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# Arctic Dreams & Nightmares

With only a headlamp and the mid-February moon to light the way, Mike Horn treks across pack ice on the Arctic Ocean. He and teammate Børge Ousland were pursuing a shared vision: to ski to the Pole in the dead of winter. Not long after, a third adventurer—stranded, frantic, and alone—sat atop a shrinking ice floe facing death.

**By Marguerite Del Giudice**





Cocooned in a buoyant dry suit, Børge swims through a slushy gap between floes, an often repeated ordeal that could take up to an hour. At minus 30°F, the air was much colder than the water, Børge says. "I was sweating inside the suit."

MIKE HORN



**Spooky.** That's the word that keeps coming up when people describe Cape Arkticheskiy, the godforsaken tongue of land where this Arctic adventure tale begins. There's nothing there but the ice, moaning like an old door in the wind, and hungry polar bears looking for lunch—which, on any given day, if you are not careful, could very well be you. (That's why you pack the .44 Magnum.) This desolate dot on the top of the planet is like any other Siberian outpost, except for one thing: It's the start point for some of the

most ambitious Arctic expeditions and extreme explorers of our time, one of the places where the pros separate themselves from serious amateurs and adventure clowns.

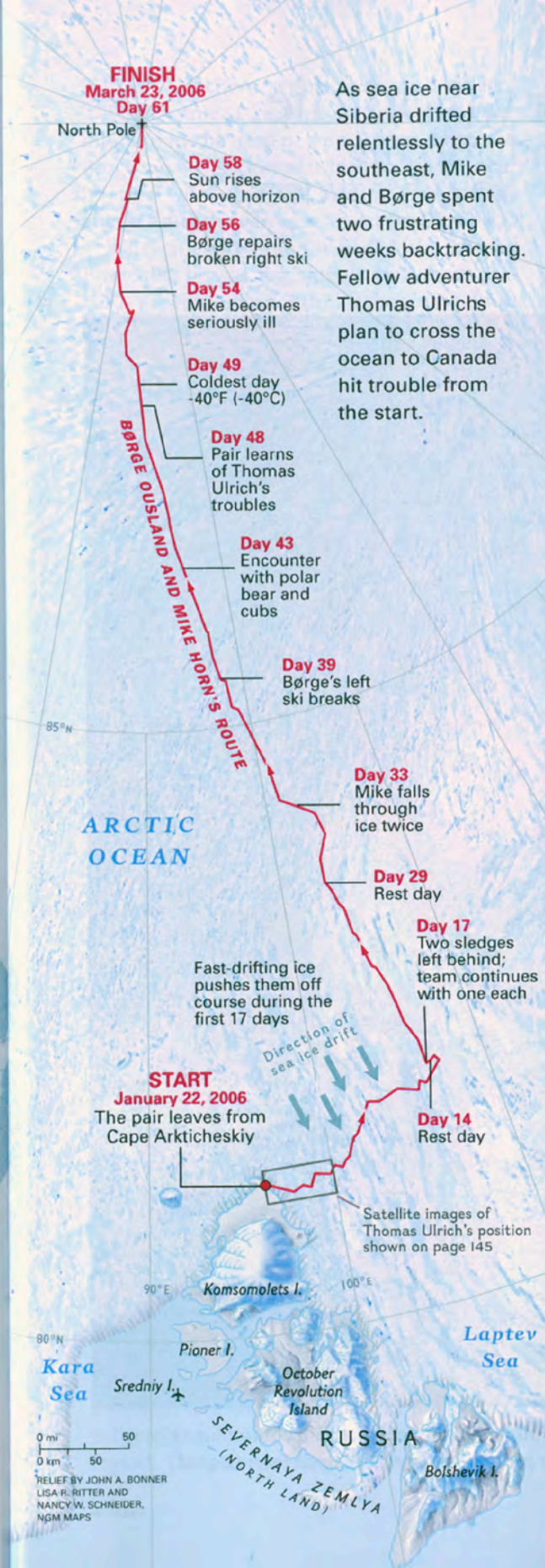
The tricky part is getting off the cape and onto a more solid surface to walk to the North Pole. Depending on the weather, that first step can either be more or less a breeze or a death trap. Sometimes the ocean surface freezes all the way up to the shoreline, and sometimes there are miles offshore of unstable, drifting ice and open black water that, in 2004, swallowed one able French adventurer, Dominique Arduin, without a trace. It's not uncommon to end up being flown across the hard part or picked up as a nervous wreck.

In the early months of 2006, six expeditions planned to set out from Cape Arkticheskiy. One solo adventurer crapped out altogether, as soon as he got a load of it, and three other parties were airlifted by helicopter to a safer chunk of ice. Two expeditions remained: The team of Børge Ousland and Mike Horn, who were navigating 600 miles to the North Pole—in the darkness of polar winter—and Thomas Ulrich, who wanted to cross the Arctic Ocean, 1,200 miles from Siberia to Canada, later on with daylight but alone.

Børge, 43, lankily erect, fair-featured, and self-possessed, with long, rosy arms and cinnamon hair, was known, among other things, for his obsessive preparedness; he was a study in Nordic cool. Mike, 39, a dark-featured, dimpled South African-born Swiss, tightly muscled and with

gigantic thighs, had a zesty kinetic spirit that gave the impression of a bull in a china shop; he thought of himself as a hot Latin and was more inclined to wing it. You could see the stamina shining out of his eyes. Thomas, 39, a compact and talkative Swiss, quick to laugh, with twinkly blue eyes and an underlying edge, was fastidious about safety and had a professional alpine guide's love of detail. At one point, he was a prospective third partner on Mike and Børge's trek to the Pole in the dark, but, for reasons which will be explained later, they went their separate ways.

This is how they went about things: Both expeditions were unsupported. No dogsleds or airdrops of equipment or food or fuel along the way. They had to be as prepared as was humanly possible for circumstances that promised to be wildly unpredictable: biting headwinds and whiteout conditions, 40-below temperatures, polar bears, pack ice, open water. The ice often presents itself as a mosaic of islands, separated by canals of water. These canals are called leads, and leads can be a big part of an Arctic explorer's life. When you come to one, the first thing you do is look for a crossing where the two ice fields meet; otherwise you have to hop across, paddle across in an



As sea ice near Siberia drifted relentlessly to the southeast, Mike and Børge spent two frustrating weeks backtracking. Fellow adventurer Thomas Ulrichs plan to cross the ocean to Canada hit trouble from the start.

inflatable rubber dinghy (if it's really far), or swim across in a waterproof suit, a big one-piece polyurethane thing that fits over your clothing and boots and traps air in such a way that you float: Børge's invention.

They did their walking on skis, and dragged anything they might need behind them. Each man wore a harness, and the harness was roped to two single-file capsule-shaped sledges weighing a total of several hundred pounds that would get gradually lighter as they used up supplies. The sledges could float and had runners for the snow. Their gear included tents, stoves, sleeping bags, and vacuum-packed food, of course, the inflatable dinghies and waterproof suits, and also flare guns, the .44 Magnum revolvers, satellite phones, backup batteries, pocket PCs, and global positioning system (GPS) units. Mike and Børge had lithium-powered headlamps to light their way in the dark. They were all working with the same Russia-based expedition planner, Victor Boyarsky, and every day, a guy in Switzerland, Hans Ambühl, passed on information about weather conditions and how things looked up ahead, based on satellite images provided by the Canadian Space Agency.

So this is who they were and what they were doing up there. Børge and Mike set out together first, in the dark of January. Thomas followed alone, in March.

This is their story.

### The first step is always like this

Explorers will tell you that—in an extreme wilderness like the Arctic Ocean, which is still among the least explored places on Earth—your life is in danger from the moment you take your first step, and after that it's only a matter of how much in danger. Such was the case with Børge's and Mike's first steps in and around Cape Arkticheskiy in the pitch dark of polar winter.

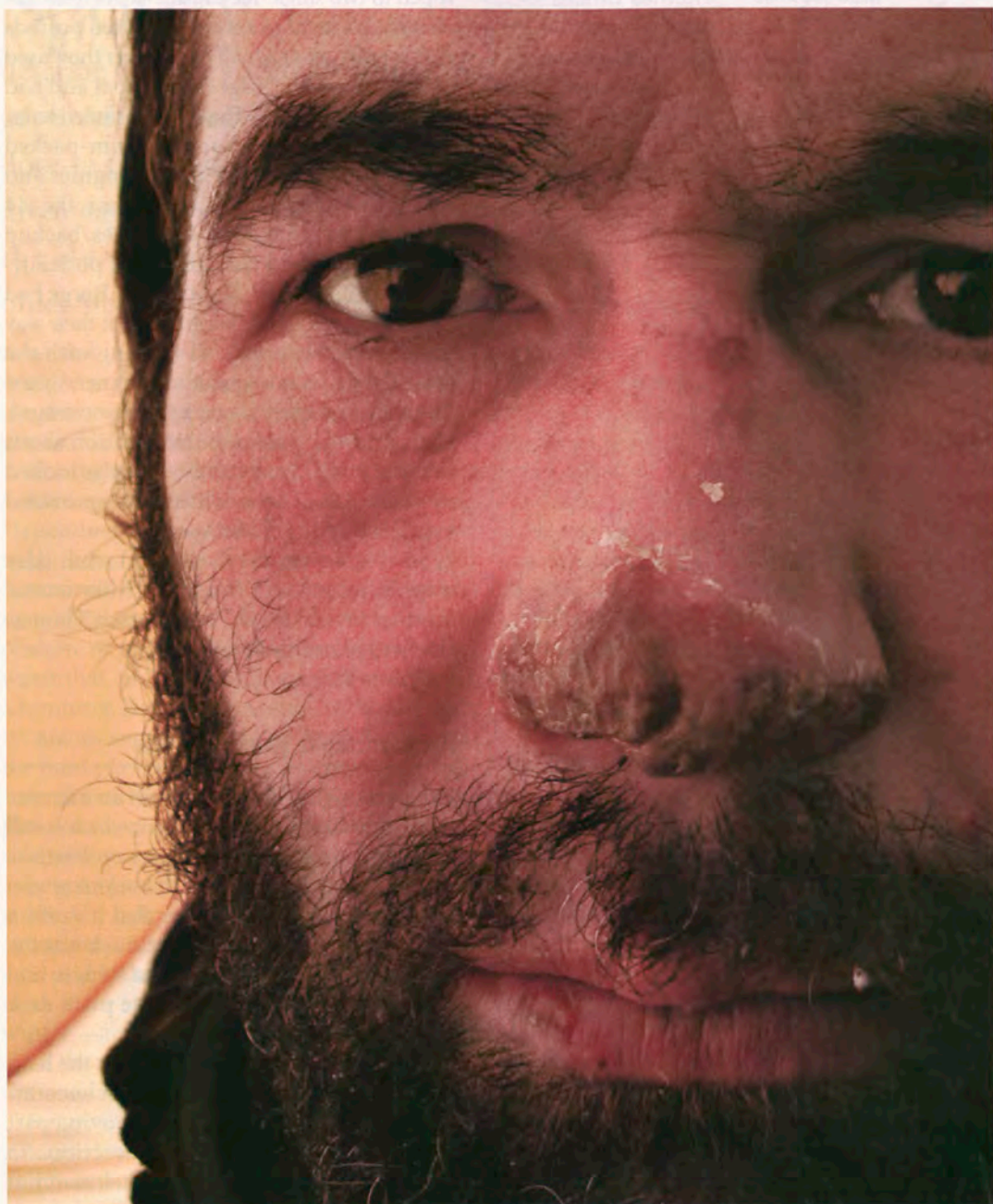
They tried to get going right after the helicopter dropped them off there but encountered a wall of ice at the coast, moving past them sideways in the wrong direction. So they spent the night, scared in their tent but happy that at least there were two of them. Then Børge heard something.

"Mike, is that you?"



**"If you worry, you die.  
If you don't worry, you also die.  
So why worry?"**

—MIKE HORN



Frostbite took a piece of Mike's nose, despite his daily regimen: He coated his skin with his own mucus, which froze into a protective layer. His nose later healed.

"Yeah, I'm chewing on a piece of chocolate."

Then came a ripping sound—*fwaap!*—followed by the head of a polar bear. Mike and Børge lurched backward, which scared the bear; it ran off with some food, and they had to chase after it firing the flare gun, to get the food back.

When it came time for bed, Mike assured Børge that he was alert, jungle savvy from previous expeditions, months kickboarding down the Amazon and walking around the Equator; he knew all the sounds. That said, he immediately fell fast asleep and started snoring. Børge was wide awake all night.

"Mike, how can you sleep?"

"Børge, if you worry, you die. If you don't worry, you also die. So why worry?"

The next night, the tent was flapping so noisily in the wind that they didn't hear a polar bear dragging away their rubber boat. They found it the next morning, a hundred yards away, all chewed up, and had to spend hours repairing it. Two nights, two bears.

They took a walk to check out the ice. Hans was telling them that the ice, based on the satellite images he was analyzing back in Switzerland, appeared to be drifting fast to the southeast—the wrong way—at a rate of half a mile an hour. But they were already so tired of polar bears that when they found a good crossing off the cape and the drift seemed to calm down, they decided to get the hell out of there.

They had to use the patched rubber boat to cross some treacherous leads and get away from the coast and ended up camping for the night a couple of miles out. When they woke up, they found they had drifted nine miles backward.

That's how things went for the next couple of weeks, with everything around them opposite from what it was supposed to be. Instead of frigid weather, they got a Siberian heat wave—temperatures in the teens and twenties. Instead of minimal wind, it was harsh, blowing the wrong way, and in their faces. Instead of the ice drifting in a direction that would help them, the floes were carrying them away from the Pole. Day after day, they'd march north, then slip toward Siberia while they slept; it was all they could do to hold their position.

There were only so many weeks before the midnight sun would rise over the horizon and deliver its six months of continuous light to the region. The plan was to get to the Pole before

that, but they'd never make it at this rate; they'd run out of food. So they started walking longer and eating less and, consequently, having distracting food fantasies: blueberry crepes with sour cream for Børge and chocolate-covered marshmallows for Mike.

In the beginning, they swam a lot—up to five or six times a day—across canals of water between islands of ice. "We just swam, swam, swam, got out, swam, and kept going north," Mike says. This entailed taking off their skis, packing them up, maneuvering themselves, in all their heavy clothing and boots, into the zippered waterproof suits, sliding very carefully into the water so none would seep in at the neck, then dragging in their sledges, which together weighed, at the start, 340 pounds. Sometimes they had to break up thin ice on the surface before sliding in. The water was warmer than the air, the sledges could float, and the waterproof suits were buoyant; but still, here they were, "out there in pitch-black water with just a headlamp and these towers of ice moving around," Børge says. Sometimes unable to see either where they were swimming or the sledges they were pulling behind them. "We felt a little bit like Laika in space"—the dog the Soviets sent up. On another planet. It was scary.

When they weren't in the water, they were ski-walking in what felt like a tunnel, everything whited out from the snow except the dimmed cone of a few yards of light from their headlamps. They navigated through thick snow and flat ice fields and pack ice, which is frozen salt water that has broken up and jammed together into varying piles of giant ice cubes.

It wasn't practical to rely solely on the GPS, because it consumed too much battery power, and the display tended to freeze up and had to be warmed up in their pockets. They'd check it once in a while but mostly navigated by wind direction (in part determined from the flapping nylon telltales attached to their ski poles), the moon and stars, and, in particular, Mike's mastery in reading drift patterns in the snow. He had learned "the old way," he says, from an Inuit in Canada's Foxe Basin, named Simon, who "taught me all the different ways snow looks." Falling snow, drifting snow, blowing snow; knee height, shoulder height, head height. A drift starts at the level of the ice, and, as the wind gets harder, the drift gets higher. The higher the drift,



# The tent was flapping so noisily in the wind that they didn't hear a polar bear dragging away their rubber boat.

the higher the wind speed. Wind speed, in turn, indicates how fast the ice will be moving and how fast it might break up. Mike could follow the wind-hardened ridge of an old drift with the tip of his ski, and in this way the two men tapped their way north in the dark.

Sometimes it was all they could do to keep their eyes focused on the ends of their skis, the next hour, the next minute, the next yard, because it wouldn't do any good to think ahead. It was that rarest of experiences—living completely in the now. *Where am I? What must I do? Can I still feel my fingers?* Sometimes they were happy just to find themselves alive in the tent at the end of the day.

## Why are they doing this?

This kind of hell, of course, was exactly what they were looking for. These guys are professionals. They have sponsors—outdoor gear manufacturers, construction outfits, an adventure travel agency, a watch company—and their livelihoods involve doing extreme adventures. They didn't set out for things to fall that way; they were just doing what they loved. But after discovering they could earn a living—writing books, taking pictures, making films, and especially motivational speaking—by following their hearts, what was not to like?

Each had been adventuring since boyhood, practicing at taking incrementally higher and higher calculated risks, and at some point they left their comfort zones and never went back. For them, going to extremes that may seem insane was actually a logical progression.

You don't go to the North Pole in the dark as a first adventure, for instance; you start, as Børge did, growing up skiing and roaming the mountains of Norway. You start your life, get some kind of job. He worked as a diver for an oil company. Wore a copper helmet and big lead shoes and lead weights on his back and chest. Graduated

to the depths of the North Sea, sometimes working for weeks at the bottom in a pressure chamber, inspecting oil rigs and working on pipelines. In between, he spent a couple of years in the Norwegian Navy, as a diver with the special forces. He loved training. His first expedition was a trek across Greenland with a couple of diver friends 20 years ago, before GPS and satellite phones. They relied on sextants, cotton, wool, and other equipment similar to that used by Fridtjof Nansen and Roald Amundsen, the great Norwegian polar explorers of yesteryear and Børge's countrymen, in whose large footsteps he follows. That's when he got the bug. On this trip, he was wearing boots that were replicas of the ones Amundsen wore on his 1911 trek to the South Pole.

In Mike Horn's case, the pivotal point in his life, he says, came when he impulsively left his hometown of Johannesburg, South Africa, and moved to Europe. A gifted athlete, who ran track and triathlons and played competitive rugby, he dreamed of competing internationally, maybe the Olympics. But South Africa, shunned by the world community at that time because of apartheid, was not allowed. At 18, he was drafted by the South African Army to fight a communist insurgency in Angola as a commando. Afterward, he went to college, then worked in his uncle's fruit and vegetable business. But the monotony got to him, and he longed to see the world. So he decided to give his stuff away and get on the next plane to the first country that would have him—Switzerland—where he took a job washing dishes in an old hotel. He learned to ski (he'd never seen snow before that) and became a ski instructor, then rafting guide, and paraglider (venturing to Peru and crashing near Machu Picchu). After swimming the Amazon for five months with a kickboard, he became an adventurer full-time.

Thomas Ulrich, whose expedition we'll get to later, grew up in the mountains around



Børge's headlamp glows in the bitter darkness as he stands by the tent. Inside, togetherness sometimes turned into quiet sparring. Børge said Mike walked too fast. Mike felt Børge was bossy. "But polar exploration is his life," says Mike. "I was there to learn."

Interlaken, Switzerland, hiking, camping, alpine skiing, and racing. He was rock climbing and paragliding (at one point, he worked as a test pilot for a manufacturer) before the world at large knew much about paragliding. People would ask, why are you doing that? Or say to his parents, hey, you might want to check out your kid here. He seemed extreme. He worked some as a carpenter but felt bored and restless. He would take pictures during his mountain adventures, and one day he sent one to a magazine and the editors published it. That's when he first realized that he might be able to make money doing what he loved. He took an international mountain guide course and started a paragliding school while continuing to build an adventure photography business. When he was about 18, he took his first of many trips to Patagonia, to climb an 11,000-foot tooth of rock called Mount Fitz Roy, and that was the trip—the preparation, especially, the new culture, living in a tent—that propelled him into the world of extreme exploring.

The idea that these men have a death wish seems to amuse them. It isn't a desire to be closer to death that attracts them, they will tell

you—it's a desire to be closer to life. They've been to the mountaintop. They know that willpower can be built, that ordinary people, like themselves, have abilities beyond their reckonings. They're just the ones who are out there, scouting the wilderness on behalf of the rest of us. Not marking dots on a geographical map anymore—that was accomplished long ago. What they're exploring now is the inner map, the mental and emotional map. What will they learn, about themselves, from being in a position where nothing matters except to stay alive? What, exactly, is the human being capable of? This is what drives them.

## Oscar, meet Felix. Felix, meet Oscar.

For Mike and Børge, the expedition was turning out to be as much interpersonal as geographical. The men—two alpha males sharing a tent—had to figure out how to get along. They had been virtual strangers beforehand. Then, on the trip, they couldn't see each other's faces in the dark, couldn't read each other's reactions, and the headlamps shone awkwardly in their eyes. A simple misunderstanding, after a bone-tiring day fighting to stay alive, could escalate



Sometimes they were happy just  
to find themselves alive  
in the tent at the end of the day.



Mike soldiers through a whiteout that reduced visibility to a few feet. "It was like we were blind," recalls Børge. "We were just feeling our way forward."

unpredictably and require energy neither could afford. So in the beginning, they kept their differences to themselves, sitting on their own sides of the tent at the end of the day, cleaning their gloves and shoes, with their backs to each other.

One of their issues had to do with defecating in the tent, what was acceptable and what wasn't. Mike had brought along a "multipurpose" insulated aluminum pot that could be used both as a cooking pan and a toilet, a system he had previously used in the Arctic. He'd line it with a plastic bag, sit on it, do what he needed to, take the bag out, the contents would freeze, he'd empty them out, and the bag would be completely dry; he thought it was brilliant. But Børge said no to that. Going to the bathroom in the tent, something he had not done before, would be all right, he supposed, as long as he and Mike went at different times, but you certainly didn't go in the same pot you boiled your water and cooked your meals in, no matter how many plastic bags you lined it with.

Børge also liked to follow strict regimens, which had served him spectacularly well in his extensive polar experience. He was fussy about the equipment, how breakfast was prepared, how the tent went up and down. The margin for error in a place like this was virtually nil; any lapse could be fatal. Mike, meanwhile, was grateful to have Børge's polar expertise at his side. The expedition had been Børge's idea, and Børge was the boss. But Mike, accomplished as well and accustomed to exploring alone—emotional, proud, and stubborn—was inclined to bristle at being told what to do or how to do it. One evening, after a particularly long and tiring day, a pole snapped while Mike was putting up the tent, and Børge accused him of being careless. (Repairs were Børge's job, and rethreading the drawstring inside the tent pole had to be done with bare hands in the cold, Børge's bare hands, because Mike's had been frostbitten on a previous expedition and were too vulnerable to expose.) Mike felt sure he hadn't forced anything—the pole just wasn't holding up to the elements—and took offense.

Here they were: the Arctic odd couple, alone together on the ice.

After that episode, the two men sat down in the tent for a gentlemanly tête-à-tête. Mike told Børge he had a lot of respect for him but didn't always agree with how he explained himself or



felt things should be done; he came off as rigid and sometimes arrogant. Børge explained that the Scandinavian culture was one of few words. Norwegians don't say "I'm sorry" all the time, for instance. They just go about their business, correctly and in silence, and expect others to do the same. Remarks Mike had experienced as criticism, Børge had intended as advice. In the end, they realized that their main problem had been poor communication and pledged to be more open with one another.

Børge finally accepted a cup of Mike's coffee, they swapped meals (precooked, ground-up, freeze-dried, and vacuum-packed things like potatoes, chicken, beef, lamb, reindeer; each had his own menu). They even reached a compromise on the toilet issue: Mike had his door between the inner and outer tent, and Børge had his. Sometimes, one of them would make a scatological joke, and they'd share a little laugh. The two men learned to appreciate these moments, because the rest of the time, they knew, they were going to suffer.

#### Just the usual polar despair

After a couple of weeks, the wind shifted, and they finally found themselves headed steadily north with the wind at their backs. All they had to deal with then were the usual hazards associated with doing what they were trying to do in the dark: Walking blindly in whiteout conditions, unable to discern the terrain. Negotiating a compression zone where mountains of ice six yards high blocked their path. Crossing a 400-yard lead covered in thin ice by donning their swimsuits and crawling. Mike's thumbs were frozen, and Børge was stuffing hot-water bottles in his boots to keep his feet thawed.

After six or seven weeks, the sun, while not yet risen, was close enough to the horizon to light up the landscape, and they didn't need their headlamps anymore. The North Pole was in their sights, two or so weeks away, when Børge started getting disturbing text messages on his satellite phone about Thomas Ulrich. Remember Thomas? He had just set out from Cape Arkticheskiy, intending to cross from Siberia to the Pole and then on to Canada. Børge had talked to him by phone to say that ice and wind conditions ahead were good. But the text messages now were indicating that something had gone wrong

and Thomas was drifting in strong winds. Børge tried to call to offer moral support, but Thomas's phone was either turned off or in use. Børge knew how difficult it was getting past Arkticheskiy's coastal turbulence. But he didn't think it was anything serious, just the usual polar despair.

#### Sometimes it's better to just stay in the tent

Thomas's life was in peril almost from the moment he stepped off the cape. First of all, he'd had to spend five restless 30-below nights alone on Arkticheskiy, waiting for ice to form off the coast so that he'd have something to ski-walk on, and watching out for polar bears. One had already come sniffing around his equipment, and he'd had to scare it off with a signal flare.

Finally he got some encouraging news from Hans, his home-based expedition manager, the lean, sensitive egghead who was interpreting satellite images back in Thomas's hometown of Interlaken, Switzerland, for him as well as for Børge and Mike. The pictures were showing a small window of opportunity—six miles of suspicious but traversable ice offshore, which could be covered, theoretically, in one day—so he bit. A favorable north wind was being predicted that could blow the good ice closer to the coast and close up the leads, and he figured that, if conditions turned out worse than expected, he could always come back to the coast. So he put on his skis and set out, early on a Wednesday morning in March, towing two yellow sledges weighing a combined 375 pounds.

The going at the start was relatively easy. But the leads off the coast had opened up overnight, and the best one he could find was at least a hundred yards across. The ice on the other side appeared older and more stable, so he inflated his rubber dinghy and started paddling. A thin layer of ice soon stopped him, and he had to slip into the water in his waterproof suit. Breaking the ice with his body while dragging the sledges behind, he injured his groin. On the other side, the ice turned out to be disappointingly thin and surrounded by water, and he found himself on an island about the size of four football fields. He would have retreated to the cape, but the wind kept pushing the ice he was on farther from shore, and him with it. Not good, but having no other options, he camped for the night.

In the morning, a strong northwest wind

## He vacillated between panic and calm. Screaming, swearing, crying, praying, and then getting back to work.

was blowing his mosaic of ice southeast at an unpleasant pace. He was riding in an area of swiftly drifting patches of ice, and he was on one of those patches. At this point, he was thinking he might have to be evacuated and restart his expedition. But he wasn't scared to death or anything. Then the storm hit.

Two years he'd spent preparing for his big moment, organizing the gear, raising \$250,000 from sponsors, getting in shape by dragging car tires behind him on mountain trails in the Swiss Alps. Now look at him: huddled alone in his tent, making frantic calls on his space-age phone to Hans in Switzerland and Victor in Russia, who were trying to come up with a plan. He had been only a couple of miles off the coast when the storm hit. *How could they not see it coming?* There wasn't even any snow to weigh the tent down with—he'd had to use food bags—and if he opened the door the howling wind was going to inflate it like a balloon and catapult him into the sky. Every now and then it insinuated itself underneath, and he could feel himself hovering momentarily over the ice, like a flying carpet revving its engine. The only thing keeping the tent on the ground was the weight of his body, and all he could do was sit there, trying to be heavy.

*What am I doing here?* All he could think about were his wife and daughters. *How could I do this to them?*

The yellow walls of his tent were covered with family drawings: the Easter Bunny, a bonfire, his hammock, and, oh, yeah, some angels. Here was a guy who believed that when your number's up, it's up—"They put you in the cemetery and the worms come"—but he wanted angels. He was imagining his kids crying in the church at his funeral and people talking about what a dope he was and all the stupid things he did in his life. He couldn't just do things "for fun." He couldn't just be a carpenter, as he had trained for, and climb mountains on the side

like everyone else in Switzerland. No, he had to climb them intentionally in bad weather, or scale the treacherous Ferrari route of Cerro Torre in Patagonia *during the winter*, or cross Patagonia's Southern Ice Field on foot. That one day he might not return home was always a risk. Now, sitting alone in his tent fighting an Arctic storm, he was wondering if this was that day.

Every now and then he tried to call Børge but couldn't get through. Which was just as well. For one thing, what could Børge do for him? He and Mike were probably suffering, too. For another, Børge was his teacher, as far as polar exploring was concerned—that's who he traversed the Patagonian Ice Field with, over 54 days, in 2003—and he was embarrassed about the pickle he was in. For a third, Thomas originally had planned to go with Børge in the dark to the North Pole. The two had discussed it while in Patagonia, and Børge had told Thomas then that he needed to get more experience first—both Arctic and solo—and that after that the two could go. Thomas was already well into planning that solo trip, when Mike Horn entered the picture. Mike had done a solo circumnavigation of the Arctic Circle, and therefore knew how to get around up there in the dark, something Børge didn't have experience with. After Mike returned, he and Børge got to talking, and Børge invited him in. At first, Børge figured all three men could make the trip, but Mike wouldn't go for it. He didn't want to wait for Thomas to get experience, thought having three would slow the trip down and complicate decision-making (inevitably turning two against one), and believed Thomas didn't bring a skill to the table that either Børge or Mike didn't already have.

Børge had crossed both the Arctic Ocean and Antarctica solo and was the first man, in 1994, to walk to the North Pole unsupported and alone. Mike was famous in Europe for his extreme solo expeditions. Thomas was known mainly as an adventure photographer; he had not really been



The only thing keeping the tent on the ground was the weight of his body, and all he could do was sit there, trying to be heavy.

tested in the Arctic, and he had never gone anywhere solo—a true measure of psychological grit.

Børge was torn and felt bad. But he understood Mike's position, and in the end it was decided not to wait for Thomas, who, confident in his own capacities and not one to slink into the shadows, proceeded with his ambitious plans for an unsupported trans-Arctic trek.

In any event, marooned in the Arctic on a floating piece of ice, Thomas was mortified that his big expedition was going south so fast. It's always a crapshoot when you put yourself at the mercy of nature. (And Børge would say later, "He was just unlucky.") But at that point, Thomas was racked with self-doubt—*Was it bad luck, or did I make a mistake?*—and, on that level, his teacher Børge was the last person he wanted to talk to.

#### Can it possibly get worse?

So there he was, sitting on the ice in his tent, fighting the storm. It was dark, the ice was breaking up, and the piece he was on soon shrank in size, from four football fields to one. No more staying in the sleeping bag. His boots were on, and he'd fixed a bag to his harness—containing satellite phones, backup batteries, an emergency satellite beacon, three days of food, the stove, a little water—in case all hell broke loose and he had to scramble to another piece of ice. In the middle of the night his rubber dinghy, which was roped to the tent, started flying around, threatening to pull it down, so he cut it loose and watched as it disappeared into the black sky.

He was in frequent touch with Hans, but the satellite images were only so helpful. By the time the satellite finished its orbit and the images were downloaded and processed, they were already four hours old—at best. They also couldn't be transmitted directly to Thomas on the ice, and therefore he couldn't reckon them with what he was seeing with his own eyes.

A strange sensation suddenly gripped him.

But he couldn't unzip the floorless outer tent and look, for fear the wind would rush in and blow it away with him in it. So he crawled underneath it. Flying water hit him in the dark, he got soaked.

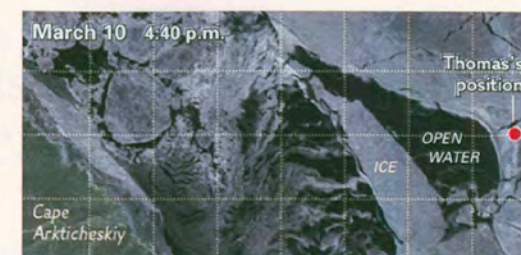
Then he realized what was happening. A yard from the side of his tent, the ice had cracked, and he was undulating near the edge. Then in front of the tent came a second crack, and a third, and then one under the tent. His football field was breaking up completely, and before long he was standing on a piece ten yards square. He activated his emergency beacon then, grabbed his emergency bag, pulled on his skis, and hustled around in the dark, looking for a better piece of ice, bobbing up and down, as if he were on a raft.

Screaming and crying, he called Hans. "I'm dying! I'm dying! You have to get me out of here!"

#### Meanwhile, back in Russia . . .

The rescue would have to be organized by Victor Boyarsky, Thomas's Russia-based expedition manager and fixer extraordinaire, an accomplished polar explorer in his own right, a man full of humor and confidence and life, and a master at working the Russian aviation bureaucracy. As a director of the Russian State Museum of the Arctic and Antarctic in St. Petersburg, Victor had contacts high and low in the infrastructure, and it was looking as if he would be needing all of them.

Thomas had laid out \$140,000 of his own money—a bank guarantee—to ensure easy access to funds in the event that he needed to be rescued. But that didn't mean helicopter rescue crews were standing by 24 hours a day. Two helicopters had originally remained near Cape Arkhticheskiy for some days, meaning to hang around until he made it safely off the coast. But the weather was so bad, and Thomas had to wait so long for conditions to improve, that by the time he got



**Thomas's nightmare** Foul weather—and bad luck—doomed Thomas Ulrich's dream of crossing the Arctic Ocean alone from Siberia to Canada. Conditions went from bad to worse between March 9 (above left) and March 10 (above right), when a storm fractured the ice into ever smaller floes and scattered his food bags (bottom). "There was no safe place," says Thomas (below). "Everything was blown away."





started the helicopter crews, for cost reasons, had returned to their base in the city of Norilsk—840 miles away from the cape. Now there were procedures, restrictions, military permits to obtain. It was nighttime, and the helicopter pilots weren't allowed to fly at night. Then the wind kicked up, and they had to wait until morning anyway.

Victor broke the news to Thomas. Make a new camp from the remains of your old one, Victor told him, and try to keep warm. By then the wind had died down and the ice wasn't moving so much—the storm was over for the time being. So Thomas went back to his original camp, dragged his sledges to the new spot, and fixed them together with his skis into a kind of catamaran; that way, he'd have something to sit on in open water, if he needed to. Food bags and other gear had been strewn over the ice in the storm, and a polar bear came sniffing around. He had to fire three live rounds into the ice at its feet before it went away.

He was waiting with his catamaran and his .44 when the light came up, which, of course, allowed him to see farther away, and what he saw was a huge expanse of open water not very far in the distance. It was as if he were sitting on the beach at the seashore. Waves were washing up on the edges of his ice and melting it away. He vacillated between panic and calm. Screaming, swearing, crying, praying, and then getting back to work: watching the ice, checking his gear, keeping warm by the stove.

He still hadn't called his family. His composure was iffy, and he didn't want to frighten them. He didn't think his wife, Åsta, originally a farmer's daughter from Norway, could handle it, and he didn't think he could handle her not handling it.

### The view from Switzerland

Back home, meanwhile, Åsta could tell something was up. Thomas had been phoning her every day. Now he was phoning only Hans, and when she spoke to Hans he would say only that something wasn't so good. She could hear him searching for his words. Finally, Christine Kopp, a writer and close friend who had accompanied Thomas to Siberia, spilled the beans to Åsta. Christine called Thomas and told him he had to call his wife, and so he did. When the two finally spoke, he tried to explain: the bad ice, the

open water, the sudden storm. He was crying and uncertain if he'd survive the night. Åsta told him there was nothing he could have done, he didn't have to explain. "You use your energy up there," she told him. "Don't worry about us." But after they hung up, she couldn't breathe.

It wasn't long before Thomas's predicament leaked into the media: Swiss Explorer in Race with Death. That sort of thing. The children—Linn, 11, Silje, 9, and Julie, 5—were quieter than usual, as if they didn't want to know more. To protect them, Åsta kept the newspapers away, the radio and TV turned off, and took them to a museum in Bern, called the Sensorium, to distract them from the prospect of their father's death.

### No eating, drinking, or sleeping allowed

After the call, Thomas decided he owed his family for their unconditional support: *I'm not allowed to not come home*. Then he did a strange thing. He went to his tent on the old campsite, and, instead of collecting it, he cut out the drawings his family had made on the inner tent wall—a drawing from each daughter and one from his wife. He was doing everything he could to live, but a part of him was preparing to die.

*This is what's going to help me now, and this is what I'll take with me if I'm going to die.*

A third night out there loomed. The sleeping bag, everything, was wet, and all he had for shelter was the outer tent with no floor. He hadn't slept, and he couldn't afford to. He wanted to eat, but he was out of fresh water and there was no clean snow to melt. He was situated on saltwater ice, and as soon as any new snow hit the ice, it absorbed salt. He'd been using what snow he could glean from the folds of the tent and the tops of the sledges. But the food was too salty and made him sick. On top of everything else, he was suffering from diarrhea.

"I fell asleep," he told Victor during one of their calls. Just for 15 minutes.

"No, no, no, no!" Victor said. "You must not sleep! Call me now, every ten or fifteen minutes!"

Thomas got the Styrofoam box his father had made for him to store his batteries in, a comforting reminder of home, and spent one night and another day sitting on it. Making calls, trying to figure out what he did wrong, and thinking about the meaning of his life.

## He still hadn't called his family. His composure was iffy, and he didn't want to frighten them.

### Arm bending, Russian-style

By then, the rescue helicopters had actually taken off from Norilsk. But it took them eight hours to get to the air base on Sredniy Island, 90 minutes from Thomas's position—and by the time they arrived and refueled, it was night again, and they weren't permitted to fly at night. Getting the pilots on board to rescue Thomas was a delicate matter. Victor was asking them to do something dangerous. But he also knew, from talking to Thomas every 15 minutes, that the weather around him right then was good but might change if they waited too long.

At a certain point, the pilots were willing, but the air company was not. Flying in the Arctic is risky, and Russian pilots are used to that. But managers and bureaucrats don't like to take additional risks, especially if the operation—flying at night—falls outside the rules. Not unreasonably, the air company was reluctant to jeopardize the lives of ten people, two five-man helicopter crews, to save one. Victor spent hours on the phone, cajoling, arguing, explaining, and warning. "If you don't fly, Thomas is going to die. He can only survive a certain amount of time out there, without water, in the cold, without sleep. Anytime, the ice can break and he could go in the water!" He was working the phones like crazy, across time zones and under the dizzying communication constraints of the remote Arctic, waking people up in the middle of the night and pulling every string he had. "Big mess."

In between, Thomas would call and terrorize him over the phone. "Make it happen, Victor. Get me out of here!"

"Give me one hour," Victor told him. "I have to make a few more calls."

Finally, Victor, according to his own account, got through to the "chief" at the air company and made the right argument: Thomas's predicament was all over the news. If he dies, Victor told him, and you have decided not to fly to him because

it's dark, you will have to choose your words very, very carefully. The world will be watching.

The next call Thomas got was this:

"Give me your coordinates, they're coming."

Thomas gathered his tent, mattress, and other flammable equipment into a pile and saturated it with fuel. When he heard the helicopters, he shot a flare into the pile, which erupted into a beautiful light. The beams of two choppers came toward him, dipping in and out of the fog, and flew right past him, throwing him into a momentary heart-stopping panic before they made a wide turn back. One hovered high overhead while the other dropped in smoothly just above the surface. Thomas leaped into the doorway, and they pulled him aboard. It was 1 a.m., and he'd been out there going on four days.

### The final push

It wasn't until the end of Thomas's ordeal that Børge realized the gravity of the situation, when messages started coming in to his sat phone from three different people. "Please call Thomas!" Then, finally: "Rescue completed."

At this point, Børge and Mike were heading steadily north with the wind behind them, in the midst of a cold snap that dropped temperatures to minus 40°. Their faces were so encased in ice that it was hard to find a place during breaks to put the food in, and they couldn't take their mitts off to eat without freezing their fingers. For a time, they were walking along a long lead, in whiteout conditions, thinking about making a last run for the Pole. If they skied 12 hours a day instead of 10, they figured they might be able to complete the journey before the midnight sun arrived.

After a few days they realized that they could not walk for so many hours on only six hours of sleep when the weather was fighting them, and they decided to fall back to ten hours a day, with the aim now of arriving, as Børge put it, "in a dignified manner."



# It isn't a desire to be closer to death that attracts them—it's a desire to be closer to life.

## One last test

Around this time, Mike started noticing that 30 minutes of walking was feeling like two hours and that the sleds seemed heavier instead of lighter. He started to shiver, had trouble eating, and blood was oozing from his mouth and nose. Here was a guy who never complained, "the toughest guy" Børge says he ever met, and suddenly he was complaining—of back pains, kidney pains, bleeding when he went to the bathroom. Generally, Mike thought, people stopped themselves too soon, but he realized that you had to stop in time. Børge asked him if he thought he should give up. Mike said:

"I'm never going to give up."

They deduced that infection from various wounds and frostbites—pus came out under the nails when Mike squeezed his thumbs—had spread to his whole body. But Mike wouldn't take the antibiotics Børge had with him. He hated pills; the vasodilators he was on to thin his blood so his fingers wouldn't freeze were bad enough.

Børge, meanwhile, was having visions of Mike in a coma. He called a doctor in Norway, who told him it didn't sound good, and where was the nearest helicopter? (Victor was already looking into having a paramedic skydiver swoop in if Mike got worse.) Finally, Mike agreed to take the antibiotics—a double dose three times a day.

In the midst of all this, word came from Hans that a storm was brewing, and they had to get to the Pole before it hit. So they decided to make a run—within limits. Børge took over lugging the tent and doing more of the routines and suggested that Mike lead to set the pace, though leading is very tiring—making the track, concentrating on the route. Mike didn't want to appear weak, so he didn't say anything. He needed rest, but just days from the Pole, where they would be picked up by helicopter, he couldn't bring himself to ask for it, and if Børge offered, he would have to refuse. So he continued, walking like a robot,

stopping along the way to hang on his ski poles.

"Børge, does the snow look pink to you too?"

"Mike, I think we better camp."

"No, no, we'll walk the day, we'll walk the day."

And so they did, the full ten hours every day, 15 miles a day at the end, as the antibiotics kicked in and Mike's strength began to return.

Two days or so before they expected to reach the Pole, the sun rose in a red glare over the horizon. It was March 20: Spring had arrived. It would have been nice to get there before that and officially nail the first ever trek to the North Pole to begin and end entirely in winter. They missed that record by a hair. But what they did accomplish stands as one of the most daring polar feats in recent memory: Setting out in total darkness. Navigating off Cape Arkticheskiy, swimming and skiing through that mess. Surviving physically and mentally. That was the essence of the trip. Mike overcoming his sickness. Børge breaking both skis and having to create a new pair with what he had. Two high-octane guys from different cultures, sharing a vision and becoming a team. Reaching the Pole was a necessary but oddly irrelevant conclusion.

Børge checked his GPS. It was Thursday, March 23, 2006. The Pole was a thousand yards away.

"I've been there before," Børge told Mike. "You've never been. You go first."

"No, no, no," Mike said. "We do it together."

In the end, the odd couple approached their destination side by side, banged up and frost-bitten but still in one piece. Out there in the elements, the fundamental truths had emerged: The most important things in life really are family, friends, honesty, beauty, and love, and the journey really does matter more than the destination—lessons human beings can evidently learn over and over and never tire of. □

▲ **Long Cold Night** What's worse than the rigors of a Polar trek? Facing death alone in the dark. See the images in our Photo Gallery at [ngm.com/0701](http://ngm.com/0701).



Flying the banners of Norway and South Africa, Børge, left, and Mike embrace at the Pole, fulfilling their dream to trek the Arctic Ocean during its most demanding season.