

ICE 225 - The Ice Men Cometh

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Step By Step



Upon arriving in Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, team members of ICE 225 off-load the expedition vehicles and supplies.



Dogsled is the traditional means of transportation in Greenland, a multi-footed contrast to modern expedition vehicles.



A tugboat flying the Danish flag tows a barge containing the vehicles and supplies for ICE 225 128 miles into Godthabsfjord.



Team members of ICE 225 land their barge on the shore near the Sarqoap Semessua glacier, where their over-ice journey began.



River crossings are common on Arctic expeditions and require experience and nerves of steel. In some cases a driver will actually wade across first to check the depth of the water. In this case the driver could see the bottom and plunged in.



One of the hidden dangers in glacial travel is crevasses and sink holes. Either could swallow a vehicle whole. In this case, the right side of the Polar Truck was buried up to its 44s. The explorers were lucky this time, as the truck was quickly winched out.



The Sarqoap Semessua glacier looms in the distance as the expedition drivers prepare to pilot their vehicles to the top.



Freyr Jonsson puts the pedal to the metal on a largely flat and open area of the ice cap. Even pulling a fully loaded trailer, Freyr managed speeds in excess of 60 mph.



This type of four-wheeling requires constant work in one of the harshest environments on earth.



Portable bridges are commonly used to drive across crevasses. These lightweight metal ramps are vital pieces of equipment for travelling across the ice cap and stow easily on the roof-rack of the truck.



ICE 225 teammates pose in front of the abandoned radar station that became their shelter for a night. It was cold inside, but with a blizzard howling, it was even colder outside.



The Polar Truck crosses a crevasse and prepares to plunge into an icy pool in its journey across the ice cap.



Bare ground was a rare scene on the expedition, but a welcome one; the mud bog meant sea level, and thus civilization, was near.



Heres a little-known fact for you: Greenland is the largest island in the world. Its not only large; its cold, with about 85 percent of its total area covered by a huge ice cap covering 1.4 million square miles. That cap is up to 10 feet thick,

and the ice it contains represents something in the range of 10 percent of the worlds total fresh water reserves. So why, in a land this remote, frigid, and utterly barren, would anyone want to drive across it? Thats what we asked a team of Danish and Icelandic explorers who were the first men ever to accomplish this feat on an expedition known as Ice 225. Their reply, like that of a generation of adventurers before them, was simply, Because its there. Sounded good to us. Heres their story.

PRELUDE

Our group of eight hard-core adventurers consisted of Freyr Jonsson, Addi Hermann, Inage Thorsteinson, Valdi Gudmundson, Arni Arnason, Hallgrimur Arngrimson from Iceland and Allan Greisen and Lasse Rungholm from Denmark. After months of detailed planning and preparation the group finally came together in Nuuk, Greenlands capital, eager to begin the expedition. The plan was to drive three highly modified Toyota Land Cruisers, built by Arctic Trucks of Iceland, from Nuuk to Isortoq, a distance of nearly 500 treacherous miles across Greenlands ice cap, a feat never before attempted in modern 4x4s. At a press conference in Nuuk, a group of Inuit villagers gawked at the unusual vehicles being off-loaded from the ship that had just arrived from Iceland. To them, a dogsled was the proven method of transportation in this barren wasteland.

After the press conference it was time for the final loading and preparation of the Polar Trucks. Everyone lent a hand except Addi, who volunteered for a two-hour reconnaissance flight by helicopter to check the conditions on the glacier. By evening the men had completed their work and were rewarded with a Greenlandic feast and an impressive show with Danish and Greenlandic entertainers. In the morning the challenge would begin.

DAY 1

The guys were up at 6:00 a.m. and immediately went to work loading a barge with three Polar Trucks, one trailer, six 55-gallon drums of diesel, crevasse ramps, spare parts, and enough food and water to last for 14 days. A tugboat was ready and waiting to tow the barge 128 miles into Godthabsfjord, where they were to land near the base of the Sarqoap Semessua glacier. The tug had to be disengaged 50 miles into the fjord because of too-shallow water, leaving them on their own to pilot the barge the rest of the way. Nearing the shore, the team beached the barge on the incoming tide, lowered the gangways, and off-loaded the vehicles and supplies onto dry land. High tide was fast approaching, so the team had to work fast to move to higher ground, where the explorers set up camp for the night. The weather was a mild 28 °F moderate conditions in Greenland on this first night of the expedition.

DAY 2

The second day was slow-going and uneventful as the team managed to travel just eight miles the whole day. It took a while to get oriented, relying strictly on the teams Magellan GPS in this eerie, unfamiliar terrain. Freyr and Valdi spent several hours in the morning wrenching on the Polar Trucks, checking anything that needed to be tightened or tuned. The group finally made camp on a grassy, frozen patch of marsh, the last sign of vegetation theyd see for some time. Afterwards a dinner of boiled light-smoked Greenland trout, baked potatoes, and Danish roulade helped send everyone to bed happy.

DAY 3

The target for today was to make camp in the middle of Lake Taserssuaq, a frozen lake located nearly 20 miles away. The route threaded along the Narsarsuaq plain, an area flanked by majestic mountains on each side. This was one of the few geographical points mentioned on the maps; the rest of the journey was mainly uncharted. A few miles from the lake the team had to cross a huge frozen river. Normal passage would be by a natural snow bridge formed from previous blizzards but one was nowhere to be found. A decision was made to cross the frozen river anyway, a dangerous maneuver that could prove disastrous. Valdi was sent across first, with Freyr close behind. When Addi came across last, the Polar Truck broke through the ice on the riverbed and completely submerged the back half of the vehicle. Everything in the cargo area was soaked, including the tents, sleeping bags, groundsheets

and rifle. Fortunately, Addi had managed to get the front tires up on the riverbank when the ice gave way, allowing the team to recover the vehicle quickly with the winch. This was a close call that almost ended in disaster.

Once the team made it onto the lake things went much better, and the explorers enjoyed blasting across the frozen expanse at speeds of up to 25 miles an hour, their top speed so far. Camp was made in the center of the lake and the guys enjoyed a view of the 300-foot-tall face of the Sarqoap Semessua glacier looming in the distance. Theyd have to climb it. They settled in for the night wondering how they would get their trucks to the top.

DAY 4

After a 6:00 a.m. breakfast of museli with powdered milk, hot coffee, tea, cocoa, and bread with jam, the team was fueled and ready to assault the glacier, 24 miles away. The edge of the glacier was a nearly sheer 300-foot face with a natural ramp winding its way up one side apparently the only way to the top. By no means was this going to be easy. At the base was a sandy slope that was the first obstacle to overcome. The sand was very deep in places and the slope so steep that it required winching with the help of sand anchors. Next, the sand turned to rock and ice, which made the ascent even more challenging. A narrow, icy slot had to be negotiated and Freyr managed to tear off one of his running boards, mangling the side of his prized Polar Truck. This proud Icelander was the brunt of many jokes later in the evening. After hours of laborious winch work the team made the top and claimed it was one of the most incredible 4x4 ascents any had experienced. That night they set up camp on the rim of the glacier which they rightly named Camp Nansen after the Norwegian Arctic explorer and diplomat Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930).

DAY 5

The men awoke at 6:30 a.m. and were in especially good spirits due to the accomplishments of the day before. Valdi had prepared a hot porridge that was eagerly consumed and followed with a short cross-country skiing excursion. This gave the guys a chance to inspect the fissured terrain that lay ahead. Normally, great fissures in the glacier would extend from the rim a few miles inward, but reconnaissance revealed that they were filled with snow. This would make for easier travelling. At 9:00 a.m. the team proceeded with the trucks over a frozen moonscape towards a white horizon. By lunchtime they had covered nearly 30 miles. The men were delighted with their progress, which they credited to nearly perfect weather with better than expected driving conditions. By nightfall they had covered a distance of 93 miles, the best mileage in one day so far. Dinner was served in a celebratory fashion and consisted of Greenland whale meat, seals blubber, and three desserts by Ingi. Afterwards, Icelandic schnapps was enjoyed around the campfire and helped to cut the 6 °F air temperature. The men joked about going to bed in their long johns tonight.

DAY 6

Saturday mornings weather was clear but cold (13 °F) and the team set a course for the DYE-3 radar station (an abandoned American military installation) 95 miles away. After the cold night it took a while to get the trucks started. Freyr had to pour hot water over the manifold of the truck they called Pamela to get her going. The other two started up after sputtering a bit at first. On the way to DYE-3 the team crossed the highest point of the ice cap, which they determined to be 9,042 feet above sea level. Theoretically, itd be all down hill from here. What they didnt know was that the terrain would become incredibly more difficult the closer they got to Isortoq. That night was spent in the eerie DYE-3 in a scene reminiscent of the movie Alien III. The temperature was the coldest yet inside this frozen steel tomb, but with a raging storm blowing outside, the men built a fire and decided to make the best of it.

DAY 7

The explorers were thrilled to leave the metallic grip of DYE-3 and set out for the downhill stretch to Isortoq. The day started with rough driving conditions, the snow being almost four feet deep. After driving about 30 miles the team entered the glacier fissure zone mentioned earlier on the ascent. They hardly entered the zone before Addi dropped into a huge crevasse in his Polar Truck. As Valdi attempted to rescue him with his truck, it slipped into a crevasse as

well. Valdi managed to save his vehicle with the crevasse bar (a tubular steel device attached to the front of the vehicle) and cross with portable steel bridges that were placed across the gap. After crossing the crevasse, Valdi attached his winch to Addis vehicle and recovered it from a potentially icy grave. After this mishap the team worried that the descent through the fissure zone would be more of the same. They were still 4,300 feet above sea level. However, after a short reconnaissance, Freyr found a route that was surprisingly easy and got the team to the bottom of the ice cap without any more drama. As they set up camp an emotional celebration broke out as the realization of being the first to drive across Greenlands ice cap sunk in.

DAY 8

The men awoke with a sense of accomplishment none had ever experienced before. With the ice cap conquered, the final leg to Isortoq took them along the base of the glacier where more crevasses had to be crossed with their portable bridges. It took three hours to traverse a quarter-mile along the edge of ominous 300-foot-tall cliffs of ice to their exit route along a frozen fjord. At one point, a giant slab of ice the size of a building gave way and nearly annihilated the expedition. Nerves were tense and the men wondered if they would make it through this final stretch. The Polar Trucks crept along cautiously until the group made it to the frozen fjord, the highway to civilization. At this point the team members realized the expedition was clearly over. Once in Isortoq, they were greeted with a heros welcome.

The final task of their laborious journey was simple enough. Just load the vehicles aboard the ship and go home. There was only one problem, however: The ship couldnt make it into the frozen harbor, which probably wouldnt thaw until August. This left our explorers with only two options. Either rent a helicopter and lift the vehicles to a ship waiting beyond the ice, or drive back across the ice cap where the harbors are ice-free all year.

It didnt take long to make that decision, since they were short on cash but still heavy with fuel and supplies. After a couple days of R&R, they packed up the Polar Trucks and headed west, back over the ice cap, grinning from ear to ear.