

Paddling LIFE

Turk, Boomer Complete Ellesmere Circumnavigation



Tired Tourers: Turk and Boomer, en route to circumnavigating Ellesmere.

“When a walrus attacked Erik in open water, things looked pretty grim...”

Paddling into Grise Bay on Aug. 19, once-strangers Erik Boomer and Jon Turk managed to travel 1,485 miles in 104 days, skiing on ice, jumping from flow to flow on moving pack ice and finally paddling through ice-choked water to complete the first-ever circumnavigation of Ellesmere Island. PL checks in with the ragged, haggard tandem...

Boomer and Turk made it to Grise Fiord at midday, with Turk barely able to walk and Boomer's feet swollen two sizes. But they say there were always in great spirits despite over 100 days of being wet, salty, and cold.

“I'm 65 years old now and I planned this journey as my retirement party; the most physically demanding expedition of my life, as my last,” says Turk, a veteran of several other major sea kayaking

expeditions. “Erik and I launched this expedition as near perfect strangers, 40 years apart in age. It turned into absolutely the best partnership imaginable. We endured uncounted hardships, lived in constant company for 104 days, and ended up as the best of friends and partners. I wish I were younger so I could join him on more expeditions, but couldn't think of a better person to pass the baton to.”

For Turk, the seeds for the trip were planted nearly 25 years ago. “I thought about this circumnavigation in 1988, when Chris Seashore and I paddled the southeast coast of Ellesmere on our way over to Greenland,” he says. “At the time, even though I was 23 years younger, I thought it was physically impossible. Then, over the years, I thought, well, someone is going to attempt it. But when no one stepped up to the plate, I realized that I had to give it a go.” But it certainly wasn't easy. En route, they got stalled out behind ice for three weeks, had bears bite through their tent and were forced to negotiate a constant jigsaw puzzle of pack ice.

“As for harrowing moments, most of the time the journey was difficult and the future uncertain, but at least you could look forward and say, well, nothing bad will happen in the next 30 seconds, so short term, at least, we're fine,” says Turk. “But when a walrus attacked Erik in open water, things looked pretty grim for a few moments.”

They got grimmer at trip's end. Fifteen hours after arriving in Grise Fiord, Turk awoke in the middle of the night with the fearful sensation that his metabolic system had broken down. “Friends drove me to the local medical clinic, where my condition was considered ‘life threatening,’” says Turk, currently recuperating at his home in Montana. “I was medi-vac'ed to Ottawaby Global Rescue, which stepped up to the plate when m