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# LIFESTYLE NEWS

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## Aloha Antarctica

Local resident braves the unearthly elements in awe-inspiring but unforgiving South Pole region

BY DEBRA DOWNEY  
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It was a quiet January day in the Staudinger family's Dundas home. Patriarch Dieter had his paint brush in his hand, giving some of the walls a shiny new coat.

The shrill ring of the telephone interrupted the calm and set Mr. Staudinger's pulse racing and his mind whirling.

Did he want to spend a month trekking across the unforgiving but awe-inspiring continent of Antarctica?

"It's a big stretch from painting walls, but you know what, it's so crazy that it's going to work," he told the caller, friend Armin Wirth.

And so began a once-in-a-lifetime experience that took the two adventurers to the South Pole region, where the rigorous, solitary conditions tested both their physical and psychological strength.

Mr. Staudinger and Mr. Wirth were more prepared for the harsh conditions than most people. The two men have led a life that has been far from sedentary, and challenging the ravages of Antarctica wasn't an overwhelming or outlandish idea.

Mr. Wirth worked for many years as a guide in Greenland, and has explored and led expeditions in the Arctic, Canada and Norway. Mr. Staudinger, meanwhile, served in the Austrian military with the Alpine Jaeger unit, where he taught wilderness survival and tracking skills.

The two met in 2000 through world renowned survival expert Tom Brown Jr.

"We met in one of his classes," said Mr. Staudinger. "They are intimate, powerful and intense weeklong workshops and we fast-forwarded a friendship."

Three weeks after the phone call that shattered the serenity of his home redecorating project, Mr. Staudinger and Mr. Wirth travelled to Germany to prepare for their trek to the Earth's southernmost continent.

Their journey officially began on Nov. 1 when they flew from Capetown, South Africa, to the Russian Novo Airbase. They had planned to continue their trip the next day to Neumayer station, a

research observatory and logistics base for expeditions in Antarctica. But unfortunately a cyclone kept them pinned to the ground. The winds were so strong, said Mr. Staudinger, that walking was, at times, nearly impossible.

By Nov. 6 the vicious weather conditions had abated, and the pair reached Neumayer. Their first day in Antarctica went as scripted with the two men travelling 36 kilometres in five hours, primarily by "kiting," a process which involves being attached to kites by 200-foot lines with 120 kilograms of gear in a sled attached to their bodies.

Mr. Staudinger said his first glimpse of Antarctica was unlike anything he has ever encountered.

"There's not a whole lot of places on the planet that could compare," he said. "It's so still you can hear your heartbeat and feel your heart pumping blood through your veins."

As November wore on, the days fell into a familiar pattern of simply struggling to cope with howling winds, bone-chilling temperatures and a barren landscape in every direction.

"Antarctica is a continent that, bar none, exemplifies extremes," Mr. Staudinger said. "A lot of effort has to go into things we take for granted here."

The pair would rise at 7 a.m., have a brief discussion about their emotional and physical well-being, then it took about 2 1/2 hours to dress, eat and get ready for the day ahead. Mr. Staudinger and Mr. Wirth painstakingly used a burner to melt ice for water, prepared breakfast, retaped their toes and heels to prevent blisters, conducted minor repairs on equipment and dried their boots.

By 10 a.m., when the sun was high enough so the one-mile thick ice surface was more conducive to gliding their equipment sleds, the adventurers were ready to roll.

They walked eight or nine hours each day, stopping only for lunch. They had planned to travel greater distances by kiting but the winds wouldn't co-operate.

"We would get a weather update that said blue sky, light winds from the north and unlim-

*"Antarctica is a continent that, bar none, exemplifies extremes."*



Dieter Staudinger (right) and Armin Wirth get ready for their once-in-a-lifetime experience to Antarctica.

ited visibility, so we thought could use our kites," said Mr. Staudinger.

"But the wind would actually be from the south, with cold and blowing ice crystals."

When they did try kiting, Mr. Staudinger described it as a "hell ride."

"It was the most scary thing," he said. "The forces generated are really enormous, and the jolting and bumping of our bodies were taken to the limit."

Around 6 p.m. each day, the pair started looking for a flat surface to set up camp the night. It then took three hours of labour before they were able call it a day. The tent had to be set up, ice melted, food prepared and the daily call made to the Russian air base at 8 p.m. to provide their GPS location should an emergency arise.

Mr. Staudinger said some days, when the wind was at gale force, just putting up the tent was a monumental task. The pair had to move swiftly and precisely or the tent would be gone in a second. Death would be imminent.

"You really realize how far away you are from any safety net, and you have to contend with all of your worries and fears, and not let them get in the way because if you do, that's when you're prone to make mistakes."

The extreme environment eventually forced a very reluctant Mr. Staudinger and Mr. Wirth to bow to Mother Nature. The pair had been bested by -30C temperatures and uncooperative winds. The Antarctic had won.

Mr. Staudinger said he and his buddy wrestled for three days with the decision to leave. On the morning of Day 26 of their journey, they looked each other in the eye and knew it was time to go.

"One part of you wants to keep going," said Mr. Staudinger. "But in four weeks the conditions hadn't changed and we didn't want to

become a rescue operation. At some point that's irresponsible to ourselves and the people who have to rescue us."

Through a quirk of fate, the two men were airlifted from a plateau only a few hours later.

By 6 p.m. they were back in Capetown, their bodies and psyche trying to adjust from going to -30 C to 30 C temperatures. Still clad in their polar gear, Mr. Staudinger and Mr. Wirth made their way through a commuter traffic jam, complete with buses belching black smoke and goats voicing their discontent. After the lonely silence of Antarctica, it was disconcerting to experience so much sensory input in such a short time.

"It was all very surreal," said Mr. Staudinger. "People looked at us (in our polar gear) like we were from the moon, and we felt like we came from the moon."

Two months after his attempt to conquer Antarctica, Mr. Staudinger is back to the mundane, operating a spiritual psychotherapist practice in Dundas and enjoying life with wife Katie.

Antarctica, however, still tugs at his heart strings. He said he fell in love with the continent where there is no military, no single ownership, and where those who brave its ruthlessness are dedicated to peace and knowledge.

"It's such a remote and extreme environment where not even human beings have a foothold," said Mr. Staudinger. "It's definitely changed me, in the sense that I feel more peaceful with myself and the world. I don't necessarily like what I see, but I'm more empathetic and less likely to let things rock my boat."

"In many ways the experience has allowed me to know myself better and that has the benefit of feeling more peaceful and at ease with things that were challenging."

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