



GOSMIC, MAN

ROS WOODHAM
JOINS AN
UNFORGETTABLE
MUDRUT
EXPEDITION
THROUGH THE
NEAR POLAR
WONDERLAND
OF NORTHERN
SCANDINAVIA



PHOTOS: ROS WOODHAM

Nordkapp, 12.40pm.
Sunrise (two hours
before sunset)



Clumsy and useless from the cold, my hands fumble around the buttons and dials on the camera before finding the shutter-release. Above me, the Aurora Borealis has exploded into an immense genie-like phantasm, enveloping the entire night sky.

In silence, I wait for the 30-second exposure, anticipating the clunk of the shutter and burning to see what has been recorded. I hold my breath for what seems an eternity, hypnotised by the anomalous glow that has risen from the horizon and is now swirling and pulsing across a starry sky. My mind recalls the chain of unforgettable events that have led us to this secluded camp at the tip of northern Norway, within spitting distance of our objective, Nordkapp.

Moments before the shutter closes, I experience a bizarre sensation of perspective: beneath this scintillating

display of the Northern Lights 60 miles above, I feel strangely insignificant as I witness the interaction of solar wind entering Earth's magnetic field, trapped in a spiral orbit around the Earth's pole. Add a pair of Defenders and a glowing tipi in the foreground for ambience, and the feeling can't be beaten. If only it were possible to bottle this moment.

The shutter closes and the scene appears on the screen. Real magic. The image depicts our secluded camp nestled among snowy mountains beneath an insane green sky. I throw myself backwards into the thick snow to watch more of this incredible light show.

The journey and events leading up to our experience of this atmospheric phenomenon have been spectacular. The discovery of this winterland within the Arctic Circle has been tough, definitely, but overriding the difficulty has been a

magical adventure through a land I never imagined would be so rich and indescribably beautiful.

The idea for this trip had been born just a few months before over a wood-burning stove in the very same tipi pitched in the high Pyrenees.

Ian Woolley, our expedition leader and no stranger to Arctic climes, was keen to journey far north during the hardest time of year. Ylva, native Swede and cold-climate proficient, was on board. An interpreter is useful; but we found that even in parts of Norway and Finland where Swedish isn't spoken, most folk reply to the question: 'Do you speak English?' with a brusque 'of course!'.

The final recruit was Stuart Dalrymple, high-calibre Scotsman and engineer. Although a relative newcomer to overlanding, inexperience didn't deter him or his newly prepped 2007 110 from



It's a long way to anywhere from the Arctic Circle (66°N)



Cold Crew: Ylva, Ian, Ros and Stu



No winning today - compacted snow has frozen solid around it



The Northern Lights appear in waves of increasing intensity through the night



Where there's smoke...



...there's fire. Stove is on blocks to avoid melting the snow beneath



Tough guy Stu minds his own bivi-ness



Astonishingly beautiful scenes such as this spur the team on through perishingly cold starts to each day

this adventure, the perfect shakedown for a five-week jaunt across Russia planned for later this year.

A CUNNING PLAN

We had allowed two weeks for the 5000-mile round trip from our respective homes in the UK and Spain to Nordkapp (North Cape), land of the midnight sun, midday darkness and the most northerly point in mainland Europe. It's equal in latitude to central Greenland.

It may seem strange to travel through one of the most beautiful countries in the world during the darkest months, but the journey would be challenging and rewarding, while experiencing the

Arctic at its most severe. And there was the added incentive of maybe catching a glimpse of the Northern Lights.

The polar leg of our route would follow the E6, Norway's Arctic Highway, a relatively modern road and a coherent and unbroken land link through Norway's Arctic counties, or Fylker.

There is a deep history associated with the Arctic Highway, the existence of which is owed to the foresight of locals who sought support from influential figures in the prosperous south. Then, during World War 2, under German occupation, significant improvements were made to the E6 at the price of slave labour: many Russian and Yugoslav

prisoners of war sacrificed their lives for the development of the road. In the past 60 years, bridging and tunnelling have connected the sections linked by ferries: now only one ferry remains.

The E6 follows Norway's fractured coastline, a land of fjords and frozen lakes that benefits from the relative warmth of the North Atlantic Drift, with much lower temperatures inland. We were expecting an average well below zero and the possibility of overnight temperatures falling below -30°C.

ON THE ROAD

From his home in Scotland, Stu covered the longest distance, hooking up with

Ian in Worcestershire before catching the Chunnel, picking me up in Antwerp, and then slogging across a dark, foggy Germany. An even foggier Denmark spat us out on to the phenomenal Oresund Bridge into Sweden, arriving at base camp in Uddevalla, an hour north of Gothenburg, where we met up with Ylva to complete the team.

That evening was spent replenishing supplies and finalising preparations, ready for an early start. Conditions were relatively benign for the start of the journey. Only several feet of snow remained from the metres in previous weeks and the roads were fairly clear. Our first night was spent in a campsite near Lillehammer, north of Oslo, well placed to reach Trondheim in a respectable six hours the following day.

At this stage, on the same latitude as the Shetlands, it was cold enough to freeze the lettuce in our sandwiches. We had a selection of tent options to suit different circumstances. The tipi with log-burning stove would be our main communal sleeping quarters but, for ease of set-up that evening, we put up smaller, individual tents.

I was elected the bivi. It's an effort to dig a hole in the snow, and a struggle to get in and out but, once you're in, it's



Sometimes, the steering didn't operate as expected



Stu's 110 needs rescuing after getting stuck in deep snow overnight



Stu is underwhelmed by this sleeping option

A few more miles to enjoy the sensational scenery before darkness sets in

surprisingly comfortable. Our lowest overnight temperature read -8°C, well within the capabilities of my Tundra bag (rated to -40°C) atop a down-lined Exped and reindeer skin.

Next day, we continued beyond our planned stop in Trondheim with a view to crossing the polar circle a day early and increasing our chances of reaching Nordkapp as planned. In the early hours we finally pulled off the E6 to find a spot for our first wild camp beside Lake Store Svenningvatnet, which reflected a beautiful waning moon back at us.

However, we encountered an issue that would become a problem throughout the trip: finding ground suitable for pegging beneath the snow. Neither

snow nor ice pegs would penetrate. We could have persisted with rock pegs but we were eating into limited and valuable sleeping time, so we abandoned the tent option and slept in the trucks.

Several hours on, we breakfasted at Mo i Rana, geographical centre of Norway, within 50 miles of the polar circle. From here, the E6 can properly be called Norway's Arctic Highway. Already further north than Iceland, we had timed it just right to reach our first major milestone, the Polar Circle Monument, in daylight.

Although very excited, I wasn't prepared for the experience that followed. Driving on to the high plateau of the Arctic Circle marker where the Saltfjellet National Park extends to the

VEHICLE PREPARATION

Both 110s had the Land Rover cold climate pack, which was a real bonus and, for added warmth, Stuart favoured an Eberspacher cab heater. The Mudrut 110 had a Webasto Thermotop in the engine bay.

The BFG KM2 and Mickey Thompson ATZ Tyres performed well, but snow chains were also carried. Fresh anti-freeze was mixed at 70/30.

Windscreens wash should be topped up with Scandinavian 'spolarvatska', which works down to -30°C. Wipers with a high silicone content also work better in extreme temperatures.

Cold-climate trips require more storage space so, for this trip, Woolley removed his Hannibal roof tent in favour of the extra rooftop capacity, allowing room for more Space Cases. You'll also need to reserve space on board for good recovery gear and a decent snow shovel.



east, the bleak landscape was shrouded in the beautiful low light of the midday sun. The dazzling white and subtle blue tones of the snowdrifts of this desolate Tundra roll gently as if moulding the waves of a frozen ocean.

The silhouettes of a hundred reindeer scattered the hillsides and lined the ice road ahead. Such beauty and serenity could rarely be experienced, I imagine.

It was so cold, the inside of my nostrils froze with each breath. That night, we camped in the tipi, combating outside temperatures below -20°C.

After driving the lovely Rago National Park and taking a ferry crossing, we had passed Narvik, well on the way towards the great northern capital of Tromsø.

Closer to the coast, we spent a warmer night at a campsite on the outskirts of the city and wandered into town for a civilised breakfast by the port before taking the scenic route towards Alta via two ferries spanning beautiful fjords.

Still experiencing the last official days of polar night, our daylight hours were limited and reducing at an alarming rate the further north we drove. Blizzards and unpredictable road conditions restricted us to speeds deemed laughable by locals who flew past us on studded tyres along roads that bore the appearance of Winter Olympic bobsleigh runs.

A 5am roust should have seen us through to Nordkapp in time to join the daily midday snowplough clearing the final eight miles to the Cape. This section

of road is closed in winter, only allowing access to tourists by bus or by special permission to those in 4x4s. However, from the shore of Raftsbotn, the E6 climbs through a gorge away from the fjord towards Skaidi, 50 miles away, crossing wild and desolate country.

The weather had worsened overnight and a road closure meant a four-hour wait for the snowplough to clear the road and allow the patiently waiting traffic to continue on its way.

Once through, we cherished the remaining hours of daylight, allowing us to see the incredibly beautiful coastal region around Porsangerfjord, before reaching Honningsvåg in complete darkness at 3pm.

We set up camp in a blizzard beneath a cloudy sky, with fading hopes of seeing the Northern Lights – which, according to the locals, hadn't been seen for more than a week due to overcast skies.

But, late into the evening, I ventured outside into the frozen night to retrieve the bedding from the roof boxes. Suddenly, I looked up, noticing that the clouds had begun to part, revealing a distinctive glow on the horizon: the Aurora Borealis had arrived, prompting a photographic frenzy.

ONWARDS AND UPWARDS

Now, all that remained for us to crown this already successful mission was to reach Nordkapp, 71° north. In the morning we congregated at Skarsvåg,



the world's most northerly fishing village, where the snowplough led us the final eight miles to the headland. **No computer trickery – the sky really is that colour (71° north)**

Stu played end-to-end Pink Floyd albums, reflecting on the previous evening's phenomenal light show as we navigated this final, incredible expanse of snowy wilderness.

It was such a privilege to be alone at the Cape. As a group we shared the



Ice Road: the E6 from Mo I Rana crosses the Arctic Circle on its way to the mountains of the Rago National Park



CLOTHING

It's important to use a correctly layered clothing system to keep warm. This should include a good-quality base layer, such as thermals made from merino wool, one or more mid layers and a GoreTex or breathable outer layer. Cotton isn't recommended as it retains moisture against the skin.

A thin pair of gloves is useful when dexterity is called for but you'll also need a good pair of thicker gloves. There's an old Inuit saying: 'If your feet are cold, put a hat on,' and a hat with ear flaps is favourable.

Finally, footwear suitable for the snow should be a size bigger to allow room for extra socks. Again, merino wool is a good thermal insulator.

elation and sense of achievement in complete solitude from the rest of the world, driving the two Defenders right up to the Nordkapp monument on the very tip of Europe.

The wind bit so hard, it was painful to bare skin. My eyes remained half-closed and my face buried inside the neck of my jacket. But not even such bitter cold could detract from the emotions that befell me as I gazed out across the deep indigo water, sensing the curve of the earth across the horizon and knowing all that lay in front of me were ice caps, a frozen ocean and the North Pole which, from here, was much closer than my home in Spain.

The intense days of driving long hours on ice and snow, through blizzards, and largely in darkness were a realistic measure of what it takes to reach such an incredible place and to experience such a satisfying feeling of achievement.

In terms of time, we were only halfway through our journey, but there was a definite and distinct change in our mindset as we left Nordkapp and pointed south. The sun managed to skim the horizon for our visit and as we left, I realised that I had photographed both sunrise and sunset within the space of just two hours.

We routed the return journey through Finnish Lapland, a bitter and barren Tundra that is the homeland of a large concentration of Sami, Europe's only indigenous people. Crossing the border into Finland meant that we had racked up 10 countries on our voyage.

Noteworthy landmarks on the way back included the Sami town of Karasjok, and Kiruna, where Ylva managed to



Kiruna Ice Hotel – cool in every sense



On top of the world? Maybe not, but on top of Europe, at least

procure the use of snowmobiles to reach the astonishing Ice Hotel, before we disappeared down the magnetite mines on a fascinating tour.

Continuing south along the Swedish High Coast, we spent the last night before returning to base camp at a Kyrkstad, or 'Church City' in Löfvånger, one of the numerous communities that were built around the 18th century to house those who travelled long distances to go to church.

The following day, our final stop was at Gränsfors Bruks, the traditional axe forge, before an extremely long drive back to Uddevalla – a journey that allowed plenty of time for reflection.

With a total of more than 5000 miles under our tyres, of which some 1900 were driven entirely on ice and snow, we were delighted to emerge with surprisingly few mishaps: the final tally was one stone chip, one hairy moment in Finland where Stu's Defender seemed to stutter as if fuel starved, one blown headlamp bulb, one stuck fuel gauge, four winch rescues from snowbanks, and one bent camera filter.

We discovered that: frozen bananas are useful for hammering in snow pegs; a moose tastes better than it looks; the warmest place in the Arctic is inside the on-board fridge; Scotsmen function best after being warmed from the inside by a good single malt.

Finally, nothing can detract from the marvel that is the Aurora Borealis. It simply must be seen. **LRO**

■ For more information on how to join a Mudrut Expedition, contact Ian Woolley: ian@mudrut.co.uk.

