

## INTRODUCTION

I hate the cold. It invades your entire being – your mind, your body and your soul. In Antarctica, staying warm is an unremitting challenge, requiring your fullest attention every minute of the day. One of my greatest fears is that of being stuck, exposed and helpless and slowly freezing to death, in some lonely wasteland. I think this is one of the reasons that Antarctica has always intrigued me.

My attraction to heroic and often ill-fated adventure stories began in early childhood when I became absorbed by accounts of the much-maligned Burke and Wills expedition of 1860, which took the doomed explorers deep into the Australian interior. From here, my childhood fascination with death and tragedy led me to the famous race to the South Pole between the Englishman Robert Falcon Scott and his great rival, the Norwegian Roald Amundsen.

Thirty years after first hearing the tales of Scott and Amundsen's race to the pole, I found myself summoning all my courage and seriously contemplating making the trip to Antarctica. In August 2004, I sent a copy of my book *Australia Exposed* to my friend the respected and well-credentialed mountaineer and polar traveller Peter Hillary. I first met Peter in 1991 during preparations for our climb on Mount Aconcagua, the 6962-metre peak on the border of Chile and Argentina.

On receiving the book, Peter organised for us to catch up over lunch, where many things were discussed, including the possibility of a trip together to Antarctica. Peter mentioned that a climb of Mount Vinson, the highest peak on the continent, was in his plans and that he could be headed there within the next year. Wow! That certainly gave me something to think about.

My mind raced through the possibilities: who will come on the trip? How long will it take? How cold will it be? Will I be able to do it? Do I really want to do it? What will my wife, Caroline, think? After waiting a few days for the excitement to settle down, I started thinking what the trip would involve and what I wanted to get out of it.

My first call was to my old school mate Jason Veale. Jason and I have been close friends for many years and we have shared a love of adventure since we went spear-fishing and abalone-poaching together in our teens. We have since joined up to travel through the remote desert regions of Australia and to canoe down the upper Amazon in Peru. Jason was very keen on Antarctica, but not so thrilled about going up a mountain. Fair enough. I would see what I could do about that.

I formulated a new plan. 'Peter, what if we don't climb Mount Vinson but instead consider an old-fashioned Antarctic trek? My mate Jason Veale is excited by Antarctica but less than thrilled about climbing a mountain, and I have got to say that, in my mountaineering experience, the relief of getting to the top does not adequately compensate for the extreme unpleasantness of getting there. How do you feel about that?'

Peter was happy to take this away for further consideration. He called me back a week later, very excited about the new plans. He told me that he had made some enquiries and that it could be done. There is a logistics group, ALE, that flies into the Chilean sector of Antarctica and lands on a naturally occurring blue-ice runway. This is not a commercial flight but a Russian charter that operates for three months during the summer season from Punta Arenas at the southern tip of Chile. Right, we're in!

I need to take a step back here. In recent years, I have made some dramatic changes in my way of life. I had spent what seemed like a lifetime working in the clothing retail business, with diversions into home renovation and owning and operating the Veludo bar and restaurant in Melbourne before returning to the family business – Just Jeans. I had always felt a certain responsibility to do my bit for the family, but in doing this I felt somewhat unfulfilled in that I was not following my own dreams.

I have always wondered why children work in their parents' businesses. Is it just a remarkable coincidence? Do we love the same industry with the same passion as our fathers? Are we unwittingly pushed there? Does it just happen that way? Is there a certain feeling of obligation? The prospect of following in my father's footsteps always seemed unsatisfactory to me. Furthermore, as the son of the boss, you feel obliged to set a perfect example, work long hours, toe the company line, constantly travel around the country – in short, conform, which I am not very good at.

When the family decided to sell the business in 2002, I was at first a little disappointed that it was all over, but then the exhilarating feeling of total freedom washed over me. I thought about how this opportunity could be embraced in a way that would set me free to follow my own path. I had taken a series of photographs on a four-wheel-drive trip around Australia with Caroline in 2000. These photographs seemed to impress all who saw them, so I thought, am I onto something? I decided to self-publish a book, *Australia Exposed*, and exhibit the images. Within two years of its launch, the book had sold over 9000 copies, and the images had been exhibited successfully in Melbourne, Sydney, New York, Singapore, Seattle and Los Angeles. All of a sudden I had become 'Jason Kimberley, the photographer and author'. It has been without doubt one of the best decisions that I have made in my life.

With excitement and some trepidation, I wondered how to put my next adventure to Caroline. How would she react to me taking off for a month hauling a sledge across the frozen fields of Antarctica? Her first concern revolved around me being eaten by a polar bear. I assured her that this would not happen, as polar bears do not live in Antarctica. Her other concern was that I may fall down a crevasse and die. I could not offer too much comfort here other than a promise to be careful. She was also a 'little miffed' that we would not be able to share our first Antarctic experience together – she planned to take a scenic flight over the continent and view it from a safe distance. Eventually, all her concerns were allayed, and before long Caroline just felt proud and impressed that I would even take on such a challenge. Her final word on the subject was: 'It's not as if you are going to the Maldives to sit around a pool, get massages and sip fluffy drinks with umbrellas. If that were the case, I would insist on coming!'

Before going to Antarctica, I felt I should research what was happening there, and how developments on the frozen continent may affect our lives now and in the near future. I knew the hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica was growing at a rapid rate and that this was probably a cause for concern. I also knew that a large amount of the Earth's fresh water is stored there as ice – 70 per cent, as it turns out. Just think: all the rivers, all the lakes, all the dams and inland waterways, all the glaciers and all of the Arctic ice cap account for only 30 per cent of our freshwater. The rest is frozen on the Antarctic continent. Oh, and if all this ice were to melt somehow, sea levels would rise by 60–70 metres!

The more I read, the more concerned I became. The USA has recently cut a 1600-kilometre highway from their base at McMurdo on the Ross Sea coast to their base at the South Pole. In 2004, the Australian government put forward a claim for a massive undersea tract off the Australian Antarctic claim, with the ultimate aim of exploiting offshore resources. Not surprisingly, it was howled down by all the other signatories to the Antarctic Treaty. Australia was reminded that Antarctica is 'a nature reserve devoted to peace and science', not exploitation.

Tourists to Antarctica now number upwards of 30 000 per summer season, with the majority coming on cruise ships to the Antarctic Peninsula. These numbers are increasing at a rate of 13–17 per cent per annum. There are now 37 permanently manned stations on Antarctica and another thirteen that are occupied seasonally. The Japanese and Norwegians still slaughter

whales here by the thousand for scientific purposes. Australia's Antarctic claim of 42 per cent of the continent is largely unrecognised by other nations, namely the USA, China and Russia, who have built bases on the Australian claim.

After a recent trip there, National Party Senator Barnaby Joyce made several observations: 'When you're away ... you realise that what is really important is the actual nature of people and the vastness of nature itself.' Well put, Senator; we do need to commit to preserving this pristine wilderness. He went on to say, 'What you have to ask is do I turn my head away and allow another country to exploit my resource, and do I just walk away from my territorial integrity of that claim, or do I position myself in such a way as they can't exploit it, or do I position myself in such a way as I'm going to exploit it myself before they get there?'

The senator's comments were derided by most of his colleagues, and by fellow senator Ross Lightfoot in particular, who said on ABC Radio, 'There's no chance of exploitation of ... any of the resources there, biological or mineral wise, and particularly oil ... I'm against it; the committee's against it; the Government is against it; the Labor Party is against it, and the United Nations is against it as well.' It is of great concern, nonetheless, that the 'do it before someone beats us to it' attitude exists at all. But in our short-sighted, self-interested, profit-driven world, isn't Antarctica just another resource to exploit?

Many years ago, back in 1982, I cut an article from a science magazine and have had it stuck on the wall above my desk ever since. It is one of those articles that compresses the life of our planet into a time frame that we can readily understand. It reads as follows:

If you were to condense this inconceivable time-span into an understandable concept we can liken the Earth to a person of 46 years of age. Nothing is known about the first four years of this person's life and, while only scattered information exists about the middle span, we do know that only at the age of 42 did the Earth begin to flower.

Dinosaurs and the great reptiles did not appear until one year ago, when the planet was 45. Mammals arrived only eight months ago; in the middle of last week man-like apes evolved into ape-like men, and at the weekend the last Ice Age enveloped the Earth. Modern Man has been around for four hours. During the last hour Man discovered agriculture. The industrial revolution began just a minute ago.

During those 60 seconds of biological time, Modern Man has made a rubbish pile out of Paradise. He has multiplied his numbers to plague proportions, caused the extinction of thousands of species of plants and animals, ransacked the planet for fuels and now stands like a brutish infant, gloating over his meteoric rise to ascendancy, on the brink of the final mass extinction and of effectively destroying this oasis of life in the solar system.

Is this a little dramatic? Perhaps for some, but the truth always hurts when it relates to us. In the past we could be excused for not understanding the implications of our actions, but now we have no excuse. It seems the only people disputing our situation are those with short-term vested interests in doing nothing, and in continuing to exploit resources and pollute the planet. Meanwhile, short-sighted governments avoid making hard decisions that may cause short-term job losses and votes. The sad thing is that there is no apparent plan. It may already be too late. Our day of reckoning may be closer than we think.

Dr Eric Wolff and his team from the British Antarctic Survey have been studying the East Antarctic ice core – the deepest ice core yet extracted. Inside the core are tiny air bubbles, dating back almost a million years, which are the weather and air records of our past. 'My point would be that there's nothing in the ice core that gives us any cause for comfort,' said Dr Wolff at the British Association's Science Festival. In simple terms, there is a direct correlation between climate change and the levels of carbon dioxide. The ice core shows that for the past 800 000 years, carbon dioxide levels have remained between 180 and 300 parts per million (ppm). Today they are at 380 ppm. 'In the past it had taken 1000 years for carbon dioxide levels to rise by 30 ppm during natural warming periods. It has risen by that much in the last seventeen years.'

What does this mean? According to Dr Wolff, 'There's nothing to suggest that the Earth will take care of the increase in carbon dioxide. The ice core suggests that the increase in carbon dioxide will definitely give us a climate change that will be dangerous.' He went on to say, 'We really are in a situation where something's happening that we don't have any analogue for in our records. It's an experiment we don't know the result of.' His measurements indicate that the extra carbon dioxide is coming from a fossil source (that is, the burning of fossil fuels) as a result of increased human activity. The ramifications of this are not completely understood, as noted by the British Antarctic Survey's Dr Corinne Le Quéré: 'For example, we don't know what the effect will be of ocean acidification on marine ecosystems. There is potential for deterioration.'

All the reading and research that I did before, during and after my 16 days of trekking, camping and man-hauling in Antarctica reminded me of an observation attributed to the Irish statesman Edmund Burke: 'It is necessary only for the good man to do nothing for evil to triumph.' Antarctica is a litmus test for us all. It holds the key to our climate history and is the last bastion of pristine wilderness on our planet. Our challenge is to preserve it. It is *our* environment, not just *the* environment.

Edwin Mickleburgh, who first visited Antarctica with the British Antarctic Survey in 1968, wrote in 1987 in his book *Beyond the Frozen Sea: Visions of Antarctica*, 'The continent has become a symbol of our time. The test of man's willingness to pull back from the destruction of the Antarctic wilderness is the test also of his willingness to avert destruction globally. If he cannot succeed in Antarctica he has little chance of success elsewhere.'

Antarctica is at once the most hostile and beautiful place I have ever been.