

The Main Journey - Norway

Its passport time, and despite the diligence of the staff there are a few anomalies that get past us, including name changes, lost passports, and at the last moment the computer system at the Passport Office goes down and we have to make a last minute journey to Durham to pick up a passport.

As the week of our departure arrives we are fully prepared. One young person doesn't turn up for the final kit-packing day and we establish he doesn't want to go.

The surviving "Five-Ski-eteers" as the group later named themselves, set off to Newcastle with Pete, Michael and Trudy to the ferry that would take them to Kristiansand and the expedition of a lifetime.

The Ferry

None of the group had ever sailed on a ferry before, and after many reassurances that it was safe and that all the cars would fit on it, all we had to do was combat the sea sickness due to the high winds on the journey. The entertainment was fantastic - you had to be there - and before we knew it we were getting ready to disembark. After a full days drive north we reached Lillehammer and met Mike Cumbes our DNT guide for the expedition, who had not only booked our accommodation for the night but cooked us spag bol as well. What a star!

Lillehammer - Fallet

From Lillehammer we travelled into the mountains and at last were relieved to see plenty of snow. As soon as we arrived at Fallet we unpacked and were out training with Mike on our Nordic skis. This was the first time the group had used these skis and there were quite a few falls. Training continued the following day and the group were

ready to set off on the last training day - for a 13km long journey with rucksacks and some kit to get used to the weight. The confidence of the last couple of days diminished for some as the reality of the journey hit home. The track was long and flat, which affected the group in different ways as they realised this would be a mentally challenging expedition as well as a physical one. For others it would mean breaking personal barriers such as having to go to the toilet outside. Easy for blokes and not so easy for the girls, but it has to be done, or it just makes you grumpy as some found out. Today was also a practice day for Mike, our guide, as he had bought a pulk (a long sledge). This is an alternative way of carrying kit instead of a rucksack. The pulk got the thumbs up.

Fallet - Dorrelseter 12 km

It was an early start as we had to pack everything up, clean the hut for the next visitors and put our skis on ready for the journey. We always aim to leave the huts as clean and tidy if not better than we find them. Despite the early start we leave late as everyone learns to appreciate what is involved and is expected of them.

At last, we're off and we leave Fallet, and Piere Maurice the owner behind. It is also the last time Pete will meet Piere as he has sold his property and is to travel around the world. We leave relative civilization - electricity and running water - behind and start our expedition. We learn how to sit on our rucksacks with skis on at break-times and sit with your back to the sun so as not to lose heat. The group cannot understand how it can be so sunny, and yet so cold at the same time. The rucksacks are heavy and for most are digging in their shoulders. By the time we are getting close to Dorrelseter it is getting late and the temperature is reaching -20°C. Two of the group are struggling at the back with Trudy. They are refusing to go any further until they spot some barns ahead. They agree they will carry on until they get there, but it had better be our barn or they're going no further. Trudy is praying it is our destination, or they'll all be freezing tonight! It is and when we get in it is an eye opener for the group. There is another group already there and we have to share rooms. Its

dark and cold and we need head torches and candles to see and cook by. We sort the domestics out, eat pasta and noodles and get ready for bed. Mike recommends eating their munchies to provide energy and reduce the weight of the food. Unfortunately, some took this to the word and ate the lot.

This is the first experience of toilets in the huts (no flushing water), most of the group cope really well with it but Racheal is disgusted and if she could manage not to go, I think she would have waited till we got home - but needs must. We have an early night, exhausted and the girls try to ignore the snoring of the Dutch women in their room. The guys watch the tiny dormouse running around their rucksacks until it disappeared. But Sssssh! it's a secret because the staff didn't tell the group!

Dorrelsetter - Rondvassbu 15km

The other group are having an early start - 5.30am. Unfortunately for us they couldn't have made more noise if they had been playing a brass band. By the time its 7am we are all awake and a bit grumpy to say the least. We depart - not long after the early starters! - heading for the mountains. There is a long ascent up over some very rocky terrain, which means it is difficult to slide on the skis. We are so remote that all you can see is mountains around us. Mike tells us that Norwegians hardly ever ski this area because of its remoteness. We work out that Pete has probably skied here more times than anyone! Eventually we drop down a hill from the mountains to a frozen lake. Michael whizzes down and spectacularly wipes out by falling, somersaulting, landing upright with his rucksack having burst open and fallen onto the snow - with a broken clip. If only we had the camera ready! We finish the day by skiing 4km across the lake to Rondvassbu with temperatures reaching -25°C. There is a huge bonus when we get there because Easter has come early this year and there are more facilities open. We have a whole dorm to ourselves and supper is a hot meal of pork, meatballs and veg followed by crème caramel. Heaven

Rondvassbu - Mysusetter 15 km

Because the extra facilities are open we can't cook our own food. Shame. We are forced to eat the plentiful and varied breakfast buffet and we make the most of it and prepare sandwiches for lunch. When we leave everyone is in high spirits and the sun is shining. Everyone chats along the way and we stop for a break at the top of a long slope. We have some impromptu training from Mike skiing down the long slope and learning to turn to slow down. It is great to ski without rucksacks for a while and everyone enjoys the break even though there are a few tumbles - mostly by staff. We have lunch by a bridge in the sun and then start the long 6km descent into Mysuseter - loved by some and the worst nightmare for others as the staff are kept busy picking up the bodies on the way down. Everyone is happy to get to Mysuseter. It has electricity, running water and clean sheets on proper beds and it is the last opportunity for a shower before the end of the journey in 7 days time.

Mike suggests that the group pool their remaining food in preparation for the long day ahead tomorrow, and that he will pull it in his pulk. He didn't have to ask twice! Unfortunately, the staff still get to carry their own - stamina building or something like that I think its called.

Mysuseter - Eldabu 23 km

Today is the longest day yet, and there is a lot of concern and doubt within the group that they will manage it. We make good progress and reach another frozen lake that we will ski across. Visibility gets worse and the wind gets stronger. We stop and put on goggles and balaclavas to protect our faces from the onslaught and steadily progress across the lake. At the other side the weather starts to clear and we begin the long steep ascent up a track through woodland. There are quite a few tumbles and backwards skiing along the way, and the staff have to push the group to their limits. Eventually we stop for a long awaited break at what looks like the top, and see a couple starting to come down with a bizarre looking children's sledge with all their gear in which kept tipping over. We set off again, bemused by the couple, but it didn't last long. It was still a long slog upwards and when we reached the top there was another 6km to go in exposed conditions before we

could take a shortcut and drop down a valley and up the other side to the hut. Unfortunately, Mike could not do this route with his pulk and got sandblasted by the high winds as he went the long way round.

The hut is small, and there are not enough beds to go round so some sleep on the seats and the floor, but we have it all to ourselves and it is really cosy. The water point is a hole in the snow down a banking near the hut. The staff declares tomorrow as a rest day and the group are over the moon.

Eldabu

Even though it's a rest day there's no rest for the wicked, and we are up learning how to survive in blizzard conditions by digging snow holes. The group dig themselves individual emergency holes, while Pete makes a deluxe version using skis across the top and a group shelter to act as a roof. Mike starts a snowcave in the hillside and before we know it, it has 2 rooms and Trudy and Zoë, and Michael and Mark will sleep in it that night. We are joined in the main hut by a Danish group of 3 guys and 1 girl that night. They are chatty and friendly and one of the guys is really good looking which prompts quite a lot of interest from the girls.

That evening Mike tells us the Northern Lights are out, and we all stand outside for as long as we can stand the cold just watching the sky in awe. It is an amazing sight for everyone and for Michael it's a dream come true.

The four 'snowcavers' leave the warmth of the main hut and head excitedly for their 'deluxe' accommodation for the night. By the time everyone gets in, one at a time, and has warmed themselves up with a hot drink of Solbatoddy (non alcoholic), and a Mars bar as a treat - because you've gotta be mad to put yourselves through this - its midnight when the candle is blown out. Half an hour later Mark announces he needs to go to the toilet, Michael says he might as well go, so Trudy and Zoe think they might as well go as well. The snow around the entrance to the cave is hip high and only one person can go

in and out of the cave at a time due to the size restriction inside so it's a lengthy process. One hour later its lights out again and we sleep until 7am.

Eldabu - Grahogdabu 17km

A refreshed group leaves Eldabu. Everyone was skiing well and on the strength of it Mark decides to have a play while the rest of the group have a break. He skis off down a slope and does a fantastic head plant which causes great amusement with everyone. As the day goes on the mornings' energy burst turns into lethargy for some and a wide gap opens up. Pete, Mike, Susan, Mark and Kelly are waiting by the roadside for the others to catch up when a snow plough goes flying past. Unfortunately, one of the girls in the group was taking a call of nature at the time and nearly got blown away. As the rest of the group caught up the snow plough returned, but this time we were prepared - and ducked to protect ourselves from the onslaught of snow.

As we left the road we climbed upwards ready to contour round and drop down to Grahogdabu hut. The wind started to whip up the snow around our bodies and sandblasted our faces and the sky became dark and moody. Unfortunately, we had gone a little high - which didn't amuse the group at all. A big gap opened up and when Mike saw the hut he went down with Kelly and Susan. Trudy stayed as a 'marker' for the rest when they came over the horizon. Pete took the photo of his life - you'll see it in the presentation - as the rest of the group skied down to the welcoming hut.

The hut was absolutely freezing and it turned out that no one had stayed in it for a couple of days. So it felt damp and gloomy. Later that evening our Danish friends arrived, and later still a lady came in on her own. She was going to meet her family the next day. We were now eating the food from the stores and so we tucked in to Lapscuss and rice (a kind of Norwegian stew) followed by Kelly's speciality - pancakes. Mmmmmm

Grohagdabu - Jammerdalsbu 17km

We got up at the usual time but things didn't go to plan and we didn't set off until 10.15am. There was no running water here and we had to melt snow which takes much longer. The chores become too much, there is a bit of a mood going on. But the staff are used to it, and don't budge - we're not going anywhere till the hut is restocked and cleaned for the next people.

Eventually we set off and Racheal who has struggled with her rucksack, along with Zoe, and been at the back, flies off and leads the way for most of the day. She is first at the hut which is perched in the middle of nowhere and as dusk sets in the sky lights up with an amazing sunset. Today is Mothers Day and the group naturally feel homesick as they think of their families.

Jammerdalsbu - Vetibua 15km

Jammerdalsbu is probably the best hut we stay in and so in some ways we are sorry to leave. Our route from the hut is via a long steep hill, so Mike leads the group a safer way but still there are a few wipeouts along the way. We came to a big hill and the group put their skins on their skis so that they wouldn't slip down and save energy. But what goes up comes down and there was a big downhill at the other side. There is lots of evidence that reindeer have been there before us (poo) and one young person is not amused when she falls right on top of some. But it's a bit like rabbit droppings and doesn't cause a problem. As we are skiing along a caned route Mike and Pete call out to us to look behind. A huge herd of reindeer is in the distance behind us and we later find out as Michael flags down a guy on a skidoo (a very rare sight), that there are 2,700 in that area. One of the group is not happy and thinks that we might get charged by the reindeers herd, little realising that they have probably picked up our scent and are changing course. It motivates her into action and we continue through a summer farm and onto Vetibua - our next destination.

The staff discusses whether or not to use our last emergency day here. We decide that we won't. Blisters, aches and pains are apparent but at this stage a days rest will only prolong the agony so we will

continue and complete the journey in 2 days time. This will give us more time to travel back to the ferry.

Vetibua - Djupslia 14km

We were up and away at 9am and should have reached Djupslia in good time. But the group were weary and not skiing very well. They know that tomorrow they have to ski 25km and they have serious doubts that they can do it. Eventually we get to Djupslia, which has an interesting twisting forest track leading to it. The staff hear squeals and screams as one by one they go hurtling into the tree that stands just by a sharp left turn, and up and down the twisty bends and slopes. It brings a smile to most of their faces and we have two evening meals, one noodles and then Bog and rice (another kind of Norwegian stew) to build up energy for the 25km and 5am start tomorrow. There is apprehension in the air - no one believes they are capable of it, despite the staff telling them they can. It's also the last night they will stay in a DNT hut in Norway with no electricity, running water and proper toilets and whilst that may be a bonus they wonder where the time has gone.

Djupslia - Hafjell 25km

It's 5am and everyone is up bright-ish and early. We get extra biscuits from the stores as a treat and for extra energy. Our bread was finished ages ago and lunch consists of rye crisps and jam, honey or the remaining tuna twists. We leave at first light and the scenery and the sky is amazing. We travel for 2 hours before having a break and move really well. The tracks are well pisted which makes it easier. We cross a couple of roads and see cars - civilization! Zoe and Mike are at the back at one point and the rest of the group wait at the bottom of a hill for them. Suddenly, Mike comes flying round the corner with Zoe sitting on the pulk behind him. It looked ace, but where's the camera when you need it. Later in the day Mike offered to give Racheal a lift on the pulk down another hill because she didn't really like them and had had a few falls. It wasn't quite as successful as she wasn't really relaxed, and the pulk tipped up, Racheal fell off and Mike had to make an amazing recovery.

As we approached the end of our journey we skied through a ski resort where lots of people were skiing. There's a couple of fairly big down hills just before the end, and for some it was brilliant and some a bit nerve racking - but everyone made it down both of them in one piece and we skied jubilantly to the end of the track.

At the finish the whole group congratulate and hug one another, and for some there are tears of happiness. The Five Ski-eteers have successfully completed their journey of a lifetime. They have proven to themselves what they are capable of and can look forward to a future knowing they have choices and the ability to succeed in whatever they put their mind to.

The Five Ski-eteers Expedition 2005

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