

Kiting in Greenland

The Dream

The hum of the motors suppressed our conversation but Eric, Sarah, David and I talked louder and faster. We were on a noisy Russian Ilyushin cargo plane bound for southern Chile. We'd just spent three months in Antarctica. We had yet to take our first shower in three months and we were already planning our next expedition. Crazy!

David and I had just finished crossing the Antarctic continent. We started on the Ross Ice Shelf, on the New Zealand side of Antarctica and skied to the South Pole where we picked up Flexifoil kites and traveled to the edge of the continent on the Ronne Ice Shelf, on the South American side.

Eric and Sarah had also finished a similar expedition. They started on the Ronne Ice Shelf and skied un-supported to the South Pole. They picked up Concept Air kites at the Pole and kited back to their starting point at the edge of the continent. At 20 and 18 years old, they became the youngest people to ski to the South Pole. As well, they completed the return journey in record time: 1,100 kilometers in 17 days!

Before this beast of a plane touched down in Chile, we had committed to another polar expedition. Where: the Greenland ice cap. Why: superb kiting conditions. Our objective: a double crossing, east to west and back to the east coast. As well, we decided to challenge two world records:

- the fastest crossing – 8 days
- the longest kiting distance traveled in a 24 hour period – 272 kilometers

Antarctica offered superb winds but the snow surface was challenging with big and numerous sastrugi (snow ridges & dunes), forcing us to keep our speed low or risk injury from spectacular wipe outs. Greenland is similar to Antarctica with the exception that in May and June, the snow surface is flat as a pancake. This is what makes it the best snow kiting place in the world. Warm temperatures, 24 hours of light, spectacular scenery and very few crevasses are the icing on the cake for the snow kiter's paradise.

The "Green Speed" expedition comes to life

The first few months of any expedition are spent in front of computers. There were many issues to sort out: money, sponsorship, logistics, transportation, permits & insurance, communication & web sites, food & equipment, etc. The most important decision though, was our choice of kites. Not wanting to be influenced by sponsorship and free gear, we decided to purchase all of our kites.

We established one criteria – choose the best snow kites in the world. Four manufacturers made our short list: Ozone, Fly Surfer, Concept Air and Flexifoil. Not able to agree on the one best company, we contemplated having each person fly different kites. A novel idea –to fly kites from four different manufacturers on the same expedition! More toys to play with, pointed out Eric. As well as an opportunity to compare kites. Our shopping list:

Eric, Concept Air: 2.0 First, 3.5 Freestyle, 5.0 & 7.0 Leader, 11.0 Freestyle; all on handles, except the 11.0.

David, Ozone: 3.0, 5.0, 7.0 10.0 & 14.0 Frenzy; all on bars

Sarah, Fly Surfer: 2.0 Rookie, 4.5 & 7.0 Extacy, 10.0 Speed, 13.0 & 17.0 Psycho; all on bars.

Myself, Flexifoil: 2.5 & 3.5 Bullet, 4.9, 6.6, 8.5 & 10.5 Blade; all on handles.

Green Speed in Greenland

As the helicopter disappeared in the blue sky, the noise gradually diminished and was replaced by silence. The Greenland ice cap at last! The temperature was awesome – we were in shorts and T-shirts. Imagine... 4 people, 22 kites, half a ton of supplies, 30 days and a space the size of Europe covered in snow. . . . Cool.

As we drifted to sleep on the first night in our cozy little tent, we could here the wind strengthen. Eric stuck his head out the tent. "It's from the wrong direction for travel but good enough to play." One after another, we crawled out of our warm sleeping bags and readied ourselves for a kiting session. With 24 hours of light, time was irrelevant. The wind would dictate our daily schedule for the next thirty days. We played all night long, stopping only to film and photograph our brightly colored kites looping through the sky. We were rewarded by magnificent views as the sun skimmed the ice cap – a five hour long sunset and sunrise merged into one. To the west, the ice cap undulated as far as the eye could see. To the east, the glaciers flowed around the mountains and down to the ocean where gigantic icebergs majestically drifted out of sight.

We spent several days waiting for the wind to change direction. On the third day, the wind shifted to the north. Excited, we quickly consumed vast quantities of granola and hot chocolate in anticipation of a long kiting session, dismantled the tent and prepared our kites. Eric launched his kite first and took the lead. On May 20th at 14h00, we began our journey to Greenland's west coast. We had eight days to beat the record.

Only two hours after our departure, the wind dropped. No wind, no kiting! Without a word, we slowly changed from kiting footwear to Nordic ski boots and skied off at a snail's pace. After four hours of skiing, the wind picked up and stayed for seven hours. At 04h00, we packed our kites, tired but satisfied of our progress. We'd gained 100 kilometers. The atmosphere in the tent was festive as we consumed a hearty meal, listened to music and discussed the day's events.

Eric had brought two racing kites along: a 5 & 7 meter Leader. Not only were these kites the most compact and lightweight but Eric always flew smaller sizes than the rest of the team. He would often fly his 7 meter when David was flying his 14 Frenzy and Sarah her 17 Psycho. His high performance kites were not the easiest to fly and required constant focus and attention as David and Sarah could switch to cruise control to daydream and enjoy the music blasting through their headphones.

After several hours of sleep, David, who was out for a pee, gave a weather update: the wind was from the north at an average of 35 kilometers per hour. The good news woke everyone up. We ate breakfast, packed our pulks (sleds) and launched our kites. Fourteen hours later, the wind disappeared abruptly. Our kites literally fell out of the sky onto a blanket of powder snow. I checked the GPS: 160 kilometers. We were almost half way across after only two days of travel. Time to celebrate - we dug into our pulks looking for treats: out came the exotic chocolate and single malt whiskey.

Two days went by without a breeze. Moral was at an all time low and continued to fall with every passing hour. We took turns crawling out of the tent to check the wind... nothing. We warded off boredom as best as we could – card games, reading, discussions, sleep, card games, discussions, a few hours of skiing... We were so desperate for wind that we started a wind dance club.

At noon on our third windless day, the wind slowly increased. With 48 hours and 270 kilometers, we were not very confident that we could beat the record. We started with our largest kites but in these light winds, we had to aggressively weave them through the sky to generate any forward momentum. Everyone worked hard for each kilometer. Except for me!

Being old and wise, I had a second set of lines and, in light winds, flew 50 meter lines on my 10.5 Blade to capture the stronger winds higher up. With way more power and speed than anyone else, we transferred weight from the other pulks to mine so they could keep up with me. After the first snack break, Sarah tried my Blade. At first, the kite seemed so far away and was slow to maneuver but she soon found it smooth sailing and powerful. After she got used to it, she loved it and didn't want to give it back.

As the afternoon progressed, the wind gradually increased and so did our speed. The surface was unbelievably flat. With stronger winds, we comfortably cruised at 25 to 35 kilometers per hour. Every two hours, we stopped for food and drink. After nearly twenty hours and 200 kilometers, the wind disappeared. We had 70 kilometers left before touching land. Exhausted, we decided to sleep for three hours.

It was difficult to wake up after only a few hours of sleep. There was no wind so we departed on skis. After four hours, Eric said there was enough wind. Everyone wanted to kite so we all agreed with him and changed over. The winds were a mixed blessing as they brought in low clouds, wet snow and reduced visibility. Navigation and staying together was a serious challenge. Eric, in the lead, had the compass strapped to his wrist. I was close behind, checking the GPS every fifteen minutes. Sarah took up the rear. Everyone bunched up together in order not to lose sight of each other. After three hours, the wet snow accumulation on our kites and lines forced us to stop kiting. We put our kites away 23 kilometers from land.

We knew that the glacier would soon begin its rapid descent towards sea level, its smooth surface changing to jumbled up ice and crevasse fields. As we began our descent, we followed a smooth valley which weaved through the mess that surrounded us. As we lost elevation, we were confronted with more and more pools of water. Spring had arrived and the edge of the ice cap was melting, forming lakes and small streams. After numerous detours and zigzags, it became apparent that we had to seek higher ground. While crossing on thin ice, big Dave broke through the ice and went down to his knees in cold water. I laughed at his misfortune but a few minutes later, I disappeared up to my neck. My skis were stuck under the ice so I couldn't get out. Careful not to fall in, Eric, David and Sarah retrieved me from the icy water.

With half the team wet, we pushed on. With such poor visibility, it was challenging to navigate through the maze of crevasses and rough ice. Two hours, five hours, seven hours... Finally, through the thick low clouds, David glimpsed land one kilometer away; thirty more minutes of skiing. Tired, exhausted and happy, we touched land at 12h40 on May 27. The crossing was completed and we had established a new world record: seven days (6 days and 23 hours to be exact).

There were no calls to family or friends, no interviews and only one or two photos. Our priority was to erect the tent and quickly jump in our sleeping bags for many hours of much needed sleep.

In the morning, we descended to Kangerlussuaq, a small Greenlandic town on the west coast, for rest and lots of Danish beer. We picked up a re-supply of

food and camping gas and thirty six hours later, we were back on the glacier, skiing through the maze of crevasses towards the smooth snow surface of the ice cap. The mood was joyful and relaxed as we had 15 days for the return crossing. We knew there would be many afternoons devoted to playing with our 22 kites.

The time we spent flying different kites around camp provided an excellent opportunity to evaluate the kites. The four kite manufacturers we chose are all well established companies who have excellent products. All the kites performed extremely well and what differentiated them from one another were mostly design characteristics and personal preferences. The handle kites were more compact and lighter, an important criteria on no-wind days when you are pulling five or more kites in your pulk. The bar kite's de-powering system reduced how often you had to change kites and were also easier to fly with big expedition mitts on. We each took a small "storm" kite for high winds but only used these for playing –we will leave these at home next time around. Eric impressed everyone with his two Leader racing kites. We were surprised at how well they performed on an expedition pulling heavy pulks. David's Frenzy were an excellent all around kite, good for down wind travel, maintained a strong upwind tack, stable flying and easy to launch and land. The Fly Surfers were excellent and very smooth in gusty winds. They offered the smoothest and most relaxed ride. Sarah had the opportunity to bring a prototype Speed and this quickly became her favorite kite, especially on those afternoons when she left her pulk by the tent and raced the others. I loved my Flexifoil Blades, primarily for the ease of flying but also because they provided a lot of grunt for pulling those heavy pulks. My favorite was the 10.5 Blade on 50 meter lines.

We descended off the eastern edge of the ice cap on June 14. The helicopter returned to pick us up the following morning and we began our long journey home . . . Iceland, England, Canada.

Two Months Later

I've been busy writing articles and sorting through pictures. The photos of smiling faces remind me of all the fun we had. Greenland is such an awesome place to kite! Our Green Speed expedition completed a double crossing and established a new world record for the fastest team across, but for me the highlights were the special moments when the four of us were zooming across the snow at high speeds for miles on end and sharing this adventure with my two children, Eric & Sarah and my good friend, David. I can't wait to return.

Expeditions like ours are not possible without the generous support of many. A big thank you to: Sculpt the Future for sponsoring the expedition, Concept Air, Flexifoil, Ozone, and Fly Surfer, Hilleberg tents and ExplorersWeb.

Sarah & Paul