

PARADICE

STORY BY CHRIS BRAY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRIS BRAY AND CLARK CARTER



IN A WORLD-FIRST, TWO YOUNG AUSSIES SET OUT TO TRAVEL MORE THAN 1000 KM ACROSS VICTORIA ISLAND, CANADA – POLAR BEAR COUNTRY.



Chris Bray, 22, left, and Clark Carter, 21, haul their self-designed, homemade Paddleable Amphibious Carts, which contained all they needed to survive in the Arctic for 65 days.

"I WAS 100 M FROM CAMP, WITH NOTHING BUT A FISHING ROD BETWEEN ME AND NINE WOLVES"

GINGERLY, I leapt from one chunk of bobbing pack-ice to the next, bouncing quickly off the smaller chunks before they sank. Ice-hopping further and further from the shore of Victoria Island, 2000 km from the North Pole, I was searching for water deep enough to fish for Arctic char. Sinking pack-ice wasn't the biggest danger I was about to face. With my expedition partner, Clark Carter, I'd been crossing the barren lands of Victoria Island for 17 days, dragging our supplies in wheeled kayaks we'd designed and built in my parents' garage in Sydney.

I squinted out over the jumbled expanse of ice, my eyes watering in a wind chilled by 150 km of frozen ocean. There were no trees or bushes, no distant mountains — just a gently rolling expanse stretching out to meet the sky in all directions. Immediately beyond the tidal reach lay a thin carpet of red algae that gradually gave way to drier lichens and tundra.

My attention was held for a moment by a series of white boulders 500 m along the gravelly beach. I sprang to the next ice sheet, then noticed the boulders appeared to have moved, and there were more of them than I first thought. How bizarre. Just as I was turning away, they moved. Caribou? Probably...but they weren't moving like caribou. More like dogs. Big dogs. It was a pack of Arctic wolves!

My mind raced. I was 100 m from camp, with nothing but a fishing rod between me and nine wolves loping closer and closer, now only 300 m away. "Clark!" I shouted. "Wolves!" The wind snatched away my cries. The wolves heard me though, and stopped dead, their ears as upright as the hairs on the back of my neck. They continued advancing. I shouted again, louder, but it was no use.

I hastily scrambled over the pack-ice towards shore, but the wolves were going to reach me before I reached the tent. I changed to a desperate sprint and the wolves followed suit. Hearing at last, Clark burst from the tent, brandishing bear-spray and a shotgun. Seeing two of us, the wolves suddenly hung back, paced back and forth, then howled and vanished over the skyline.

CHOCOLATE DREAMS

VICTORIA ISLAND is a paradise usually overlooked by adventurers heading for more popular adventure destinations such as Greenland or the North Pole. In winter, it's encased in frozen seas. In summer, the largely unexplored island teems with incredible wildlife. It offered endless possibilities for two young uni students who get claustrophobic when confined to their own comfort zones.

We decided to try to cross the island, unsupported — probably a world first. Even the Inuit say they haven't explored much of the island on foot. If we could travel an average of 15.5 km a day, either paddling or walking, we'd cover the 1000 km across the island in summer's two months of perpetual sunlight. We filled each purpose-built 88 kg aluminium PAC (Paddleable Amphibious Cart) — tested all too briefly in a neighbour's pool back home — with a whopping 150 kg of gear. This included satellite phones, EPIRBs, laptop, video cameras, solar panels, shotguns, a polar bear trip-wire system, 16 kg of cooking fuel and mountains of food. Clark had worked out we'd burn about 20,000 kilojoules a day — nearly twice the usual intake of an active man our size. As well as 6.5 kg of peanut ►



A large male Arctic wolf (above), its shoulders 80 cm off the ground, investigates the duo. Food for residents in Cambridge Bay includes dried strips of Arctic char (right) but despite their best efforts, Chris and Clark were unable to catch any of the fish on their journey.



Inuit elder Mary Kilaodluk performed a traditional energetic drum dance for Chris and Clark in Cambridge Bay, accompanied by two throat singers.



"...SNAPPING HAULING ROPES AND, UNDER THE STRAIN, TEARING IN HALF BOTH THE STEEL TOW BRACKETS"

butter, we'd get through rations such as 7 kg of butter and 16 kg of chocolate. (The real reason we go on expeditions like this is so we can get away with eating huge amounts of chocolate without getting fat.)

Our start was delayed by some weeks because our in-transit PACs fell victim to an extensive truck-drivers' strike in Vancouver — a delay that would have literally chilling consequences. But eventually, Clark and I set out from Victoria Island's most easterly point, Collinson Peninsula. Progress was sickeningly slow at first — the PACs were at their heaviest and our bodies were unaccustomed to the daily torture. The laden carts got snagged on rocks every two or three steps or sank deep into mud pits. By the end of Day 3 — having slogged on until 2 a.m. — we'd only managed an embarrassing 1.7 km.

For the next two weeks we drove ourselves hard, snapping hauling ropes and, under the strain, tearing in half both the steel tow brackets on the PACs. Deliriously tired, we'd set up camp nearly physically ill from the day's exertion. During our nut breaks we'd sit lifeless and mute behind our PACs, sheltering from the bitter wind, without the energy to look around, let alone explore. We came to the depressing conclusion that 65 days just wouldn't be long enough to reach the far side.

Then, it dawned on Clark and me that we weren't out there just to reach a destination — a point on a map — we were out there for an adventure, and to experience a part of the world that

few have ever seen. In being so obsessed by our lack of progress, we were missing what we came to find. So we agreed we'd just haul as far as we could each day, allowing time to investigate things of interest.

PSYCHOLOGY 101

CLARK AND I were surprisingly equal in everything we did — not just in terms of having exactly the same-sized meals, but in strength, attitude and sense of humour. He's 21 and I'm 22. It was surprising that we got on so well — we'd met for the first time only nine months prior to the trip, and on the expedition were in each other's faces 24 hours a day for more than eight weeks. Clark had contacted me after reading that I'd been awarded the Australian Geographic Society's 2004 Young Adventurer of the Year accolade after a month-long off-track hike in Tasmania's south-west. On meeting, we flipped open an atlas and pointed randomly at interesting-looking places until Clark noticed Victoria Island.

When there's only two of you, you depend absolutely on each other. There can be no walking away, or not helping — you need to work as a team to stay alive. We both knew that, even if it meant biting our tongues and copping it sweet now and again. We finished better friends than when we started.

TOP 10 TRACKS

Chris and Clark's iPods were loaded with 1500 songs. Their favourite tracks for particular occasions:

Taking the first blissful sip of hot chocolate after a hard day's hauling

Chris: Time, Kitaro

Clark: Classical Gas, Eric Clapton

When spirits are up and hauling is good

Chris: Horse With No Name, America

Clark: Jammin, Bob Marley

Paddling in rough weather, pounded by icy waves

Chris: Pirates of the Caribbean theme song

Clark: Killing in the Name, Rage Against The Machine

Paddling silently past icebergs

Chris: Sail Away, David Gray

Clark: Le Voyage de Penelope, Air

Drowning out the pain, trying to haul just a little further

Chris: Atomic Dance Explosion, Techno

Clark: Reise, Reise, Rammstein



With wheels locked in the up position, providing extra stability to the kayak, Clark paddles among the natural ice sculptures.



One of the surprising things that gave us phenomenal power to push on was our iPods (personal digital music players). The music played a vital role in determining our progress. When the going turned from bad to worse, we'd just turn up the volume, drown out the pain and head doggedly on. "You seem full of energy — why am I hauling so much slower than you today?" Clark called out. He was enjoying some relaxing Bob Marley reggae while my iPod had jumped to an upbeat dance music track. As my song ended, switching to classical music, sure enough, Clark drew alongside and overtook.

Exhausted, Chris strains to drag his quarter-tonne load a few more metres. "Normally we'd help each other across mud, except here, where Clark pranced around taking photographs," Chris said.

a noseful of its fishy breath. The seal probably found our smell as overpowering as we did its. Unlike it, we didn't have a wash in all 58 days of the expedition.

As we knew polar bears actively hunt humans by scent, sleeping under less than a millimetre of tent fabric often felt like lying naked in a room filled with hungry bears. To help us sleep easier, we'd designed a bear tripwire to string

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BEAR AWARE

"CHRIS, LOOK AT THIS!" Clark called, nearly falling into polar-bear prints that swallowed our 30 cm ruler. When we allowed ourselves to explore and enjoy our surroundings, we discovered so much wildlife and other incredible treasures in the tundra, including countless fossils and ancient Inuit stone tent rings — a circular arrangement of boulders used to hold down skin tents. Scattered around them were bone tools including harpoon heads that we documented for the Inuit Heritage Society.

The region is so rarely visited that the animals we came across had no idea what to make of us. Migrating vees of geese, ducks and swans flew from the horizon to circle above our heads, honking excitedly. Musk ox and caribou were visibly torn between curiosity and fear at the sight of us, gradually edging closer until they'd spook themselves and thunder off. Beneath the tent one night, a lemming snuggled under my neck lapping up the warmth.

On one particularly calm day, when we were silently paddling past endless blue icebergs — seemingly suspended in free space on glass-like water — a seal suddenly surfaced alongside us. We stopped paddling and its dark eyes studied us intently. It was so close we got





14 Solar panels – 32-watt flexible solar panels to power electronics. If one of the panel's eight sections breaks or fails, the rest keep working

15 Shelter – Exped Extreme two-man tent

16 Paddleable Amphibious Cart (PAC) – made of aluminium, for strength, and weighing 88 kg

17 Exped hiking poles – aid balance and useful for testing the ground ahead

18 Wheels fold up onto the stern for kayaking

1 Balaclava

2 Dirty Dog polarised sunnies – to see beneath the water surface the absence of fish

3 iPod earphones

4 Water bladder on back – enables drinking while hauling

5 Icebreaker merino wool thermal top

6 Bear spray – capsaicin spray, similar to that used by police. It has a 6–8 m range

7 Watch – for keeping track of time in perpetual daylight; and has in-built temperature, pressure and wind-chill meter

8 Raymarine GPS chartplotter – a GPS system that plots position and route on a map. Shows coastline and sea depths, but unfortunately not all the lakes

9 Hauling harness – comfortably distributes load between shoulders and waist

10 Stainless steel D-rings to clip harness into PACs

11 Icebreaker merino wool thermal pants

12 Gaiters – to prevent snow and mud building up and freezing on pants and shoes

13 Scarpa Gore-Tex-lined boots

Risky business

"IT'S NOT ABOUT RISK TAKING," says Chris. "We wanted to throw ourselves into the experience, but not throw ourselves recklessly into the face of danger." Their uncanny ability to take calculated risks may have something to do with the fact that Chris and Clark spent their formative years in out-of-the-ordinary places – Chris on his parents' home-built yacht that the family sailed around the world, and Clark in Telfer, a goldmining town in the middle of the Great Sandy Desert.

They're both full-time university students – electrical engineering for Chris, media and communications for Clark – and they're also self-made businessmen. Chris has had an online electronics business from the age of 16 and can't stop himself designing and building things, such as an underwater housing for his video camera. Clark writes and produces music at his home studio on the NSW Central Coast.

They both took great satisfaction from planning and then seeing through such an epic undertaking. "We also thought it would impress the girls if we came back irresistible Arctic heroes," Chris adds.

KATHY RILEY

Kayaks made to order

THERE WASN'T A KAYAK in the world that could withstand the gruelling journey Chris Bray and Clark Carter were planning. "We looked at normal kayaks, but none were strong enough, and they're all designed for distributing their load while sitting in water, not for being bounced and dragged across the ground," says Chris.

The first step was to design a hull that would safely hold the weight and volume of Chris and Clark together with supplies, in case one kayak was irreparably damaged during the trek. A simple naval architectural program enabled Chris to plan the curves of the hull (1) along a series of points to meet the desired volume and buoyancy. They then modified the design to accommodate the wheels. They built a small-scale model, then set to work constructing 10 full-size aluminium cross-sectional frames. (2) The result was a kayak skeleton (3) that could be used for both kayaks, and against which the aluminium skin could be held up, marked and cut. The hull was sealed with polyurethane sealant and more than 1500 pop rivets – each one carefully pre-drilled (4). The skeleton was then removed.

Despite working on the kayaks like cattle dogs for 7 weeks – a total of 300 hours each, in between part-time jobs and studying, and with help from Chris's dad – they had only 4 days to spare when they brought their kayaks to the neighbour's pool for a water test. (5) "We dropped them into the water, and they stayed up the right way," says Chris. "The wheels acted like outriggers and made the kayaks incredibly stable. Then we leapt in

and tried to sink them – pushed them down to see if any water would spray in...and it did. It was terrifying." Chris and Clark managed to seal the water leaks, but had no time to test the kayaks a second time. They hastily spray-painted them orange "so we could find them in a blizzard" (6), packed them up and shipped them over to Canada.

Chris and Clark spent a total of nine months meticulously researching and planning every aspect of their journey. A limited budget meant the Internet had to play the roles of nutritionist, geographer and adviser. Satellite imagery, free through Google, was more useful than topographic maps, which were "like a blank sheet of paper", so flat was the terrain they'd be travelling across. The locals at Cambridge Bay on Victoria Island also provided invaluable information about the landscape, which was a patchwork of mud, ice, lakes and boulders. It was their feedback that helped Chris and Clark decide to use BMW racing-car tyres.

Clark combed through information on the diets of past Arctic adventurers to calculate the number of calories he and Chris would burn each day on the ice. Fat yields the most energy for its weight, followed by protein then carbohydrates. They settled on a diet breakdown of 50 per cent fat, 30 per cent carbohydrates and 20 per cent protein. Breakfast was a bowl of oats mixed with butter, brown sugar and milk powder, which they insist was delicious. Lunch was peanut butter or vegemite and butter on flatbread, and there was a different dehydrated meal on the menu each evening. They snacked on nuts and half a family-size block of chocolate each per day. Their rations were exactly equal, down to the peanut, and both finished the trip 2 kg heavier than when they began. "Extra leg muscle," Clark laughs.

KATHY RILEY



With the lakes starting to freeze over, Clark hurriedly packs up camp to get paddling.



around the camp each night. When a bear (or one of us, going to the toilet) stumbled into it, a piercing 120-decibel siren was activated, hopefully scaring the bear but more importantly waking us up. Unexpectedly, tiny birds in the region regularly emit a very similar siren – striking fear into our hearts nightly.

ALARM CALL

SCREEECH!!!! 3 a.m. We both sat bolt upright and blinked at one another in a dazed stupor. The alarm continued – this was no bird. Floods of adrenaline replaced the sleep-deprived fog in our minds. “BEAR!” The zips on our sleeping-bags instantly reduced to about a tenth of their size as we fumbled desperately to get out. Eventually, we sprang from the tent, armed with bear-spray, and shotguns with bear-banger fright cartridges and solid-slug cartridges. There was nothing out there, not even a lemming. Clark shrugged. “The wind must have set it off,” he said. We grinned sheepishly as we realised we’d just smashed our time record for getting out of bed.

We saw a polar bear several weeks later – it was several hundred metres upwind of us, in the direction we were heading. We slept within sight of it, always hoping to remain downwind.

We had other things to worry about, anyway. Winter had arrived like a light being flicked off, and overnight we were plunged into a world of snow, ice and frozen shoelaces. Every morning for the final three weeks, we couldn’t wedge our feet inside the solid, cryogenic coffins our boots had become until hobbling around in them thawed the leather enough to slide our feet flat. “I’ve got a whole new respect for women in high heels!” Clark said, laughing, while I struggled to extract the tent pegs from the concrete-like ground.

We got minor frostbite from donning frozen gloves and paddling in sub-zero temperatures amid flurries of snow – every

splash of water turning our dry suits into suits of armour. As the temperature plummeted, almost all the animals vanished. The geese had flown south, along with the amphibious planes we’d initially hoped to use for our pickup – with no water for them to land on, we had to look for other options. Using our satellite phone, we called Willie Laserich, a legendary 73-year-old pilot in Cambridge Bay, who had a 20-seater plane on wheels. “Just look for a flattish area and I’ll pick you up in my Twin Otter no problem,” he said. “This isn’t really flat enough,” Clark mumbled through his balaclava, kicking his frozen boot against a frozen tussock, producing a metallic ‘chink’. We shouldered our hauling harnesses and pushed on.

After two days of searching, we found a reasonably flat ‘air-strip’ some 350 km from our starting point, relayed its location, set up camp, and waited. Every day the weather deteriorated and we couldn’t be picked up because Willie was out searching for a man who’d gone missing near Cambridge Bay. We reduced our rations and waited, exploring the area as much as we could in the freezing conditions.

“Clark, there’re wolves over there! Get the video camera!” I shouted on the third-last day, fumbling for my digital camera. The leader of the pack of five fearlessly sauntered into camp, less than 4 m from us. Looking back at his companions, he howled several times, then trotted off, leading them over the skyline. We talked about it as we wandered off from camp to collect water, and soon they reappeared. I turned, “Look over...” and stopped mid-sentence, for 3 m behind us was the same white wolf. Easing off the safety catch on our can of bear-spray we remained calm. Whenever we turned to head back to camp, he’d sneak closer behind us. Eventually within 2 m, his shaggy white coat at arm’s reach – we dared not turn our back.

Defiantly we advanced towards him, talking cheerfully, kicking clumps of snow. The wolf crouched with his bum in the air, tail wagging: classic “throw me a ball” posture. The three of ►

“I’VE GOT A WHOLE NEW RESPECT FOR WOMEN IN HIGH HEELS!”

Minotaur Clark (right) dons the skull of a musk ox. The 'Inuit's plastic', musk ox horn can be carved, heated and bent. Chris fashioned spoons from a horn (below) to replace their 'unbreakable' polycarbonate ones.



Among the Inuit artefacts that Chris and Clark documented was this bone harpoon head (above). Their own fishing expeditions (left) involved wearing Gore-Tex drysuits and wading out among the icebergs to deeper water, until their legs became numb from the cold.

Toilet paper
in one hand,
shotgun in the
other, Clark sets
out to answer
nature’s call.



us played for over a minute. Intermittently though, he’d lose all interest in the game and look back to where the rest of his pack should have been, and then continue playing. Gradually we got the feeling that while we might’ve been playing with the wolf, he was toying with us – keeping us distracted. “Let’s head back to camp,” we said. The instant we turned our backs, the wolf’s playful attitude vanished and he fell into a silent gait behind us. Several times the distance closed to within 2–3 m and we were forced to restart our boisterous game. When our tent became visible the wolf raced ahead, seizing the opportunity to investigate our camp alone. By the time we caught up, he’d glided back to join his pack and all five slid off into the dusk. We stood there, awestruck and grinning. Wildlife officers in Cambridge Bay later told us we were lucky to have survived this encounter.

Three days later – Day 58 – we were treated to a display of pure airmanship, as Willie and his co-pilot Scott McClellan landed the Twin Otter in a 35 km/h crosswind, using just 100 m of our tussock-studded ‘runway’, with freezing drizzle obscuring their windscreen.

Peering out the window as the 20-seat turboprop climbed higher and higher, we silently watched our bleak, frozen white

world. “We were down there,” Clark said quietly. “Look at it. You wouldn’t even be able to see us from up here.”

Although we’d covered only about a third of the distance planned, we left knowing we’d each broken many mental and physical barriers, and we’d successfully explored a unique, very rarely seen part of the world. As a memento of the expedition, we left our spare Australian Geographic Society flag and a letter in a bear tripwire pole in a stone cairn we constructed. Perhaps one day we’ll be back to take it the rest of the way. 🇦🇺

For more details of this expedition, go to www.1000HourDay.com or follow the links from our website, www.australiangeographic.com.au.

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