

Testing Darwin

An overzealous expedition in the heart of an untamed Patagonian summer leaves three British Columbian wildmen hungry, confused and in need of a boat

By Steve Ogle

Deep in the wilds of Tierra del Fuego, author and Nelson-based adventurer Steve Ogle takes a 40-foot whipper into a crevasse, just missing an icy buttress, before his partners were able to arrest his fall. With a 30kg toboggan in tow, it would take Ogle three hours to prussic out.
Photo: Steve Ogle

AFTER SPENDING 35 DAYS on a remote icecap, barely eating and digesting proteins we didn't know we had, our first contact with the outside world is with a guy named Alfonso. On a boat access-only beach, a well-nourished Alfonso stares at us through Smith sunglasses, while behind him, shuttling from a cruise ship in various Zodiacs are some 80 tourists. There's even a Canadian among them, Alfonso explains, while in turn we try to clarify exactly how we materialized at this location, after crossing *those* mountains (Kari pointing with a ski pole) and *those* glaciers (Dean gesturing with an ice axe). *Muy encantado* is my only descriptor of what indeed must be some of the most tilted mountains in the world, for lack of a better word. Chile's Cordillera Darwin is, without a doubt, the most intense chunk of hillside we've ever set boots upon. Like a highway patrolman, Alfonso finally tilts up his shades, stares 60 kilometres in the direction we're still pointing, and emits a tedious "Hmmm."

The first person to judge our heroic efforts radios the boat to inform them the beach is ready for tourists. We motion with our axes and poles a little more pointedly. Alfonso is still not impressed.

The reason we three Canucks skied, then walked, climbed and finally crawled to this remote part of southern Patagonia, on the island known as Tierra del Fuego, is intrinsically tied to glacial recession, just like most modern-day expeditions. We wrote the global warming angle into a funding proposal to secure the \$3,000 one-way Zodiac drop-off—though we *may* have mentioned a kayaking component—which paid off, but instead of skiing 70 kilometres across the Cordillera Darwin to Argentina's border as planned, we encountered a four-week storm minutes after disembarking, which, at this point, is forcing us to seek a frugal exit back to our former lives. For the first couple of weeks, we tried to remain easygoing about our snail's pace, an average of just over one kilometre per day. But after so many days in a tent, even Yahtzee becomes tedious and so does reading *Siddhartha* four times. One day we managed to ski for 10 kilometres and didn't see anything beyond our ski tips—but it was better than that book. We did make progress. Each high col we crossed on the icecap provided enough sporty adventure—hurricane winds and strange ice walls—that even two grossly neurotic photographers and one videographer managed to emerge without a shred of documentation. At one point, while my roped ski partners waited patiently, I lay down beside my toboggan, not only to hide from the wind, but to sweet-talk it into easing up on me.

During our ordeal we adapted by rationing food, pushing the limits on whiteout glacier travel and phoning in biweekly blog reports to keep friends, family and major American publications—our ticket to breakthrough media stardom—informed of our exploits. And now, at the end of it all, here we are, grovelling for a ride at no less dramatic a site than Chile's only elephant seal colony, which writhes with six-tonne behemoths bellowing for

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"I swear it said 'Land of Fire' on the map!" In a rare weather break, Dean Wagner descends 1,200 metres from the height of the Cordillera Darwin. Photo: Steve Ogle

attention. They fittingly reside upon a sandy moraine left by the still gigantic Marinelli Glacier. Cruise ships gravitate toward elephant seals, and dirtbag skiers with no food gravitate toward cruise ships.

Alfonso kindly explains that it's high season and their vessel is at capacity with other adventurers, but another boat will arrive in four days; however, it too will be full. As only a person with a berth on a well-supplied yacht could, he gestures cheerfully for us to join him and the clients for a taste of their excellent Chilean whisky over on the beach.

The Canadian turns out to be an accountant from Toronto. He tells us he's been hiking in the mountains where we're from, or Lake Louise at any rate. It's so beautiful there, he adds, and we agree, buzzing on hooch and hot chocolate while the others jingle their plastic cups full of "glacier ice" that is so obviously cubed from their bar freezer. Another passenger from Seattle—this one travelling with her "boring parents"—is wearing a Gore-tex jacket and seems to relate a little more closely to our situation.

"I know *exactly* how you guys feel. I've been on backcountry ski trips like this... Sometimes you just wanna get home, I know."

The purpose of the conversation becomes lost on me when she doesn't offer up her berth on the ship. I feel a strident urge to break away from this crowd, so I shuffle over to find an elephant seal I can commune with, feeling boozy as I walk and spilling choco-whisky

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Top: Ogle on mandatory dig-to-live watch during a six-day storm on the upper reaches of a glacier above Pia Bay, about halfway through the expedition's planned 140-km traverse. Bottom: After spending 30 days entirely on ice and snow, Ogle welcomes a soaker. Photos: Kari Medig

onto the dirt—that hallowed substrate we yearned for so longingly while up on the ice. Lying prone on some grass behind a sand dune, I hear the droning sounds of Zodiacs streaming back to their mother ship and picture on-deck hot tubs, while slowly, memories from our ill-fated ski trip morph into dreams, or is that nightmares?

WHEN THE SNOW BRIDGE concealing the gaping crevasse broke loose, they say I screamed like a schoolgirl before dropping out of sight. I can't argue, although I would say it was more like a burly shout. Kimberley, British Columbia, native and unsung mountaineer Kari Medig was the first to feel the weight of the rope and the subsequent snow filling his nostrils as he was dragged down slope. Dean Wagner, a non-famous crab fisherman from Prince Rupert, British Columbia, was there to back him up. It was day 20 and we had only travelled about 25 kilometres along the spine of the Cordillera Darwin.

Together Dean and Kari adeptly managed the rope, doing an impeccable job of securing the well-being of their fallen ski partner with a few quick clove hitches and a T-slot—or two, since the first one didn't hold. The fallen partner, on the other hand, waited at the bottom like a crab in a pot, reconciling all those righteous thoughts about what Joe Simpson should have done. In this case, however, I was *Touching the Cloth* during the three-hour extraction, knowing that losing a ski would be tragic, let alone colliding with the ice buttress I luckily avoided during the plunge. The fact that we were roped, rigged and ready for a crevasse fall three weeks into a storm-ridden traverse did nothing to alleviate the gravity of the situation.

The drama did not subside in the ensuing period between the icy plummet and the Jimmy Buffet beach soiree. Our painfully slow progression included one six-day period where we moved three metres laterally and two more up out of the hole in which our tent was buried by a protracted storm surge. When the weather cleared, we had battled inertia and then faced a descent into a 1,200-metre, ice-choked couloir that baked under the austral sun, sending Volkswagen-sized, trip-ending chunks of ice tumbling off adjacent seracs. Eventually we reached a possible escape route, and without much discussion, voted to retreat out on the Marinelli Glacier, seeing we had travelled less than half of our intended route and had nibbled deeply into our emergency food supplies.

I WAKE UP with sand in my teeth, realizing I've subconsciously tried to eat dirt, but not to the point of satisfying any hunger. After discoursing with the seals, I realize I've displayed an overly forceful appetite, not for cheese and salami, but for recognition from VIP editors and the like who didn't bother to surf the blog. Maybe we'll skip an entry and leave them hanging, create a little drama. It may be a foregone conclusion that we'll never be rich or famous, but at least we're not dead and we can go on skiing and climbing the next great mountain range. The fact that we'll squeeze payment for the return Zodiac ride out of our retirement funds simply means we may never retire.

In the meantime, I spot a lonely chunk of ice on the shoreline that would make a great addition to a tourist cocktail, if they were still around. But I can see they've long ago left the fjord.

If anyone has a trip idea and is looking for a partner, Steve Ogle is the guy who evidently can't say no to the most ludicrous adventure proposals. He can be found in Nelson, BC, or at steveogle.ca



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