SOME GO SOLO BY NECESSITY; SOME DO SO BY CHOICE. BUT EITHER WAY, THE WORLD'S GREAT SOLO ADVENTURERS TEND TO PREFER SOLITUDE — THE FEELING OF BEING RESPONSIBLE ONLY FOR THEMSELVES. NOT SO **FELICITY ASTON,** THE FIRST WOMAN TO SKI ALONE ACROSS ANTARCTICA, AND THE FIRST PERSON — MALE *OR* FEMALE — TO DO SO UNDER HER OWN MUSCLE POWER. SHE NEVER WANTS TO GO SOLO AGAIN.

That's not as much of a surprise as you might think. Aston is renowned as a leader of teams — the more unusual and fragmented, the better. Until her record-breaking crossing of the continent last year, she was probably best known for having assembled a team of mostly inexperienced women from a range of Commonwealth nations, and having succeeded in getting them to ski from the edge of Antarctica to the South Pole. This was no mean feat: some of the original team had never seen snow before the expedition's first training trip. Capable, smart and articulate, she is a natural leader.

So why go solo, then? "It was a very personal thing," she explains to *Discovery Channel Magazine* from the extremely un-Antarctic surroundings of her parents' garden in Sevenoaks, Kent, England. "It was curiosity, to sum it up in one word. Like everyone else, I've read stories about Robert Swan and Ranulph Fiennes going off on their own. And what was going through my head was, would I be able to do it? It was about having the confidence in your own abilities to go out there alone, where there is no one to fall back on."

"It was horrendous," she adds. "It's fantastic to have had that experience, but I don't think it's one I will repeat."

You wouldn't think anyone in their right mind would repeat it. On January 22, 2012, she completed a 1,744-kilometre crossing from the Ross Ice Shelf to Hercules Inlet via the South Pole, taking 59 days. The physical challenge in itself was immense: not just the effort of skiing such a long distance, but to do so with two heavily laden sledges (she received two resupplies on her journey, the first of them at the Pole), with an ascent of the Leverett Glacier amid the Transantarctic Mountains right at the start when those sledges weighed 85 kilograms. People often don't realise the South Pole is at 2,835 metres above sea level — Aston had to pull herself up all of that height, and her sledges, a relentless uphill slog on her skis.

But perhaps the bigger challenge was mental. What is it like to be alone with your thoughts for that long?

"Frightening. Absolutely frightening," Aston recalls today. "I went to some dark places in my head. There were a lot of tears, and a lot of digging out of old wounds. Because I find that a good motivation: thinking of people who haven't thought well of you in the past, or have underestimated you, or been unfair or unjustified in their character assessment. All of those things that made me feel angry or hurt or indignant in the past."

And, while it may have been very effective for her to establish a cause to rail against, something to force herself out of the tent each day, it probably wasn't a terribly healthy way to be. "Digging those things out every single day? It's tough to be inside your own head."

In fact, she did hit a point where she decided it was no longer possible to carry on. Her book on the expedition, *Alone in Antarctica*, had not been published when we met, though she shared with us an excerpt from a chapter, in which she writes about a moment of, as she puts it, "deadening conviction: I couldn't go on."

"I knew now that Antarctica was more than I could manage on my own. I could not get out of the tent and confront the remorseless weather that waited for me. I could not spend another day inching forward on my skis trying to ignore the clammy discomfort of the close-fitting material around my face. I could not bear anymore the moment I would be forced to expose myself to the cold, hastily refastening stubborn clothing with painfully numbing fingers, only to repeat the agonising process a few hours later. I couldn't countenance another day cramming tasteless half-frozen food into jaws that ached with the repeated exertion of chewing such toughness. The relentless struggle just to stay safe, never mind move forward, was more than I could take. I understood now, categorically, that the distance ahead of me and the number of days to come, as well as my alone-ness, was more, much more, than I could face. It wasn't that I was giving in, it was instead a calm and rational realisation that I didn't have the physical or mental capacity for the challenge ahead. I had found what I had come for. I had found my limit."

ANTARCTICA	DISTANCE
A ROSS ICE SHELF	607 KM >>
B SOUTH POLE	1,137 KM >>
C HERCULES INLET	TOTAL 1,744 KM

And yet this is a segment from chapter four. She was still between the Leverett Glacier and the South Pole at this point. So despite her calm realisation, she did keep going — again and again and again.

"Despite the fact that I felt complete inertia in every molecule of my being, it was clear that somehow I had to move forward. I had no choice but to get myself out of the tent," she explains.

And so, reviving those old wounds in her head, such as the disapproval she had received from colleagues while serving on a British Antarctic Survey base when she was 23, or a cruel slight about her Commonwealth expedition by a famed explorer who called it "just a bit of fun for the girls", she got out of the tent, and moved on. And on.

Solitude is isolating at the best of times, but in Antarctica, conditions make it particularly acute. Scientists talk of something called a ganzfeld (from German for "whole field") — a homogenous visual field, where absolutely everything you see appears to be identical — and our brains can't cope with it, because we can't quite process the idea of there being nothing to see. A ganzfeld is therefore fertile ground for hallucinations. And a polar white-out is a perfect natural ganzfeld. When the ground, sky and low-level clouds are exactly the same

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colour, there is no horizon, no bearings, nothing to focus on.

"Every now and then I'd feel a sense of complete unreality that would make my head spin," Aston remembers. "I'd feel dizzy, my eyes unable to fix on a single solid point of reference. And I'd be struck by the peculiar sensation that I was falling. It was like an extreme form of vertigo." When it happened, she says, she would turn around and look at her sledges. These were the only things for a thousand kilometres that were able to give her a clue where the snow stopped, and the sky started.

An expedition like this clearly involves enormous risk, particularly solo. It's true that today's adventurers have satellite phones and emergency beacons that the Shackletons and Amundsens never did (though they were in teams), but these safety measures only go so far. "You'd say: Okay, I've got a satellite phone in my pocket, but let's say I fall down. The chances of getting a signal from the bottom of a crevasse… you'd have to be pretty lucky. Emergency beacon? Same thing. I'd be likely to be injured: I'd still have my skis and sledges on, so probably broken limbs, a head injury, bleeds, any of those things."

Anyone who falls into a crevasse while skiing is probably quite modestly dressed by Antarctic standards, because they don't want to sweat from exertion, since perspiration would quickly freeze and bring on hypothermia. In addition, they would likely be pressed against ice in the crevasse.

Aston, as is routine on missions like this, had a safety plan. She would call a logistical base once a day to confirm her position; the routine was that if she did not call, they would send someone to look for her at her last known position. "But let's say I've skied for

WHEN THE GROUND, SKY AND LOW-LEVEL CLOUDS ARE EXACTLY THE SAME COLOUR, THERE IS NO HORIZON, NO BEARINGS, NOTHING TO FOCUS ON

three hours from my last given position," she elaborates. "First I have to stay alive in this crevasse for another 24 hours, plus 10 hours until they miss my call. Then they will come and look for me where I was three hours ago — and they're going to be looking for a tiny hole in the snow that I have fallen through."

It's pretty bleak, and a real risk, since crevasses are widespread in the glaciers around the mountains. Aston is clearly very close to her family, so how did she reconcile herself towards these risks? "You tell yourself all the things that are working in your favour," she explains. "But it's something that makes you wake up with sweaty palms, particularly on bad weather days."

She illustrates what she means with an example. "Ten days before the end, I was skiing in an area where I knew there were crevasses off to my left. The visibility came in and I could maybe see a few feet in front of me, with no ground contrast whatsoever. I remember one day I was shaking as I got out of the tent, I was so scared. I was crying as I was putting my tent away. My family have a huge amount of trust in me that I will get myself back okay. That, more than anything, was the real emotional driver. That I would be letting them down if something happened to me."

One oddity of an Antarctic adventure like this is that, unlike the summit of a mountain, or the return to the point of origin in a circumnavigation, there is no obvious finish line. Crossing Antarctica means getting to the edge of the continent, not the ice on top of it — otherwise you'd end up on progressively thinner ice until you ended up in the sea. But it's only really via satellite that you can have any idea when you're at the edge of the land mass. In practical terms, anything north of 80 degrees south is seen as being past the coast. But still, you can't actually see that. There is a renowned video Aston posted when she finished her trip, in which she cries for several minutes at having done what she set out to do. Although to the novice eye, all you can see around in her any direction is more snow and ice.

"It was the ultimate anticlimax," she agrees. "It really was. I knew I was on ice over water, but I was still skiing. Yet where do you stop? I spotted this thing like a pudding bowl in an inlet and thought: I will just ski to the top of that. There were no champagne corks, no finish tape, nobody to celebrate with and give them a big hug. So I just got out my camera and cried at it for 20 minutes." She rang base to say she was there and they prepared to dispatch a plane to get her — promising a glass of red wine was waiting for her back at base. Then they had to call back, and say the weather had closed in. But she appreciated one final night in the tent, just to process it all.

Antarctic records can be somewhat arcane. Aston is not the first person to ski alone across Antarctica (though she is the first woman); two Norwegian men, Rune Gjeldnes and Borge Ousland, have done so before, and by considerably longer routes. But both of them used kites to help them, making Aston's the first one-person trip across the continent through that person's own power. Set against that, both Gjeldnes and Ousland did their trips completely unsupported, with no resupplies, whereas Aston had two resupplies. Some will tell you that her trip is therefore not truly a solo trip — and for this reason she tends to say "alone" rather than "solo".

"It's a whole can of worms," she says. "And it's a pity because to the general public it makes no difference at all." She is humble, too: despite her entry in the *Guinness Book of Records*, she considers herself honoured to be in any way bracketed with the Norwegians. "They are legends, and I still feel that what I've done in no way scratches at the toenails of what they did," she says.

Somewhat strangely, what she learned most clearly from her isolation was the value of teamwork. "I saw how being alone changed the way I made decisions, the way I reacted to things. And I thought, oh my goodness, this is why it is important to have other people here." Even as a leader? "Particularly as a leader. Many times I have been in a leadership role, and I was definitely better than when I was on my own." Why? "I was a lot more emotional on my own, and a lot more indulgent about my own emotions. If I was having a bad day, I'd have a tantrum. If things were scary I would react on that fear. When you're around other people you tend to supress it a bit." Self-discipline is hard on your own, she adds: there's nobody to notice if you skip a job or take a shortcut. "When you're on your own, there is always the temptation to stop and put up a tent. Because you've got nobody else to convince."

Getting back to civilisation brought some swift readjustment. She finished only three days before the very last plane was due to leave the base before winter closed in. In fact, she got more or less straight on to a plane, and so went from being in a tent on her own in Antarctica to a South American youth hostel within 24 hours. She started off by having a *long* shower. "Then three hours later I thought, I fancy another shower!"

She was still able to hold a conversation, she was relieved to find, though a few things had to be relearned. "When I was in the base camp, I'd be standing around chatting to people, and at one stage I needed the loo and reached back to the zips on my trousers. Then I thought, 'Oh God, I can't do that anymore, I've got to find a toilet.'" She shakes her head. "It seemed like such a waste of time."

HOME AWAY FROM HOME

"I have always used Hilleberg tents — they are a Swedish brand. Their tents are easy and quick to put up and dismantle, lightweight, can withstand the most extreme conditions, and are comfortable. I prefer 'tunnel' tents as they are easier to handle in Antarctic conditions, and Hilleberg's tents are the best."

ABOVE: WHILE 33-YEAR-OLD FELICITY ASTON WAS MAKING HER WAY ACROSS ANTARCTICA, DRAGGING HER SUPPLIES BEHIND HER (*ABOVE, MIDDLE*), SHE KEPT IN TOUCH VIA SATELLITE PHONE, SOMETIMES EVEN POSTING TWEETS **TOP:** AN AERIAL VIEW OF A CREVASSE FIELD THAT ASTON HAD TO CROSS **OPPOSITE:** HOW WOULD YOU HANDLE THE STRESS OF BEING STRANDED ALONE IN THE ISOLATED EXPANSES OF ANTARCTICA? FELICITY ASTON TESTED HER METTLE THE HARD WAY

PHOTOS: FELICITY ASTON