

British couple ski into polar history books

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Record for longest British Antarctic trek

First to complete Hercules Inlet - South Pole - Hercules Inlet route

Today at 3.30PM (UK time) a super-fit British married couple – Conrad, 49 and Hilary Dickinson, 51, from Hexham, Northumberland – skied into the record books by travelling further by foot in Antarctica than any other British adventurers.

They successfully completed their 70-day, 1,380-mile (2,220 km) expedition that started on the Antarctic coast at Hercules Inlet on November 2, reached the South Geographic Pole on December 23 and finished back at the coast at Hercules Inlet today.

Their entire trek was 31 miles (50 km) longer than that made by Sir Ranulph Fiennes and Mike Stroud in an Antarctic traverse from Berkner Island to the Ross Ice Shelf in 1993. Sir Ranulph Fiennes is described as the 'world's greatest living explorer' in the Guinness Book of Records.

Such an achievement is phenomenal under normal circumstances but the ferocious winds and current temperatures of -45°C are reported to be the worst weather conditions in the last 15 years in the Antarctic summer.

The couple can claim a further record because by returning back to Hercules Inlet they have completed a journey which according to the worldwide authority on polar expeditions Explorers Web (www.thepoles.com) has never before been completed.

Exhausted but elated, talking on a satellite phone, Conrad said, "Having covered a breathtaking 120 miles (192 km) in just 22 hours on Sunday we were tent-bound for 24 hours on Monday due to stormy weather. We completed the last 46 miles today.

"There's no doubt that our kite-ski training really paid off, especially during heart-stopping moments such as crossing the bridges of crevasses without rope support or skiing over blue ice with express train-like winds. It's incredibly exhilarating and exciting but I've known softer surfaces on ice rinks than those found in Antarctica.

"Kiting can also be frustrating, unpredictable and exhausting – similar in effort to marathon running - but sometimes I fell asleep while kiting, especially when the winds were light and the kite was moving in a gentle rhythm. I'd wake up with the kite on the ground.

"Our 70 days on ice with Matty and her incredibly talented children has highlighted how much Hilary and I miss our own children, Laura, 23 at Sunderland University and Joel, 22, at Leeds. We can't wait to see them.

“In terms of luxuries, Hilary is looking forward to a glass of Chardonnay and me a pint of Ruddles in the Tap and Spile in Hexham. A curry from the Diwan-i-am restaurant in our home town would round off the ‘dream’ evening.”

Conrad and Hilary Dickinson became the first British married couple to trek to the South Pole unsupported and without re-supply on December 23, following a grueling 52-day trek that started with them dragging sledges which weighted 20 stone (300lbs / 135 kgs). Hilary also became the oldest British woman to trek to the South Pole.

They are travelling with the American polar explorer, Matty McNair, 53 and her children Eric, 20 and Sarah McNair-Landry, 18. Matty became the first American to trek unsupported to the South Pole and her children became the youngest people ever to complete the full 690-mile (1,110 km) journey.

Following two nights spent at the South Pole, the couple picked up new food and fuel supplies and specially designed power kites, to assist them on their return trip.

Kiting innovation

Engineered to harness the awesome power of the katabatic winds that rake Antarctica’s icecap, the kites propelled the skiers, enabling them to reach speeds of up to 20 mph, even when dragging their fully-laden sledges.

Despite the advantages that kites lend to skiing expeditions, the return journey was extremely difficult, not least because their route is barred with rows upon rows of sastrugi, wind-blown snow and ice ridges which have frozen solid, giving the icecap the appearance of a storm-tossed ocean. Frequently, the couple found themselves ski-ing in and out of the ice ridges that can reach up to eight feet in height.

While strong, the winds have been gusty and that makes the kites difficult to control. The fastest manageable wind speed proved to be 41 km per hour. Wind speeds of 45 km or higher inevitably resulted in tumbles, wipe-outs and sometimes tangled kite lines.

Interestingly, the return trip took just 17 days, exactly three times faster than the journey to the pole. Conrad said, “It was very strange to find ourselves skittering past places we had passed very slowly before.”

The intrepid pair are well accustomed to the rigours and discomfort of expedition life, even though they are not professional explorers, having completed kite-skiing training expeditions in the Canadian Arctic, Norway and Greenland.

Conrad also has extensive experience of cold environments, having spent prolonged periods in the Arctic during his time as an Army Captain, whilst Hilary maintains her high levels of fitness through constant bouts of telemark skiing, fell running, cycling and competing in triathlons.

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For images please visit:

<http://www.yesconsultancy.com/ClientPages/KitesOnIce/KitesOnIceSPa.htm>

Links: www.kitesonice.ca

www.thepoles.com

www.explorersweb.com