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MAGAZINE – TELEVISION – ONLINE

Jon Turk's Kayaking Trip Around Ellesmere Island

By Jon Turk



There would be polar bears, a brush with kidney failure, and (of course) hunger and shivering. But let's begin with the walrus. On the 96th day of a three-and-a-half-month Arctic trudge, we were paddling through the ice pack with no sign of danger. Suddenly, a 3,000-pound walrus rose out of the frigid ocean—driven either by anger or curiosity—only inches from my teammate, Erik Boomer. He braced himself and slapped the tusked mammal in the face with his paddle—whack, whack—until it slid back underwater.

"Let's get out of here!" Boomer shouted over his shoulder. He was already making a wake toward shore. The expedition, to drag and paddle our sea kayaks all the way

around Ellesmere's 1,500-mile coastline, was meant to be a retirement trip of sorts...

Finally, at 9:15 on the morning of July 21, open water appeared. We paddled into narrow channels surrounded by moving ice. If it closed in again, we would be crushed. We paddled day and night and made it to the ruins of the 19th-century British stronghold Fort Conger on July 26, still 575 miles from the finish.

It was at this outpost that American explorer Robert Peary, attempting to reach the North Pole, lost eight toes to frostbite in 1899. He later wrote that "a few toes aren't much to give." Ellesmere was hard on Peary and his generation, and it took a toll on us, too. On August 19, we made it back to Grise, our starting point, after 104 days on the ice. But 40 hours after we finished our epic, my body broke down. I could no longer urinate. My blood pressure and metabolic-potassium levels spiked. I later learned that I was suffering from an enlarged prostate, which shut off my urine flow. I'd probably had it for weeks, but I believe that my focus on finishing the expedition caused my body to release cortisol and prevent the disease from becoming acute—until then.

The nurse in Grise listed my condition as life-threatening. Unlike Peary, though, I had a membership with Global Rescue. The Boston-based company dispatched a jet, and I was flown to a hospital in Ottawa.