
DEREK FORDHAM

Greenland 2002

These notes are based on the 24 reports received in response to over 40 requests for information.

Ice Cap crossings

As in previous years, expedition activity in Greenland during 2002 was dominated by ice cap crossings. From a total of 60 applications the Danish Polar Centre received for 'sport' expeditions, 33 were from groups intending to make a crossing, most planning to use the 'trade route' between the airfields at Kulusuk (east coast) and Kangerdlugssuaq (west coast). Several factors emerged in 2002. Firstly, more parties chose to make the crossing from west to east than in previous years. Secondly, the start dates were spread more evenly over the period April to August than in other years. Thirdly, at last the time taken for the fairly straightforward 'trade route' crossing of about 600km was substantially reduced by a number of parties, the current record set in 2002 being eight days, closely followed by one of nine days and another of ten days. This particular form of speed skiing is so far the sole prerogative of the Norwegians.

One of the first of the crossing expeditions was the 'Swedish Arctic Girl Adventure', composed of Maria Hedman and Kristin Lundgren (Sweden) who started on 10 April from **Kangerdlugssuaq** and reached **Isortoq** on the east coast 33 days later.

They were followed a day later by Anders Voll and Yngve Torjussen (Norway) of the Ajungilak 02 Expedition who, finding no snow on the last few kilometres to the ice cap, had to take a lift to **Pt.660** along the controversial road to the VW test circuit on the ice cap. From there, using pulks but eschewing sails or kites, they reached Isortoq in 23 days.

On 16 April Aslak Prestbakmo and Lars Helgaker (Norway) set off from Isortoq and with the aid of kites reached a speed of 15km/hr on their crossing to Kangerdlugssuaq which took 18 days despite losing 1½ days due to bad weather.

Kites were also used by Denis Bonnefous and his three companions (France) in their attempt to make an east-west crossing in less than 15 days starting on 17 April. They made slow progress to a point 100km in on the ice cap where they encountered high winds followed by a four-day storm which dumped large quantities of new snow in low temperatures. Realising that they were moving too slowly and as a result were low on food, fuel and time, they used a satellite telephone to arrange to be picked up by helicopter.

Kites also featured large in the plans of Freddy Markham, Roger Mear and Bill O'Connor (UK) who on 26 April were landed by helicopter on the eastern edge of the ice cap. However, the inexperience of one team member with the operating technique required for the large powerful kites taken meant that the expedition had to be abandoned shortly after starting.

Reverting to more traditional means of ice cap travel Sjur Mørdre (Norway) led a group of eight with dog sledges on a 21-day traverse from **Kangerdlugssuaq** to **Isortoq**, starting a 19 day return to Kangerdlugssuaq on 7 August.

On 11 May the Greenland veteran Ramon Larramendi, together with Roberto Lema and Carlos Mengibar (Spain), started from **Narsaq** in the south of Greenland and using an innovative 'Kitesled' of their own design, reached **Qaanaaq** in the north on 13 June, having covered 2408km in 33 days. The 'Kitesled' was made of three sledges lashed together to make a platform of 6x3 metres riding on four runners. A tent was permanently pitched on the platform and Ramon claims it was possible for one person to sleep and cook while the kite pulled the sledge at speeds up to 383km/day!

This impressive journey followed a similar south-north traverse made in 2001 and technical improvements in the 'Kitesled', resulting from experience gained on the two traverses, are being made in preparation for a planned traverse of the East Antarctic ice sheet.

The Greenland Bicycle (yes, BICYCLE!) Expedition was equally innovative in another form. Ralph Tuijn and Pierre Deroi (Netherlands and France) left the east coast on 12 May and made the crossing to Kangerdlugssuaq in 26 days, having lost two days to storms. On the ascent to the ice cap the bicycle needed to be carried on the pulk. Storms and later soft snow hindered its use until the central plateau where at times the bicycle, fitted with very wide tyres, was used to tow the pulk with the other member either riding on top or using snow shoes. Problems with crevasses were encountered near the west coast just before the cyclists encountered the road to the VW test track.

The hard surface from **Pt. 660** to **Kangerdlugssuaq** gave a last day of cycling with a top speed of 20km/hr. On the whole crossing the bicycle was used for 180km and the expedition plans to use the same technique on an Antarctic expedition planned for 2003/4.

The members of the Piteraq 2002 expedition, Egil Nilsen, Knut Holmann and Richard Larsson (Norway), which left Kangerdlugssuaq on 16 May, planned to make the crossing in less than 10 days and to this end took food and fuel for only 13 days. Their total load amounted to 110kg carried in backpacks and two pulks. They skied for 12-14 hours per day until, on day five, one of the party was diagnosed as having blood poisoning in his heel and had to be evacuated by aircraft summoned by satellite telephone. The remaining two members then made a big effort to make up the lost time and despite bad weather they skied long hours and made it off the ice in 9 days, 4½ hours, each 9kg lighter than when they started.

On 13 June Alice Henderson and Kirsten Dunne were landed by helicopter from Ammassalik at their starting point on the east coast and proceeded for 27 days, many with poor visibility, to a point only 6-10km from Pt. 660. Here it was necessary to use their PLB to summon a helicopter, since Kirsten Dunne was suffering from the effects of falling into several crevasses. Prior to their pick-up the party had used some of the emergency huts provided along the ice road from Pt. 660 to VW's 'Aurora' test track. Their encounter with much rubbish and worse around these huts gives further strength to the question, why on earth did the Greenland authorities allow VW to desecrate such a wonderful unspoilt natural feature with a test track for motor cars?

In the south of Greenland Jakob Fink and four companions (Norway), starting on 23 July, made a journey of approximately 120km along the edge of the ice cap between **Nanortalik** and **Narssarssuaq**. Delays with freight and terrain difficulties associated with being near the edge of the ice delayed the party and they were pushed to make their rendezvous by the appointed time ten days after leaving Nanortalik.

On 23 July one of the few expeditions to break away from the 'trade route' left **Isortoq** heading for **Port Victor**, some 80km north of Ilulissat on the west coast, following in reverse the route of A de Quervain's 1912 expedition. Led by Weiland Adler the four-man team (Germany) took 40 days to complete the 705km traverse using pulks with loads of 110kg each at the start, and sails where possible.

A seasonally late start took its toll on Thomas Klovland, Andres Storeng and Fredrik Rommen (Norway) who left Kangerdlugssuaq on 27 July. On the first day they only made 4.2km and during the first six days only 60km owing to lack of snow and much melt water in the form of rivers and lakes. However, once the snow was reached they made good progress and completed the crossing in 20 days.

Armin Wirth and Jarle Heimdal (Germany) started from Isortoq on 1 August also following in reverse the route of A de Quervain's 1912 expedition. Using kites and with a mid-ice cap visit from a TV crew they completed the crossing to Ilulissat in 25 days, despite encountering the bad weather and heavy snow typical of this time of year. They were lifted by helicopter the last few kilometres across a crevasse field and on to Ilulissat.

A delayed departure was made by Gard Telje and a companion (Norway) who started on 9 August from Isortoq. They encountered bad weather and difficult terrain conditions on the ascent to the ice cap but made it to the west coast in 22 days.

One of the last and certainly one of the fastest crossings was made by Yvind Sandbakk, Eirik Haugsnes and Ottar Haldorsen (Norway) who left Nativit on the east coast on 20 August and reached Kangerdlugssuaq in 10 days, 21 hours and 32 minutes! They started fast, in the first eight days travelling 14 hours a day until slowed by whiteout and new snow followed by a dramatic drop in temperature. On the last few days the weather and travelling conditions improved and they arrived on the west coast with five days' food and fuel in hand.

The crossing record set by the Pitera 2002 expedition in May stood for only three months, since Bjerg Odd Harald Hauge, Trond Hilde and Ivar Tollefsen (Norway) left the east coast on 23 August and even that late in the season reached Kangerdlugssuaq in an amazing 8 days and 9 hours!

East Coast

During July Steve Fisher (UK) led a six-strong expedition to the **Knud Rasmussen Glacier** area of the **Caledonian Alps** north of Semiligak. The snowline was at 600m and about 15km from the coast, much higher than in previous years, making the hauling of pulks harder work than anticipated. A base was established at the junction of the KR Glacier with an un-named side glacier from the east at about 66°11'N. From this camp three possible first ascents were made. Return to the coast was by the upper **Idrac Glacier** and this route

is recommended when the KR Glacier is dry. The expedition's lasting impression was that there are some big alpine objectives in the area which they were not equipped or experienced enough to undertake.

In July and August Roy Ruddle (UK) led a team of eight members of the Alpine Club and Alpine Climbing Group to the **Lemon Mountains** (see article 'Citrus Delights', page 57). Poor conditions on the glaciers forced their aircraft to land some 14km from the previously selected site. This revised base site, close to the **Lindbergh Mountains**, enabled the party in three groups to explore the glaciers to the north of the **Courtauld Glacier** and also the **Løebøltet Glacier**. The North Lemon mountains were penetrated and two members made a first ascent of **The Spear, c.2500m**, via the NE face. Other team members made first ascents of six peaks in the North and East Lemons in addition to other climbs in the area and three first ascents in the Lindbergh range adjacent to the landing site. These included the most southerly of the Trillingerne group and the two mountains directly to the north. Second ascents were made of the **Trillingerne Central and Main peaks**. Unsuccessful attempts were made on Mitivagkat East, Cathedral East and Narren.

In June Bjerg Odd Harald Hauge (one of the three Norwegians who later set the record for crossing the Inland Ice in August) took a six-person group (Norway) further north to the **Watkins Bjerg** where they climbed **Gunnbjørnsfjeld**. They then moved to the mountain group to the north, **Knud Rasmussens Land**, which they mistakenly believed had not been visited before (Jim Lowther and his party were there in 1988), and made the ascent of a 3015m peak which they named **Hannbjørnsfjeld**, 'as it is definitely more aggressive and impressive than its sister (Gunnbjørnsfjeld) to the south'.

Also in the Watkins Mountains in May was a five-person group led by Paul Rose (UK). The team made two abortive attempts on **Gunnbjørnsfjeld** before achieving an ascent of the north ridge. They climbed several other peaks in the area and abandoned attempts on others, being progressively hampered by bad weather before flying out on 17 June.

June also saw John Hulse and Al Read (UK) in the Watkins. They had planned to traverse Knud Rasmussens Land but bad weather forced their aircraft to divert to a site near Gunnbjørnsfjeld. In this area they made four ascents, commenting that the climbing was relatively easy and that their 'joy was enhanced by the sense of pure exploration in this challenging and remote part of the world'.

Further north, Hans Laptun, who had spent his childhood at Nyhavn adjacent to **Mestersvig**, led a Franco-Norwegian group of three to revisit the area and the old coastal trappers' huts his father had used long ago. They travelled by Zodiac through the fjords to **Strindberg Fjord** before returning to Mestersvig.

The old trappers' huts were the focus of a group led by Anders Bjerregaard (DK) who spent three weeks restoring a hut at Kap Herschell last used in the 1940s. These small isolated huts, often in the most beautiful locations, are reminders of the period of intense Danish and Norwegian fur trapping activity during and after the war. They are not often a feature of climbing expeditions but many climbers who have had occasion to travel to or along the coastal areas of NE Greenland will know how welcoming they can be.

John Thorogood and his four-person group (UK) also used Zodiacs to travel from **Mestersvig** to the head of **Dicksons Fjord**. They then travelled up the **Langenthaler Glacier** onto the ice cap before skiing with pulks to the foot of **Shackletons Bjerg**, (first climbed by Swiss geologists Haller, Diehl and von Gunten in 1953) which was easily climbed by its SW ridge. Several other peaks to the south and east of Shackletons Bjerg were climbed before the party retraced its tracks to the Zodiacs and Mestersvig.

In early July, about a month prior to John Thorogood's expedition, the five-member Cambridge Glaciology Expedition, led by Chris Lockyer, flew by Twin Otter into **Louise Boyd Land**. They carried out a field research programme into the glaciology and geology of the area and made some first ascents of 2000m summits before commencing a 200km ski journey southwards to a pick-up in Dicksons Fjord. The journey took 21 days, passing close to **Petermanns Bjerg** and Shackletons Bjerg, and provided interest in the form of numerous melt river crossings, damage to pulks and a blizzard.

Owing to the non-production of the Greenland notes in the last issue of the *Alpine Journal* it was not possible to mention the latest expedition of the intrepid Dennis Schmitt (US). In July 2001 he led a NGS-sponsored expedition to the **Warming Land peninsula** in the far north of Greenland, where he found a valley reminiscent of Yosemite with a castle-like peak at its head, an ascent of which was later made. The party crossed and re-crossed the peninsula from **St George's Fjord** to **Hartz Sund** and found the limestone terrain provided useful natural bridges over the large rivers encountered.

Later in the year Dennis completed a multi-year Arctic project; the first longitudinal crossing of the **North American Brooks Range** from **Point Hope** to the **Mackenzie River**. Dennis had lived at **Anaktuvuk Pass**, about halfway along the traverse, in his youth and conceived and executed much of the traverse of the western section while hunting caribou and dog-sledging in the area. In the '80s and '90s he climbed in the Franklin and Romanzof icefield areas and completed much of the eastern half of the route; and in September 2001 the final leg of the eastern section was completed by crossing the Barn Range to Bonnet Lake. This was a journey of about 1500km through some of the most remote mountains in the Arctic.