





# Lessons from the **Alpha Bitch**

Matty McNair is one of the toughest expedition leaders in the world. So if you sign up for her polar-training course, prepare to get schooled

*Story and photos  
by Margo Pfeiff*

Leader of the pack:  
Matty McNair  
lets the dogs out  
at her home in  
Iqaluit, Nunavut.



Attention class: McNair gives her students a few pointers on sled packing. Opposite: Indoor instruction on clothing and equipment.

**D** **ANGLING MY LEGS OFF** a six-foot-thick ice floe, I slide into slushy water. The “swimsuit” I’m modelling is no polka-dot bikini, but a screaming-red, one-piece number I’ve slipped over half a dozen layers, including an expedition down jacket and ski boots. Air rushes out around my neck as heavy-gauge nylon hugs me. Suddenly, I’m bobbing buoyantly up to my chin in the Arctic Ocean like a cherry in somebody’s pina colada.

This rare patch of water in the sea ice is a polynya, kept open throughout winter by strong currents. The  $-3^{\circ}\text{C}$  sea water steams into the clear  $-28^{\circ}$  March sky. Slapping at a raft of floating ice, I smash it with my oven-mitt paws and dog-paddle through clinking bergy bits as if I’m doing laps in a tumbler of scotch. “I find the backstroke works for me,” suggests Matty McNair at the other end of a tether connected to my suit.

When I hoist myself back onto the ice,

the salt water on my suit flash-freezes and drifts as snow to my feet. I had come north to Baffin Island to immerse myself in the Arctic, but I must confess I hadn’t expected the experience to be quite so literal.

**I HAD NEVER WANTED** to go to Nunavut in winter. In fact, I had managed to avoid it on more than a dozen journeys north in as many years, travelling mostly in midsummer as relief from Montreal’s heat waves. Then I met Matty McNair. Matty is the world’s foremost female polar expedition leader—she’s been to the South Pole three times, and she’s been to the North Pole twice. She also runs an arctic adventure company called NorthWinds.

Over the past five years, during my trips in the Far North, Matty and I have become good friends. “Come up for polar training,” she urged on my frequent traipses through Iqaluit, where she lives. “It’ll be fun.”

Every winter, the tiny and tough 56-year-old crams 20 years of Arctic and Antarctic travel experience into a rigorous two-week-

long crash training course. The course—held in polar bear country colder than the average deep freeze—is designed for people who dream of travelling by foot to either the North or South Poles. I assured Matty that my idea of winter fun included palm trees and prawns on a barbecue.

Then, in the summer of 2007, we met for a weekend at her mum’s farm in New Hampshire. It was hot, the beer was cold and the 80-year-old Edie McNair reminisced about her days as an American national gold medal whitewater canoeist. “We first took Matty canoeing when she was just two weeks old,” she boasted about her Philadelphia-born daughter who went on to spend 22 years as a wilderness survival and leadership instructor at Outward Bound. “You should do her polar training,” Edie suggested. “It’ll be fun.” Swept up by two generations of outdoor adventurers and too much brew, the macho-wannabe inside me boldly said, “Sure!”

For six months afterwards, I lived in terror of the repercussions of that tiny word.

I would hate the polar-training course. I wasn't fit enough. I would die out there in the cold. Though I'd hiked in Ellesmere and Auyuittuq national parks and done some kayaking around Pond Inlet, Matty's course was serious explorer stuff. In December, a detailed course outline mentioned dog sledding, not good news for someone still bearing puncture scars from two previous canine encounters. January delivered the bios of the four other participants, who had—among other things—trekked 1,000

By 9 a.m. the next morning, the four other participants and I are sipping coffee in Matty's dining room, the hub of her comfortable, plant-filled home alongside Frobisher Bay. The house is her office, workshop and studio where she is fiercely creative, painting, felting, teaching pottery or playing violin with a clan of Iqaluit's other musicians. It will be our classroom for six days of lectures and workshops before we hit the trail on a four-day mini-expedition across the sea ice. The participants will

then make their way back on their own for three days.

"Why don't we start with you telling me your polar dreams?" Matty says. John Dunn, a 35-year-old firefighter from Sydney, Australia, is a big jovial teddy bear of a guy planning a trip with 11 others to converge on the South Pole via five routes in late 2009. Joe Woodward, also 35, from London, England, works in property management, and is a lean, muscled adventure runner with his eye on a Greenland crossing before stepping up to a North Pole trek in 2012. Martin Murray, a 36-year-old Franco-Ontarian who runs the OK Tire Store in Kapuskasing, is a toque-topped, modern day *coureur de bois* with a steely drive to reach the North Pole solo in 2010. Tina Uebel, 39, from Hamburg, Germany, is a writer/journalist so passionate about travelling to the South Pole that she has written

Matty prances into the living room wearing sealskin boots, dog fur pants and a caribou anorak, and launches into a litany of reasons why no clothing, not even that worn by the Inuit, is perfect in the cold

kilometres across Tasmania and completed solo ski trips over Lake Winnipeg. And then, in February, the temperature in Nunavut dropped to  $-54^{\circ}\text{C}$ , particularly nippy, even for the North.

**O**N MARCH 1, nursing a killer cold that refuses to turn into the pneumonia that could get me out of this trip, I land in the barren snowscape of Iqaluit. A chipper Matty meets me at the airport, her mane of red-brown curls dishevelled by a wind that is firing ice darts at a face that looks a decade younger than her years. "You'll be fine," she says, shrugging off my anxiety. When I turn the door knob at her house, the metal sticks to my fingers, and then I'm shrouded in fog as icy air slams into the warm interior.



a fictional book about it and hopes a recent inheritance will make the trek a reality. Two North and two South Pole dreamers.

"Okay. We'll start with clothing and sleeping systems and the tents you'll be sleeping in tonight," Matty says. I am not the only one whose eyes flicker to a chalkboard where she has posted: "Monday. Blizzard warning. Night: winds 50-70 k.p.h. Windchill:  $-37^{\circ}$ ." A few minutes later, Matty prances into the living room wearing sealskin boots, dog fur pants and a caribou anorak, and launches into a litany of reasons why no clothing, not even that worn by the Inuit, is perfect in the cold. Caribou is warm with Hollofil-like hairs, but stiff when wet; sealskin is waterproof, but not warm. Thinsulate absorbs water and can take days to dry; Gore-Tex



stops breathing when it freezes. Since hot air rises, pit-zips are useless. Cheap gloves often vent sweaty hands better than high-end, windproof expedition models. The priciest brand-name gear and that offered by polar sponsors are usually re-jigged or rejected. “I’ve spent days moving zippers that end up under our harnesses or ripping out linings that suck up water,” Matty says, adding that every night on expedition she repairs or reworks equipment and clothing. “Polar travel is a problem-solving game every step of the way.”

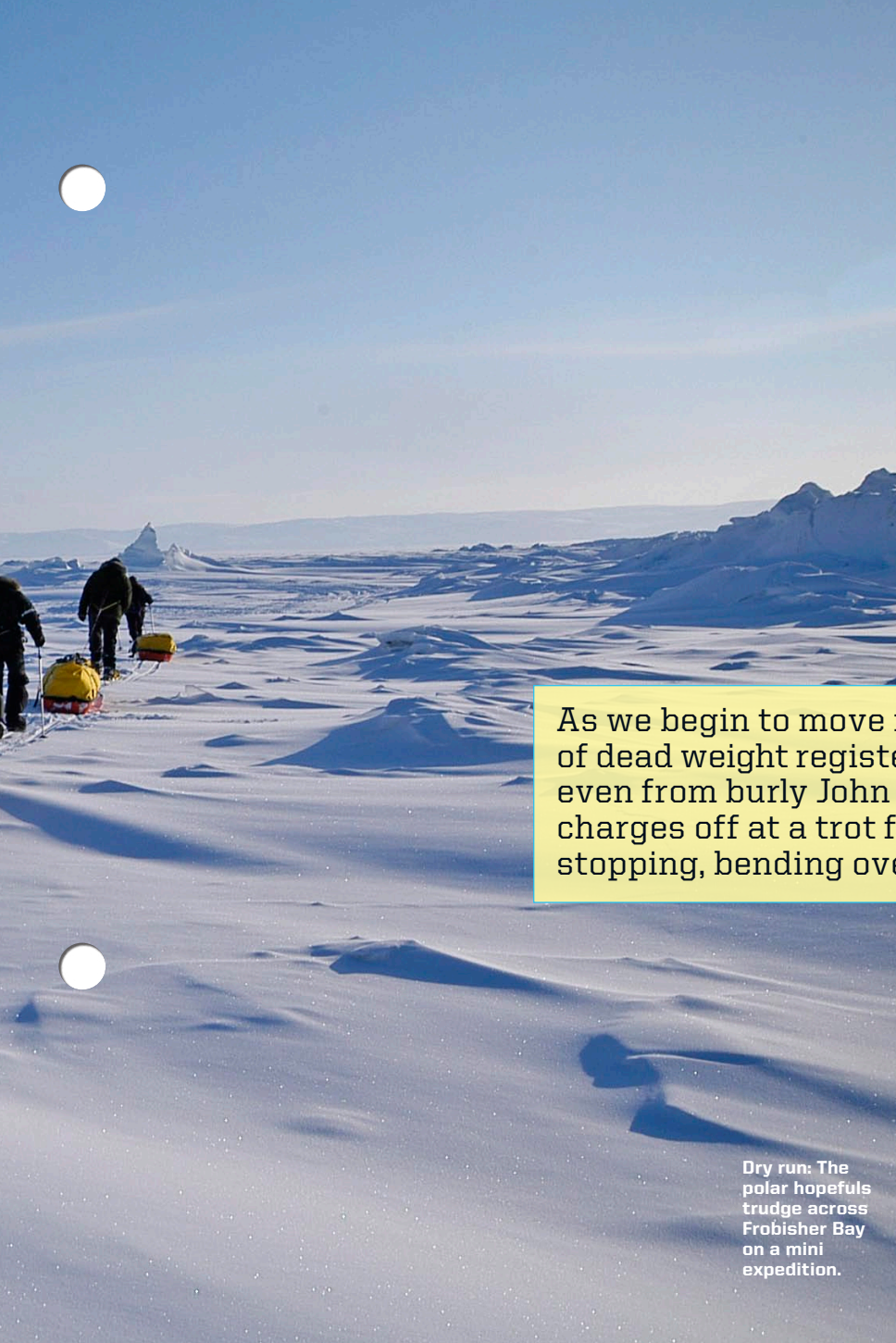
Atop her wicking and fleece layers, Matty slips a windproof Inuit-style anorak that “chimneys” cool air up its skirt and vents

warm, dangerously damp air out under the chin. She has stiffened the deep, fur-trimmed hood with a coat hanger for adjustability; the fur creates a micro-climate around the face up to 15 degrees warmer than the ambient temperature. On expeditions, Matty has stopped wearing under-pants, which chafe into serious sores, in favour of crotch-zips. “Now I’m the fastest pisser in the Arctic,” she grins. According to Matty, balaclavas that freeze to your face are out; neck gaiters, windproof cowls and stylishly large snot-rags are in. I’m getting into this. I love to accessorize.

What extra clothes did she take to the South Pole? “One pair of socks.” Once a

week for three months she “dry washed”—damp-sponged—the single set of clothes she travelled and slept in. “Oils and dead skin clog up polypro and it doesn’t work anymore.”

We pop up double-walled Hilleberg expedition tents behind Matty’s house in the shadow of the Northern grocery store, alongside the snowmobile route that is Iqaluit’s off-road Highway 401. Fully polypro-d out with cowl and gloves, I struggle into my vapour barrier, a glorified Glad bag with a drawstring designed to keep moisture from migrating into my down bag. Matty explains that we generate two kinds of sweat, “sensible” sweat to keep our skin from crack-



As we begin to move forward and the reality of dead weight registers, gasps of shock erupt, even from burly John and hyper-fit Joe. Martin charges off at a trot for the first 75 feet before stopping, bending over, panting

Dry run: The polar hopefuls trudge across Frobisher Bay on a mini expedition.

prompts comments from our group about travelling to the Pole with a pole).

Looking at the photos, it's almost hard to believe that people pay money to endure this kind of suffering. A lot of money. Roughly \$US 250,000 gets you to the North Pole from Ward Hunt Island and \$US 59,000 buys a guided trek to the South Pole. It's a testament to Matty's skill that neither she nor any of her clients has ever suffered frostbite on her watch.

After first-aid kit advice and basic navigation, she carefully checks our gear and adds missing items from a vast collection stored in meticulously organized and labelled bins. She tosses aside my pricey Gore-Tex vapour barrier socks and hands over a couple of plastic sandwich bags. "These work better." We're introduced to our "pulks," low-slung Scandinavian sleds we clip onto our body

harnesses, and as they bounce along empty behind us like eager puppies, we take off into the great, sunny, white outdoors.

It's not a pretty sight. We're okay on the flat sea ice ("We're travelling to Antarctica now," Matty announces), but things get ugly when we reach jumbled pressure ice ("Now let's go to the North Pole for a while"). Joe, from England, has never skied before, and on ice cubes the size of a VW bus, his skis slip out from under him like a colt taking its first steps. John's pricey Aussie bindings snap. I trip over my poles and do a face-plant. Fretting so much about the cold, I spend the afternoon in a sweat-fest of fogged goggles and camera lenses. "Moisture control is one of the biggest problems in polar travel," says Matty who then recites what will become our anti-hypothermia mantra—"You sweat, you die!"

Matty McNair's polar training course is the most comprehensive offered anywhere, not only for the expert instruction, but also because you get a unique opportunity to test skills and equipment in actual polar conditions. Frozen Frobisher Bay is a perfect stand-in for both the relatively smooth ice of Antarctica and the gnarly, ice-ridge-and-open-water-riddled route on the shifting sea ice to the North Pole. There are windy days for kite-skiing and

ing and "insensible" sweat—body-cooling perspiration. Vapour barriers signal your body to turn off the taps. Inserted into a sleeping bag that is tucked into a waterproof over bag, I feel like a sausage in phyllo pastry trying not to sweat insensibly.

After a night of howling dogs and Inuit kids bouncing basketballs off the side of Matty's dog-food-filled shipping container, I stumble into the kitchen for coffee. Spread across the table are photos of bloated, blistered and blackened fingers and toes. Welcome to *Day Two: How the Dominoes Line up for Disaster*.

On the menu after Raisin Bran are hypothermia, chilblains, frost nip, frostbite, snow

blindness ("It felt like my eyeballs were slit with razor blades," Matty says of that experience), hands that crack and bleed, and feet that swell into unsightly turnips two sizes bigger than your boots. We learn that a single rogue toenail can nick the neighbouring piggy and nix an entire expedition. And it's good to know that black frostbitten digits should not be severed immediately. Recent research shows it's better to wait until they atrophy. "Your feet get hammered on an expedition," says Matty, who pops up to a dozen ibuprofen a day, with codeine and morphine for bigger stuff. She adds that, to stay warm, some people even down Viagra to increase blood flow (which



**Polar bear dip:** John Dunn learns how it's really done in the Arctic.

## The Queen of Cold

Matty McNair fell in love with the cold ends of the globe after she and husband Paul Landry, a fellow instructor at Northern Ontario's Outward Bound, completed the first-ever circumnavigation of Baffin Island, a four-month, 4,000-kilometre dogsled trek in 1990. They moved to Iqaluit, raising two children and a pack of Inuit sled dogs while taking turns home-schooling the kids and guiding ski, hiking and dog-sledding trips throughout the Eastern Arctic for their adventure company, NorthWinds.

In 1997, Matty led the first commercial trip to the North Pole, a grueling 82-day British women's relay that prompted her first book, *On Thin Ice: A Women's Journey to the North Pole*. She became the first woman to guide an expedition to the South Pole in 2002.

Paul and Matty shared their polar passion with their children, who grew up with the wide-open tundra as their backyard. In their teens, Eric and Sarah begged for a real expedition with their parents "before you guys get too old." The McNair/Landry 2003 summer family vacation consisted of 22 days crossing the Greenland ice cap on skis using kites to help the dogs pull their sleds.

A year later, in the fall of 2004, Matty headed back to the bottom of the globe on an unsupported trek guiding a British couple as well as her two über-kids, then 18 and 20. They skied for 51 days from Hercules Inlet to the South Pole—an elevation gain of about 10,000 feet—and Sarah became the youngest female ever to reach that Pole. Then they turned around and kite-skied back at speeds of up to 30 k.p.h. in a record 17 days.

After a brief stopover in Iqaluit to repack and regain some of the 28 pounds she had lost travelling the 1,100 kilometres to and from the South Pole, Matty turned northward with 16 of her dogs pulling wooden sleds she had built, replicas of those used by American explorer Robert Peary. Her mission was to guide British explorer Tom Avery's team in an effort to beat Peary's controversial 1909 dash, in which he claimed to have travelled 476 kilometres to the North Pole in a mere 37 days. On April 26, 2005, they beat that time by five hours, proving the explorer's sprint may have been possible and scoring a *Guinness Book of Records* plaque for the speediest surface journey to the North Pole for Matty's wall. Not bad for a five-foot, four-inch mother in her fifties who barely tips the scales at 125 pounds. —MP

dogs for sledding practice.

After an eye-opening two-hour reality check, we limp back to the house, Tina soaked and shivering, everyone cursing faults in their costly, extensively researched equipment. After dinner, we tackle the day's gear shortfalls: Joe cuts and stitches a fleece nose guard for his goggles, John mends bindings in Matty's well-equipped workshop, Martin digs out the base of his skis to screw in climbing skins for traction and Tina adds stuffing to her overboots in a quest for

**THE McNAIR HOUSE** in Iqaluit is generally a busy crossroads, but this is Polar Madness Week and the chaos is cranked up as a gaggle of international North Pole teams passes through en route north. Matty's children Eric and Sarah, adventurers in their own right, are frantically preparing for a 2,200-kilometre trip across Ellesmere Island, led by the famous American polar veteran Will Steger. In charge of logistics, Sarah sews harnesses for 30 dogs and packs tonnes of

A blue patch ahead signals thin ice. Most of us nervously follow in Matty's ski-steps, but Martin scouts his own route. "Shit!" he shouts and frantically "runs" on skis, splashing in water and very nearly falling through

warmer feet. "You take care of your gear; it takes care of you," Matty says.

On our third day, bitterly cold and sunny, we learn to harness and drive sled dog teams, observing the sometimes snarky social hierarchy that occurs at the front of a fan hitch. When a fight erupts during lunch break, a whip-wielding Matty stomps into the fray growling "Down!" in a low voice. All the dogs back off. "There's only room for one alpha bitch out here."

Unharnessing the dogs at the end of the day, Matty hands each of us a squirming ball of fur to clip back onto their chain. By this time, my heart is no longer lodged in my throat with fear. "Don't forget to thank all your doggies as you feed them," Matty tells us. "I have to act like the boss or they won't respect me, so I need others to socialize them to be people-friendly."

food while Eric builds sleds and tests flexible solar panels for recharging batteries. Daily deliveries of expedition gear make navigating the hallway precarious. Steger drops in for progress updates; Sam Branson, son of Virgin's Richard, stops by for coffee. Steven Jones, the operations manager of America's Patriot Hills base camp in Antarctica, clears a spot on the living room floor to unroll his sleeping bag. He is also the operations manager for Hannah McKeand, a 35-year-old Brit who is attempting the first unsupported female solo trek to the North Pole—769 kilometres in 60 days.

Our days are now a head-spinning blur of romps through increasingly fractured ice and workshops packed with tips on everything from lining up sleeping bags to mark

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an ice runway for a Twin Otter to fashioning dead-men to hold a tent down. Finally, the morning of our mini-expedition departure looms. Steven Jones's Iridium phone rings at breakfast. It is Hannah McKeand's second day on the ice and she is demoralized by her meagre 1.5-nautical-mile progress after more than seven brutal hours in  $-50^{\circ}\text{C}$ . She wants to jettison food and fuel to lighten her 260-pound pulk. There is a sombre silence around the table as Steve assures her the early days are the toughest and to hang in. He sighs as he disconnects the satellite-lifeline connecting the solitary explorer to the rest of the world. "She needs everything she's got. We even weighed her bobby pins."

Matty, who cuts the handle off her toothbrush to save weight, pulled only 130 pounds on her resupplied North Pole trek. Although her unsupported South Pole pulk came in at 230 pounds, it was easier to move. Reaching the South Pole is a midsummer trip over a solid ice cap in 24-hour daylight. Travel to the North Pole begins in the dark and bitter cold of winter over rough

sea ice that drifts so much it's not uncommon to lose ground after a gruelling day. Super-mountaineer Reinhold Messner, who has scaled the world's highest peaks without oxygen, attempted the North Pole and declared it tougher and 10 times more dangerous than Everest.

Grimly weight-obsessed, we pack our pulks. Matty consults a list and begins dishing out 40-pound bags of dog kibble to mimic real expedition heft. "John and Tina. South Pole supported. Three bags each." Four bags are awarded for Joe's resupplied North Pole journey. And Martin, our unsupported North Pole aspirant from Ontario, gets five bags, upping his total pulk tally to roughly 260 pounds. I don't get any dog food, but I do carry my share of the supplies and my camera gear.

As we begin to move forward and the reality of dead weight registers, gasps of shock erupt, even from burly John and hyper-fit Joe. Martin charges off at a trot for the first 75 feet before stopping, bending over, panting. Then we inch our way out on the ice at the edge of town.

On our first rest break an hour later, with the skyline of Iqaluit still embarrassingly near, we are a sullen group. "Have a pee

while you can still feel your hands," Matty says cheerfully, before demonstrating how to fashion a pointed "snow wedgie" in lieu of toilet paper. I try it and end up with an ice cream headache in my crotch.

Thankfully, we have packed our pulks logically, with our down parkas, water bottles and easy-to-open-with-mitts snack bags up front and accessible. Following Matty's example, I spoon frozen salami wedges, rock hard cheese and chocolate beneath my nose guard.

We slog through rubble ridges as high as a house, my back grateful for Matty's adaptation of a shock-absorbing bungee between me and the sled to avoid jarring as the rope becomes taut. Skis clatter and shimmy, pulks jam. It is frustrating and utterly exhausting and a blessing when we reach flat ice. "Now we'll travel to the South Pole for a while and find a place to camp," Matty says, forging ahead. When she crosses her poles in mid-air in the distance I want to weep with relief. "Stop at the Sign of the Crossed Poles," I mutter. "It sounds like a pub," says Aussie John hopefully.

Setting up camp is measured multi-tasking. While pitching the tent we three girls

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will share, Tina works the guy wires as I shovel snow onto the flaps. Matty tosses our sleeping bags and pads into the tent then digs a sunken kitchen in the vestibule, piling the snow into a corner for water. I reach into my sports bra for my warm and dry lighter to fire up three MSR stoves mounted on boards so they sit squarely without melting the ice.

Water bottles are lined up for filling as the “fat boy” kettle melts snow. Boots come off first and the plastic bags have indeed kept my socks dry. The wet nylon liners are tucked into the dry and toasty confines of my bra, which is turning out to be my most useful item of clothing for the first time in my life.

We strip to a single layer, pinning damp clothes onto the clothesline in the tent rafters, then sip soup with melted cheese chunks while Couscous Almandine simmers. Now it’s time for our bath.

Something you won’t find on Matty’s high-performance bio is her ability to transform polar travel from an Everest-like ordeal to an experience that almost anyone in rea-

sonably good shape can do. Although she loved the Arctic landscape at first sight, the travelling was tough—cooking outside a tiny tent, shivering and damp from a day’s exertion, and then climbing into a cold sleeping bag. “We knew we were on an expedition,” she recalls of her first northern trip, “because we were miserable.”

As she travelled between communities, she encountered Inuit camping in big canvas tents they could stand up in. At day’s end they fired up stoves to dry clothes and cook in near tropical temperatures. “When you’re warm,” she noticed, “you laugh more.” If the North’s expert travellers hit the road in comfort, why couldn’t she?

Matty designed a big, light tent she called The Emerald Igloo that sleeps six and weighs 11 pounds, and began taking regular folks out on the land in mid-winter. She once took three middle-aged ladies celebrating menopause, and despite a wind chill of  $-89^{\circ}\text{C}$ , they had a good time.

Most polar travellers—who burn up to 5,500 calories a day—are fuelled by a repetitious regimen of oatmeal, powdered milk and noodles. Matty instead prepares homemade granola, with dried coconut, pine nuts and honey, and jazzes up quality

dehydrated meals with spices and dried meat for dinner. She carries more fuel than most expeditions, nearly five litres for every day so that four MSR stoves crank up temperatures to almost 30 degrees to dry clothes. “I call it ‘travelling in style,’” she says. “My philosophy is that a happy traveller makes more miles.”

Two hours after pitching our tent, we’ve had a sponge bath, our “tub” a self-standing empty Harvest Foodworks bag filled with hot water. Our clothes are dry and we nibble shortbread cookies, sip herbal tea and update journals. Tina checks the GPS and relays our coordinates on our 7 p.m. sched call. We drift to sleep with hot water bottles tucked at our feet. I never thought I’d award four stars to an Arctic camping experience.

**T**HERE IS A GENERAL perception that Olympic-level fitness is required to travel in polar regions, but Matty says that’s not true. Some of her clients have never skied before; others have never camped. “You train your body before you go, but polar expeditions are done 80 per cent with the mind.” And how do you

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train your mind? Matty looks at me for a long time, then says quietly, "You do something really hard that you never thought you could do. Then you wrap your head around it."

Day two on the trail dawns grey and gloomy, and we spend it alternately travelling for 60 minutes, then breaking for 15, switching between North and South Pole terrain. Matty believes that routine takes stress out of hardship. She keeps a strict schedule, performing tasks in the same order to stay efficient and save fuel and energy, even sleeping in the same spot in the tent nightly.

In the evening the wind picks up. We unpack the kites for a spin, sitting back on the snow and butt-skiing (or ass-surfing), letting the wind pull us across the ice in an exhilarating taste of how useful this form of transport would be in polar travel.

That night over dinner, Matty suggests to Tina, who is blurred in a halo of steam rising from her clothes, that she might want to ditch a layer while exerting herself. "It's not sweat, just a little melted snow," Tina

says defensively, wringing water from her waist-long blonde braid. Matty shrugs.

Throughout the night, the ice sheet we're camped on creaks and cracks as the second biggest tides in the world lower Frobisher Bay by 45 feet. I try to wrap my head around what it would really be like to be heading for the top or bottom of the world.

**R**ISE AND SHINE!" Every morning on the ice, Matty is our cheery 6 a.m. alarm clock. She heats water, drags sleeping bags outside to air, and sings "You Are My Sunshine," while I'm still figuring out which way is up on my boots. Still, it's hard not to hum along.

Two hours into our third day, we are travelling alongside a dramatic, shoreline ice wall where the ice sheet slides up and down with each tide. A blue patch ahead signals thin ice. Unlike brittle freshwater ice, thin sea ice flexes. It's like skiing across a wobbling waterbed. "Rubber ice," Matty calls it. Most of us nervously follow in her ski-steps, but Martin scouts his own route. "Shit!" he shouts and frantically "runs" on skis, splashing ankle-deep in water across bobbing ice slabs, very nearly falling through.

The overall scheme of polar travel is start-

ing to appeal to me. A fixed distance and a measured quantity of supplies. Run out of gas and you can't eat, drink or stay warm. Extreme efficiency in every move is essential within such dangerously narrow parameters. "It's chess," Matty says happily.

When she's on an expedition, Matty likes to keep her mind busy and positive. She ranks her favourite pies from raspberry on down, or redecorates her house, moving furniture in her mind. On South Pole trips, she plugs into upbeat music. (On North Pole trips, she has to listen for bears and dangerous ice.) "Negative thoughts make your pulk heavier," Matty says.

I make my own mental list to ease the ordeal of taking photos in extreme cold. Stop, shove goggles onto head, pull down neck gaiter. Pull pulk alongside, brush snow off top, open zipper. Slip off one glove and hold with teeth, unzip insulated beer cooler coddling 35 mm digital gear. Remove camera battery. Grope through four layers of clothing to slide ice-cold battery into bra, grabbing warm second battery while there. Insert battery into camera. Hold breath to prevent condensation on viewfinder. Press shutter release, then pray the photo is good

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since the display is turned off to save power. It's a myth that cameras cease working in the cold, but batteries do, although they can be revived with warmth.

By afternoon, Joe is plodding silently, head down, withdrawn. "You okay bro?" asks John, who moves steadily and keeps an eye on his tent mate. Tina has learned a slow, steady rhythm that helps her from trailing the group. Matty clips onto a flag-

ging Martin's pulk to help him pull through pressure ice. Then, after a break, he charges ahead without removing his down warm-up jacket, which later comes off in a burst of steam. "There is only so much I can teach," Matty sighs, "the rest they have to learn from the cold."

**O**N DAY FOUR, Matty's last with the group, we do our swimming in the polynya, so that those who dream of a schlep to the North Pole will know what it's like to cross open leads between ice

floes. A couple of Matty's colleagues have snowmobiled the 16 nautical miles from Iqaluit, pitching her Emerald Igloo for a last night celebration before she heads back to Iqaluit in the morning to prepare for an upcoming North Pole trip (she'll be guiding a group from 89° N. to 90°N.). I decide I'll snowmobile back with her, because my cold has taken its toll.

At dinner, exhaustion and stress are beginning to create the first irritable cracks in the group's demeanour—who cooked last, who did the dishes, whose turn is it to get snow for water?

In the morning, after a map huddle, Matty delivers the good news that everyone can toss one bag of dog food onto the snowmobile-drawn sled. The bad news is that she expects a 10-nautical-mile day during the three days back to Iqaluit. So far, our best distance has been 4.3. And finally, as the snowmobile idles, the group once again repeats the Three Rules of Polar Travel: "Stay together. Stay together. Don't separate."

All is well on the first sched call at 7 p.m. that night. On the second evening, I dive for the ringing phone just as a red-faced, dishevelled Martin strides into the kitchen. "I'm not staying out there when I can see the lights of Iqaluit," he growls. Confused, I answer the phone. Sounding weary, John reads out the group's coordinates and announces that they completed 10 nautical miles.

Tina, John and Joe ski into Iqaluit just before noon the next day. Martin returns from his hotel, and over lunch they confess that routines broke down while on their own. And though Tina has frostbitten fingertips, they are cheerful, wiser and triumphant. As Matty shuttles them to the airport, they still harbour their polar dreams.

The next morning, Matty is heading to the airport for her North Pole trip, and I'm catching a ride with her. She packs her gear into the van, and then runs back into the house—"Forgot something." I hear her record her outgoing voice-mail message: "Hi. You've reached NorthWinds. Eric, Sarah and the dogs are on Ellesmere Island. Matty is headed for the North Pole. Please leave a message." **e**

*Margo Pfeiff is a freelance writer based in Montreal. This is her first piece for explore.*

**Matty McNair's 2009 polar training course runs from February 23 to March 7, and costs \$3,000 + GST. Customized courses are also available. For more information, northwinds-arctic.com; 1-867-979-0551.**