



Words and Photos | **Barry Roberts**

A SKI MOUNTAINEERING OTTERSEY – MILNE LAND GREENLAND

The Twin Otter became audible at 13.50, ten minutes ahead of schedule, and I made radio contact to welcome our pickup aircraft. “Twin Otter, Twin Otter, this is Tangent Expeditions. Welcome to Milne Land. I have you in visual contact. Maintain your heading. Over.” The Danish pilot acknowledged me and within minutes the aircraft flew low overhead, circled above the icefall behind our camp and made a low pass to suss out the glacier surface he’d have to land on. Despite trying to maintain my cool and cred as expedition leader I waded like a giddy plane spotter as they passed overhead. The radio crackled and the pilot said, “It’s too rough for me to land. You’ll have to move to above the icefall. I’ll be back in five hours.” I relayed this disappointing news to the team, who were packed and ready to bug out. Aiden Forde, one of our two Irish team mates said “You’re talkin’ shoyte!” (Apparently I have a reputation for this.) So just when we thought it was all over we had to hump about 400kgs above the icefall – 200m higher and a kilometre away from our current position. Four hours and 50 minutes later, job done, we collapsed in a hungry and dehydrated heap. “Sven” (we never knew his real name) and his *Otter* returned ten minutes early as planned. Maybe he was Swiss, not Danish.

Our team of eight arrived on Milne Land 17 days earlier by snowmobile after seven hours and 150km of numbing, exhilarating (at speeds up 140km/hr) and stunningly beautiful passage across the sea ice and a 1000m vertical climb up the Charcot glacier to Camp One. The glacier and surrounding mountains were totally unexplored and never visited. Milne Land itself, a mountainous island on Greenland’s east coast, had only hosted two expeditions and none as early as ours in mid-May. We hoped to be in time for some sweet spring skiing.

Milne Land is ridiculously accessible from the UK. Within 30 hours of meeting up at Stansted airport, the team travelled via Iceland, through to Constable Point on Scoresbysund on a scheduled Fokker, then onwards by snowmobile to Camp One. By 11pm, and one burned out snowmobile later, we were



Photo | Eadaoin Hutchinson



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setting up camp under the Arctic midnight sun and rummaging through cases of high tech goodies – sat phones, EPIRBs, solar panels, medical kits and radios – and fiddling with a slightly rusty gun for dealing with peckish polar bears.

My wife Eadaoin Hutchinson, the second Paddy and Marketing Coordinator for The North Face, and I were just back from Nepal four days earlier from a climbing expedition to 6500m. We were fit, though not very fresh. Doug Gurr and Lucy Makinson, our long time Chamonix ski touring friends and Triathlon/Ironmen masochists, joined us for their first expedition. Swiss based Brit and research boffin Andrew Lunn was on his 2nd Arctic trip as was *northern lad* Adrian Pedley. The team grandfather was 66 year-old Geoff Bonney from Wales. Wind farm developer and geologist (a.k.a. *Rock Doctor*) Aiden Forde was fulfilling an ambition he postponed a year ago when a big deal had to be done.

For ski mountaineering, this place had two major pluses – 24 hour daylight and relatively low altitude. The sun never sets in May so, snow conditions aside, there’s no pressure to get up and down the mountains before dark; and the highest peak is 2000m so there are no acclimatisation issues. Lucy, for example, suffered terribly on an aborted Mont Blanc ski ascent with me three years ago but was in steaming good form throughout this trip. We had 16 days on the ice ahead of us. The weather remained stunning for the most part and every morning Eadaoin could be heard saying, in a dodgy Big Brother Geordie accent, “Day 12 on Bazza’s Boot Camp.”

After bagging every peak within striking distance of Camp One, we loaded up the pulks and headed higher up the glacier. At Camp Two the team dug the grandest and deepest loo that almost required a fixed rope to use. The camp was neatly tucked into the lee of a buttress to shield us from the annoyingly steady katabatic (down valley) winds but this also put us in shade from 5pm. In the midnight sun the temperature pleasantly hovered around zero degrees but in the shade it plummeted

to an uncomfortable -10c. It was a popular decision to move camp just thirty minutes away and back into the sunshine after two nights.

The team was working efficiently now – getting roped up or skins/crampons on/off quickly and moving together with a solid rhythm. The south facing slopes softened up nicely between 2 and 5pm so our daily efforts were focused on catching some spring snow descents back to camp in this window.

All told, the expedition achieved twenty first ascents, most of which earned one to three out of three stars in our grading system. Some ascents were fabulous single peak traverses – up one tributary glacier, cramponing or skiing over a ridge and summit, then skis on to descend another unexplored valley. The ascent of Mount Priestcliffe was particularly outstanding. Bus eating crevasses guarded the way to the west flank but once through this tricky maze, we found a steep climbable (but unskiable) gully that lead to the west shoulder. Down right from the shoulder we passed a steep 500m



OUR FINEST PEAK-BAGGING DAY TOOK IN FOUR PEAKS, A 1000M DESCENT AND A 4KM SKI BACK TO CAMP

high Y shaped couloir – an inviting shortcut back to our main tracks. A straightforward skin brought us to the friable rock cap. A thirty minute scramble lead to a fine snowy summit and we snuggled together in the survival shelter drinking Adrian's hot chocolate. Lucy named the peak after her home village in Derbyshire. This was an indulgence we all took turns at. (I named another brilliant peak Mt Everest on the one year anniversary of my Everest summit day in 2004). Back at the top of the Y couloir two team members opted to crampon down. The rest of us, one by one, and in stages being careful to shelter behind rocks from falling debris (or skiers!), steadily worked our way down the 35-40 degree slopes. Fantastic!

Our finest peak-bagging day took in four peaks, a 1000m descent and a 4km horizontal ski back to camp. If we had stayed any longer in Milne Land we would have run out of home towns, nieces/nephews, girlfriends and pets to name conquered peaks after.

The Twin Otter's left ski nearly took Andrew's head off as it finally landed to collect us at 7pm. As the aircraft u-turned to taxi back to our mountain of kit, its front ski dived into the metre deep slush. We dug it out but the pilots bivvied down in the cabin to wait for the overnight freeze before attempting a take off.

I roused the pilots at 3am to check conditions and they agreed to give it a go but there was a catch. Our take off weight had to be limited so we left most of our kit on the glacier for later pickup by helicopter. I marked a waypoint with my GPS before boarding the Otter. Our kit, and its festering contents of socks and thermals, is still making its way back to the UK. Meanwhile, I'm moving ahead with plans to return to Greenland in March '06 to lead The North Face Roof of the Arctic expedition and make the first winter ascents and paraglide/ski descents of the three highest peaks in the Arctic. I hope I get a chance to do my laundry before then. ❄️



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