



# ADVENTURE

Edited by Jonathan Thompson & Joe Mackie

PUSHING THE LIMITS

## TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH

Join *MH's* Jonathan Thompson as he straps on his crampons for the climbing trip of a lifetime; and discover how you can visit the last great wilderness on earth – Antarctica  
**Photography Mark Chilvers**

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**Words Jonathan Thompson**  
We pack *MH's* senior editor off to the white continent to follow his childhood dream

**THEY** say there are no atheists at the South Pole. As the clouds clear beneath my climbing boots, I begin to understand why. The panorama swimming into focus below our tightly-roped group is spectacular, raw and other-worldly. Hundreds of feet down, the stillness of an enormous natural bay is shattered as a juvenile killer whale breaks the surface, flipping onto its back as it plays among the floating shards of ice. Above and beyond us, unblemished snowy peaks march away into infinity, the vast majority never troubled – or ever likely to be troubled – by human footprints.

"This is incredible," I shout to the Mexican climber, Carlos, who is roped behind me. "No my friend", he shouts back, "this is God."

I feel a tug on the rope above me and turn my mind back to the job – and mountain – in

hand. This is no time for soul searching; the weather is raw and ethereal too, and we're still a long way from the summit.

So this is finally it, the seventh continent. A place I've been dreaming of since childhood; a destination I've been actively trying to reach for over a decade. My grandfather's grandfather, a sailor and adventurer by the name of Richard Thompson, was here more than a century ago with the legendary polar explorer Ernest Shackleton, and it's my turn to follow in his footsteps.

I have travelled to the Antarctic Peninsula on a specially adapted icebreaker vessel, the *Ocean Nova*. On board are 70 other adventure travellers from 17 different countries, all of whom are desperate to set foot on this, the planet's most remote continent. Even now, 200 years after its discovery and 15-years after mainstream tourism began, only an estimated 120,000 humans have ever been to continental Antarctica (as opposed to its surrounding islands). Some football stadia hold more people than that. And somewhere in that crowd is my great-great grandfather.

### THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT

Our voyage began in the 'city at the end of the world', Ushuaia – a town teetering on the southernmost tip of Argentina. After boarding

the *Ocean Nova*, we headed out into the Drake Passage – one of the most aggressive stretches of water on Earth. The convergence point for no less than three of the world's five oceans – the Atlantic, Southern and Pacific – the Drake is notoriously violent. One of Shackleton's companions, a young Irishman named Felix Rooney, said it was "so rough, the ship would roll the milk out of your tea." ▶

◀ For the 500-mile crossing – which took a little over two days – we were tossed around by avalanche-like swells, many of which made George Clooney's *The Perfect Storm* look like a trip to the Butlins wave pool. Ice axes had to be stowed carefully under bunks to avoid waking with one embedded in your forehead, while shaving became a life-threatening exercise. And this, we were told, was a relatively good crossing.

Waking in sheltered waters on the third morning, the stunning Antarctic Peninsula was all around us. Colour had returned to the world – and to our faces. Plus, we could now have a shower without the risk of breaking a limb.

We were to spend five days here, travelling from point to point along the pristine white coastline, landing in small Zodiac dinghies wherever and whenever weather allowed.

Every day involved a climbing expedition of some kind – from straightforward mountaineering trips to more technical