

Braving Antarctica

racingtheplanet.[®]
where athletic frontiers begin

4 deserts



by
Thaddeus Lawrence
Dec 2010



JETSPEED TRAVEL PTE LTD



Bottom of the World

Antarctica.

Earth's final frontier lies at the bottom of the world. With almost all of its entire 14 million square kilometres covered in ice and snow, Antarctica is the world's largest polar desert. As a continent, it is the coldest, driest, highest and windiest place on earth. Due to its harsh climate, hostile environment and harrowing isolation, there are no permanent residents. So what is a man from a sunny tropical island halfway around the world doing on its shores?

Up until the 19th century, Antarctica was referred to as *Terra Australis Incognita* (unknown southern land). Although it remains largely a mystery, it has long captivated the imagination of mankind. Over the years, an assortment of explorers, scientists and madmen have been lured into the enchanting white folds of the world's last great wilderness.

Living out a boyhood fascination, this was my first real chance to play explorer. Except that my exploration was not so much in scientific or adventurous pursuits, but in the search to understand self, a bid to discover where my inner limits lay. And what better place is there to do so than in some of the most formidable and inhospitable yet spectacular and stunning landscapes?

An Antarctic saying has it that below 40 degrees south in latitude there is no law; below 50 degrees south there is no God; below 60 degrees south there is no common sense. That must explain the plethora of exclamations along the lines of "You must be crazy!" when I announced that I would not just be travelling to The White Continent, but taking part in a self-supported multi-stage ultra endurance 250 kilometre footrace.



"We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started... and know the place for the first time." ~ T.S. Eliot

Breathing Life

Perhaps it was the absurdity of the whole idea that people found so alluring. Or maybe the vicissitudes of life simply cannot erase that natural sense of adventure that is in all of us. Either way, I figured this was an ideal opportunity to go that extra distance and raise the bar on this challenge. If people are going to live vicariously through me, then I want a portion of those people to comprise youths and children.

The concrete goal was to raise \$100,000 for Gracehaven, a residential home run by The Salvation Army for young persons from dysfunctional families. Beneath that ambitious target set by my main sponsors Pet Lovers Foundation and me, was a greater desire to live a stand – that dreams come alive and we can accomplish absolutely anything that we set our hearts and minds to.

My choice of target audience was no doubt influenced by my previous work with underprivileged youths in the villages of Tanzania and street children from the slums of Bangkok. I suspect also that my previous role as a teacher played a major part. As Gandhi once pointed out “If we are to have real peace, we must start with the children”. On top of peace, I will add passion and purpose in life.

We eventually exceeded our fundraising target and I more than doubled the total I had raised from my previous run in the Sahara Race. My reward came in the form of an invitation to attend Gracehaven’s year-end Thanksgiving Night, a concert and play put up by the children and youths themselves. To watch the beneficiaries of my run present their talents; to see their eyes light up through their authentic performance; and to be lifted by their love, was sheer delight. That night was truly a priceless gift.



“Some people hear their own inner voices with great clearness. And they live by what they hear. Such people become crazy...or they become legend.” ~Jim Harrison

Life Changing

As race day drew ever closer, excitement over my expedition mounted. Other people's excitement, that is. Strangely I found myself nonchalant; my enthusiasm was unusually muted and I left my packing preparations to the last minute. Throwing myself into work, I tried not to think too much about Antarctica. Was there something I was avoiding?

It was a stellar cast assembled for The Last Desert. All invited competitors must have completed at least two other endurance races in the Sahara, Gobi or Atacama deserts. Many have finished more, and a large group were on track to achieve the Grand Slam of all 4 deserts in one calendar year. Was I out of my depth here in such esteemed company at the ends of the earth?

Such is the extreme of Antarctica that it evokes polemic views. Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer and first man to reach both North and South poles mused that "this land looks like a fairytale". Meanwhile Captain Scott, leader of The British Antarctic Expedition adjudged, "Great God! This is an awful place". But all who have witnessed the austere beauty of this land speak of its wonder and splendour. What if I did not experience the life changing experience that was expected?

My first fear was put in perspective by a fellow competitor who shared the same thoughts: we were deserving competitors because we had proved ourselves. All of us have earned the right to be here. And there was no one single Antarctic encounter to be had by all. As my coach reminded me, my own experience is special and unique in itself. Maybe I was merely the messenger, and that my calling was to go on this race and use it to change the lives of others. This was thus to be an assignment like no other – have not a life changing experience, but a *lives changing* experience.



"We must go beyond textbooks, go out into the bypaths and untrodden depths of the wilderness and explore and tell the world the glories of our journey." ~ John Hope Franklin

Endurance

en·dur·ance **n.** the ability to experience an unpleasant or painful situation for a long time calmly and patiently. I had always considered myself more of a sprinter than a long distance runner, on track and in life. So my biggest challenge in an endurance race was breaking down the barrier of time. Consequently, this race was tailor-made for me to master the practice of being in the moment in order to muster the energy to stay the course.

The first test came by way of the Drake Passage. This 800 kilometre stretch of water between the most southerly tip of South America and the most northerly tip of the Antarctic Peninsula is the roughest ocean in the world. It transpired that the five days of sailing between Antarctica and Ushuaia conferred upon me the circumstances to seek solace in my cabin and become deeply acquainted with the wallpaper patterns. And the toilet bowl. I was later mortified to discover that only one IV drip was administered throughout the entire race. That was for seasickness. To me.

The extremity, variability and unpredictability of Antarctic weather meant that the success of the race – and our survival – was at the mercy of Mother Nature. To ensure easy and immediate evacuation, race organisers took the precaution of designing circular circuits, effectively requiring us to run for hours on end in loops, and quite possibly turning us all loopy. Completing the course now demanded an exceptional degree of mental toughness.

So what is the secret to an accomplishment which Men's Health magazine calls "pushing the limits of human endurance"? I'm afraid there is no secret beyond a stubborn determination to laugh and have a good time regardless of circumstances and conditions. When the going gets tough, enjoy it.



"Men wanted for hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful, honour and recognition in case of success" ~ Sir Ernest Shackleton

Competition

Racing on foot in a harsh and hostile environment is an activity that is the subject of intense competition. Unlike conventional sports however, this competition takes on a different dimension. Winners receive neither fame nor fortune for there is no prize money and no interest from glitzy magazines to attract the paparazzi – this is after all an activity that would send the adrenalin seeking sports fan into a slumber.

So what sort of person is drawn to a race costing thousands of dollars in fees and demanding hundreds of hours in training? Are we a distinctive breed of individuals or simply self-glorified narcissists? A powerful appeal is the pride and personal fulfilment associated with the achievement of successfully conquering a difficult athletic objective while exposing oneself to potential injury, death or ridicule. Another feature is competition.

Such an event offers an opportunity to go beyond the boundaries of ordinary existence. What people really seek in life is to actualise their potential and this is made easier when others force us to do our best. The Latin roots of the word *compete* means “to seek or strive together” and nowhere is this more evident than in the world of individual footracing. Thrown together into bleak surroundings and charged with a single mission, my competitors are also my team mates. When they get better, so do I.

A key insight came on the final day of racing in a location of breathtaking beauty and winter wonderland whiteness. Having the gall to hang onto the coattails of a leading group of runners, I managed to summon a singularity in focus to keep pace with their punishing tempo. My reward was an entire day spent in an optimal experience of what psychologists call *flow*. Thanking them later, I was bowled over when one of them said she was actually grateful I was on their tail, for my presence had spurred her on.



Everyone wants to be different, just like everyone else.

Celebration

I am an immensely lucky man. I have the freedom to pursue the deepest desires that resonate with my soul. I have the comfort of work as the vessel of inspiration. I have the backing of friends to catch me when I fall. And I have the blessings of loved ones to make possible the impossible. There is absolutely no reason for living a life short of excellence.

There is always a litany of excuses why we cannot do something. They are all true. We know because all too often we witness dreams dissolving into a quick sand of fear and negativity. At the same time there is also a catalogue of proof that dreams do come alive. And these are also all true. Because we still hold dear in our inmost hearts the vision of a beautiful life. To live this vision into reality requires an energy and expectancy that it is truth.

I am often asked when I will settle down to a normal life. What is a normal life? I have long recognised and surrendered to the fact that my drive for challenges is a major part of my personality, my modus operandi. And as I digest the lessons of Antarctica and reclaim the 7 kilograms of body weight that I had lost to the Drake Passage, there is no time for resting on my laurels.

Whatever it is that inspired me to embark on this journey – blind courage? unshakable conviction? neurological catastrophe? – is without question a gift and I have been profoundly enriched. As long as I have the capacity to be both inspired and inspiring, I have a use. To live with such vigour is my responsibility and lifework.



“Life loves to be taken by the lapel and told: ‘I am with you kid. Let’s go.’” ~Maya Angelou



Speaking
Writing
Coaching

Contact Thaddeus
Mobile: (+65) 9049 2939
Email: thaddeus@dreamscomealive.com
Blog: www.dreamscomealive.com