



Hollie

ROCKET GIRL

Can you imagine dragging something heavier than you are across a canvas of ice all day, every day for a month? Hollie Woodhouse reckons it’s all about the top two inches.

WORDS **JENNY RUDD + HOLLIE WOODHOUSE**
PHOTOS **KEITH PARSONS + BENGT ROTMO**

When I first came across Cantabrian Hollie Woodhouse’s magazine *Say Yes To Adventure* two years ago, I was completely captured by its exciting stories and eye-widening images of people doing things that make you feel like the world is something to climb to the top of so you can truly see how magnificent it is. She published tales of scaling barren mountains in countries I’d never heard of, camping in the ice under the Northern Lights and cycling across continents. At the centre of it all was Hollie herself, a diminutive, blonde handful of sparks. As well as writing about her own adventures, she edited, designed and published the magazine too.

That afternoon, I went for a walk around the Mount and on the spur of the moment, decided to say yes to adventure. I left the track and headed diagonally up, fighting my way through scrabbly scrub

and eventually getting stuck. Sweaty and a bit scared, I perched halfway up the slope facing out towards Matakana Island. My only option was to let gravity lead me back to the base track through the dense bush. I arrived home breathless and muddy. ‘Probably won’t mention that to Hollie...’ I thought.

If you ask Hollie about her achievements, she’ll tell you, “I’m not some ultra-athlete, I’m just a girl next door who goes out and gets involved.” But when you consider what she’s done, you realise she’s anything but average. Among other feats, she’s competed in the Coast to Coast, run 250km across the Moroccan desert in the brutal Marathon des Sables, and most

self-deprecating woman with a flair for graphic design. Originally from Ashburton, she’s been spending more time in different parts of the country through being invited to speak at events and share her experiences. Talking to her in Cambridge, I ask what she learned from her Greenland crossing.

“I learned what it feels like to really, really struggle,” she says. “I used to be pretty dismissive of people when they said they couldn’t do something, especially physical things like running 5km or swimming in the ocean, but now I know, because that was me at times in Greenland. I felt like I just couldn’t do it, but our team encouraged me and spurred

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recently crossed the 560km Greenland ice cap pulling a sled heavier than she is.

I was expecting her to be a no-nonsense, laser-focused high achiever; instead, when we eventually meet I find a funny,

me on. So I suppose you could say it made me a nicer person!”

I asked Hollie to tell us more about her extraordinary Nordic feat. Here, in her own words, is her story.



I was three hours into trekking across the Greenland ice cap, and all I wanted to do was quit. I'd spent the past six months imagining myself as a strong warrior gliding over smooth snow under bright blue, never-ending skies, the sun warming my bronzed face. The reality, however, couldn't have been further from the truth.

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My 55kg were struggling to pull the 60kg pulk (sled). My skis had a mind of their own, sliding uncontrollably from underneath me, too often seeing me face plant into the icy snow. It's funny how dreams never quite work out that way we intend, but to hell with happy endings. Ultimately, I was there for the story.

I was part of a six-man team (Antarctic Heritage Trust executive director Nigel Watson, polar guide Bengt Rotmo, and four explorers: New Zealanders me and Brando Yelavich, and Australians Bridget Kruger and Keith Parsons) led by the Antarctic Heritage Trust for its third Inspiring Explorers' Expedition – a 560km trek across the Greenland ice cap. The trust's mission is to conserve, share and encourage the spirit of exploration, something they believe is critical in the 21st century. This expedition was to do just that while honouring the remarkable legacy of Fridtjof Nansen, who made the first crossing 130 years earlier.

Growing up on a sheep and beef farm prepared me for the rough and tumble of the outdoors, but nothing could have prepared me for this adventure. Even though expeditions in freezing climates had never been on my bucket list, however, I knew this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, not to be missed.



Best described as being trapped inside a ping-pong ball, Greenland was far removed from my everyday reality. Life was broken down into the most basics tasks. It would take me 15 minutes every morning to squeeze my feet into my frozen boots while balancing awkwardly in our two-man tent. After boiling water,

Tent up, water boiled, dinner eaten, team meeting, diary entry and finally, sleep. Wake up, repeat. I now understand the meaning of the term ‘Groundhog Day’.

We battled unseasonable wild weather, including two hurricanes. Each time, we dug down our tents to escape the full

normal. With every step, I managed to grasp the skill of Nordic skiing. Instead of fighting the unnatural movement, I was able to switch to autopilot and would often find myself in a state of flow. It was during these moments that I was reminded why I say “Yes” to the unknown.

We were told the trip would take us anywhere between 22 and 25 days, so we took 27 days worth of food, just in case. Our fuel was high-energy, high-fat foods including nuts, chocolate, chips and lollies – a five-year-old’s dream. On the morning we were due to leave, Bengt was concerned we didn’t have enough to eat. A small detour on our way to the ice cap took us to a tiny supermarket where we bought more food, including three blocks of Norwegian butter. At the time, I questioned if I’d ever be in a situation where I’d voluntarily eat three blocks, but towards the very end of our trip, as I sliced off chunks and ate them straight, I cursed myself for not buying more.

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eating breakfast, then clumsily taking down our tent (a small feat in itself when wearing three layers of oversized mittens) we’d line up ready to tackle the next 20-odd kilometres of the day.

Using the sun and wind to navigate, we’d ski in a line, one behind the other, with a 10-minute break every hour. After anywhere between 10 and 16 hours of skiing, time would be called and the evening routine would commence.

force of the ferocious winds. Using the excess snow, we built giant walls, their proximity to the tents critical, down to the last centimetre. We hunkered down for up to 30 hours at a time, snow falling like cement around us. These delightful moments were considered ‘rest days’; there’s nothing like the steady drum of 180km/h wind to lull you to sleep.

As the days turned into weeks, my body slowly became accustomed to the new

TOP + MIDDLE LEFT Putting up and packing up the tent in the freezing wind – all part of the daily routine. **TOP RIGHT** The team stops for one of their many essential 10-minute breaks. **MIDDLE RIGHT** Dinner for four. **OPPOSITE** Bridget and Hollie.



“WOULD WE MAKE IT? MORE IMPORTANTLY, DID WE WANT TO MAKE IT?”

Towards the end of our journey, we were up against it. Storms and sickness had slowed us down considerably, and with five days left and more than 170km still to cover, tensions were high among the team. Would we make it? More importantly, did we want to make it? Frustrations aside, we decided not to call the helicopter, instead opting for human power to get us to the finish – or at least as far as possible.

Pushing on, the final day provided the best conditions of the entire crossing.

With our boat having literally sailed, a helicopter was organised to pick us up, regardless of our location. After battling whiteouts, powder up to our knees, relentless winds and temperatures as low as -39.5°C , we could finally smell the salty sea air.

After 22 non-stop hours, I ungracefully pizza-wedged to a stop for the final time. With tears sliding down my sunburnt cheeks, I was overwhelmed with emotion: elation, pride and an immense sense of achievement (and relief in knowing I

never had to pull on my boots again!). In a season in which only a handful of teams successfully made it across the ice, I couldn't have been prouder.

As I peered out the window, safe in the helicopter that was transporting us back to a warm shower and a decent meal, I watched the vast white of the ice cap below. From east to west, 29 days later (five days more than expected), Greenland had brought me many lessons, complete hopelessness, uncontrollable laughter and life-long friendships.



Eight years ago, I made a pact with myself to do one big adventure each year that challenged me, like New Zealand’s Coast to Coast, and ultra-marathons across Morocco’s Sahara Desert and through Peru’s Amazon jungle. While these experiences left me wanting more, Greenland changed me. I came home with a huge appreciation for my life – my boyfriend, my family and friends, my job and just how lucky I am to live in this incredible country.

This adventure taught me the true definition of resilience, and that ultimately, it’s all about the top two inches. I go on adventures to push myself, and to experience moments I never thought possible. Greenland dished these up in bucketloads. 🧊

In *Nansen’s Footsteps*, a documentary about this epic expedition, can be viewed at inspiringexplorers.com.

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Get up and go!

Want to have an adventure of your own?
Here are Hollie’s top picks.

TEAM TEST: Spring Challenge

This women’s adventure race moves around the country each year; I took part in Auckland in 2018 – this year it’s in Wanganui and Cromwell. Up to 450 teams of three women raft, hike, bike and navigate their way around an adventurous course. The event was the vision of adventure supremo Nathan Fa’avae – get a team of girls together, then google Nathan and marvel at his stories. springchallenge.co.nz

LOCAL LEGEND: Waitomo Caves Trail Run

There are lots of distance options here: 6km, 11km, 21km and 35km. The scenery is absolutely top-notch, and you get to go through caves and see glow-worms, the cornerstone of any Waitomo experience. Don’t forget, though, trail running is very different to road running. You need sturdy shoes to stop your ankles turning on tree roots – and expect to be covered in mud by the end. waitomotrailrun.co.nz

THE ULTIMATE ULTRA: For Rangers Ultra

This is an ultra like no other. It’s 230km across Kenyan land dotted with giraffes, zebras, impalas, elephants and rhinos. My brother-in-law Sam Taylor works with rangers who protect rhinos from poachers, and along with others, we set up the For Rangers charity to do our bit to save these beautiful beasts. Join the fight by taking on a life-changing challenge in the home of long-distance running. beyondtheultimate.co.uk

MULTISPORT MAGIC: Coast to Coast

I reckon this is New Zealand’s best multi-sport event; I’ve done it three times now, and I’d do it again. If you feel like two days of biking, running and kayaking is a bit much for you, you can always enjoy it as a spectator, or if you feel like two days isn’t enough of a challenge, you can sign up to do the Longest Day instead, where you complete the whole thing in one go. coasttocoast.co.nz

OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT Bridget Kruger, Hollie, Brando Yelavich and Keith Parsons, jubilant after finishing their journey.

