

# Top of the world

Smashing through great sheets of ice and passing polar bears and seals in the midnight sun makes a journey to the North Pole one of the world's great travel adventures. **Nick Smith** joins a Russian nuclear ice-breaker heading northwards

A century ago no one was known to have been to the North Pole for sure. Some Arctic historians think that in 1909 US naval commander Robert E Peary might have reached it. But it wasn't until 1948, when Russian Alexander Kuznetsov arrived there by plane, that we could say with any certainty that a human had stood at 90N. And it wasn't until 1969 – the same year Apollo 11 landed on the moon – that the late Wally Herbert removed all doubt by becoming the first to arrive there on foot.

I'd read the stories of derring-do, of frostbitten death-or-glory marches to the pole, doing battle with pressure ridges and driving teams of exhausted dogs. But never did I think that I'd go to the end of the earth – what TS Eliot called “the still point of the turning world” – to see the majestic expanses of the Arctic pack ice for myself.

My adventure to the ultimate North started in Finland last summer, where I joined a select band of 120 like-minded, multinational travellers who were to accompany me through the oceans of icebergs. From Helsinki we flew to Murmansk in Russia, the most northerly city in the world, where we joined our ship, the “50 Years of Victory”.

Victory is a working nuclear-powered ice-breaker, that, for most of the year, keeps Russia's coast clear for commercial shipping. But in the height of summer she's not required for such work and is taken over by **Exodus** for a specialist polar cruise.

Powered by two nuclear reactors, Victory makes the round-trip using only 200 grams of heavy isotopes – that's the weight of an apple – making it, arguably, one of the most environmentally friendly ways to travel. Once settled into our snug cabins, the engines purr into action, the captain points the ship north and we head for the open seas.

Life on board the Victory is active. Cohorts of photographers line the deck snapping away at the kittiwakes that follow us for most of the voyage. But, for those preferring the warmth inside, there's a hectic lecture schedule on Arctic exploration and wildlife by a team

of experts; it's almost impossible to go to all of them.

There's also a great deal of socialising as the passengers get used to the rhythms of travel to the north. Soon everyone knows everyone else and the restaurant and bar are abuzz with adventurers sharing tales of their past travels. After dinner there always seems to be plenty of Russian vodka to lubricate proceedings, although in the perpetual light of the higher latitudes you have to remember that while it might feel like lunchtime, it's often well after midnight.

During the day there are helicopter excursions and raft landings. Our first is at Cape Tegetthoff in Franz Josef Land, where we step onto the tundra to marvel at deserted explorers' huts, rugged mountains and purple saxifrage. After days at sea it's good to be back on dry land, but soon we're heading north again and getting stuck into the serious business of smashing through the ice. As we encounter the first crumpled pack, the temperature gets decidedly colder and the passengers become excited as we scan the ice-sheet for our first sight of polar bears, ringed seals and walrus.

As the going gets harder the Victory slows to ice-breaking pace. We're navigating north using natural sea-lanes in between the vast expanses of multi-year ice, but there are times when there's no option but to call on the full force of the 75,000-horsepower vessel. With its steel-reinforced prow and submerged “ice-tooth”, the Victory shoots streams of bubbles up ahead to lift the ice, and then carves through with rumbles, creaks and deafening explosions. At dinner the occasional bottle of

wine takes a tumble, and you walk around the ship with one hand on the rail and sleep with earplugs.

Before I travelled in the polar regions I'd imagined that the adventure would be defined by the cold. But I was wrong. While it can get pretty chilly – especially in the wind on the observation deck – the most impressive aspect of the Arctic is the space. What's hard to understand initially is the sheer scale of the never-ending horizon that encircles you, creating the startling illusion that the sky is a dome over your head.

A week into the voyage we reach the Pole, where the Exodus team sets up a party on the ice. It's hard to believe we're on top of the world, but the GPS says 90-00-000N, so there's no further to go. Standing on a sheet of ice only six-feet thick, with 13,000 feet of sea beneath, is a strange feeling, but nowhere near as odd as walking in a circle around the Pole and crossing every time zone as you stroll. “I've just walked around the world in five minutes,” shouts one very excited passenger. A few take the “polar plunge”, diving into the inky waters with a rope around their waist.

All too soon it's time to head back to Russia. The captain turns the Victory around and we sail back “downhill” in our own wake, through the channel we created earlier.

It's easy going south, and there's even time to return to Franz Josef Land for some bird watching. On the way we see many polar bears and walrus. As I look out over this lonely wasteland, I feel true admiration for those early explorers who made this journey alone and on foot – it really is one of the last great adventures on earth.

## Way to go

**Exodus** offers a 15-day Journey to the North Pole cruise, departing July 9, 2010. **From £14,940pp**, excluding flights. (0845 863 9600; [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk))

**Noble Caledonia** offers a Polar Bears Adventure in the Midnight Sun cruise, with regular departures from June 12, 2010. **From £4,395pp**, including flights. (020 7752 0000; [www.noble-caledonia.co.uk](http://www.noble-caledonia.co.uk))

**Hurtigruten** offers a nine-day Kingdom of the Polar Bear voyage with departures from June 2010. **From £3,785pp**, excluding flights. (0845 225 6640; [www.hurtigruten.co.uk](http://www.hurtigruten.co.uk))



NICK SMITH



**Bear essentials:** keen polar travellers spot wildlife as the 50 Years of Victory carves through the ice; below, a mother bear watches over her cubs