JOURNEY TO THE ARCHIPELAGO

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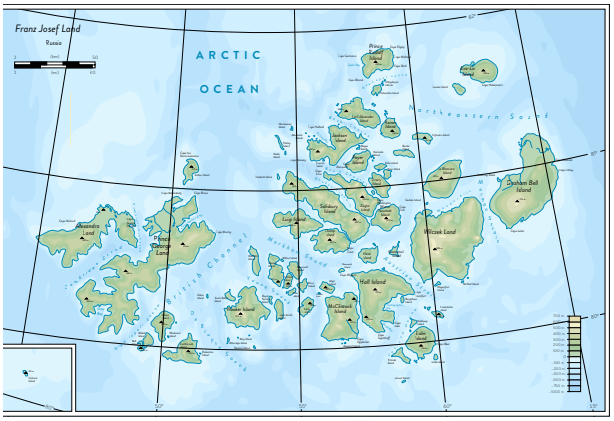
Since **Alain Hubert** and **Dixie Dansercoer** first made a challenging crossing of Greenland together in 1995, this famous two-man team has gone on to successfully complete several big polar expeditions in both the Arctic and Antarctic.

Today, they are joining forces once more for a new polar adventure scheduled for 2015.

This time, their aim is to travel from the geographic North Pole to the Franz Josef archipelago, which is located 300 kilometres from the Svalbard archipelago (Spitsbergen). Setting off in April 2015, the two Belgian explorers plan to trek over 900 kilometres on foot with no outside assistance, pulling amphibious sledges behind them. Given that the breaking up of the ice pack is becoming more marked each year and occurring earlier on each spring, they will need to be extremely careful in their choice of sledges, as these will often have to serve them as boats.



Map1: source, Wikipedia

The Franz Josef archipelago, also known as 'Franz Josef Land', is made up of 191 islands, all of which are uninhabited and (theoretically) covered in ice throughout the long winter months. It is situated to the north of Novaya Zemlya ('New Land') and east of Svalbard (Spitsbergen) in the Arctic Ocean, between the latitudes 80° and 82° N, and covers a total area of 16,134 km^2. The only more northerly lands are Greenland and Ellesmere Island (from where most Arctic expeditions from Canada to the North Pole have traditionally departed and continue to do so today).

A MYSTERIOUS, FARAWAY ARCHIPELAGO

1865 / It is possible – but by no means certain – that the Franz Josef archipelago was discovered in 1865 by the Norwegian sailors Nils Fredrik Rønnbeck and Johan Petter Aidijärvi. Based on their accounts, we know that they came across a new land when sailing due east from Spitsbergen, but no one knows whether they ever landed.

1873 / Eight years later, in 1873, the Austro-Hungarian North Pole expedition, led by the explorers Julius von Payer and Karl Weyprecht (who had set off in search of the Northeast Passage, but whose ship became trapped in ice), rediscovered the archipelago. They named it after Franz Josef I, the emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, as this was not an official expedition, Austria did not lay claim to the islands.

1893 - 1896 / However, it was without a doubt the Norwegian explorers Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen who brought this archipelago to the world's attention. This was partly due to the fact that they wanted to prove the existence of a large, easterly transpolar current and, in order to achieve this, allowed their three-masted ship, the *Fram*, to become trapped in ice off the Franz Josef archipelago and left it adrift for three years (between 1893 and 1896). It was also because, following their attempt to reach the North Pole on foot and dog-drawn sledges and subsequent failure at 86°13' (the most northerly point ever reached by man), their journey back from this point – towards the Franz Josef archipelago – would become what will forever be considered one of the most heroic chapters in the great polar story, both in the Arctic and Antarctic.

After realising that they would not have sufficient provisions to reach the pole and return safely, the duo turned back on 7 April 1895 1895. They headed for Franz Josef Land, often without so much as a

watch, and were only rescued from one of the islands in the archipelago (Northbrook Island) on 17 June the following year!

A year later, it was the turn of the Belgian baron Adrien de Gerlache to let his three-masted ship, the *Belgica*, become trapped in the Antarctic waters and spend the winter there with his men for an entire year from 16 March 1898 to 17 March 1899.

1914 / One final polar expedition, the Brusilov expedition (named after the Russian deep-sea captain who came up with the idea of discovering the Northeast Passage), guaranteed the Franz Josef archipelago a place in the history books of polar adventures. The expedition party set off from Alexandrovsk on board the *Svyataya Anna*, which became trapped in ice (although this time accidentally) off the coast of Franz Josef Land. The *Svyataya Anna*, together with all its weapons and cargo, drifted for two winters until it reached 83 degrees. There, the second in command, Valerian Albanov, and one of the crew members, Alexander Konrad, seeing the men on board succumb one by one to scurvy, requested permission to abandon the ship. Once this had been granted, they set out alone on foot in an attempt to reach land, just as Nansen and his companion Johansen had done between 1895 1895 and 1896 1896. They were the only survivors of the Brusilov expedition.

More than a century passed before another expedition came across remains of some of the men from the *Svyataya Anna* by chance in 2010 on one of the islands in the Franz Josef archipelago. It is still not known what became of the Russian three-masted ship or the rest of its crew.

1926 / In 1926, the archipelago was annexed by the Soviet Union and a handful of people moved there for research and military purposes. Access to the archipelago was prohibited, adding to its air of mystery, and even today a special permit is required to visit the islands (although these are rarely granted).

2007 / More recently, the Norwegian explorer Børge Ousland, together with his friend Thomas Ulrich, successfully set off from the North Pole to follow in the footsteps of Nansen and Johansen. They left the pole on 1 May 2007 and took one month to reach Eva-Liv Island, the most northerly point of Franz Josef Land.

They subsequently crossed the entire archipelago, just as Nansen and his companion had done in their time. They waited at Cape Flora for three weeks – camping in the open – until a friend picked them up in his sailboat.

PLAN FOR THE 'JOURNEY TO THE ARCHIPELAGO AT THE END OF THE WORLD' EXPEDITION

The duo will fly from Denmark to Longyearbyen, the capital of Svalbard. A few days later, they will be flown to Camp Barneo, a Russian floating ice base, by Victor Boyarsky. This base is the drop-off point for all tourists who are undertaking what has become known as 'the last degree'.

Around mid-April (2015), an Mi-8 helicopter will take them and all their equipment to the North Pole. Once they have touched down on the ice, Alain and Dixie will begin their 900-kilometre (direct) trek in the direction of Franz Josef Land.

They will take the same equipment used by all polar explorers, including special foodstuffs, navigation instruments, clothing and equipment for taking scientific measurements. However, for this expedition they will be using custom-designed sledges. The duo will be able to bind these kayak-shaped sledges together with ropes and, using paddles, turn them into a kind of amphibious catamaran. This catamaran will not only have to face the many open water channels that the team will doubtless encounter on their journey, but must also be capable of sailing for long distances

over the enclosed seas that now pepper the Arctic ice pack as global warming becomes an inescapable reality for our planet.

According to the most realistic estimates, their journey should take roughly fifty days. They will travel completely independently, as it will not be possible to send them fresh provisions – or indeed provide any other kind of assistance – during this season in this rarely visited part of the Arctic ice pack.

Alain Hubert has decided to get back onto terra firma on the island of Alexandra Land, the most westerly island in the archipelago.

Due to the Russian embargo on Franz Josef Land we know very little about this part of the world, other than the origin of a few names. During World War II, the Germans set up a weather station there, but this was later abandoned when most of its occupants died after contracting intestinal parasitosis from eating raw bear meat. We also know that the Russians built the Nagurskoye military base on this island, which has today been abandoned.

The Belgian duo chose Alexandra Land as the final destination on their trek as it is the only island in the archipelago to have an airstrip. Unfortunately, this airstrip is normally covered in ice and is not particularly reliable – on 23 December 1996, a Russian Antonov AN-72 aeroplane crashed there during landing.

Once they arrive at the archipelago (they expect to make land around mid-June), A. Hubert and D. Dansercoer will have to try and enter it as close as possible to Alexandra Land to reach the old military base and be picked up by an aeroplane as soon as this is possible. This final stage of the expedition may prove difficult due to the strong currents that they will have to face in their boats.

Once they arrive at the archipelago (they expect to make land around mid-June), A. Hubert and D. Dansercoer will have to wait until the weather is good enough for an aeroplane to come and collect them. No one can predict what the snow or climatic conditions will be like in this completely isolated part of the Arctic.

Furthermore, no agreement has yet been signed with an airline to carry out this pick-up and the Russian government has not yet granted the Belgian team permission to set foot on the Franz Josef archipelago. We are hopeful that Victor Boyarsky, with his experience of dealing with the Russian government, will be the man to help us resolve these two issues.

As they did during their Arctic crossing in 2007, Hubert and Dansercoer will take measurements of the snow coverage on the ice over the first 800 km of the expedition. These measurements are needed to improve the calibration of those taken by the new European satellite, Cryosat II. This satellite can take images of the ice coverage in the Arctic and validating these satellite data is vital to providing accurate estimates of the thickness of the Arctic ice and any losses in its mass. This is a critical issue for Europe as global warming could well accelerate this process, with all its resulting consequences. The IPCC's recent report reminds us of this in no uncertain terms.

AIMS OF THE 'JOURNEY TO THE ARCHIPELAGO AT THE END OF THE WORLD' EXPEDITION

Alain Hubert and Dixie Dansercoer are unfazed by the delicate topic of why people undertake this kind of trip and the increasing pressure to 'be the first'.

After all, they have twenty years of polar expeditions under their belts. We should remember that they were the first to cross the entire Antarctic continent in 1997-98 on the 'South through the Pole' expedition, during which they covered 3,990 km in 100 days. They were able to achieve this thanks to the development and use of the first

single-surface power kite, the precursor of modern surfing kites. After attempting the longest ever crossing of the Arctic basin from the New Siberian Islands to Canada in 2002, in spring 2007 they successfully completed the first crossing from Siberia to Greenland in 106 days – always as a team.

They therefore no longer feel the need to prove anything on this front. On the other hand, the exploration of polar regions is increasingly changing. Nowadays, although we still venture to the furthest reaches of the planet, it is not with the aim of discovering new lands, but rather to record the visible and fundamental changes that are taking place in fragile and inaccessible areas, such as the polar regions or countries with large glaciers, such as Patagonia and Greenland.

Twenty years on, and despite the fact that Alain Hubert and Dixie Dansercoer are no longer the spring chickens they once were, they are still as obsessed with the polar world as ever and remain ardent and active defenders of the open-air laboratories that are the Arctic and Antarctic. We should remember that it was Alain Hubert who, in collaboration with the International Polar Foundation, succeeded in setting up the Princess Elisabeth Antarctic (PEA) on the 6th continent. This is the first zero emission polar research base in the world, meaning that it generates all of the energy that it uses. For his part, Dixie Dansercoer, together with his wife Julie Brown, has continued to take measurements all over the world to demonstrate the importance of respecting the environment and the planet as part of the work done by their company, Polar Circles.

Both are therefore eager to return there, not only to undertake their umpteenth great adventure (you only need to look at the photos taken on the ground to realise the huge challenges that await them) and in doing so raise awareness among as many people as possible of the need to protect polar regions, but also and above all to see how the Arctic ice pack has changed since their last visit during the 2007 'Arctic Arc' expedition (Siberia > Greenland).

They are clearly also aware – along with many others worldwide – that in less than a century this great ice-covered ocean risks disappearing entirely every summer.

They are thus undertaking this journey in the spirit of conquerors, aiming to show the rest of the world the most dramatic and shocking change (in terms of its speed, nature and prognosis) to take place on our planet since the Hominidae first appeared in the African savannah – the disappearance of the Arctic ice pack.

This expedition will be of particular interest in terms of the scientific observations and records that will be made along the North Pole > Franz Josef Land axis, as the Norwegian explorers Børge Ousland and Thomas Ulrich made the same observations and measurements seven years ago. This will therefore be one of the first times that the institutes responsible for analysing the data on the explorers' return will be able to accurately record the many changes to the Arctic ice pack (not only in terms of the thickness of the ice, but above all that of the snow covering the ice, the characteristics of the ocean, the drift, etc.). This will be a truly new achievement for this latest Belgian expedition.

Alain Hubert & Dixie Dansercoer

These two polar explorers need no introduction. Each in their own way has been and remains a worthy representative of all those who are trying to make a change and who are showing the world that global warming is well and truly a reality and that our planet will never go back to how it was.

Finally, it is perhaps useful to note that only a few months ago (on 27 September 2013 in Stockholm, to be precise), the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) published the first volume of its Fifth Assessment Report on climate change (AR5), in which it was clearly stated that we can now confidently assert that the climate is changing and that global warming is an intangible reality.

For more information on Alain Hubert and to view his CV, please visit his website:

www.alainhubert.com

For more information on Dixie Dansercoer and to view his CV, please visit his website:

www.circles.com