



# In the Footsteps of Shackleton

Ahead of a return to South Georgia later this year, legendary mountaineer **Stephen Venables** looks back on his previous recreations of Shackleton's famous Antarctic crossing 100 years ago

PHOTOGRAPHS BY STEPHEN VENABLES

I will never forget our glorious ski down the Spenceley Glacier on the sub-Antarctic island of South Georgia. We had just made the first ascent of a magnificent peak and were flushed with success. The sun shone, the sky was blue, the distant sea glittered and our skis skimmed the perfect snow crust. We only had a short way to go to reach the shelter of our large and well-stocked snow cave. But as we rounded a corner into a bank of cloud we were suddenly hit by one of South Georgia's notorious williwaws - the vicious katabatic gusts that hurtle randomly down from ridge crests, in any direction.

Balance got tricky. We began to stagger. Then, as the gusts became more malevolent, we were flung repeatedly, face first, into the snow. So we stopped, sat down and, fumbling with numb fingers, took off skis, strapped them to our rucksacks, and replaced them with crampons. We had more purchase, but I still had to lean hard into the wind, braced on ski poles, with one mittened

hand held up to protect my eyes from lashing spindrift. Then the gusts got even stronger. As I lifted a leg to move forward, the wind caught the skis raised high above my rucksack like windmill sails, and I toppled to the ground. Again and again I was hurled flat. At one point I was pinned to the ground, unable to move, getting rapidly colder and thinking, 'This is how people die.'

In the end, desperate to reduce my wind profile and continue moving towards the snow cave, I was reduced to the pathetic ignominy of crawling on hands and knees across the glacier, my face rubbed yet again - both physically and metaphorically - into the essential truth: on South Georgia you take nothing for granted.

That baptismal drubbing took place in 1990, in South Georgia's southern Salvesen Range. Ten years later I returned, this time to the northwest end of the island, to trace the legendary trek over the mountains made by Ernest Shackleton, Tom Crean and Frank Worsley in 1916 - the final sting in the tail of their epic, improbable

escape from the wreck of the *Endurance*. Unlike the *Endurance* survivors I was not engaged in a life or death rescue mission. Instead, I had a bit part in the IMAX film *Shackleton's Antarctic Adventure*. But I was certainly in distinguished company, trekking alongside American mountaineer Conrad Anker and the famous South Tyrolean climber, Reinhold Messner.

I was fairly apprehensive about keeping up with the young greyhound and the wily old fox, yet excited at the prospect of experiencing the exact terrain that Shackleton had traversed in 1916, a journey of about 50 kilometres across the then totally unknown and unmapped mountains and glaciers between King Haakon Bay and the whaling station at Stromness.

#### HAVE PULK, WILL TRAVEL

The 2008 Shackleton Traverse was the first time I used a pulk. Since then I have completed several similar multi-day journeys elsewhere on South Georgia and in Antarctica, and I remain convinced by this comparatively effortless gear-hauling system.

Some people like to use rigid tow poles to connect themselves to a pulk. I prefer flexible, elasticated tethers. I clip them to gear loops on my rucksack, which distributes the load between hips and shoulders. Downhill, I usually hold both tethers in one hand, keeping 'the dog' firmly to heel on a tight lead, with ski poles in my other hand.

Unless the glacier is particularly treacherous, my parties generally descend unroped. As one authority has put it, roped skiing downhill, unless done by the most expert skiers, quickly generates into farce, particularly if pulks are involved. By contrast, on any uphill or level glacier travel - even when towing a pulk - it makes sense to rope up.

Crag Jones has developed a system of feeding the safety rope through a prusik loop on the rear attachment point of the pulk. The theory is that if you fall into a crevasse, the prusik knot will lock tight on the loaded rope, preventing the pulk from tumbling down on top of you. So far, I am glad to say that I have not had to put this theory to the test.



## Instead of smooth snowfields, we found bare ice riven by a tortuous labyrinth of open crevasses

Unlike the genius navigator Worsley, we had a map to tell us where to go. We also wore modern survival clothing that wasn't begrimed with a year's accumulation of seal blubber soot and salt water. Instead of a single carpenter's adze, we carried three ice axes. And, rather than putting a few nails into the soles of our mukluks, we had modern crampons clamped to proper mountaineering boots.

Nevertheless, Reinhold (the prophet of lightweight) insisted on paring things down to the minimum. His only concession to roped safety was a short length of very thin Kevlar cord. Food was minimal and, unlike Shackleton, he didn't seem to believe in stopping for regular brews. Conrad was less austere, and slipped in some extra rations when Reinhold wasn't looking. As for shelter, Reinhold was all for making do with a bivvy bag, or trying to dig snow holes. But here I put my foot down. I had vivid memories of my terrifying windblasting a decade earlier and insisted: you may be the world's greatest mountaineer, but we are taking a tent.

Shackleton made his crossing in the austral autumn, leaving King Haakon Bay in the early hours of 19 May 1916 and reaching Stromness 36 hours later. We too travelled in the autumn (in April, one month earlier than Shackleton) and also took around 36 hours, albeit spread over three days. Conditions were very different. The famous 300-metre snow slope, down which the three sailors tobogganed so brazenly in 1916, was now bare ice, gashed by crevasses and pitted with fallen rocks, causing the three modern mountaineers to descend gingerly, very glad of crampons. When we got down onto what is now called the Crean Glacier, instead of the smooth snowfields that they had crossed by moonlight, we found bare ice riven by a tortuous labyrinth of open crevasses. It was slow work, made doubly tedious when

OPENING PAGE: Mark Dravers, Skip Novak and David McMeeking on the previously untrodden summit of Thalassa in September 2014; LEFT TO RIGHT: climbing off the Fortuna Glacier to the missing tooth gap; bombproof camp on the Crean Glacier - a luxury Shackleton did not have; the 2014 Pelagic team toasting "The Boss" with replica Nimrod whisky at the Grytviken graveyard



Reinhold broke his foot leaping a huge crevasse. As darkness engulfed us in the middle of the labyrinth and rain began to splash on the pitted ice, I felt very grateful for the tent we had brought.

On the second day the weather improved. But it was still slow work, weaving our way through the crevasses - one of us with a painfully swollen foot - until we reached smoother ground, passing Worsley's 'great dome-shaped nunatak' and crossing to the Fortuna Glacier, where we camped for a second time. On the third day, South Georgia's capricious weather treated us to a gloriously calm and sunny afternoon as we crossed the final pass to Stromness Bay.

It was an eye-opening lesson for me doing that crossing with Reinhold Messner, who took just minimal food and gear in a 15-litre rucksack. His boots were ultralight, his crampons were titanium and the aforementioned rope didn't look much thicker than bootlace. Everything was pared down to the absolute minimum. We didn't actually carry much more than Shackleton and his companions, but we did, critically, have a map, proper mountaineering equipment, more protective clothing and a tent, which allowed us - unlike Shackleton - the luxury of stopping at night to sleep. It's interesting to ponder what would have happened to the men in 1916 had they not been incredibly lucky with the weather. Had a storm hit them when they were halfway across South Georgia, would they have survived?

Since then I have repeated Shackleton's crossing twice in a very different style, co-leading teams with renowned mariner, Skip Novak. Sailing from the Falklands, and responsible for people with less experience than the likes of Messner and Anker, we eschew the Messner shoestring principle and take the kitchen sink plus a bit more. We have a high margin of safety (which is now compulsory in order to obtain an expedition permit from the South Georgia authorities). And we allow time to relish the unique ambience of the island's mountain interior, with the possibility of diversions to attempt a summit or two en route. Acknowledging modern climate change, we now undertake the crossing not in the austral autumn as Shackleton did, but in the austral

spring, when there is still ample winter snow to smooth over crevasses. That means travelling much more enjoyably, on touring alpine skis, with the kitchen sink trundling behind on a pulk.

Of course, pulks have their disadvantages too, particularly when going downhill. Lowering them rope length by rope length down Shackleton's toboggan slope, which is about the height of the Eiffel Tower, can be irksome. Yet on all the other downhill sections, and on the gentle glacier ascents which predominate, this is the perfect way to travel. On the final, often snowless, ridge crossing to Stromness, we usually cheat and offload the pulks onto one of Skip's polar vessels in Fortuna Bay.

Travelling in this heavyweight style means reassuring security and comfort on overnight stops. We use spacious, four-person dome tents fitted with large snow valances, thick groundsheets, heavy duty flysheets and double sets of aluminium poles. Guy lines are secured to ingenious snow anchors made from short lengths of hosepipe by fellow South Georgia veteran, Crag Jones.

As well as personal alloy shovels, we also carry a snow saw and a steel spade so that if the worst comes to the worst, we can excavate the toughest snowbank to dig an emergency cave. This situation has befallen another party: while trying to pitch camp in a particularly trying blizzard, their flysheet was ripped from their hands, never to be seen again.

We take two gas stoves per tent, for fast snow melting and cooking, and we have no truck with weird dehydrated meals. I always try to include at least one bottle of wine, which makes a good risotto even better. I like to think that Shackleton and his companions would approve. Unlike them we are not on a desperate mission. We go to enjoy ourselves, in safety, simply to see at first hand the landscape that resonates so powerfully with the story of their extraordinary journey.

*Mountaineer Stephen Venables is perhaps best known for climbing a new route up Everest's forbidding Kangshung Face. The author of a dozen books, Stephen is returning to South Georgia in September to make his fourth crossing of the island. [www.stephenvenables.org](http://www.stephenvenables.org); [www.pelagic.co.uk](http://www.pelagic.co.uk)*

## TEN OF THE BEST

Expedition equipment is rarely more safety-aligned than when being used for sub-zero temperature trips. For **Stephen Venables** this includes multi-person tents, comfortable boots, saws that can cut through ice without breaking, pulks that can be used in emergencies and a rucksack that's as at home on a glacier as it is being hand luggage on an aircraft...

### 1. Tent

**Terra Nova Heavy Duty Terra Firma - £1,200; 9.1kg**

Sleeps up to four people, with one porch for the kitchen and another for the front door. We use a double set of poles for extra strength. Custom snow valances are essential for glacier camping.

### 2. Footwear

**Scarpa Maestrale 1.0 - £450; 1.52kg**

At last! A light and comfortable plastic alpine touring ski boot that fits my feet and works equally well up and downhill on skis. Doubles up as an ice climbing boot when fitted with crampons.

### 3. Snow saw

**MSR Basecamp - £80; 310g**

Whether you are digging an emergency cave or building protective walls for tents, a snow saw makes life infinitely easier. The foldable Basecamp is equipped with bi-directional aluminium teeth, which means that every stroke cuts through snow and ice. A low profile locking pin maintains the saw's rigidity.

### 4. Shovel

**Draper folding steel - £15; 1.1kg**

Light alloy snow shovels can break easily when digging through seams of ice. We always take one of these robust folding shovels, equipped with a serrated carbon steel blade, to supplement our regular avalanche tools.

### 5. Skis

**Dynafit Cho Oyu - £970; 1.97kg (660cm skis, skins and bindings)**

Weight in a pulk is no problem, but on your feet every ounce counts. Consequently, I am currently saving up to buy a pair of these ultralight yet comfortably wide skis. I will fit my Cho Oyu skis with dedicated skins and TLT Speed Radical bindings.



### 6. Pulk

**Acapulka Feather Light XL150 - £1025; 3kg**

Although there are lighter and less expensive pulks around, the XL150 glides beautifully and its built-in fabric cover makes it quick to load and unload. The bow section is designed to float in deep snow. When travelling with a large group, we take one longer pulk which can double as an emergency stretcher.

### 7. Rucksack

**Osprey Variant 37 - £120; 1.56kg**

Despite all the toggles and buckles, I love this sack. It is the perfect size for skiing and mountaineering. It also makes for ideal airline cabin luggage: the integral snow shovel panel performs double duty for quick laptop removal at airport security. The sturdy waist belt is great when hauling a pulk and can be removed for technical climbs and air travel.

### 8. Insulated jacket

**Mountain Equipment Fitzroy - £200; 645g**

Insulated with synthetic PrimaLoft Gold, this lightweight jacket is perfect for wet and windy belays, snack stops and cooking in a cold tent. Ditto Mountain Equipment's Compressor trousers (£135, 335g) with their full length leg zips for rapid donning over crampons or skis.

### 9. Rope

**Beal Ice Line 8.1mm - £165; 2.34kg (60m)**

These slinky ropes handle beautifully. We use a single for glacier travel and a double for any hard technical climbing. The Ice Line utilises Beal's new unicore technology and is designed to resist bunching. The rope has a weight per metre of just 39g, which should be light enough for everyone save Messner!

### 10. Compass

**Silva Explorer Pro Hi-Vis - £20; 68g**

GPS devices are all very well but they are not infallible. For reliable navigation you can't beat a compass, particularly when used in conjunction with an altimeter. Silva's Explorer Pro Hi-Vis lives up to its name with luminous paint that does not degrade over time. An integral clinometer measures slope angle.

**DON'T FORGET...**

... a pee bottle. I hate leaving my warm tent during a blizzard and the ubiquitous Nalgene wide mouth, one litre plastic bottle does the job nicely. But make sure it's a different colour from your water bottle!