Pole to Pole

Michael Palin

Photographs by Basil Pao

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Extract

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PHOENIX

DAY 1: *The North Pole*

It's 3.45 on a Saturday afternoon and I'm seventeen miles from the North Pole. Somewhere, a long way away, people are doing sensible things like watching cricket or digging gardens or pushing prams or visiting their mothers-in-law.

I'm squeezed tight into a small, noisy aeroplane descending through stale grey cloud towards an enormous expanse of cracked and drifting ice. With me are Nigel Meakin and his camera, Fraser Barber and his tape-recorder and Roger Mills and his pipe. With our two pilots, Russ Bomberry and Dan Parnham, we are the only human beings within 500 miles. Outside my window one of our two propeller-driven engines slowly eats away at a fuel supply which must last us another six hours at least. In little more than ten minutes our pilot will have to fashion a landing strip out of nothing more than a piece of ice – strong enough to withstand an impact of 12,500 lbs at eighty miles an hour. Below the ice the sea is 14,000 feet deep.

I'm sure I'm not the only one of us looking down on this desolate wilderness who hasn't wished, for an impure moment, that the North Pole, rather than being in the middle of an ocean, was solid, well marked and even supplied with a hut and a coffee machine. But the cracked and fissured ice-pack offers no comfortable reassurance – no glimmer of any reward to the traveller who has made his way to the top of the world. The Arctic Ocean, known to the Victorians as the Sea of Ancient Ice, stares balefully back as we descend towards it, reflecting nothing but the question: Why?

It's too late to ask the producer now, too late to begin to speculate why I so eagerly agreed to come here, and completely out of order even to mention that if we survive this ice landing we have only another 12,500 miles to go.

At two minutes past four our De Havilland Twin Otter, designed in the fifties and much loved and trusted by Arctic flyers, is finally over the North Pole. One almost looks for a point, a peak, a curve offering tantalizing glimpses of those huge land masses – Alaska, Siberia, Scandinavia and Canada – which

back on to the Arctic. But all there is to see is ice and the nearer we get to it the more evident it is that the ice is not in good shape. Russ, a self-contained, taciturn man about whom I know nothing other than that my life is in his hands, leans forward from the controls, scanning the conditions below and frowning.

Technology cannot help him now. The decision as to how, when and ultimately whether to drop the plane onto the ice is for his judgement alone.

He clearly doesn't like what he sees and, by my watch, we have circled the roof of the world for nearly thirty minutes before a change in engine note indicates that he is at last throttling back in preparation for a landing. We drop low, running in over a tongue of open water, Russ staring hard at the ice as ridge walls taller than I'd expected rush up to meet us. Brace myself for impact, but it never comes. At the last minute Russ thrusts the overhead throttle control forward and pulls us up banking steeply away. He checks the fuel gauge and asks Dan, the young co-pilot, to connect up one of the drums for in-flight refuelling. Dan squeezes his way from the cockpit to the back of the plane, where he begins to fiddle around with spanners and tubes until the aircraft is rich with the smell of kerosene. The Pole remains 100 feet below us, tantalizingly elusive, probably in the middle of a black pool of melted water. Russ takes advantage of some marginally increased sunlight to attempt a second landing. Once again hearts rise towards mouths as the engines slow and a blur of ice and snow and pitch-black sea rises towards us, but once again Russ snatches the plane from the ice at the last moment and we soar away, relieved and cheated.

I make a mental note never to complain about a landing ever again. Russ circles and banks the plane for another fifteen minutes, patiently examining the floating ice for yet another attempt.

This time there is no pull-out. Six hours after leaving Eureka Base on Ellesmere Island, Canada, the wheels and skis of the Twin Otter find the ground, bounce, hit, bounce, hit, swerve, slide and finally grip the slithery hummocked surface. We are down and safe. I check the time on my watch, and realize that at

this point it could be whatever time I wanted it to be. Japanese time, Indian time, New York time or London time – they're all the same at the Pole. It is ten o'clock at night in London.

Home seems impossibly far away as we step out onto a rough base of ice and snow. It looks secure but water channels only a few yards away and the fact that Russ will not risk switching off the aircraft engines in case the ice should split reminds us that this is a lethal landscape. Finding the highest point in the vicinity – a pile of fractured ice-blocks, soaring to three and a half feet, I plant our 'North Pole' (kindly loaned to us by the Canadians) and we take our photos. The air is still, and a watery sun filters through grey-edged cloud giving the place a forlorn and lonely aspect. The temperature is minus twenty-five Centigrade. This is considered warm.

After an hour's filming, we defer to Russ's polite impatience and return to the aircraft. Concerned about fuel, he takes off quickly and unceremoniously, as if the North Pole were just another bus stop.

We have planned to follow the thirty degree East meridian all the way to the South Pole, but straight away there are problems. There is only enough fuel left to reach the nearest airstrip, a Danish base in Greenland. Even this is 480 miles away, and beyond radio range at the moment. We have no option but to fly in hope.

For some reason the only liquid we have been provided with for our journey is a litre can of tomato juice which doesn't last long between six people, and it is a thirsty, underfed, cramped and exhausted little group that puts down at Nord Base, Greenland, with only twenty-five minutes of fuel left. We have been away from the rest of the world for ten minutes short of twelve hours.

There is not a soul to be seen.

Russ, armed with registration documents and proof of identity, trudges off into the distance to try and raise someone.

We wait by the aircraft, in a curious state of mental and physical limbo. The only one who seems really happy is Roger, who is at last able to light up his pipe.

After what feels like an eternity, Russ returns with a young Danish soldier who is in a state of considerable shock. No one had told him we were coming, and it being three o'clock in the morning on the north coast of Greenland, 700 miles from the nearest settlement, a knock on the door must have been like the start of a horror movie.

He bravely tries to laugh it off, 'We thought it could only be Father Christmas', before offering us what we are dying for – food and drink and a bed for the night. So day one ends in country one, which turns out, quite unexpectedly, to be Denmark.

DAY 2: *Greenland to Ny Alesund*

The midnight sun is shining brightly when I climb into a bunk at 3.30 a.m., and equally brightly when I wake at half-past nine. From 15 October the sun will disappear below the horizon and not rise again until the end of February, but for now, in mid-May, day merges seamlessly into day.

Greenland is a part of the kingdom of Denmark – a massive, almost uninhabited ice-cap over fifty times the size of its mother country. The base at Nord is manned for the Danish government by five soldiers, but one of them is away, so Henny, Jack, Kent and Kenneth are running the place at the moment.

Two big supply planes come in each year bringing all they need – fresh videos, books, food and drink, and equipment. The only thing they don't like is that it means letters . . . 'Not receiving them, *writing* them,' they explain.

They're so friendly, open and hospitable that there is a great temptation to abandon the journey and stay here, drinking fresh coffee with rich Danish bread, half-listening to a rock-and-roll track by a Miss B. Haven entitled 'Making Love in the Snow', and gazing out to a view of icy fiords bathed in crisp bright sunshine. I ask Jack if the snow ever disappears.

'Oh yes,' he assures me, 'it melts in July. And starts snowing again in August.'

Russ is unable to make contact with our next port of call – Ny Alesund in Spitsbergen – and the Danes say they will try and raise a weather forecast from the American base at Thule. This takes some time, but at midday the news comes through that the weather is good, and after refuelling and repacking we squeeze back into the Twin Otter.

There are 325 miles between Greenland and the Svalbard Islands, of which Spitsbergen ('steep mountains' as it was named by the Dutch who discovered it 400 years ago) is the largest. Part of Norway since 1925, it is for us an important stepping-stone between the North Pole and Europe, and the first place where we hope to do without aircraft and continue our journey by land and sea.

Below us, a mixture of black clear-water channels, pale-blue icebergs and various shades of frozen and refrozen ice give the Greenland Sea a mottled effect, but as we cross the Greenwich meridian and enter the eastern hemisphere the effect of a warm current pushing up from the Atlantic changes the scene dramatically. The ice melts away and thick cloud hides the water for a while. When we see it again, it is only 1500 feet below the plane and a fierce easterly wind is flicking spray from the top of angry waves.

The Twin Otter is suddenly battling against a headwind and horizontally driving snow. Russ takes us down another 1000 feet but the visibility is no better, and before we hit slap-bang into the side of Spitsbergen he pulls us sharply up through the impenetrable but mercifully low storm cloud to calmer conditions at 2000 feet.

Judging from his expression Spitsbergen is not on Russ's regular beat and he seems as surprised as any of us to see the sweeping sides of a mountain range emerge above the clouds to the east. From the map these look to be the peaks of Albert I Land, and turning the little aircraft south we follow the coastline and descend through the angry, drifting remains of the storm clouds into King's Fiord, where glaciers roll down to the sea and fragments of ice speckle the dark water. Dwarfed by the massive landscape two golf ball early-warning domes, a couple

of tall concrete structures and a cluster of brightly painted houses mark the settlement of Ny Alesund (New Alesund). We have crossed two time zones in our two-and-a-half-hour flight and passed south of latitude 80 degrees.

At Ny Alesund we rendezvous with David Rootes, our adviser on Arctic survival from the Scott Polar Research Institute, Engineer Geir Paulsen, the organizer of our land transport, and Patti, Nigel's camera assistant. Basil Pao, stills photographer and last member of our team, is to meet us in Tromsø. It's soon clear from the swirling snowstorms that sweep across the fiord and from the experiences David and Patti recount from their journey up to meet us that Greenland and the North Pole have been a picnic compared with what lies ahead.

But first the pleasure of a shower and clean clothes and a drink in the only bar in Ny Alesund. Everyone seems subdued, but this is apparently the result of multiple hangovers from a party held here last night to toast the news of our arrival at the Pole.

DAY 3: *Ny Alesund*

We're quartered in simple comfort in a long wooden hut comprising individual bedrooms, shared shower and lavatory, sports hall and a room for conferences and classes. It's owned, as is most of Ny Alesund, by the King's Bay Kull Company. Kull, or coal, is the main reason for a human presence on Spitsbergen but following a series of disasters in the early 1960s the Ny Alesund mines were closed down and the accommodation is now used for scientific research, intrepid vacations and the inevitable weather station. There is even a fledgling British presence here in the shape of Nick Cox and his wife Katie who are employed in setting up an Arctic research station.

Life is still run along the lines of a company town. Breakfast at 7.30, lunch at noon and supper at five are all served in a communal canteen, a five-minute walk along a snow-covered track. The preferred mode of transport is the snowmobile,

often known by one of its trade names as the Ski-Doo. Built like a fat motorbike, it is driven by a caterpillar track with short skis on the front for steering. With flashy trims and names like *Exciter*, *Enticer* and *Phazer II* they make a lot of noise and give a great impression of speed although rarely hitting more than 45 m.p.h. They are to be our transport on the 155-mile journey across the mountains to the capital town of Longyearbyen.

Though we are crying for a day off after the polar adventure, Geir Paulsen, a round, pony-tailed adventurer with a considerable sense of humour, is of the opinion that we should try to leave before bad weather sets in. (One thing I've noticed in countries full of weather stations is that no one can give you an accurate weather forecast. They can tell you that palm trees will be growing in Iceland in seventy-five years, but nothing at all about the afternoon ahead.)

We load up and set off about 3 p.m. It is appropriate that our column of snowmobiles and trailers should pass, on the way out of town, a three-foot high bronze head of the explorer Roald Amundsen. It commemorates the first transpolar flight in his airship *Norge*, which left Ny Alesund on 11 May 1926 and landed in North America on 14 May, after a journey of over 3000 miles. Three years later Amundsen died in the Arctic attempting to rescue his friend Nobile, whose airship, like Amundsen's, left from the thirty-foot pylon which still stands on the edge of town, receding into the distance as we head for the mountains.

Determined to do all my own stunts, I send myself and my passenger David Rootes flying as I lose control of *Mach-One* (the name of the black Ski-Doo I've been allotted) round a tight bend. One handlebar is the accelerator, the other the brake, and at this stage I'm not entirely sure which is which. Fortunately the accident causes more injury to pride than to limb. The going is not easy. The sun is now lost in cloud and it's difficult to see the track. Heinrich, a young Norwegian with disconcertingly blue eyes, who can probably drive a snowmobile standing on his head, leads the procession as we climb towards the saddle of the mountain. Quite suddenly thick cloud envelops us and

everything around is white. All sense of direction is lost, and when we do eventually have to pull up, David Rootes informs me drily that 300 yards to my left is a precipice, dropping sheer to a glacier. Defeated by the worsening conditions we turn back. Fresh snow is falling and a small drift has formed already on the side of Amundsen's huge and beaky nose as we re-enter Ny Alesund. Neither he nor anyone else seems surprised to see us back.

DAY 4: *Ny Alesund*

Wake to the sound of bird-song. As I haven't yet seen a single living creature in the Arctic, I wonder for a moment if this might be one of the crew, driven mad with homesickness, playing a Percy Edwards tape. But Peter Webb, a young Englishman and one of our Ski-Doo circus, tells me at breakfast that it's a snow bunting. We're also likely to see seals, reindeer and possibly Arctic fox on our way across the island. I'm desperate to see a polar bear (having been brought up on Brumas) but might have to shoot it if I do. I glean this from a warning poster, in Norwegian and English, displayed at the door of the canteen. 'Polar bears may be very dangerous,' it begins:

'The following precautions should be taken: (1) Always carry a weapon. (2) Do not attract bears by putting out food. Place your garbage at least 100 metres away from the camp, directly in view of your tent opening or cabin door. This may enable you to see a visiting bear in time. Report to the authorities if you have had to kill a bear, find out what sex it is, and take care of the skull and skin.'

Roger slept badly and suspects he has a sprained wrist following yesterday's excursion. This is his excuse for wearing a sinister black glove on one hand. Fraser dreamt that he gave every member of his family a Ski-Doo for Christmas. I can see why he thought of Christmas, for the snow is falling here as copiously as in any Disney cartoon, making it hard to remember that it's nearly June.

Geir is ever hopeful. The barometer is evidently rising and we should be packed and ready to leave at six this evening, after supper.

At 6 p.m. the snow is falling in great big fat lazy flakes, and we are about to settle, not unhappily, for an evening of table tennis and a good night's sleep when Geir and his colleagues suggest that the most settled conditions are often in the middle of the night and they would seriously ask us to consider a 2 a.m. departure. This is seriously considered, but not for very long. Another postponement, until tomorrow morning, is agreed upon. Back to the table tennis.

DAY 5: *Ny Alesund to Kap Wik*

2 a.m. The skies duly clear and dazzling sunlight picks out mountains and glaciers obscured for forty-eight hours.

8 a.m. I raise my blind in expectation. The sun has gone as if it were a dream, and the pile of snow at my window is half an inch higher. Walk through a blizzard to the canteen. I have said goodbye to the breakfast chef at least twice and he is now thoroughly confused and a little suspicious of my intentions. Am I really on my way to the South Pole or just trying out Great Mueslis of the World?

Heinrich is phlegmatic.

'Waiting . . .' he observes, 'everything about the Arctic is waiting.' After lunch the snow begins to ease off and in the square the Norwegian flag turns abruptly to the south. This is a sign of the arrival of the settled northerly airstream for which we have been waiting.

The journey to Longyearbyen is likely to take twelve hours at least, and it is suggested that we should break it with a stop at Kap Wik, about five hours away, where there is a trapper's hut with accommodation. This sounds suitably photogenic and fairytale-like and once the vehicles have been cleared of their carapace of snow, the sledge trailers lashed down and hooked up, and an anti-polar-bear rifle stashed aboard, we are once

more ready for departure. Nick and Katie Cox honour us with an official British presence at the great moment, and Nick entrusts me with a bottle of whisky for Harald, the trapper. I am so embarrassed that we might have to slink back yet again that I avoid the chef's eye and Amundsen's severe stare as we finally pull away just after seven in the evening.

The mountains climb quite steeply to 2000 feet and we have to stop a lot in the first hour, partly to free snowmobiles bogged down by their heavy loads, but mainly to photograph the spectacular views out across King's Fiord, fed by three glaciers and rimmed with sweeping mountain peaks. As soon as the motors are turned off and the natural silence restored, the size and scale and majesty of the landscape is indescribable. There are no trees on Spitsbergen, and therefore few birds except around the coast, and with unbroken snow shrouding the valley below us there is an atmosphere of magnificent peacefulness.

Soon we are across the pass and putting the snowmobiles down a snow-slope so steep that we are warned not to use the brake. This is to prevent the trailers from swinging round and pulling the vehicles over – and presumably sending the driver hurtling downhill in a mass of wreckage, though they don't tell you the last bit. We twist and turn through some perilous gullies which Roger refers to with a certain relish as Walls of Death, as in 'Michael, we'd like to do another Wall of Death sequence'. The whole adventure seems to have gone to his head since he chose the codeword 'Raving Queen' for his end of the two-way radio. Fraser, at the other end, is 'Intrepid One', and I suppose it does take away some of the terror to hear, floating across a glacier, the immortal words:

'Raving Queen to Intrepid One, Michael's on the Wall of Death . . . Now!'

On the other side of the pass another epic wintry panorama is revealed on the shores of Engelsbukta – 'English Bay' – where an English whaling fleet under Henry Hudson took refuge in 1607 while in search of the north-east passage. Much of the bay is still frozen, and we see our first seals – nothing more than

tiny black blobs – waiting beside their holes in the ice. A ptarmigan, in its white winter coat, peers curiously down at us from a pinnacle of rock, and a pair of eider ducks turn low over the bay.

We head towards a wide, level glacier passing ice cliffs of palest blue which are millions of years old and still moving. I ask Geir why they should be such a colour. Apparently it is caused by the presence of air inside the ice.

After the roller-coaster conditions on the pass, progress across the glacier is fast and reasonably comfortable. I am riding pillion behind David, and apart from nursing an occasional numbing cold in my thumb and fingers, I have plenty of time to sit back and take in the glories of this wide, unvisited landscape. A pair of Svalbard reindeer, not much bigger than large dogs, wander across a hillside. God knows what they find to eat.

After five hours we grind to a halt, our vehicles stuck in deep fresh-fallen snow at the top of a pass, still barely halfway to the trapper's hut. Bars of chocolate, nips of Scotch and stupendous views keep spirits up as Geir, Heinrich and the team make repeated journeys down the valley to bring up machines that couldn't make it to the top. Once all of them are up on the ridge they have to be refuelled, a slow laborious job, as is anything which involves unloading the trailers.

We are rewarded with a long exhilarating run on wide downhill slopes to our first ice-crossing – on the frozen headwaters of the Ehmanfiord. The surface is scratched and rutted, and it's only on the last stretch that the ice is smooth enough to open out, and we ride like invading Mongol hordes toward the tiny, isolated cabin on Kap Wik where, somewhat improbably, we are to spend what remains of the night.

DAY 6: *Kap Wik to Longyearbyen*

It's 2.45 in the morning when we arrive at Harald Solheim's hut. A tall wooden frame hung with seal carcasses stands on a slight rise, more prominent than the cabin itself, which is set

lower down, out of the wind. The first surprise is Harald himself. Instead of some grizzly bearded old-timer, a tall, pale, studious figure comes out to welcome us. He does have a beard, but attached as it is to long, aquiline features the effect is more rabbi than trapper. The second surprise is how benignly and agreeably he copes with the appearance of ten tired and hungry travellers in the middle of the night. First we fill up his minuscule hallway with our boots and bags, then we burst his sitting-room to the seams while he heats up some stew on a wood-burning stove. His wood supply, neatly stacked in a workshop, is driftwood, probably from the Russian coast. His electricity supply is wind-generated.

He fetches out a leg of smoked reindeer, which is quite delicious, and over this and a mixture of stew, smoked salmon, Aquavit (the local spirit) and Glenmorangie whisky we thaw out and swap stories. Harald offers advice, comment and information, liberally laced with dry humour. It's like some wonderfully chaotic tutorial.

Around about 4.30 a.m. some of us start looking a little anxiously for the dormitory. Harald explains the arrangements. In a next-door room he has four bunk-beds and floor space for two. There is more space on the floor of his workshop. Everyone else will have to sleep in the sitting-room with him. There is one sit-down loo, but as this is a bag that has to be emptied men are requested to use the Great Outdoors whenever possible, but to refrain from peeing on the side of the house from which he draws his water supply. For cleaning teeth and washing he recommends the snow.

When I wake, it's half-past eleven. The sitting-room resembles some Viking Valhalla with recumbent Norwegians scattered about and Harald sprawled on the sofa like a warrior slain in battle. Then the telephone rings. Last night my tired brain was so busy romanticizing Harald's existence that I hadn't noticed the phone, or the remote control for the matt-black hi-fi, or the visitors' book, or the collection of Rachmaninov piano concertos on CD, signed 'To Harald from Vladimir Ashkenazy'.