

Four women cross Antarctica without the help of dogs, machine, or men.

Narrator: What's the most challenging thing you've managed to accomplish? Training for and running a marathon? Completing your college degree? Maybe learning to program your own Web site? How about crossing Antarctica on skis, pulling a 110-kilo sled? That's what four women from the United States decided to do. The expedition was the idea of Ann Bancroft, a former teacher and winter-trekking enthusiast from St. Paul, Minnesota. Her dream was to cross Antarctica totally under her own power without dogs, machines, or men. Her partners for the expedition were Sue Giller, a computer programmer and outdoor enthusiast from Boulder, Colorado, who would be the navigator for the expedition; Anne Dal-Vera, also from Colorado, who had extensive winter-camping experience and was the team's strongest skier; and Sunniva Sorby from San Diego, California, also a winter-camping enthusiast with extensive wilderness-trekking experience. The plan was first to travel the 975 kilometers from the coast of Antarctica to the South Pole. This portion of the journey would be all uphill and against the wind. The last 1,500 kilometers – from the South Pole to the opposite coast – would be downhill and with the wind. The goal: to reach the other side of the Antarctic continent in time to catch a free ride home on a tourist cruise ship.

Team Member: So we started the wheels turning, of becoming an organization, working on our mission and our vision.

Narrator: Carrying out an enormous undertaking like this required months of planning, organizing, training, and fund-raising. Ann's background as a teacher led her to a creative solution for financing this expensive expedition. The team publicized the expedition in schools and received contributions from tens of thousands of schoolchildren and ordinary citizens – one dollar, five dollars, and ten dollars at a time. As the time for the expedition approached,

the team gathered and packed the supplies and equipment they would need for almost four months on the ice.

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Narrator: On October 30, they arrived in Punta Arenas, Chile. From there, it would be a ten-hour plane ride to Antarctica. But bad weather delayed their departure for nine days – days they would have to make up in order to meet their cruise ship for the trip home.

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Narrator: Finally, the long-awaited day arrived.

Team Member: The plane ride – looking down out of the window – for me, was big, and seeing Antarctica and the mountains half-buried in ice.

Narrator: Day 1: Spirits were high. With this trip, they hoped to accomplish what no other women have ever done: to cross the Antarctic continent completely under their own power. All food and gear was set up for pairs. Changing tent mates every eight days would help relieve the stress of being in a small tent with the same person for four months. Pulling sleds of 110 kilos uphill and against the wind was demanding labor. To maintain their body weight, each woman had to consume 5,000 calories per day, forty-five percent of it from fat. Adding great quantities of butter to every pasta, rice, and meat dish helped provide the calories they needed. To keep on schedule, the team had to travel at least ten miles a day.

Team Member: Day 6: It was really discouraging today. We only came up with five miles.

Narrator: So they pushed even harder to make up the lost time, but the physical stress began to take its toll. In addition to sore, cramped muscles, Sunniva came down with a respiratory infection. Anne Dal-Vera developed painful tendinitis in her right foot. After thirty days of one thing or another, things went from bad to worse. Sunniva sprained her ankle.

Sunniva Sorby: I couldn't fight anymore, because I found that not only did I not have anything left physically, I was fighting so hard I had nothing left here. And this scared me more than this scared me.

Narrator: Day 57: Morale was low. The team knew that Ann Bancroft, as the leader of the expedition, was considering radioing for an emergency evacuation of Sunniva by plane. Since all their equipment was set up for pairs, they wondered who else would have to leave with Sunniva. Because of her tendinitis, Anne Dal-Vera knew that second person would be her.

Anne Dal-Vera: It seemed to me that she had made the decision that I should go out.

Ann Bancroft: It wasn't an end-all decision at the time, but it was put very strongly towards her that "if Sunniva goes, you will probably have to go."

Narrator: Day 59: The dream of reaching their goal came alive again, if only briefly. A military supply plane flying to the South Pole dropped an unexpected package for the team.

Sunniva Sorby: We open it up and it says, "To the Antarctica explorers" – crossword puzzles, comic strips, homemade chocolate-chip cookies, four apples, and a rose.

Narrator: Some scientists and military personnel stationed on the coast of Antarctica had heard of the women's challenging expedition and had decided to send them a message of encouragement.

Sunniva Sorby: We were sort of sobbing – four very strong women who have skied, you know, over two months. It reminded me that I . . . I was still alive.

Narrator: The unexpected gift gave the team the mental strength they needed to continue.

Team Member: We could see the Pole for about a day of travel – about fourteen miles.

Narrator: With no roads or signs, Sue had managed to guide them accurately across the vast wasteland of Antarctica.

Ann Bancroft: We're seeing it . . . we're going there. At this point, I've got the group shoulder to shoulder because I want us to come in together to signify this team.

Narrator: The four women were able to reach the South Pole together without dogs, machines, or men. . . . But a difficult decision had to be made. Should Ann Bancroft and Sue Giller finish the journey by themselves?

Ann Bancroft: I was totally ready to go. Food was there. I'm in the best shape of my life.

Narrator: But the trip to the South Pole had taken longer than planned. If Ann and Sue didn't make it to the coast on time to meet the cruise ship, they would have to call for an expensive emergency evacuation. All four women decided to end their adventure together with their successful arrival at the South Pole.

Anne Dal-Vera: We all agreed. We felt that that was important: not to be the first all-women's expedition to be *rescued* from Antarctica.

Narrator: Several years have passed. Ann Bancroft still dreams of crossing the Antarctic continent.

Ann Bancroft: The demanding mental fortitude that it takes is really intriguing to me. You grow as a person as a result of . . . of those struggles.

Narrator: Today she is returning to Antarctica with a new partner, Liv Arnesen from Oslo, Norway. When this trip is over, Ann hopes she will have achieved the goal she was unable to accomplish on her first trip: to cross the entire Antarctic continent without dogs, machines, or men.