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"We know the strengths and weaknesses of each other and being together made us stronger." Image at the Ceremonial South Pole. Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

South Pole traverse skiers, Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel: the race begins halfway

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(By Correne Coetzer) With 2 days to spare before their pick-up deadline, French long-distance-running married couple, Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel, completed a 2,020 km traverse of Antarctica from the Ronne-Filchner Ice Shelf to Hercules Inlet, via the Geographic South Pole (90°S), in 74 days.



"The effort and energy one has to put in to be at the starting line of such a traverse of Antarctica is very important." Image ALE's Kenn Borek pilots dropped the team at their start point. Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

The first 40 days, skiing uphill to the South Pole at app. 2,800m, the couple, together with team mate Are Johansen, averaged app. 23 km per day south to the Pole. Then turning their compass north and 1,130km to go, the race started, Stéphanie and Jérémie expied to Explorersweb. "As it is the case when running ultra trails, the race only begins when you have done at least half of the distance."

Exweb caught up with them in France. They tell about their biggest challenges, how that experienced the "very long effort in an extreme environment", gave three top tips for a traverse, and tell about the effective polar skirt, which is growing in popularity.



Explorersweb: Was this traverse what you thought it would be?

Stéphanie and Jérémie: The traverse was indeed pretty much as we expected it to be: a very long effort in an extreme environment. Over the past year we had tried to focus our preparation on these two aspects as much as possible - besides all logistics and financing aspects of such an expedition, plus the projects we wanted to build with some schools in France and our support to the Charity Association Petits Princes.



"The landscape itself is almost the same all the way, but the weather makes it look different almost every day, depending on whether it is sunny or not, cloudy or not, cold or extremely cold, strong wind or no wind, not to mention white-out or snowy days, etc." Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

The traverse was a very long effort over 2,000 kms and we anticipated and got prepared for our endurance and patience to be tested. We started with shorter skiing days, progressively from 5 to 8 hours over the first week and then keep this schedule until we reached the South Pole. It can be frustrating sometimes because you feel good and would like to do more. But as it is the case when running ultra trails, the race only begins when you have done at least half of the distance. And because we had 76 days maximum to reach the South Pole and get to Hercules Inlet, this had to be a race.

So we reached the South Pole using 40 days - which makes a daily average of app. 23 kms. We took two "rest" days at the South Pole - not much rest actually as we worked on the equipment for the second part of the expedition, did some filming and photos for our sponsors, answered to media inquiries, exchanged information with schools in France, but no skiing on Christmas Eve!



"It is important to know why you want to traverse and what you are trying to achieve." Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

Then with 1,129 kms to cover in order to reach Hercules Inlet within a maximum of 34 days, that was when the race started. We increased progressively the daily duration of the effort - up to 12 hours of ski every day at the end of the expedition, and we reached Hercules Inlet from the South Pole using 32 days - which makes a daily average over 35 kms.

The environment was also extreme as we thought it would be: extreme cold (down to -50°C), strong winds sometimes and nice sastrugi on the way! We were surprised however - and that was a good surprise - by the variety of landscapes we went through. The landscape itself is almost the same all the way, but the weather makes it look different almost every day, depending on whether it is sunny or not, cloudy or not, cold or extremely cold, strong wind or no wind, not to mention white-out or snowy days, etc.



"Extreme cold (down to -50°C), strong winds sometimes and nice sastrugi on the way." Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

Were there times that you thought it would be impossible to complete? What was the most difficult for you?

We were extremely motivated during this traverse. Mostly because we had the opportunity to share this experience with many school students in France, we were also raising funds for a charity and sharing this expedition with so many people through our blog. And we had the chance also to share this expedition as a couple. So the motivation was high and we knew we would be on the ice until the very last day if we could manage to avoid serious injury and frostbite.



"The fact of sharing this adventure as described above gave us so much mental strength that even when the weather conditions were extreme and made it more difficult to progress, when the body was suffering from the cold, when we felt tired and hungry, we were always happy to be down there on the ice!"

The most difficult thing about this expedition was actually the logistics and financing beforehand - the effort and energy one has to put in to be at the starting line of such a traverse of Antarctica is very important and we did actually not sleep much the last couple of months before getting to Union Glacier.



"It is important to know why you want to traverse and what you are trying to achieve." Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

Regarding the expedition itself, the most difficult was to manage to take photos and do some filming as this was also part of the overall project we had structured. And this means carrying more equipment (we started with app. 25 kgs of video/photo and related equipment in Jérémie's sledge), taking time to recharge batteries with solar panels, taking out gloves to do filming and photo, making copies, so this is less time to rest and recover, and also more exposure to potential frostbite. But it definitely is worth it as it gives more ways and opportunities to share.



"A very long effort in an extreme environment." Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

What did you learn about each other that you didn't know before?

We met at school 13 years ago and somehow grew up together at some stage so we knew each other very well. We know the strengths and weaknesses of each other and being together made us stronger.



"The polar skirt worked well and we had no frostbite (on the upper legs!)" Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

Stéphanie, love your skirt. Did the men also wear a skirt sometimes? How did your skirt work? Was it easy to put on in high winds and with gloves/mitts? Where did you get it?

I had a pink skirt and Jérémie had the same - blue color. This is just a polar skirt that we put over our bibs on windy days, to reduce as much as possible the exposure to polar thigh - kind of frostbite on the thighs. We got them from Skhoop. And it is very easy to put on in and out even with gloves and mitts thanks to zippers on each side! It worked very well as we had no frostbite.



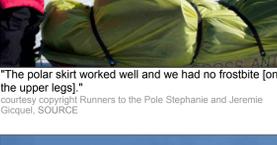
"Three tips you would give someone who wants to traverse?"

First tip is just go for it - do not think it is too difficult, too long or whatever, and do not listen too much to people who tell you this is not possible. As long as you are prepared for it, motivated and able to keep your spirit up, then the chances to achieve the traverse are high enough.



"Then it is important to know why you want to traverse and what you are trying to achieve - high motivation is a key, because being dropped to the start line requires a lot of effort, but being then picked up on the way is not so difficult."

And as mentioned above, keeping spirit up is another key. Even with the best preparation ever, and the best equipment, some things will go wrong and not as expected during such a long trip.



"Future plans?"

Nothing planned yet in terms of future expedition. We know at some stage we will want to experience other experiences like this - so the question then is, where and when! As for now, we just enjoy spending more time on post expedition projects, notably with the schools involved, preparing photo exhibition, working on the expedition film and sharing through conferences lessons we learned from Antarctica.



"Stéphanie and Jérémie covered a distance of 2,020 km in a straight line between waypoints. The last day, Day 74, they managed 45 km in 18 hours, team mate Are Johansen reported. The team calculated a distance of 2045 km on their GPS, and 73 days 15 hours and 35 minutes on their stopwatch. As they started on November 14, 2014, and completed their journey on their last full day skiing, January 26, 2015. They received resupplies along the way."

AdventureStats statistics:

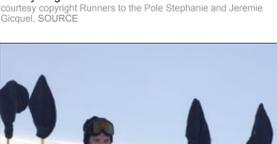
With covering 2,020 km, Stéphanie completed the longest ski expedition for a woman on Antarctica. In 2009-10 Cecilie Skog skied from the ocean edge of Bernt Island to the Ross Ice Shelf at the bottom of Axel Heiberg Glacier a distance of 800 km. The two expeditions though differ in terms of assistance, Cecilie had no resupplies.



"Married couples who together completed ski expeditions on Antarctica are: Tom and Tina Sjogren (Hercules Inlet to SP, unassisted unsupported 2001-02, Explorersweb founders and owners) Ray and Jenny Jardini (Hercules Inlet to SP, assisted supported 2006-07) Marty and Chris Fagan (Ronne-Filchner to SP, unassisted unsupported 2013-14) Jérémie and Stéphanie Gicquel (traverse Ronne-Filchner to SP to Hercules Inlet 2014-15)"

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ExWeb pre-South Pole interview with Stéphanie and Jérémie



"We wanted to build the project with some schools in France and..." Courtesy copyright Runners to the Pole Stéphanie and Jérémie Gicquel. SOURCE

Are Johansen, Stéphanie Gicquel and Jérémie Gicquel completed South Pole traverse

South Pole Traverse Trio: weak, tired and hungry, nearing the end

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Stéphanie and Jérémie's pages:

Website

Facebook

Video - Into the Wind (1:50)

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Antarctica ski and kite-ski routes. Courtesy Map compiled by Explorersweb. SOURCE

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