

SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT

— THREE MONTHS IN ANTARCTICA —

LAST JANUARY, AUSSIE ADVENTURERS **JUSTIN "JONESY" JONES** AND **JAMES "CAS" CASTRISSON** BECAME THE FIRST AND YOUNGEST PAIR TO TRAVEL THE 2,270KM JOURNEY FROM THE EDGE OF ANTARCTICA TO THE SOUTH POLE AND BACK, TOTALLY UNSUPPORTED. THIS IS THEIR CHILLY, CAPTIVATING TALE, AS TOLD BY CAS



Cas (left) and Jonesy (right) all smiles

for NZ. We'd planned to do the 2,200km expedition in 35 to 40 days. Turns out that wasn't the case and we ended up paddling 3,318 kays over 62 days. Upon arrival, we were absolutely wasted – and not in the good sense! Sharks had bumped up against the hull, we'd been battered by storms, and faced waves up to 10m high. You can add sleep deprivation and exhaustion to the mix, too. Adventure leads to adventure,

and, for me, Antarctica has always held this starry-eyed fascination. If I put it in the context of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, what chocolate is to Augustus Gloop is what

Antarctica is to me in terms of adventure. I used to love reading those stories from the heroic age of adventure – back 100 years or so ago – about pushing the limits in Antarctica, and I knew I'd do it someday. While I loved reading the stories and watching the documentaries, I don't think you can get a true understanding of the blizzards or



THE BACKGROUND

Jonesy's been my best mate for around half my life – we met at school when we were 15. As the years progressed, we went from bushwalking and climbing and canyoning to bigger trips. A few years ago [2007-8] we paddled in a kayak from Australia to New Zealand. Earlier this year we returned from our biggest trip yet, which was to Antarctica.

Some people operate better alone and prefer their own company. I much prefer being out there with someone else – especially my best mate – and sharing the highs, while also getting through those deep, dark lows together.

At the end of 2007, we pushed out from Forster, on the north coast of NSW, and left

In the last 27 days we had to cover 1,100km, which is more than a marathon per day. We were averaging 16, 17 hours skiing daily. Our bodies just fell apart.

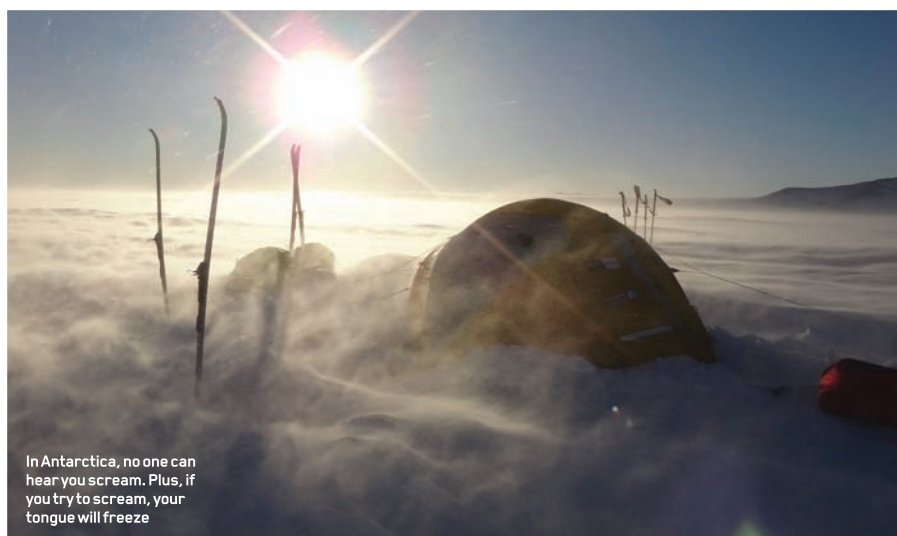
the intense cold or what it's like to cross a bridge over a crevasse unless you do it for yourself.

There's this appeal that has to do with its remoteness and the fact it's just so mysterious. It's completely desolate and the environment is as hostile as you can get on this planet – temperatures are brutally cold; it's also the windiest and driest place on Earth – so the idea of doing an expedition down

there really turns me on. I guess you either get the appeal or you don't.

THE PREPARATION

A trip like this is 95 per cent planning and five per cent execution. We trained and prepared for this expedition over three-and-a-half years. Our mantra was: Fat, fit, and flexible. We had to be fat because we knew we were going to lose a lot of weight down there, and over the course of the expedition we lost a combined 55 kilos. Despite the bulking up, we also had to be the fittest we've ever been in our lives –



In Antarctica, no one can hear you scream. Plus, if you try to scream, your tongue will freeze



our sleds were close to 160kg when we first started out on the coast. And when you're pulling that for 10, 12 hours a day, it completely rips your body apart. We did 30 hours a week of training over a good 12 months prior to leaving Australia. What we'd do is hook up two big truck tyres to one another using the sled hauling harness and just go for long walks on the road with them. Fifteen months before departure we decided it might be a decent idea to learn how to ski, since neither of us had ever skied before. Luckily, we had a great coach, but it was still a steep learning curve.

Before Jonesy and I embarked on the kayaking expedition, we asked the Army to put us through various sleep deprivation exercises. They pushed us to the point of collapse and hallucination. The reason we did that was so we'd know how our bodies would react when we were out in the Tasman. When I hallucinate – and this happened in Antarctica – I see this six-foot-five [196cm] baby in a diaper drinking out of a milk bottle and it completely freaks me out. Jonesy, on the other hand, can feel people touching him and trying to pull his ski pole or paddle out of his hand.

The one thing we couldn't prepare for in Australia was the cold. You go down to the Australian Alps and it might reach, at worst, -10°C. In Antarctica, for most of the expedition, we were looking at -30°C. We went to the Arctic Circle to get used to the temperatures but there's really no getting used to it.

Finally, we had to be

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flexible, because we couldn't afford injuries when we were down there.

THE CONDITIONS

The moment you step out of the plane, it's like being punched in the face by coldness. The air is around -35°C and you can add wind chill to that. There's something called the 30 Rule: If you've got skin exposed and the temperature is -30°C and there are winds of 30km/h, then that skin will get frostbite within 30 seconds and die.

That just shows you the severity and brutality of the place. You need to be switched on at all times.

The worst thing about the cold is that



No man taking on Antarctica leaves home without his stash and stew



you can't escape it, so it constantly wears you down. I'll never forget walking out of the plane and the moisture inside my nostrils freezing instantly: When I pushed my nostrils together I could hear it crunch and crackle. Ice crystals and ice chunks actually formed inside our sleeping bags.

Besides the cold, something else I was very wary of was the isolation. And when it sets in, it's truly overwhelming. We stepped off the plane and there was nothing else around. When we pushed out into the Tassie Sea a few years earlier, there was always this sense that Australia's just back behind us and New Zealand's just over there. When we were down in Antarctica, it felt like we were on another planet and there was nothing else around. In the first month we got hammered by blizzard after blizzard and we hardly ever saw the Sun.

If anything had happened to us, we were completely alone – there was no way a helicopter or plane or person was coming for us – and that's terrifying.

THE ESSENTIALS

One of the most important things we packed was our iPods. We're not sponsored by Apple, so, if you're reading this, feel free to give us a call! But seriously, there's so much desolation, so being



At times, Jonesy bears an eerie resemblance to Charlie Sheen



able to listen to music and podcasts and audiobooks was great for taking our minds off the pain and the monotony of the trail.

Having a good, bombproof tent is essential. Days on end, the wind was blowing at 80 – 110km/h. If our tent had collapsed or been compromised, that would've been lights out for us. For three months, a 1.8m² tent was our home. And it kept us alive, thankfully.

OK, so going to the toilet... you've gotta do it bloody quick! You need to be super-well organised and, because the weight

of the sled was a major consideration, we could only carry a very limited amount of toilet paper. That meant using ice and snow blocks when we ran out – and that stuff can be gravelly.



One of few meals that didn't taste like blood from busted lips





Rashes and rations (from left): Cas, minus lots of weight; a foot fetishist's nightmare; Cas' angry inner-thigh rash; freeze-dried ice cream (below)

THE STRUGGLE

There was atrocious weather for the first month, with all these blizzards. We needed to average 25km a day over the entire trip and we were doing just under 10. We'd fallen hundreds of kilometres behind schedule and, at that point, the finish line felt so remote. We actually dumped three days' worth of food to try and lighten our sled and make faster progress. By Day 80 – well into the return journey – we were absolutely ravenous, so we spent half an hour digging through the snow like a couple of lunatics, looking for the food we'd buried. Didn't find it...

So you have an idea, in the last 27 days we had to cover 1,100km, which is more than a marathon per day. If we didn't achieve that, we wouldn't have made our goal, and would've missed the last plane out for the season [we could've gotten one from the South Pole but that wasn't the plan]. During the outward journey, the biggest day we'd done was 34km, so it was 10km more than that each day. We were averaging 16, 17 hours skiing daily. Our bodies just fell apart.

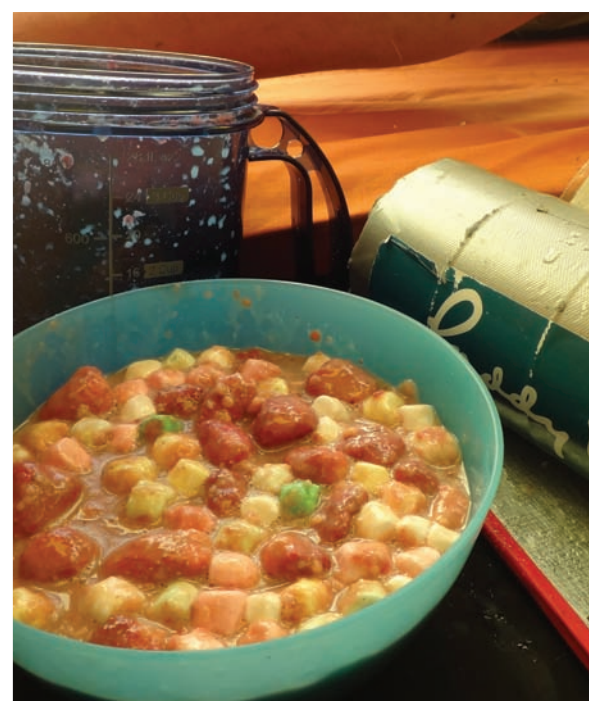
To be honest, it wasn't even until Day 87 that we thought there was



a chance we might actually pull it off. At the time, I was busy focusing on the day ahead. When that got too hard, I focused on the next 100 steps. When that got too hard, I focused on the next five steps. When we returned to the coast, where the plane was picking us up, and we didn't have to ski the next day, I reflected on what we'd done. But even then it was so surreal, like, how the hell did we do that? Even now, flicking through the book and looking at footage, I can't quite understand how we got it done.

There were definitely moments of doubt. On Day 29 I had this skin infection

There's something called the 30 Rule: If you've got skin exposed and the temperature is -30°C and there are winds of 30km/h, then that skin will get frostbite within 30 seconds and die.



on my balls that I would not wish upon anyone. It felt like someone had rubbed them raw with sandpaper for two hours then poured vinegar on the area. It was so incredibly painful – I had to take a course of antibiotics and was holed up in the tent for two days.





"Um... you said there'd be South Pole dancers, dude."



THE FINISH

This trip took us to places physically, mentally, and emotionally that we'd never been. After 89 days, we'd pushed ourselves so far, and we were walking that fine tightrope between failure, collapse, and just scraping in. Our hands and feet were dying; we had infections running rampant over our bodies; our lips and faces were smashed – our lips were caving in

on themselves and when we'd eat, all we could taste was blood; the soles of our feet and our toes had filled up with pus, so we had to lance them nightly. It had become a very dark state of affairs. Looking back now, I'm not sure how we pushed on. I guess we were so far beyond any expectations and boundaries we'd set for ourselves that we just kept going without thinking about it.

In terms of physical stuff, once we returned there was some nerve damage to the fingers and toes that took a while to recover, and we had to set about putting that weight back on. The only lingering effect was this sense of fatigue and tiredness that clings to you.

It's funny. My then-fiancée picked us up from the airport and when I got home and sat down at the dining table I noticed this long to-do list. Our wedding was two weeks after I got back but I didn't shirk any responsibilities – I just got straight back into normal life. We had three months to write the book and Jonesy got stuck into producing the doco, so we haven't had any time off since we got home!

Daniel Steiner



EXTREME SOUTH BY JAMES CASTRISSON IS OUT NOW (RRP \$35). FOR MORE INFO ON CAS AND JONESY: CASANDJONESY.COM.AU

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