

Traversing the Ellesmere Island Glacier

by Pete Dronkers

Sitting in a Twin Otter ski plane with our heads glued to the windows, we are in sheer disbelief. We have just left Resolute Bay, a tiny Inuit village on the shores of Cornwallis Island in the Canadian Arctic, and are headed for Ellesmere Island — the northernmost landmass in North America.

When Lake Tahoe locals Blue Eisele, Jonas Cabiles and I crossed the Arctic Circle for the first time yesterday en route to Resolute, we entered a trance that would only intensify with time. Now, our expedition is finally underway.

After three hours in the plane and endless miles of pack ice, we see the first mountains through patches in the clouds. It's a world of ancient ice caps; the scale is overwhelming. Tomorrow we will arrive at Mt. Barbeau, the highest peak in the Canadian Arctic — about 500 miles from the North Pole.

We first touch down at Eureka, a small research outpost and fuel cache on the shores of one of Ellesmere's many fjords. The air is warmer than Resolute, and unlike much of the Canadian arctic, blue sky prevails. Instead of talus, we find permafrost and the tiny plants that live on it. An oasis it may be, for the arctic that is.

At Tanquary Fjord we check in with a park warden as we're about to enter Qutirniqpaaq National Park. He tells us we're on our own out here, and we fill out the paperwork realizing that we are to be the only expedition on the ice cap. By the following day, we would be alone.

After touching down on the frozen surface of Lake Hazen, the largest freshwater lake in the arctic, we set up camp. We see the huge valley containing the Henrietta-Nesmith Glacier far down shore, which, if necessary, would be our escape route from the icy wilderness surrounding Mt. Barbeau. From its terminus, we would carry our loads overland to the lakeshore and then back to the Lake Hazen camp on either lake ice or on the beach.

A park warden informs us that no expedition has ever completed our intended route — we would be the first people to trek from Barbeau to Lake Hazen. The other two wardens view our choice not to bring communication as irresponsible. They tell us we're unprepared but admit they've never been on the ice cap. We wonder who is right. I barely sleep from angst, and in the morning we leave for Barbeau with 30 days of food.

Flying over the Henrietta-Nesmith glacier, we notice the large water runnels and assure ourselves that we'll be able to cross them higher on the glacier where they're smaller. We see the terminus and it appears to be a ramp leading right to the ground. It all looks doable.

We land at Mt. Barbeau and set up camp while the plane flies out of sight. The dry, brown mountains of the lower elevations are gone. We're at 6,000 feet and standing atop 1,000 feet of ice.

Despite the few crevasses we saw on Barbeau's slopes a few



Blue Eisele prepares to cross one of the many ice-rivers on the first expedition to explore the Henrietta-Nesmith Glacier.

Photo by Pete Dronkers

days ago, we assume the ice cap is solid, so we pack up and head southeast toward a stunning ridgeline. Occasionally we see huge holes where the ice cap has fallen in on itself, and at times the snow collapses under our feet, resulting in whooping sounds that resonate in the same direction that a lateral crevasse might run. After eight hours of travel we set up a camp at the start of a valley that eventually leads to the Henrietta-Nesmith glacier. Looking back at Barbeau it seems as if we could make a quick dash to it. We vow to name this area Deception Valley, as the scale is difficult to comprehend.

We decide to rope up the next day, and two hours after leaving, Jonas nearly plunges through the surface and into a deep ice cavern. Snow bridges are everywhere but not visible. Suddenly the ease and peace of mind of ice cap travel are gone. We move slowly. Jonas is still on the front of the rope and he probes carefully.

After two days of travel from Barbeau we are under the ridge line and in the wide, unnamed valley. We can now see the upper Henrietta-Nesmith glacier in the distance. We move out from camp for a day to check the conditions of the ice cap in the direction of the ridge line. Jonas yells into a crevasse, and a few seconds later the sound comes up through a hole in the ice I've excavated 200 feet away. The ice seems hollow. We hope to reach and cross the Henrietta-Nesmith glacier without any crevasse

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View near the summit of Mt. Barbeau, the highest mountain in the Canadian Arctic. *Photo by Pete Dronkers*

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falls, but through binoculars it appears to have a rough surface.

A few days later we aim for the Henrietta-Nesmith. The ice changes from a cavernous hollow to a compact blue ice sheet as we move closer. The temperature drops below freezing, the wind picks up and the weather deteriorates. When we reach the Henrietta-Nesmith, we stop for a long break to absorb the scene before crossing the five-mile wide glacier — an ocean of ice.

The further we move toward the middle of the glacier, the worse the conditions become. Melt water pools on top of the ice, and in a few hours we find ourselves crossing small semi-frozen creeks flowing with ice water. We wonder how much worse it may become. As I reach down to probe the depth of a creek before crossing it, my pole breaks the fragile film of ice covering the creek, releasing a surge of water that gains momentum and floods the glacier below. Now I realize we are trekking through a glacial flood plain. I hope nothing comes surging onto us from above, but after five hours of crossing small rivers and nearly filling our sled duffels with ice water, we arrive close to the other side and set up camp.

Our new camp is terrible. We're situated between icy moguls and melt water. And when we set out from camp to reach the edge of the glacier, we encounter a new problem — deep ditches with steep walls and crossings only on marginal snow bridges. We sink ice screw belays for safety. At last we're across the glacier, but the runnels get worse, spilling off the edge the lower we go.

We agree to keep moving until the rivers force us toward the edge. We realize that the largest of the runnels are still to come. We set up a camp next to a 75-foot deep meandering river canyon and contemplate crossing it the next day. But how many more will there be after this one? What if the temperature rises and we can no longer cross them?

I walk down to see the edge of the glacier to evaluate our other option — 150-foot vertical ice cliffs with peeling seracs and gushing rivers at the base. There's no easy way off this thing. We opt for the high-angle evacuation. It would be dirt at last — no more surprises.

Equalizing four ice screws, we build an anchor from which to lower gear. The release of pressure at the edges of the glacier is causing loud cracking noises that resonate through the ice, and on both sides of us, car-sized seracs lay broken on the rocks. Six loads of lowering later, everything is on solid ground. We can see Lake Hazen in the distance.

With more than two weeks of supplies left, we break up the load and carry it to our new camp halfway to the lake. The wind picks up, sandblasting us with 40 mile-per-hour winds. There's sand in everything.

The next day we return for the other load and another carry of gear down to Lake Hazen, another session of sleep, and finally another carry to the shore. Having determined the lake ice was thick enough, we skied onto it and returned to the Lake Hazen camp. A few miles later, the lake ice deteriorates, leaving gaps of open water between the shore and us. We hope for the best. Luckily, after a short wade, we gained the shore at Lake Hazen Camp. Only then were we back to predictability and relative comfort.

A few days after returning to Lake Hazen, we caught an empty leg of a chartered flight back to Resolute, where we waited a week for a return flight to Vancouver. It had all gone by so fast. Part of me wanted to be back on the ice cap, living in the same predictability that we experienced at Mt. Barbeau — for it was there we thought our route would be simple. Part of me wanted to be exploring on good snow, trekking in the comforts associated with a known outcome and knowing that a satellite phone could spew our coordinates to some pilot for a pickup. Yet with no phone and no option for a pickup, we had chosen the route for true adventure, which was not valued by the park service but meant everything to us.

We had been dropped in this vast wilderness with only one goal — to make it out safely. There was no one to guide us, no possibility of giving up. We would get back to Hazen no matter the cost, no matter the time. Our total vulnerability to something greater does, perhaps, make us appreciate our short existence even more. We left Ellesmere earlier than planned, but more fulfilled than we could have ever imagined. ▲



Jonas Cabiles preparing to cross the unexplored Henrietta-Nesmith glacier. The crossing of the five-mile-wide glacier took nearly a day due to dozens of ice-river crossings.

Photo by Pete Dronkers