



DISCOVERING BAFFIN ISLAND

– A YOUNG EXPLORER'S DREAM PLAYGROUND!

IF YOU ARE INVITED TO APPLY FOR AN ALL-EXPENSE-PAID EXPEDITION, WITH THE WORLD-FAMOUS SOUTH AFRICAN EXTREME EXPLORER, MIKE HORN, YOU DON'T THINK TWICE, BUT RATHER JUMP AT THE OPPORTUNITY OF A LIFETIME. THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT HENKO ROUKEMA, 19-YEAR-OLD MARITIME STUDIES (NAVIGATION) STUDENT FROM CAPE TOWN, DID WHEN HE JOINED THE PANGAEA YOUNG EXPLORERS PROGRAM (YEP). THIS PROGRAMME INVITES THE YOUTH TO EXPLORE, LEARN AND ACT TO PROTECT OUR ENVIRONMENT.

My enthusiasm for adventure, multiple sport skills and nature were the reasons I applied to be part of a Pangaea Expedition, and my excitement couldn't be contained when I was selected as one of eight international Young Explorers, aged 15-20, for the ninth and three-week expedition to Nunavut, Canada.

Our expedition took place towards the end of the 2011 Arctic summer (August – September), and our base was Mike's massive Mercedes-Benz/Geberit 32-metre sailing vessel; the Pangaea. This enabled us to reach usually inaccessible and unexplored areas of the east coast of Baffin Island. Baffin Island, the fifth largest island in the world and separated from Greenland by Baffin Bay and Davis Strait, is the ultimate playground for expeditioners, big wall climbers, BASE jumpers and film-makers.



The island's remote and inaccessible location contributed to feeling like a true explorer discovering the stunning Arctic landscape. The only access is by air or sea in the short summer period, when most of the sea ice has melted.

It is highly unlikely that you'll encounter another soul while out exploring and the only sounds you hear are the cracking of glacier ice and melted water cascading down to the moraines and fjords below. The largely unmapped nature of the island presented us with an opportunity to conquer previously unscaled peaks and glaciers throughout our expedition. As Young Explorers we witnessed its profound beauty and erratic moods firsthand, with weather conditions changing from one extreme to the other, all adding to the immense feeling of accomplishment once we reached our destinations.

Sailing north from the tiny remote Inuit village of Clyde River, we navigated our way between huge icebergs as they drifted from Greenland to the 'Pass of Death',

certain to melt in the warmer sea temperatures. Mike's passion for the extreme gave us our first adrenaline rush when we were dropped onto a huge, flat iceberg in the middle of the Arctic Ocean! The feeling of floating on an age-old iceberg, in the middle of nowhere, certainly set the trend for the rest of our expedition!

Next up was a three-day glacier crossing. Wearing crampons and pulling our sleds, with all our gear in tow, from Sam Ford Fjord's Walker Arm to Gibbs Fjord, we struggled to progress more than six kilometres on the first day, as the glacier's moraine, debris and melting ice water streams provided many tough obstacles to cross. Tied together in teams, we trekked an average of 20 kilometres each day over the next two days, traversing various technical crevasses and icy rivers in the process. During one of our breaks, we all wrote messages and hid them under an inukshuk we built (N70°,40'18.2 / W71°,53'95.8). An inukshuk is a stone figure the Inuit used for communication and survival, and to mark caribou travelling routes. ▶



Our next challenge was climbing the Gibbs Fjord Big Wall with the PETZL mountain guides showing us the ropes. These sheer granite cliffs soar four to five thousand feet above the fjord's turquoise water, necessitating us to use more than 240kg of climbing gear, including over 600m of rope, about 90 carabiners, screw carabiners and eight portaledge. With the fog rolling in, we finally reached our overnight spot a couple of hundred metres up the vertical rock face and prepared our portaledges before settling down to enjoy the most incredible bedside view you can wish for! However, the wet weather and a rock fall forced us to pack up in the heavy clouds the following morning and seek refuge on the Pangaea. Thank you to Petzl for providing the mountain guides on the expedition.

Day 10 saw us pounding away on a 15-hour hike via Stewart Valley, to the summit of an unnamed, unclimbed peak adjacent to Mount Lonestaff, south-east of Refuse Harbour, off Gibbs Fjord. We managed to summit even though it was snowing, and proudly displayed our country's flag at the summit photo shoot.

From Gibbs Fjord we sailed south to Clyde River to visit the local Inuit community and exchange traditions, as well as learn from each other's experiences. Passing Qikiqtarjuaq, an island known for its Arctic wildlife and whale watching, we headed to Moonshine Fjord and embarked on a two-day hike to summit an extinct volcano peak in the south-eastern part of Cumberland Sound. Canyoneering in the Arctic Circle, encountering four polar bears and having our progress obstructed by huge glacier ice blocks provided many more adrenaline rushes! Reaching the plateau, our efforts were rewarded with the most spectacular sunset over the snow-capped mountains.

After a night spent under a star-studded sky, even though it was -10°C, we eventually reached the volcano peak. Standing on the 1,700m-high ridge, with a 360-degree view, you could see the vast Penny Ice Cap and its century-old glaciers and fjords, and the Arctic Ocean in the far distance. The Penny Ice Cap forms a 2,000m-high barrier in Auyuittuq National Park and is a remnant of the last ice age. The word 'Auyuittuq' is an Inuktitut word meaning 'the land that never melts'.

As Young Explorers are encouraged to do projects to raise public awareness on environmental issues, I had decided to do an arctic ice swim, according to the International Ice Swimming Association's (IISA) rules of swimming one mile wearing only a speedo brief, a cap and goggles, in water below five degrees Celsius, to raise awareness of the effects of global warming on the Arctic. In preparation, I had done various acclimatisation swims around the Pangaea and completed the IISA 2011 Speedo Africa Ice Swim. Using the snow-capped mountains as reference points and with Mike Horn as my skipper, we achieved our goal of recording the most northern IISA one-mile ice swim (N66°, 17'55.3; W62°, 46'22.4) in 3,9°C water. Although happy with my achievement I was also saddened by it, as climate change is definitely affecting the Arctic and previously iced-up seas are now accessible by boat! We need to raise awareness about the importance of lowering our daily carbon footprint.



Back on the Pangaea we headed further south, covering about 200 nautical miles. My 'graveyard' watch shift at 2am turned out to be a real highlight, as I watched the night sky light up with a magical display of green dancing lights – the legendary Aurora Borealis - satellites and shooting stars. With a front row seat to nature's dramatic sky spectacle and show of lights, created by solar winds reflecting light along the magnetic fields, it was truly amazing!

Reluctantly I went to bed after my watch, only to be awakened by being thrown out of bed. The Arctic sea had suddenly come alive, living up to its reputation of being the graveyard of many explorers! Gale force winds of up to 49 knots and huge swells hit us head on from the starboard side. At times we just clung onto the safety handles, feet slipping and sliding desperately to find a firmer footing. It was fascinating to experience the Pangaea living up to her reputation of being the '4x4' of the oceans, as she continued nonchalantly on course! Other vessels not so well equipped would have been in real danger in these conditions.

Our last land-based exploration session was to be Frobisher Bay. We were dismayed to find so much plastic pollution in such a remote area, having drifted here from Greenland. So we set about an impromptu beach clean-up before hiking across the island to meet the Pangaea. Now much further south, the landscape had changed to swampy areas and freshwater lakes filled with huge trout. We also found a walrus and arctic fox's skull, caribou horns and polar bear tracks.

Our final leg towards Iqaluit was done in daylight, as this remote and unchartered area, with many small islands and shallow rocks, requires careful navigation. Too soon our Arctic visit came to an end after sailing 1,800km along the Baffin Island coast, and the Young Explorers boarded their flights to return to their various countries. As Mike Horn said, "We spent three weeks on Baffin Island not only to experience nature's beauty, but to open our minds."

The Arctic's vast open spaces certainly opened my mind to the importance of doing everything possible to preserve our natural heritage, so that future generations can also enjoy 'playing' in nature. Since returning, I have started a new movement named 'echo)))' - an acronym for Enjoy and Conserve Nature and Help Others. I urge all outdoor lovers to give back to the environment in appreciation of all the amazing and fulfilling hours spent discovering our wonderful, diverse planet! •

FOR MORE INFO ON FUTURE ALL-EXPENSE-PAID MIKE HORN PANGAEA YEP EXPEDITIONS, VISIT WWW.MIKEHORN.COM/EN/YEP