

NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM/MAGAZINE | JANUARY 2009

# NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

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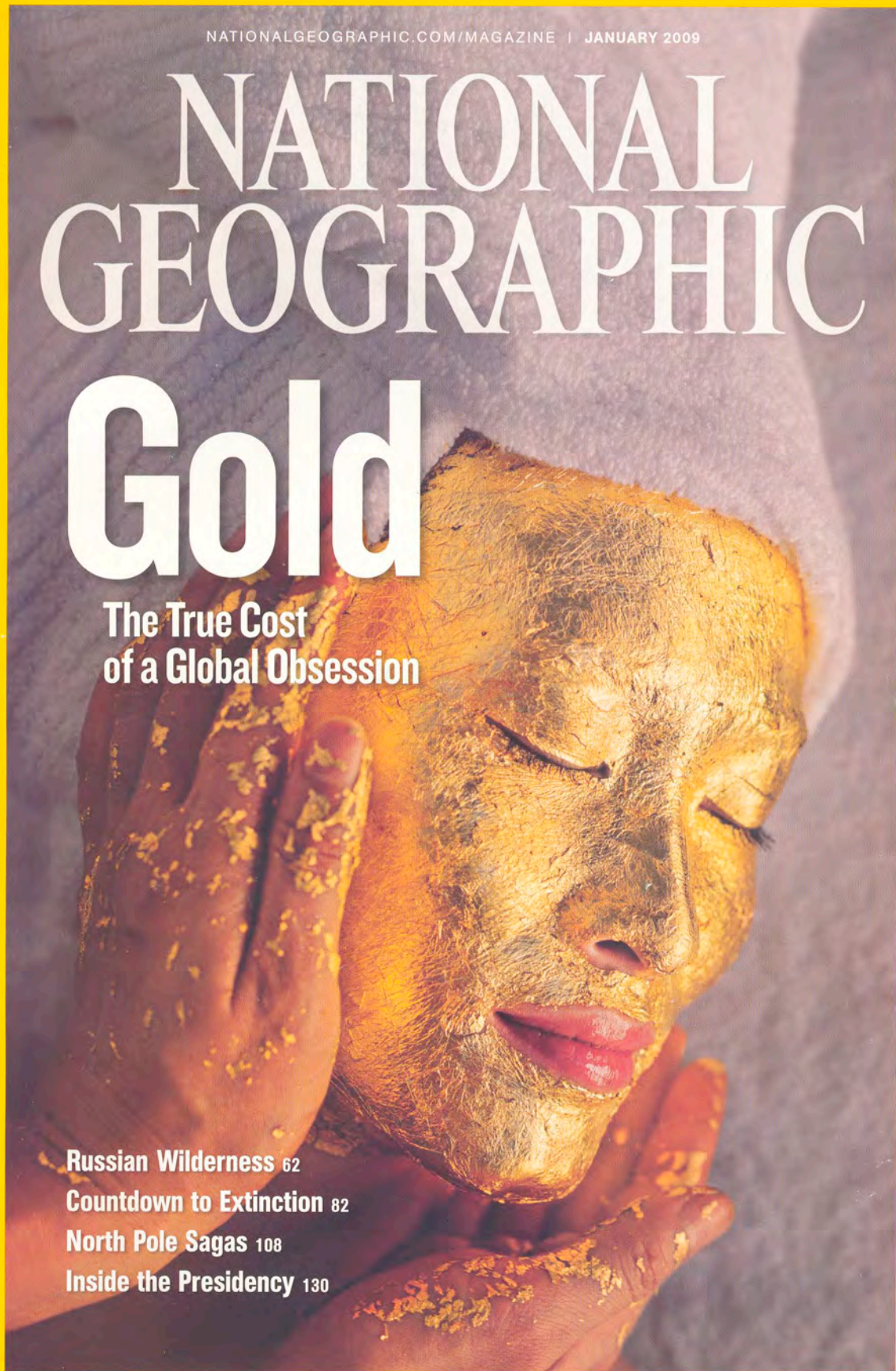
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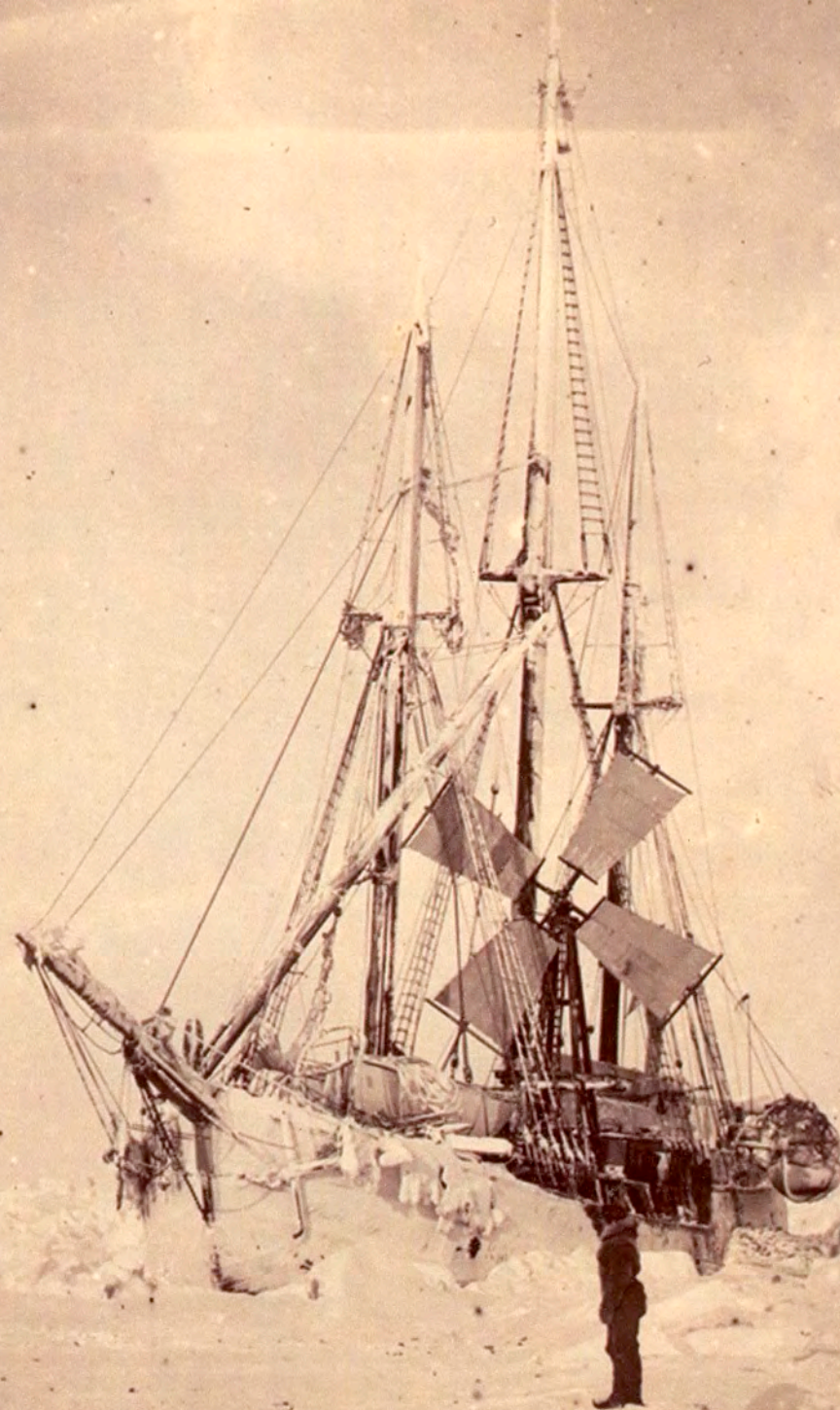


IT WAS AN OUTLANDISH IDEA: FREEZE A WOODEN SHIP IN THE ARCTIC OCEAN AND RIDE THE DRIFTING ICE ACROSS THE NORTH POLE. WHEN THINGS DIDN'T GO ACCORDING TO PLAN, FRIDTJOF NANSEN, A DARING NORWEGIAN SCIENTIST, SET OFF BY DOGSLED WITH ONE COMPANION TO GO WHERE NO ONE HAD GONE BEFORE.

POLAR SAGA PART ONE 1893-1896

# 1,000 Days in the Ice

Driven by sails and a steam engine, with a hull built to withstand the crushing force of polar ice, Nansen's ship also carried comforts like lights run by a windmill-powered electric generator.





Wool and fur shielded crewmen from the cold when duty called them on deck or onto the ice. Nansen's many accomplishments included photography. In October 1894, when he made this picture, temperatures averaged 8.5° below zero F.

[ BY HAMPTON SIDES ]

OUT IN THE COLD FJORD, on a spit of rocky land just a short ferry ride from the city center, Oslo has created a kind of national cemetery for famous ships. It's a Norwegian thing—what other country would build public crypts around its most beloved boats and enshrine them for the ages?

Out here on the Bygdøy Peninsula, visitors can spend days rambling through splendid museums that house ancient Viking longships, 19th-century fishing vessels, even Thor Heyerdahl's famed balsa wood raft, the *Kon-Tiki*.

But the most striking of Oslo's nautical temples is a pointy glass-and-metal structure that rises from the waterline in the shape of an enormous letter A. Inside, basking in the filtered light, sleeps a sturdy wooden schooner, built in 1892, called the *Fram*.

*Fram* (which means "forward") is perhaps the most famous ship in Norway's long seafaring history, and an icon of polar exploration. Nothing about this fat-bellied ark would begin to suggest the grueling odysseys it has endured. The story of the *Fram* is a modern Norse saga, a story of unimaginable hardship and intelligent striving that is closely tied to Norwegian national identity. The boat itself is an engineering marvel—its reinforced hull having withstood three years gripped by Arctic ice. True to its assertive, full-frontal name, *Fram* bored farther into the frozen latitudes than any vessel had before.

The prime mover behind the *Fram*, the brilliant and moody scientist-explorer who commissioned its construction and led its insanely dangerous maiden voyage into the polar mists, remains a national patriarch. His name is Fridtjof Nansen, and although today he is not as

*Hampton Sides explored the life and times of frontiersman Kit Carson in Blood and Thunder, one of Time magazine's ten best books of 2006.*

well-known outside Norway as other marquee polar adventurers—Peary, Scott, and Amundsen—he should be. For Nansen was quite simply the father of modern polar exploration; all others were, in a very real sense, his acolytes.

Nansen was a strapping blond man, fair complected, with a frosty stare and a truculent face that seemed slightly at odds with the refinements of his intellect. Nansen stood apart from the quixotic glory hounds who characterized much of polar exploration's golden age. Call him a Renaissance Viking: He was a gifted writer, a sought-after lecturer, a first-rate zoologist, and a prominent statesman. Fluent in at least five languages, adroit with a camera, he made beautiful maps and illustrations, kept up a voluminous scientific correspondence, and brought an element of cerebral precision to all his explorations. A contemporary German scientist said of Nansen that he "knew how to handle the microscope as well as the ice axe and skis," and his scientific achievements were notable, including a groundbreaking paper on the nature of the central nervous system.

In 1888 Nansen led the first traverse of Greenland—with typical understatement, he called it a "ski tour"—but he missed the last boat home, forcing him to stay the winter hunting seals, learning to kayak, and living with Greenlanders. This experience formed the basis for his acclaimed account, *The First Crossing of Greenland*, published in 1890, and a lively ethnology, *Eskimo Life*. Following his Greenland adventures, he became a leading proselytizer for the sport



July 12, 1894: Nansen takes a reading of deep Arctic Ocean water temperature as part of the expedition's scientific work. Astronomical, meteorological, and oceanographic data were consistently collected.

of skiing. At Oslo's Holmenkollen Ski Museum, Nansen is depicted as a twin-planked deity in furs, a founding father of Norway's national sport.

FOR ALL OF NANSEN'S protean accomplishments, it was the harrowing journey of the *Fram* between 1893 and 1896 that gave his life story real drama. The expedition was predicated on an idea so outlandish that the leading polar authorities of the day, including the Royal Geographical Society, considered it suicidal. Nansen deliberately set out to become locked in the Arctic—or, as he put it, to "give ourselves up to the ice."

Nansen sought to improve upon the voyage of an earlier polar exploration that had ended in disaster. In 1879 the American ship U.S.S. *Jeannette* became locked in the ice pack above Siberia. It drifted in the Arctic for 21 months, but was eventually crushed by the pressure, and sank on June 13, 1881. Although the crew made a valiant sprint for Siberia, more than half the 33 men on the expedition perished. However, three years later, artifacts from the *Jeannette* were found

washed up on the coast of Greenland after having drifted thousands of miles in the ice.

Reading about the *Jeannette* artifacts, Nansen wondered if the strong east-to-west current over the Arctic could be ridden to the North Pole—or at least close. And so an idea was hatched. It was an unorthodox notion, says Nansen biographer Roland Huntford, "to take note of the forces of nature, and try to work with them and not against them."

The trick, of course, was to build a boat far tougher than the *Jeannette*, and in 1891 Nansen hired a brilliant Norwegian naval architect of Scottish descent named Colin Archer to do just that. Archer's design featured a curiously rounded hull that lacked a pronounced keel, and wells that allowed the rudder and propeller to be hauled up to safety in the event of crushing ice. The hold of the ship was braced with mighty timbers. To keep the explorers warm, Nansen insulated his vessel with thick felt, reindeer hair, cork shavings, and tar. To fight off the perpetual blackness of the polar night, a windmill was

FRIDTJOF NANSEN

NANSEN EXPEDITION 113

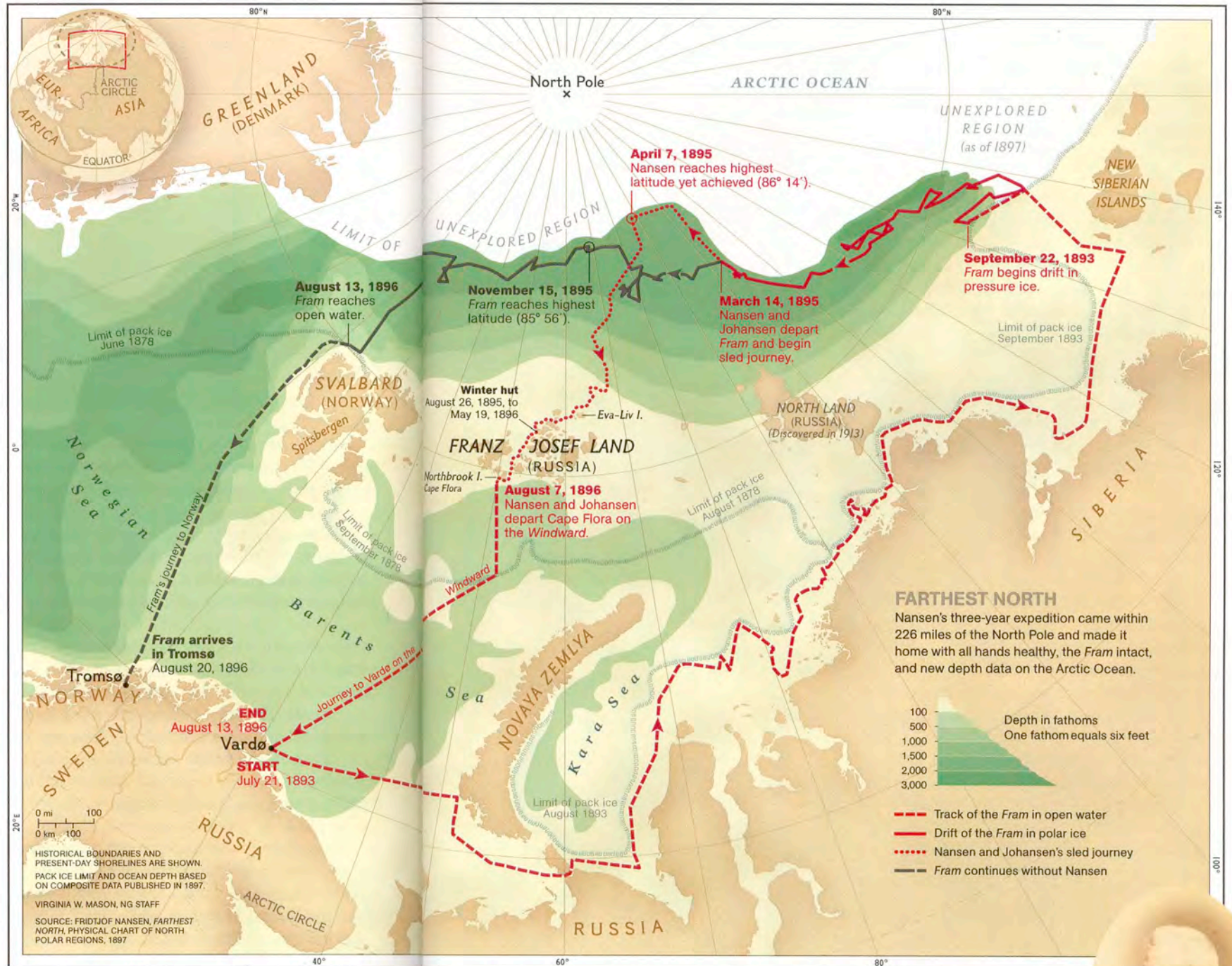
installed to run electric arc lamps. Belowdecks were a cozy saloon decorated with carved dragon's heads and a library that Nansen stocked with some 600 carefully chosen volumes.

Nansen pronounced the vessel fit, and with thousands of well-wishers lining the Oslo harbor, his wife, Eva, christened the ship *Fram*. With a crew of 13 and provisions for five years, Nansen left Oslo in the summer of 1893, bound for the New Siberian Islands.

As expected, the *Fram* became locked fast in the ice in September. The pressure was intense, and the constant churning and scraping of the ice made ghastly sounds. "A deafening noise began, and the whole ship shook," Nansen wrote. "The noise steadily grows till it is like all the pipes of an organ." The ice, he wrote two days later, "is trying its very utmost to grind the *Fram* into powder." But the *Fram* easily withstood all this frightful squeezing and simply rose up, unharmed, from the depths of the ice. Over time Nansen came to "laugh at the ice; we are living as it were in an impregnable castle."

The *Fram* continued to ride the floes toward the Pole at the creaky pace of a few miles a day. Despite several mishaps—including a polar bear attack that ended with one crewman bitten and two dogs dead—the first two years of the journey were oddly easy. The men ate well in the bright, warm saloon—where an automatic organ played through the long Arctic nights and the electric lamps, Nansen wrote, "acted on our spirits like a draught of good wine." The men published their own newspaper, organized ski outings on the ice for exercise, and took endless soundings and other measurements. Boredom was a constant companion—one crewman cursed "the monastic life we lead in this dead zone"—but Nansen's men did not suffer. "I myself," he wrote, "have certainly never lived a more sybaritic life."

EARLY IN THE SECOND YEAR, however, it became apparent that *Fram* would not reach the Pole. To achieve his goal, Nansen would have to get out on the ice with sleds and dogs and make a dash for it. He selected a companion, Hjalmar



Nansen (right) garnered financial support for the *Fram* expedition from the Norwegian Parliament and other donors, including King Oscar II. He was already a national hero for leading the first expedition across Greenland, on skis, in 1888.



HENRY VAN DER WEYDE



March 14, 1895: Nansen and Johansen (second and seventh from left) prepare to leave the *Fram* with three sleds, 28 dogs, and three Norwegian flags. Their goal: the North Pole.

Johansen, and in March of 1895, after two false starts, they left the comfort of the *Fram*. A cannon volley boomed as the two skiers, dragging three sleds, carrying two kayaks, and accompanied by 28 dogs, headed north. Nansen and Johansen soon ran into trouble—impossible terrain, equipment failures, fast-shifting floes that canceled out their progress. As their provisions dwindled, they began to butcher the weakest dogs to feed the others. By April they had traveled as far north as they could go—86° 14' N. Although they were still 226 miles shy of the Pole, they had ventured farther north than any human ever had. It was the largest single advance in nearly 400 years of Arctic exploration.

Nansen had promised Eva he would make it back alive, and that was far more important to him than risking death—and immortality—at the Pole. “You are thinking of me,” he had written her in his diary one night. “Your thoughts fly northwards in the great desolation. They do not know where to look for me.”

And so, prudently, Nansen turned the expedition around. The two men aimed not for the *Fram*, which had drifted out of reach anyway, but for the distant archipelago of Franz Josef Land, some 600 miles to the south. Their desperate journey over the floes must surely rank as one of the most miserable and arduous polar slogs ever attempted. Over the weeks and months, they killed off their remaining dogs (cutting their throats to save on ammunition), and at one particularly low point were forced to eat a porridge made of canine blood. “If I say that it was good, I lie,” Johansen wrote. “But it went down, and that is the main thing.”

Through the summer of 1895 Nansen and Johansen searched in vain for Franz Josef Land. “For a quarter of a year we have been wandering in this desert of ice,” Nansen despaired, “and here we are still.” Traveling sometimes by skis, sometimes on foot, sometimes in kayaks, they negotiated endless mazes of rafted ice intersected by slushy leads. Nansen admitted that he and Johansen had “no prospect for the moment to get on, impassable packed ice in every direction, rapidly diminishing provisions, and now, too,

nothing to be caught or shot... I lie awake at night by the hour racking my brain to find a way out of our difficulties.”

Finally, on August 6, the two men reached an island—the first land on which they had stood for two years—and their fortunes turned. Hunting polar bear and walrus, they soon had fresh meat aplenty and regained their strength. Threading south through the icy archipelago, they realized by August 26 that they would have to spend another dismal Arctic winter far from home. Using a broken sled runner as a pick, Nansen and Johansen built an improvised lair. There they stayed for the next nine months, sharing the same greasy sleeping bag and subsisting on polar bear broth and bear meat fried in walrus blubber. Trapped in such harsh circumstances, they kept their sanity remarkably intact. “We didn’t quarrel,” Johansen would say later. “The only thing was that I have a bad habit of snoring... and Nansen used to kick me in the back.” As Nansen wrote in his diary, “Johansen is asleep, and making the hut resound. I am glad his mother cannot see him now... so black and grimy and ragged as he is.”

As the spring thaws came, Nansen and Johansen ventured out of their hovel. They wound south through the archipelago by ski and kayak. When a walrus upended Nansen’s kayak, they put in at Northbrook Island to dry out. There they began to prepare for a dangerous journey across the open water to Spitsbergen, where they nursed an overly sanguine hope of being rescued by a Norwegian whaling or sealing vessel. But then on June 17, Nansen thought he heard a familiar sound coming from somewhere over the frozen wastes: a dog barking. He took off alone on skis over the jagged terrain to hunt it down. Nansen wrote: “Suddenly I thought I heard a shout from a human... How my heart beat, and the blood rushed to my brain... I hallooed with all the strength of my lungs.” There in the distance, sure enough, was another human being. Nansen approached the figure, and soon the two men enjoyed a remarkable Stanley-Livingstone moment.

“Aren’t you Nansen?” the man said in English

as he studied the greasy, soot-blackened wretch before him.

“Yes, I am. By Jove! I am glad to see you!”

“You have made a good trip of it,” the man told Nansen, “and I am awfully glad to be the first person to congratulate you on your return.”

Nansen’s rescuer was an accomplished British explorer named Frederick George Jackson who, as it happened, had met Nansen four years earlier in London. Jackson had sailed his ship, *Windward*, to Franz Josef Land preparatory to his own attempt on the Pole. The explorer was not looking for Nansen, exactly, but he knew that the Norwegian might be in the vicinity.

Still, the odds were against their encounter on this desolate island, and if Jackson had not appeared when he did, Nansen and Johansen in all likelihood would have died. Jackson welcomed the two men into his headquarters hut, where they waited for the *Windward*—sent home the year before for supplies—to speed them home.

WHEN NANSEN AND JOHANSEN returned to Norway in the summer of 1896, they might as well have been returning from the dark side of the moon. Their hero’s welcome was made all the more sweet a week later by the happy news that the *Fram*, under the command of Captain Otto Sverdrup, had broken free of the Arctic ice and returned safely the same month.

Never mind that Nansen had not quite attained his goal of reaching the Earth’s apogee. He had gotten close, and done it with style and grace and at a time when his countrymen, still under Swedish rule, hungered for a defining hero. Although luck had smiled on his expedition, it was a testament to his foresight and good judgment that not a single crewman had died.

Aside from proving the theory about a polar current, Nansen had made an important discovery about the Arctic: It was an extremely deep sea capped by an ever shifting ice pack—and almost completely devoid of landmasses. The Arctic was, in other words, an ocean.

Nansen became a celebrity the world over, the obsession of swooning ladies, and the toast of dignitaries as varied as Jules Verne and U.S.



Nansen and Johansen, who came closer to the North Pole than any previous explorers, approach the end of their 16-month homeward odyssey. The Arctic, Nansen wrote, demands “all the vigor and elasticity of the soul.”

President William McKinley. There were Nansen sardines, Nansen songs, even a Nansen brand of aquavit. Within months he embarked on an extended victory tour to promote *Farthest North*, his haunting account of the odyssey.

One of the many admirable quirks of Nansen’s personality, rare for an explorer, was that he knew when to quit. Sensing that his adventuring days were over, Nansen left the Pole-bagging business to Peary, Scott, and fellow Norwegian Amundsen (who, in fact, sailed the *Fram* to Antarctica and used it to launch his historic first journey to the South Pole). Nansen himself forged ahead into completely new fields: oceanography, meteorology, diplomacy. In 1906, a year after Norway achieved independence from Sweden, he became his country’s first ambassador to the United Kingdom. After the death of Eva, Nansen squired an impressive succession of international beauties while pursuing a career as a humanitarian. Named a high commissioner for the League of Nations, he helped repatriate prisoners of war and resolve refugee

crises in Turkey and Russia following World War I—hard, peripatetic work that earned him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922.

Nansen died of a heart attack in 1930 on the balcony of his castle-like house in Lysaker, on Oslo’s outskirts, where his ashes are now buried beneath a simple gravestone on the south lawn. He was 69. Today the house, called Polhøgda, is an institute (devoted mainly to the politics of energy and the environment) and a small museum. Up in Nansen’s office on the top floor of the tower, one can still find his exploration-age artifacts much as he left them: moldering charts and maps, a pair of Inuit “sunglasses” made of wood with slits as lenses, and a half-rotten polar bear rug spread on the creaky wooden floor. From here one can look out through thick woods toward the cold fjord where the *Fram* was launched and where she now rests in her splendid tomb—not his ship, but Norway’s. His desk chair is turned toward the window, facing the only direction Dr. Fridtjof Nansen ever knew—forward. □



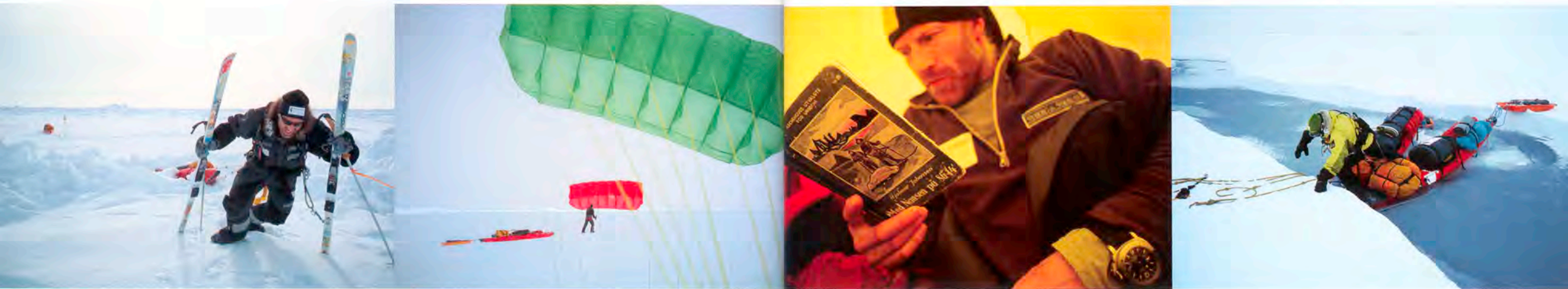
POLAR SAGA PART TWO 2007

# Chasing Nansen's Ghost

Two adventurers set out across the Arctic in the footsteps of Norway's pioneering polar explorer.

Surprise visitor: A young polar bear eyes the unfamiliar sight of a tent on a remote Russian archipelago. When he came closer, Børge Ousland and Thomas Ulrich scared him off with pepper spray and gunshots in the air.





BY PETER MILLER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BØRGE OUSLAND AND THOMAS ULRICH

**THOMAS ULRICH SAW IT FIRST.** It was pure white, like a long, smooth cloud on the horizon with a single dark stripe. Shadows passing over the stripe gave it away. The shadows were moving—they were clouds—but the stripe wasn't.

"I think I see land," he said to Børge Ousland, with whom he had spent the past six weeks chasing the memory of two famous explorers across the Arctic. Beginning at the North Pole, the pair had skied 600 miles to this spot off the northern coast of Franz Josef Land, the remote Siberian archipelago where Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen had sought refuge after their own attempt to reach the Pole in 1895.

Like many Norwegian boys, Ousland was raised on bedtime stories about Nansen's exploits. Years later these tales inspired him to make the

first unsupported solo ski trek to the Pole, one of 14 visits as a professional adventurer and guide. Now he and Ulrich, a mountaineer and photographer, were following the same harrowing route Nansen and Johansen had taken 112 years before—something no one else had done.

"We had Nansen's book with us, so we knew we were experiencing many of the same things," Ulrich said. "Just like them, we had skis and kayaks, but," Ousland added, "we used para-

sails instead of dogs to help us go faster. And, of course, we had communication and navigation

equipment, while they didn't know for sure where they were. Their old map wasn't correct at all."

The land Ulrich had spotted was the distant coast of Eva-Liv Island, named by Nansen after his wife and daughter. But just because Ulrich and Ousland could see the island didn't mean they could reach it. When Nansen and Johansen first glimpsed Eva-Liv, they figured it would take them only a day or two to get there. In the end it took 13, and they barely made it to land.

In June 2007 Ulrich and Ousland faced the same obstacles. The smooth sea ice they'd raced over for days, pulling their rugged plastic kayaks filled with food and gear, had given way to a chaos of icy rubble that looked "as if some giant had hurled down enormous blocks pell-mell," as Nansen described the same scene. Even worse, the whole jumble was drifting northwest, away from Eva-Liv, one floe grinding against another as currents shoved them from below.

With no choice but to forge ahead, the adventurers took their chances in the drifting ice. Still nearly ten miles from land, they jumped from floe to floe, pulling their heavy kayaks

behind them with 40-foot ropes. It was exhausting and nerve-racking. Ousland had already fallen through the ice, weeks earlier, sinking to his waist in the frigid water. Now Ulrich was having flashbacks to a terrifying experience in 2006, when a storm had trapped him on a disintegrating floe off Siberia's Cape Arkticheskiy (see *National Geographic*, January 2007). Finding himself again at the mercy of unstable ice, he said, "I have to tell you, I was scared."

At night they struggled to sleep as the ice shifted beneath them, "like someone kicking you in the back," Ousland said. The strange thing was the silence. In winter, sea ice makes a terrible racket as it cracks and grinds together, but in the mild spring weather, approaching 32°F, floes as thick as three feet crushed together soundlessly. At four o'clock one morning, Ulrich

*Peter Miller is a senior editor for the magazine.*

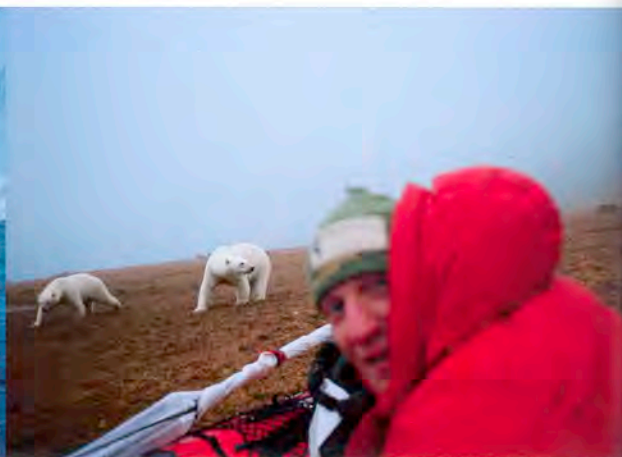
*In 1994 and 1995 Børge Ousland became the first to make unsupported solo treks to both the North and South Poles. In 2003 Thomas Ulrich teamed with him to cross Patagonia's Southern Ice Field.*

Top, left to right: Leaving the North Pole behind, Ousland pulls a kayak over rough ice using his skis as extra poles. To speed the 600-mile journey to Franz Josef Land, he and Ulrich sometimes hooked themselves to ski sails. Ousland's copy of *With Nansen at 86° 14'* was the one his father read to him as a boy. Using a kayak as a bridge, Ulrich crawls over thin ice.



Spreading out his weight to avoid breaking through the ice, Ulrich brushes a path through delicate crystals with the sleeve of his waterproof suit. "Imagine plastic stretched over a swimming pool," he says. "That's what this ice feels like."

GEORGE OUSLAND



woke Ousland to tell him they were drifting away from the coast at about half a mile an hour, according to their GPS device. When they opened the tent, they saw that a huge channel of black water had opened up a hundred yards away.

At that moment they decided to push as hard as possible to reach land. “We agreed not to stop until we got there,” Ousland said, “because if we didn’t make it to the island today, we wouldn’t reach Eva-Liv at all.” Heading southeast, they trudged and paddled through heavy fog until they reached a solid ice edge. They’d been on the go for more than 24 hours. Ulrich checked the GPS device for drift. There was none. This ice was firmly attached to land. They had made it.

For the next eight weeks they followed Nansen and Johansen’s trail southwest through the archipelago, moving from island to island. Once a Soviet military zone and still largely off-limits to outsiders, Franz Josef Land remains virtually as unspoiled as it was during Nansen’s day.

At Cape Norvegiya on Jackson Island, Ousland and Ulrich found the ruins of the miserable stone hut with a walrus-hide roof where the earlier

explorers had wintered over, hunting polar bear and walrus for food. Nansen had picked up crucial skills from Inuit villagers on Greenland, where he had spent the winter of 1888-89. When he and Johansen ran out of fuel for their stove, they used blubber lamps to cook. “I’m surprised they didn’t just shoot themselves,” Ulrich said, looking at the low circle of stones from the cramped shelter. “The only reason they survived,” Ousland said, “was that they refused to give up.”

By the time Ousland and Ulrich reached Cape Flora on Northbrook Island, where Nansen and Johansen were rescued by British explorer Frederick George Jackson, they too were eager to make their departure. A friend from Oslo had agreed to pick them up by sailboat but had been delayed by several weeks. “It was a very peaceful place with a small lake, the perfect place to wait three weeks,” Ulrich said. “The other residents were thousands of seabirds nesting on cliffs and a hungry polar bear and cub, stranded by the lack of sea ice—a consequence of recent

climate change. Night after night the bears returned to camp to try their luck, tripping the last of the flares set up to scare them off. In the end the men had to shoo the bears away by dousing them with pepper spray, shooting rifles in the air, banging on pots and pans, and screaming at the top of their lungs.

“We chased them right into the water,” Ousland said. “After that we reached an understanding.”

On August 13, as promised, the ketch *Athene* appeared off the coast of Cape Flora, and Ousland and Ulrich paddled their kayaks out to meet their ride back to Norway. After 15 weeks in the far north, the time had come to follow Nansen’s ghost home.

“Nansen was way ahead of his time in how he thought about the Arctic and how to travel in it,” Ousland said. “For us it was like a holiday compared to Nansen,” Ulrich added. “We knew what we had in front of us. He didn’t even know where he was and how far he had to go.” □

■ **Society Grant** This expedition was funded in part by your National Geographic Society membership.

Top, left to right: In the northern part of the archipelago, Ulrich paddles past the face of a glacier. Later, on a southern island, a mother bear and cub try to push into camp. An abandoned Soviet military hut on Hoffman Island feels “too spooky” for the adventurers’ use. After a three-month journey, Ousland smiles as a friend’s sailboat arrives to carry him and Ulrich home.



As round-the-clock summer days warm the ocean, Ulrich skis across a melt pond on sea ice near Champ Island. After experiencing some of what Nansen and Johansen endured, one thing impresses Ulrich and Ousland most: They never gave up.

BORGE OUSLAND