

THE NORTH POLE BY NIGHT... PITCH BLACK

“**FEAR PREVENTS US FROM SLEEPING – FEAR DOES NOT ALLOW US TO REST**”



They've plunged through thin ice into the Arctic Ocean and been hunted by a polar bear, but two Russian explorers are on course to become the first men in history to ski to the North Pole in the interminable darkness of a polar winter

“Everything is much worse in the darkness. All feelings are sharpened. You cannot suppress your fear... Now there is complete darkness all around us. I fell 50 metres behind, and Boris went forward and vanished. I had a horrible feeling of emptiness and solitude. There was only a ski track in front and behind me.”
It reads like the final terror-stricken entry in a doomed polar explorer's diary, to be discovered years later still clutched in the frozen fist of his eerily preserved corpse. But these panicked words, etched into the journal of Russian polar pioneer Matvey Shparo on his historic expedition to travel from the continent to the North Pole during the endless night of a polar winter, carry one striking difference – he's still out there.

THE LONG NIGHT

On December 22 of last year, Shparo, 32, and his Russian compatriot Boris Smolin, 46, set out to become the first men in history to ski to the North Pole during the Arctic winter, when the icy wasteland is shrouded in total darkness for 24 hours a day. Because of the tilt of the earth's axis, and its revolution around the sun, the Arctic sees no sunrise and no sunset between December and March every year. There, in the pitch black, they are coping, day to day, with temperatures of -50 degrees, ice buckling and cracking under their feet, and the constant, lingering threat of polar bears.

“We are encircled by darkness – there was not even a moon between December 30 and January 13,” Shparo told *Sport*, emailing from his laptop in his tent last week. “Our main problem is fear. Fear prevents us from sleeping. Fear does not allow us to rest.”

Shparo and Smolin's expedition is expected to last at least 70 days, and will need to be completed →

WEBLINK www.shparo.com

FAST FACTS



MATVEY SHPARO
 Age 32
 Lives Moscow, Russia
Achievements
 2002 Ascent of the 20,320ft Mount McKinley, Alaska
 2000 Crossed Greenland
 1998 First crossing of Bering Strait on skis, with father Dmitry



BORIS SMOLIN
 Age 46
 Lives Moscow, Russia
Achievements
 2002 Ascent of the 20,320ft Mount McKinley, Alaska
 2000 Crossed Greenland

On such thin ice, a delicate walk can soon become a frenzied swim



The men have had to battle biting winds and heavily sub-zero temperatures



After an encounter with a polar bear, the adventurers now sleep with guns at arm's length



before the first sunrise of 2008, in March, if the explorers are to make history.

The Russians, who have been uploading their diary entries on to their expedition website so that the polar community can follow their ground-breaking progress, have received letters of support from some of the world's greatest living explorers – no less distinguished a figure than Sir Ranulph Fiennes praised them for demonstrating the “new, modern capabilities of a human being”.

Shparo's own father, Dmitry, is a famous explorer who attempted a shorter, 700km trip during the polar winter of 1986 – so he knows exactly what his son is experiencing.

“It was pitch black,” he recalls. “If you went without switching your torch on, you would not be able to distinguish a man at an arm's length. That's why such an expedition is so terrifying.”

Smolin and Shparo Jr, who together have previously completed a crossing of Greenland and an ascent of Alaska's Mount McKinley, began their expedition at Arkticheskiy Cape (the Arctic Cape), the northernmost point of Russia's Severnaya Zemlya archipelago, which is geographically part of the Russian continent. From here, they hope to travel 1,000 kilometres to the North Pole itself.

Most of the distance will be covered on skis, with each of the two men dragging two sleds packed

with 140kg of equipment and supplies. Incredibly, though, they are also swimming across sections of open water in orange drysuits, which create an air bubble to protect them from the debilitating cold.

AFRAID OF THE DARK

When the Russians were flown in to their start point at the Arctic Cape by the aviation department of Russia's Federal Security Service, they were immediately filled with trepidation. In the narrow spotlight of the Mi-8 helicopter, they caught snapshots of thin, broken ice, ominous black holes of open water and the glittering footprints of polar bears. When the helicopter had gone, they stood alone, in the darkness, in total silence. “Our first impression was nothing but fear,” admits Shparo. The team are navigating using powerful lanterns that carve a narrow sliver of light up to 50 metres ahead through the darkness. But, in the regular snowstorms and blizzards, their lanterns often penetrate only three metres, blinding them to the hazards and pitfalls that surround them.

“The darkness is the main danger,” explains Shparo, who says the pair now won't travel more than 15 metres apart after he momentarily lost his companion in the incident recounted at the beginning of this article. “In the night, we are afraid of polar bears or thin ice breaking underneath our tent while we sleep. In the day, what direction should we go? All around us is darkness. You cannot see anything.”

POLAR BEAR ATTACK

The explorers did not have to wait long before their fears were confirmed. Having spent three nights over Christmas stuck in a tent in a howling snowstorm, they awoke on December 26 to

bloodcurdling growls and the sight of an adult polar bear clawing through the tent. The bear crushed gasoline cans, spilling petrol over their food, and damaged a sled before they managed to frighten it off with signal rockets and gunshots. “It took us three hours to scare it away,” explains Shparo, who now sleeps with a gun at arm's length at all times.

Living day after day through an Arctic winter is hazardous enough in itself, with biting temperatures of -50 degrees, blinding snowstorms and icy winds raking across the land. “After fear, the cold is our main problem,” says Shparo. “We cannot stop, even for five minutes, for fear of getting frostbite. At night, we cannot sleep. And it is difficult to repair anything – you hold a metal pole in a naked hand here, and your hand turns white. Never before in the universe has there been such cold and such constant wind.”

The polar terrain has also dealt the expedition many cruel blows. The Arctic is not a fixed land mass, but a frozen icecap encrusting the Arctic Ocean, meaning it is constantly shifting with the currents underneath. When the current and wind is against the two men, they have experienced ‘negative drift’, spending days skiing northwards only to check their GPS and discover that they have not moved any closer to the North Pole. “These are the saddest days,” says Shparo.

ON THIN ICE

The fear of falling through thin ice has haunted their every step. Because the ice is constantly contracting and expanding, it can buckle and fracture at any moment, plunging them into the icy grip of the Arctic Ocean. “Some days we travel over thin ice – it holds us, but then suddenly you break through and start swimming, pulling the sleds after

you,” says Shparo. Some nights, he lies awake listening to the ice cracking, undressed and outside his sleeping bag, ready to flee.

PSYCHOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

The mental challenge of the expedition is equally harrowing. The human body suffers from a lack of exposure to sunlight, triggering depression, paranoia and incoherent thoughts. “My father carried out an expedition here in 1996, and he told me that all 11 participants had hallucinations,” explains Shparo, who admits to having suffered psychological problems from the lack of sleep and sunlight. “The human mentality is oppressed by the absence of outside light stimulus. We are afraid, but in the darkness an ordinarily difficult situation can feel hopeless.”

Shparo acknowledges, however, that they have experienced moments of incredible beauty, including the shimmering dance of the aurora borealis (northern lights). “In the course of travelling, there are a lot of thoughts, dreams and feelings in your head, but we can't think about any beauty at the moment,” he says. “You think only how not to lose the direction of the route.”

With several more weeks to survive under the thick blanket of darkness, are the pair confident of completing their expedition and writing their names into the chronicles of polar history? “We have no doubt that we will manage to reach the North Pole before March,” insists Shparo. “I've always wanted to do something unrivalled, unprecedented.”

If he and his companion can follow that small, yellow beam of light all the way to the North Pole before the sun rises over the horizon in March, he will have done precisely that.

NORTH POLE BY NIGHT THE EXPEDITION

DARK KNIGHTS

Two Russian explorers are attempting to become the first men in history to ski from the continent to the North Pole in the total darkness of a polar winter. Matvey Shparo and Boris Smolin set out from Russia's Arctic Cape on December 22 last year, and need to complete the 1,000km journey to the North Pole before the sun rises above the horizon for the first time in 2008. In January 2006, Norwegian Borge Oustand and South African Mike Horn attempted a similar expedition, but arrived at the North Pole on March 23 – the sun had risen a matter of days earlier.



EVENTS SO FAR...

- Dec 22** Begin expedition, cover first 10km of 1,000km.
- Dec 26** Attacked by polar bear; equipment damaged and food supplies ruined.
- Dec 30** Moon disappears from the skies, blanketing them in darkness.
- Jan 10** At the end of day 20, the explorers had covered 200km.
- Jan 12** The team's first ‘bath day’ and change of pants.
- Jan 13** The moon reappears, allowing a thin twilight.

NAVIGATION

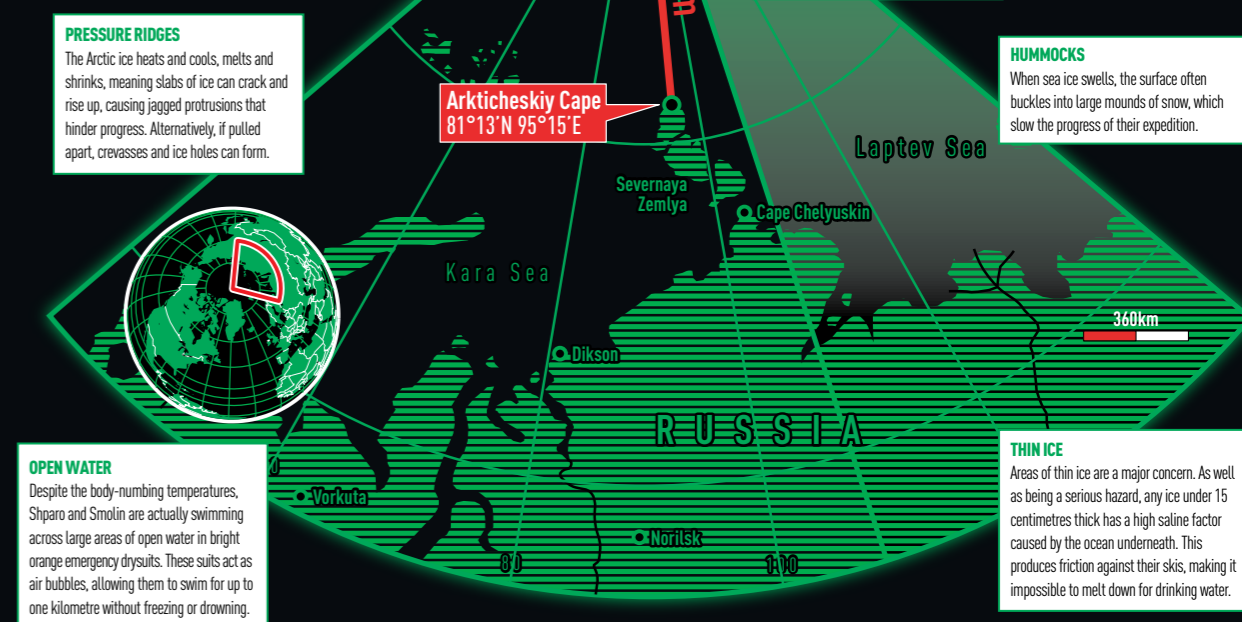
The Arctic and Antarctic Research Institute in St Petersburg sends satellite images and weather forecasts to the team's base in Moscow every day. The data is then relayed to the two explorers via the internet, along with radar plates of the land ahead. Using this information, they can navigate their course north using star formations, a compass and a GPS.

KEY EQUIPMENT

Fischer E109 skis, sledges, guns, Alfa Mordre ski boots, 40 bottles of petrol, tents, barrels of supplies, drysuits, inflatable boat (since discarded), stoves, lanterns, 10kg of batteries, GPS, phone, Cospas-Sarsat emergency beacon.

THE ROUTE

As well as temperatures of -50 degrees and the threat of polar bears, the Russians must contend with all of the Arctic's geographical hazards and pitfalls in total darkness.



NEVER BEFORE IN THE UNIVERSE HAS THERE BEEN SUCH COLD AND WIND

PHOTOGRAPHS BY OLESY KAZDZIALA, SKETCHES BY ADAM, MAP BY NINE