

# Arctic ordeal that really is as Good as it gets

Reindeer stew, bagpipes and a cosy tent make a 100km trek for children's cancer charity It's Good 2 Give an experience one fund-raiser will never forget

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **KAE TINTO MURRAY**

**W**ITHOUT doubt, this was one of the most challenging things I have ever done; walking 100km in the Arctic over three days. But definitely the most fun and by far the most enjoyable. It kicked Kilimanjaro into touch, knocked the socks off the UK 3 Peaks Challenge, left The Moonwalk for dust and outshone both the West Highland Way and Ben Nevis, which is saying a lot, for they are true Scottish treasures close to my heart.

The fun began in early March when 21 intrepid souls and I headed to our base in Rovaniemi in northern Finland. After an overnight training weekend and several information evenings, we all knew each other fairly well and were in very good spirits after a day of acclimatisation.

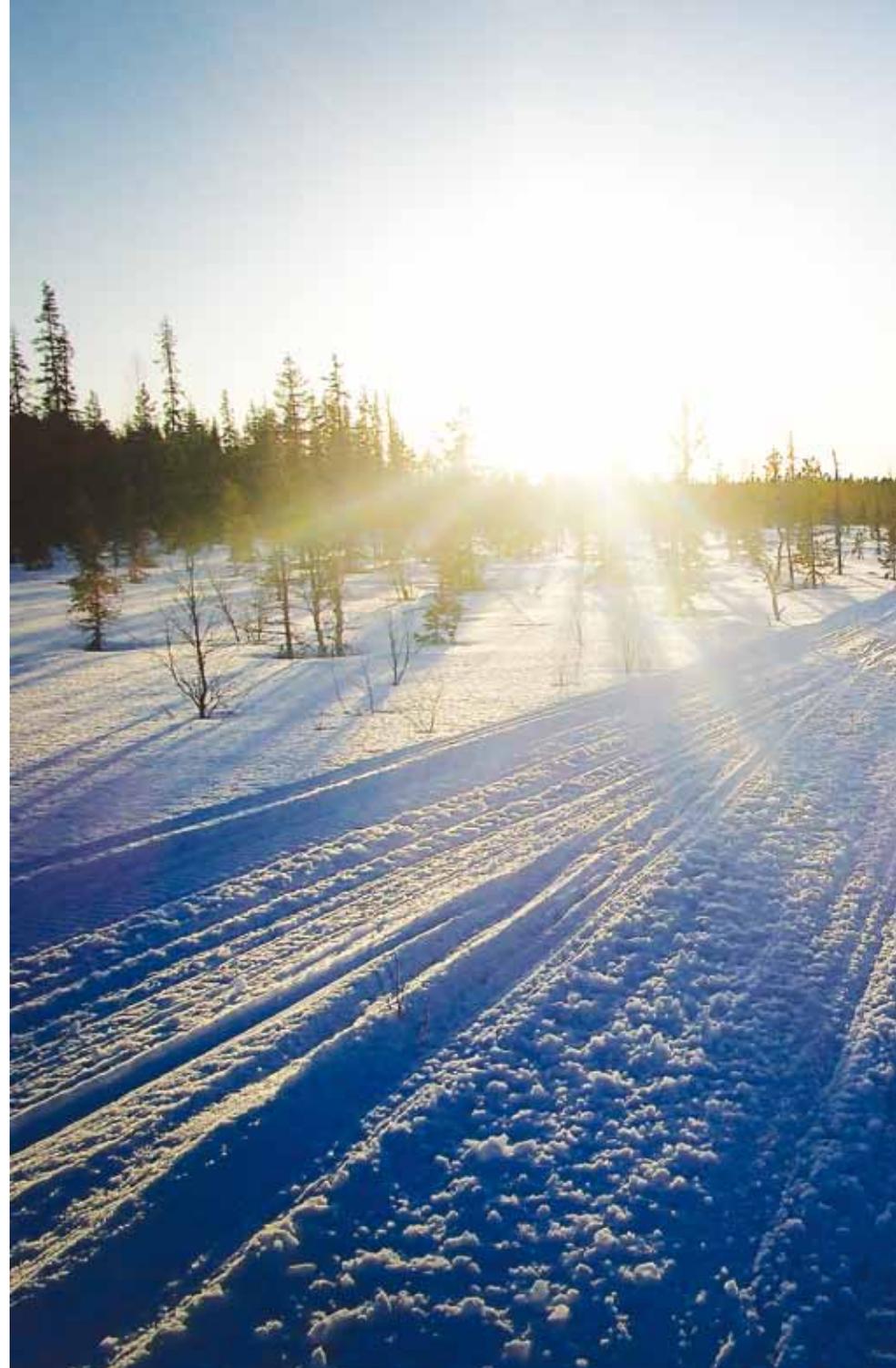
What we didn't account for, as we set off merrily on our adventure, is that it would snow like it has never snowed before. Having travelled north, we were expecting cold, but not a whiteout with zero visibility. We were all prepared for extreme Arctic weather, wearing merino wool baselayers, multi-layer clothing, down mitts, down jackets and hand warmers, but with a sudden and sharp rise in temperature to only minus 3 degrees, we were not ready for this type of snow. It wasn't the fluffy, dry variety but the kind that leaves cold, damp, through-to-the-skin wetness that I can still feel to this day.

Our Spanish polar guide, Alex Casanovas (uber-cool "I've spent eight seasons in Antarctica, so man up"), zipped ahead of us on his snowmobile to assess our expedition route and make changes as appropriate. He was the boss and we couldn't have been in safer hands. We walked 35km in single file on that first day, pulling our trusted

pulks, or small toboggans (mine rather affectionately named "Fred The Sled"), rarely seeing anything other than the snowy rear-end of the person in front and the whole time dreaming of our camp, our fire and the cosy, luxurious confines of our 20-plus-person tent complete with log-burning stove.

Night one and we managed to head up from our tent to the lavvu, a traditional Finnish three-sided wooden bothy, for some shelter and scran. Team chef, Wes, filled our standard-issue plastic green mugs with the most delicious salmon and potato chowder and then piled high our limp paper plates with melt-in-the-mouth reindeer stew and mashed potatoes drizzled with lingonberry sauce. A heavy green tarpaulin shielded us from the freezing Arctic wind during this feast, and we either knelt or the quicker among us grabbed a seat on a log for extra comfort.

Tent sleeping is something I have only done several times in my life and certainly never en masse, so I struggled with the arrangements, the rustling, the snoring from every direction, the



fidgiting, the midnight-snack-eating, the whispering and giggling. But I quickly got very used to it and it was a lot of fun. One of my co-trekkers, and now a treasured friend, had the ingenuity to bring speakers and a bottle of Courvoisier, and so after the evening ritual of swapping painkillers, moans, Ibuprofen gel, dry kit and suggestions for easing aching limbs, we had a right little party to ourselves. Camp living rocks.

At dawn on day two, my new chum happily announced that it was a blue sky morning. A picture perfect day

for Arctic trekking. Hooray! Coupled with a resounding bagpipe serenade by co-trekker, the fabulous Ruairidh MacLennan - Clan Chief MacLennan no less - morale was lifted, as was our fighting Scottish spirit. We set off, a merry if somewhat damp and bedraggled band of trekkers, to kick the Arctic's ass. We were not to be defeated. We trekked long into the night and I loved every single minute.

For the remaining two days, we were rewarded with the most wonderful blues skies and perfect calm, and despite the freezing cold, I found myself





**WRONG KIND OF SNOW** Clockwise from above: the trekkers in single file pulling their pulkas; Ruairidh MacLennan plays the pipes; the happy band; Kae Tinto Murray smiles for the camera

## FACT FILE

\* Edinburgh-based children's cancer charity It's Good 2 Give aims to raise £1 million to fund a retreat for young people with cancer and their families. With a plot of land being gifted to the charity on the banks of the stunning Loch Venachar in the Trossachs, building of the Ripple Retreat starts this year.

\* Lynne McNicoll, head of It's Good 2 Give wanted a challenge with a difference, one which would test fund-raisers and edge them closer to their target; Breaking Strain Events, also Edinburgh-based, were happy to help.

Directors Lee Peyton and Garry Mackay have been working with charities for seven years, delivering bespoke challenges with a difference. Having taken podium position in some of the world's most extreme, and coldest, challenges, a "little" trip to the Arctic was right up their street. After months of preparations, in March this year, they flew to Rovaniemi, home of Santa, in Finnish Lapland.

\* It's Good 2 Give ([www.itsgood2give.co.uk](http://www.itsgood2give.co.uk)); Breaking Strain Events ([www.breakingstrain.co.uk](http://www.breakingstrain.co.uk))

frequently looking above and saying a quiet "thank you".

But the success of the expedition was in large part due to the enjoyment we took in each other's company. What a fantastic group of leaders in Garry and Lee and our talented chef, Wes. There was never a dull moment, with constant humour and encouragement. I have been most fortunate to find myself some very dear friends and some lifelong memories to boot.

We crossed the finish line late in the afternoon on the Monday, three days after we had started, to the sounds of Ruairidh's bagpipes and with much back-slapping, hugging and celebration. For us all, it was the adventure of a lifetime, and what better way to celebrate than with an overnight stay in a glass-roofed igloo in the Arctic SnowHotel.

We have raised over £146,000 for It's Good 2 Give's Ripple Retreat and I would like to extend my personal thanks to every single one of my sponsors for helping me raise, inclusive of Gift Aid, over £30,000 for this wonderful cause and for Cancer Research UK. I am deeply humbled and I dedicate my adventure to those who we have loved and lost, for those who have fought and won and for those who are fighting hard. I salute every single one of you. □

## DO NOT DISTURB CHILTERN FIREHOUSE, MARYLEBONE, LONDON

**T**HE Chiltern Firehouse is on fire. Fittingly for a former fire station it's both London's hottest and coolest hotel, restaurant and bar, and celebs are falling over themselves to see and be seen in this latest playground of the belle monde. Kate Moss, Naomi Campbell, Gerry Butler, Philippe Starck, the Clintons, Tom Cruise, Bono, Carrie Fisher and Cara Delevingne have all been spotted at the latest offering from American hotelier André Balazs. With a stable that includes the Chateau Marmont, where Led Zep once rode their Harleys through reception and John Belushi died of a drug overdose, to The Standard in New York, where Solange Knowles whacked Jay Z in front of her sister Beyoncé in the lift, Balazs's hotels have an air of anything could happen.

Built in 1889, the decommissioned Marylebone Fire Station was bought by Balazs in 2011 and opened last autumn after renovations extended it into a hotel of 26 rooms and suites with a restaurant, bar and terrace. Victorian gothic red brick with soaring arches and crenellations on the outside, inside it's part white-tiled brasserie, part louche Palm Beach lounge and glitzy cocktail bar and part yer granny's, with its antique light fittings and ceramic knick-knacks.

### BUDGET OR BOUTIQUE?

It's five star with personal concierge service that ranges from running your bath to calling an ambulance, to smuggling you in and out the back door to avoid the paps. There's a sense of anything goes, and when it does, discretion is guaranteed, with the chatty concierge nonetheless disappointingly shtum about the shenanigans of their famous guests.

### ROOM SERVICE

In my loft suite, where the thick purple paisley carpet and double glazing muffle any after-party sounds into silence, the look is mid-century chic, with long velvet benches in front of the windows, calm creamy walls and retro light-fittings. There is a mini-bar, 24-hour room service, TV, free wi-fi, top notch toiletries and robes, and separate dressing and seating areas. The WC is separate from a bathroom with slab marble floors, bespoke handmade tiles and a huge claw foot bath that makes you long for Johnny Depp and 122 bottles of champagne. On a pad next to the bakelite telephone is a handwritten message: "Dial 0 for anything." I sink back on bespoke pillows to think of something suitably racy to demand and promptly fall asleep on the drifts of Italian bedding.

### WINING AND DINING

In the dining room, Michelin-starred chef Nuno Mendes orchestrates a mid-Atlantic influenced menu from a theatrical open kitchen. Starters include crab-stuffed donuts and mains chargrilled Iberico pork



followed by pumpkin and brown butter pie. The decor is all pendant lamps, cream panelled walls and strategically placed mirrors, while the light from the large fire station doors makes the room seem endless. A nice touch is the table speared by the fire station's original pole, but unless you're Naomi Campbell, dancing around it is discouraged. Dinner was above my influence grade, but as a guest I qualified for breakfast and a highly recommended Eggs Royale and Hansen & Lydersen smoked salmon on a toasted brioche. In the Ladder Shed lounge bar, which is large enough to accommodate a palm and two fig trees, trailing vines and hanging baskets, the deep wicker chairs and cashmere banquettes are the place to pose under flattering beams thrown out by kitschy pineapple lamps. Knock back a vodka, Chambord and pomegranate cocktail and soak up the sounds from whoever is hitting the decks. Guests can have a go too, and Bill Clinton has been known to give the vinyl a whirl.

### WORTH GETTING OUT OF BED FOR

Forget it. Stay in, dial 0 and have a ball.

### LITTLE EXTRAS

Ask the staff nicely and they'll lead you behind a discreet door on the fourth floor, up the twisting staircase to the top of the look-out tower. A table for two provides the perfect eyrie to drink up cocktails and views across to the London Eye.

### GUESTBOOK COMMENTS

There's something in the air at the Chiltern Firehouse, and it's not just the heady whiff of moss, leather and tea scents that perfumier Azzi Glasser created to waft around the interior. It's the crackle of anticipation, the buzz of excitement and the smell of success. □

Janet Christie

Classic rooms from £495. Chiltern Firehouse, 1 Chiltern Street, Marylebone, London, W1U 7PA (020-7073 7676, [www.chilternfirehouse.com](http://www.chilternfirehouse.com))