

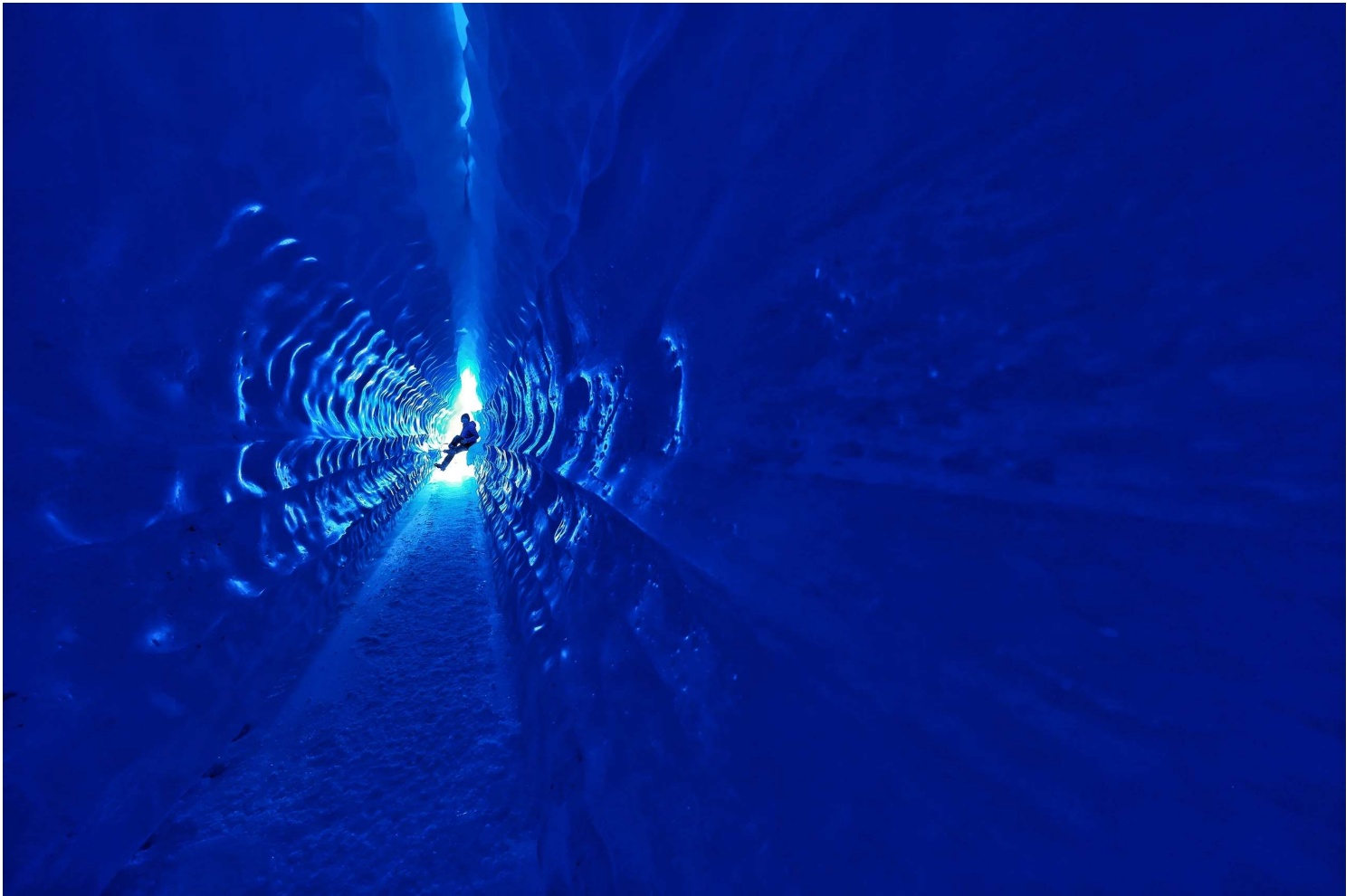
GRAND DETOURS

# One Woman's Story of Isolation in Antarctica

Three months, two books, and a voyage of self-discovery.

BY VALENTINA WRIGHT

APRIL 28, 2020



**R**obyn Woodhead, founder of luxury Antarctic travel company White Desert, is well placed to teach us a thing or two about coping in isolation. In the brutal yet magical landscape of Antarctica, Robyn endured three months completely alone after transport complications meant she had to send the rest of her team home. With just two books for entertainment and dehydrated meal sachets in the way of

“comfort food”, Robyn camped out in the blistering cold so that the opposing team could get their resupply and continue with the mission.

Although extreme, this kind of adventure was not new to Robyn. While other 13-year-olds might have spent their holidays in front of the television with an ice lolly or basking on a sunlounger, Robyn and her family were climbing Kilimanjaro, trekking to Everest base camp and exploring East Asia.

So when Robyn flew her nest in Cape Town, she wasn't afraid to fly far away, and landed in Notting Hill, London. “It was London, New York, or Hong Kong. And I thought, ok I'll try London, they speak English there.”

Three years into a settled West London life, that intrepid spirit was resurrected when Robyn's Cambridge-born boyfriend, Patrick, began talking non-stop about Shackleton and the original great explorers. Tales of Peary, Scott and Amundsen traversing terrains few had braved before entranced Robyn; “I fell in love with those stories”. The seed was planted.

“In 2003, we hatched a plan to recreate Shackleton's expedition, where they had two teams, one starting on the East of Antarctica and the other on the West, with the idea for one to drive and one to man haul and meet in the middle, and then support each other back.”

After months of planning, in November 2004 Robyn left her advertising job and that plan became a reality.

Far from the six-course tasting menus, cosy bedrooms and well appointed en-suites she now offers the likes of Bear Grylls and Prince Harry, Robyn's first venture into the Antarctic started on a Russian cargo plane with a toilet strapped to the back with bungee cords.

In the coldest climate on Earth, with a disorienting 24 hours of sunlight, where no rain has fallen for two million years, Robyn watched the plane fly away. “Everything is white. There is nothing else. And your breath, it almost freezes in your lungs.”

Separated from Patrick by the width of a continent, Robyn and her three-man team began adapting to polar life. They learned to wash with ice and prepare and share dehydrated food.

Being on the driving team, you'd be forgiven for thinking Robyn had lucked out—but nothing in Antarctica is simple. “When we loaded up our vehicle we started realising we were just going to get stuck.” The next 10 days would be a laborious process of driving and digging,

and driving and digging, and digging, and digging, until there was far more digging happening than driving.



A White Desert client trip KELVIN TRAUTMAN

“I kept taking my goggles off in the glare to dig. It was a rookie mistake. I got snow blindness.” Snow blindness is when the outer layer of the eye is essentially burned by too much UV light—and it’s as painful as it sounds.

Luckily, Robyn’s vision came back after 24 hours—just in time to see her team fly away. “On day 10 it dawned on me, as the team leader, that I had to send my team home”. If Patrick’s team made it to the South Pole only to find there were no provisions to continue, the entire expedition would fail.

Knowing someone had to stay in Antarctica to ensure the safe negotiation of the resupply, Robyn thought: “Why put four people through a struggle that one person can endure?” And that one person, in a virtually uninhabited 5.4 million square miles, was Robyn.





Robyn in Antarctica by herself digging a tent

So there she was, alone, with her tent, camping stove, and Elizabeth Arden 8 Hour Cream (a vital component of any expedition—seriously). What did she do next? What any sane, feeling person would do. “I cried. It was probably one of the loneliest birthdays of my life. It was horrible.” But then, “the real magic of the experience started to happen.”

(Pens at the ready—COVID isolation tips incoming.)

Robyn pulled out a little leather bound journal and smiled, “My sister made me this journal, and she actually wrote in it—‘your book of inner exploration, I hope this voyage is one of self-discovery more than anything’—and she was right! It completely changed my approach to life. Resilience, self-reliance, the importance of being honest, looking after yourself, and being ok with your faults and mistakes. As long as you learn from them, it’s ok.”

Robyn journalled on every one of those 90 isolated days, whether she felt like it or not. Being confronted with a blank page is intimidating, “so I just wrote about my day, because it was the simplest way to start”. Then, “what’s the emotion behind these things? What did I feel

today?” Sometimes it was venting, just getting something out that you don’t want to (or can’t) express to someone else.

The important part is putting thoughts into words, no matter how inarticulate or banal—the point is expression. “You don’t need to think about your audience because who is your audience if not yourself.”

“Routine was key.” Setting and maintaining a daily structure encourages a state of acceptance. If we’re constantly having to make choices there’s too much room to feel we’re making the wrong ones—with routine the next step is always clear. Leaving room for second guessing is all too risky when that routine involves an hour long ordeal of washing with ice. “You’ve got to get naked and rub ice all over your body. Yes, outside—because otherwise you get snow all over your tent.”

Being kind to yourself is paramount too, Robyn told me. “I’m quite organised, I like everything to be just right—and you have to let that go, and you have to laugh at it.” Surrendering to a lack of control isn’t giving up, it’s an efficient use of energy. Nothing will be perfect, “so let’s make it half perfect, and let’s relax and pat yourself on the back for achieving something, and reward yourself!”

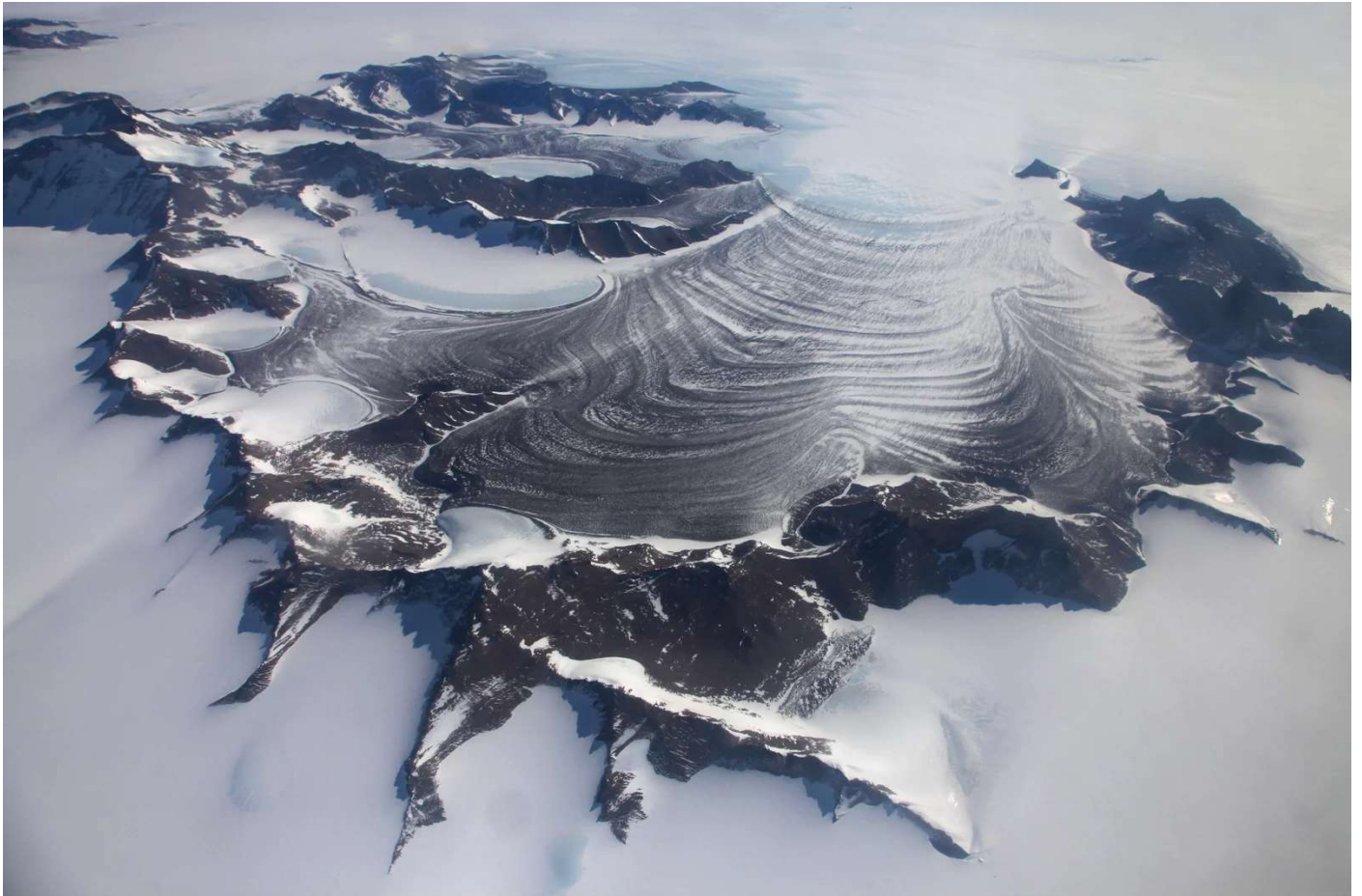
And that reward? Escape. “Antarctica is an inert environment. There’s no smell there, there’s no sensory distractions like scent or greenery.” Unlike our endless stream of polished Netflix originals, gripping reality TV, and absurd docuseries (yes, that one), Robyn had only *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde and *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking—the latter of which she read four times. “It was a good choice because it was so complex and so different from where I was, it was a complete escape.”

I asked Robyn which books she would choose now. “There are so many books I haven’t read! I love Gabriel García Márquez, I love the South American writers, magical realism is just a wonderful escape, so I’d probably choose something more playful.”

After adjusting back into society (which wasn’t as easy as you might think) the take home messages were evident. Journalling, routine, self-compassion, escape, and, of course, laughter. These are the golden tools of coping.

We may not be contending with sub-zero temperatures and sunburned corneas, but there’s no denying things are pretty weird right now. While we yearn for hugs from our loved ones

and dream of cold pints in bustling pub gardens, let's keep Robyn's learnings in mind—and turn this into our own voyage of self-discovery.



PHOTOGRAPHER: ALEXEY NAGAEV / WWW.NAGAEV-FOTO.RU

White Desert

Get unlimited access to *Vanity Fair*, plus access to the archive!

**Subscribe now ▶**