ice world around them, but when it snowed, they could see no further than the person ahead. One day, four weeks into their trip, they faced a blizzard that was so fierce that they could not see to ski, and the wind was so strong that they could not put up their tent. They had to weigh down the tent material with their sledges to stop it blowing away, and then they crawled beneath it with their sleeping bags and a bag of chocolate chips and nuts each. They lay there for three days, trapped by the storm, before they could continue their journey.

'It's times like that when you have to remind yourself why you're there,' says Ann. 'We'd chosen to go to the North Pole. We were doing it for our sponsors, who had given us the money for the trip. I was also doing it for my children. We had no choice but to hunker down and wait for the storm to pass.'

They made slow progress. After thirty-seven days, they had only completed sixty-nine miles out of 500, with half the time gone. They all suffered because of the freezing temperatures. Ann got a frostbitten little toe: she had to warm it up carefully in the tent, otherwise she might lose it. Frostbite gave Caroline blisters on her fingers, which meant she couldn't take her gloves off easily. Ann had to help her get dressed and wipe her bottom, which reminded her of looking after her baby triplets! Pom had painful frostbitten toes. After forty-seven days, when a plane landed to deliver extra food to the women, Pom made the difficult decision to leave the trip.

Ann and Caroline still had over 300 miles to go and only thirty days left before a plane was scheduled to collect them.



‘Reaching the North Pole now looked impossible. But neither of us was willing to give up even if we failed in the end. We had to keep going for Pom.’

It was now the start of May. The pair decided to take the challenge one day at a time. They covered extra distance each day by skiing for longer and only sleeping three hours a night, which was possible because in the Arctic it is daylight all the time in springtime. However, because the temperature was now rising, this meant there were more areas of open water instead of ice. The women wore special waterproof suits to swim across sections of freezing ocean, their sledges floating behind them. They also used their sledges as bridges to cross areas of broken ice.

Slowly, they made up lost time and couldn't believe it when they finally arrived at the North Pole on 1 June 2002 with just two hours to spare before their plane landed. It had taken them eighty days. They put up a British flag, sang the national anthem and celebrated by eating beef stew. Ann and Caroline were the first ever all-female team to ski to the North and South Poles. But their joy was tinged with sadness because Pom was not there.

During this trip, Ann had noticed much more open water and cracks in the ice than she had on previous visits. She knew that the Arctic ice was melting and it made her sad. The beautiful, magical place she loved was disappearing – and this would have an impact on the animals that lived there, and on human life. She vowed that, when she got home, she would do all she could to help protect this special place.

‘When you're in the Arctic, you're stripped down to the person you are inside,’ Ann explains. ‘Having lots of new things – such as cars, phones and TVs – doesn't matter. I am now passionate about the beautiful world we live in, the climate, and trying to stop the damage we humans are doing to the planet.’

After returning from the Arctic, Ann had a fourth child, Sarah, with her new partner Tom. After Sarah started school, Ann was chosen to lead three expeditions to the North Pole with teams of scientists. These were the Catlin Arctic Surveys of 2009, 2010 and 2011. During these trips,

scientists measured how thick the ice was so they could understand how quickly the frozen Arctic Ocean was melting. They also took water samples to measure carbon dioxide levels – too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere makes the oceans more acidic, which damages living things in the oceans, such as coral reefs. Ann was responsible for leading the team on the ice and finding a safe route, having to make difficult decisions in the extreme conditions.

Ann continues to work at the poles. In 2017 and 2018, she worked in the Arctic with NASA, the European Space Agency and other scientific bodies on Operation IceBridge. In this project, Ann and her team placed special beacons in the ice so that scientists can monitor the disappearing ice near the North Pole. Ann is also a climate change ambassador, and is regularly asked to speak about her polar experiences on television and all over the world.

‘Working at the extreme ends of the Earth is unimaginably hard, but it is a privilege and an honour,’ says Ann. ‘It makes you realise just how insignificant you are when you're faced with nature on such a grand scale, and for me it evokes a passion to do something to protect our fragile environment. I have seen first-hand the devastating effects of climate change on the Arctic. It is warming faster than any other region in the world.’

Even though she grew up in a city, Ann found her calling as a polar explorer, leading people through one of the harshest places on Earth, and now she is helping to protect the special places she loves so much.

