



Sam Newman's Dog Sledding Diary

Friday 30th January- Tuesday 3rd February 2015

Day 1 - Friday 30th January 2015

Today is the day! Its 4:30am and I'm sat in a cab Heathrow bound.

I'm excited and nervous- I've been looking forward to it for ages but now I just feel so unprepared, it's the same feeling when you go on holiday and you're sure you've forgotten something.

We met at Heathrow and everyone is really lovely- all such endearing characters! Tony (ex-Newcastle footballer!!), 'Babs', Nicole, Catherine, Anne, Pat, Hilary, Vicky and Rosanna are the others on the trek. Then there is Gideon, the tour manager and Matt, the doctor. It was so lovely to meet them all for the first time and find out about them and their reasons for joining the trek. It's such a diverse group but so far everyone seems to gel really nicely!

We flew Heathrow to Stockholm and as we flew over you could see the frozen lakes and seas, it was really breath-taking. And didn't half let you know how cold it was going to be! Then Stockholm to Kiruna, where we landed in the snow! Amazingly the landing was a smooth one- really shows up our pilots when Heathrow closes for a mere dusting of snow!

Before even getting out the plane we were all donning our hats and gloves, and stepping outside you could feel the sudden nip of chill – it was -12 landing and only about to get colder!

We met Daniella and Remi, our local guides at the airport and they helped us with our bags into their trucks and took us to The Musher's Lodge where we got assigned rooms and could dump our stuff. We were given a very welcome hearty soup lunch and went down to the kit room. We got given our kit, huge winter snow boots, a snowsuit that resembles that of the Michelin man, leather gloves and a hat. All kitted up it feels roasting but I'm sure I'll be glad of the layers come tomorrow when we get going!

The lodge itself it beautiful, all wooden panels and traditional artwork (including some ... interesting taxidermy...). The surroundings are the best bit though- stunning snowy scenery!

After hauling our kit back to our rooms we went outside to meet the dogs- they are beautiful!! I can't wait to know which ones I'll be looking after tomorrow, I can already tell I'm going to become quite attached.

The snow is so thick here - we took a wander down to the start of the trail and stepping off the compacted snow track you fall into waist deep snow. I've never seen anything like it!

We are staying here in the lodge tonight before setting off tomorrow and will return for our last night and the celebratory meal.

After we'd all looked around, nosied at the dogs and got ourselves settled we were driven down to the Ice Hotel. It was beautifully crafted- some of the expensive rooms are incredible. It changes every year so even though Gideon had been the previous year it was all still new to him. We wandered round the hotel , tried the luxury rooms out for size and sneered slightly at the 'budget

rooms' (not that we could even afford those really!) and had a look inside the church. We also found an ice throne round the back – it was amazing! Slippy to get on but covered in reindeer hide so actually not that cold to sit on!

The ice bar was slightly underwhelming but only so I think because I expected it to be a lot better than the London one where as it was about the same just bigger. The cocktails were however very welcome, though not quite accustomed to the cold yet, we opted to the warmer inside heated bar after just one!

We headed back and enjoyed a lovely meal cooked for us in the lodge before most eventually splitting off to bed- it going to be a very exciting but long first day tomorrow! Myself, Babs, Matt, Hilary and Pat decided it would be a good idea to walk into the forest, following a trail we would take by dog sled in the morning. It was dark and quite scary, something out of a horror movie, however it was beautiful and breath-taking. We walked for about 30 minutes and turned back to find our way home. As I settled down to sleep, it feels so long ago that we were all strangers at Heathrow - so much has happened since! Here's hoping tomorrow goes well- I'm falling asleep to the sound of the dogs howling and the falling of snow- I can't wait!

Day 2 - Saturday 31st January 2015

Today was our first full day sledging, we were up bright and early ready to get kitted out and introduced to our dogs. I have Atna, Eric, Jamie and Jack. I think I might have already found a favourite in Eric. He's stunning, white and kind of toffee golden and he is a proper lad. All of my dogs are great – they are all very keen to say hello to me and love being petted when we come to a stop or they are on a break for lunch. Atna is the lady of the group, keeping the boys in check. Jamie and Jack are brothers and they interact so well, they snuggle together when they aren't running and you can tell they have been used to being with each other their whole lives.

We got them all strapped up and before anything could happen Pats dogs ran away. Daniella said this could happen, and that if we were to fall off we should grip on to prevent losing them. Apparently she has chased dogs for 40km to get them back before. Thankfully Remi was quick and jumped on the snowmobile after them. Daniella's husband Yan (who reminds me exactly of a slightly manlier version of the man at the trading post in frozen), followed soon after and Remi brought the sledge back and then took Gideon out to fetch the second snowmobile.

Then, all set up and ready to go again we were off! It's spectacular- whizzing through the snow. Just an expanse of trees and snow as far as the eye can see. Its really hard to properly convey how amazing it is. We went across two frozen lakes and that was the strangest thing. Everything tells you its not safe, that the ice won't be thick enough, but Gideon assured me that the thickness was about 3meters- that tells you enough about the kind of cold temperatures we are talking about here!

My dogs don't half poo! They stink! Also not entirely useful when they decide to stop to poop and then leave us playing catch up to catch the rest of the group. But I guess when they've got to go they've got to go!

The scenery is amazing though, and the snow so deep! Past my waist at some points today! And it falls in fully formed visible snowflakes, like the proper stereotypical shape but you can see them. Its stunning.

Beautiful as it was though it certainly wasn't easy! I fell off round a sharp bend however luckily managed to keep hold of the sled and jump back on, as I turned round to see if anybody saw, I watch Nicole take a slightly harder fall and having to let go off her sled, she screamed "Sam catch the dogs" something I learned to get quite used to during the day!

We got to the lodge we are staying in and it is beautiful. So lovely and cosy with the fire and the candles! I could see myself getting used to this! There's no electricity or running water though so the facilities are very basic. There are lots of jobs to do right from the off. We have to get the fire going in the lodge and light the candles then there is water to collect from the stream -200L for a morning and a night all collected with a bucket into containers then brought up the hill by sled! Then the wood needs to be chopped into large sizes for the fire, smaller for the stove and even smaller yet for kindling. Then the dog food needs to be chopped and then melted to feed them. Once all of this is done and the dogs are settled in their kennels we can all come in and relax. I dabbled with all of the jobs and started to really appreciate the amount of work that has to be done in this type of setting.

When we had done all of that we got the sauna fired up, got changed into our swimming stuff and headed in. It was wonderful to warm up – and to try an authentic Scandinavian sauna. I didn't realise how simple they actually are to run! You need boiling water and then fire heating coals. It was lit by candles so very simple to maintain in such a basic place- a nice little luxury! We sat in there for a while, then when you are really hot you take the plunge. You run outside and throw yourself head first into the snow! Its like a plunge pool concept but a lot colder! It's a rush of adrenaline though! It was great! Makes you feel a nice tingly warm when you get back in the sauna and very refreshing after such a hard day! I did it twice.

Definitely warmed me through for tonight – all ready for tomorrow! More sledding and hopefully no falling- let's make that the aim for the second day!

Day 3 - Sunday 1st February 2015

After a good sleep we were up again to start a new day! Last night wasn't as cold as I imagined. I definitely over layered to go to bed, I strapped myself too tightly into the sleeping bag too and got minorly panicked in my half sleepy state when I got hot and stuck and couldn't get out. Not something you expect in the arctic! But it was a good sleep all the same! I was up nice and early to feed the dogs (giving mine a friendly portion). Everyone else was getting stuck in to the other jobs, we were like proper little community already. Once all the jobs were done, we got our day bags sorted, the dogs harnessed up and we were off.

Today was amazing, so tough but amazing! The route was a lot harder- we went through forest and hilly, mountain land. It was a lot of throwing about and falling off, and being dragged behind. All sorts! Everyone fell off at least once!

For lunch we stopped and made a fire pit in the snow. Firstly Gideon and I walked a circle in opposite ways to make the outside then with Nicole's help we walked into the middle and compacted all the snow down so we had a circle in the snow. Then I used the lid of the food box to dig right down to the ground in the centre of the circle. This was where we made the fire. Then we all sat around the edge making our seats in the snow that formed around us. It was chilly but actually surprisingly

comfortable. The only issue was making the fire stay alight. The wind caught it and so it took a while for it to much more than smoke profusely. It eventually did heat up though and we made hot dogs.

The temperature seemed to drop a lot though and we were all freezing. The second half of the day was tougher. The wind picked up and as we went through more exposed land it seemed to catch a lot more and stick around.

During a downhill part through the woods, I decided to hold back and gain as much speed as possible, stupid move as there was a sharp corner I didn't anticipate, my dogs turned I didn't, I managed to wrap myself round a tree and hit my back quite badly, I managed to brush myself off though and laugh about it! It was all go, and our Dogs really have worked hard! When we got back to the lodge we did all of our jobs again and headed back to the Sauna to warm up!

By the time all that was done it was tea time and now we are all sat cosy by the fire again playing Charades. It was great fun. It's amazing how little you miss entertainment when you have a big group and can make your own. Babs and Nicole didn't quite get the concept of the game they got syllables confused with letters – It had been a long day in their defence! Rosanna was hilarious, she was given 'The Only Way is Essex' by Gideon and after a 'pfft that's easy' proceeded to struggle for about 15 minutes in getting us to guess! It was such a lovely way to spend the night – it's such an easy group to have a laugh with!

Tomorrow is our last day of sledging properly- I can't believe it gone so quickly! I've loved doing all the little jobs and bits and pieces! It's freezing and testing and I ache from the standing, my crash, and the cold! But it's an amazing experience!

Day 4 - Monday 2nd February 2015

Today was another busy one!

We were up, repacked, and harnessed after jobs and breakfast and ready to head off!

We were heading back to the Musher's Lodge today so it was a long day! The first part of the trail was okay, then we headed out onto a large exposed lake. About 5km across we stopped on a small forested island for lunch- and it came at the perfect time! Part of our trail had disappeared due to heavy snowfall and so we had had to turn around mid- morning and head a slightly different way. One of Daniella's dogs was injured and so she was carrying him in her sled, meaning she was one dog down with more weight. As a result our group was moving a lot slower meaning the trail took longer and especially on the exposed lake, got a lot colder.

I was so cold! The wind went straight through me. Eventually we reached our lunch spot, a small tea pea on a remote island on the lake. We quickly got the fire going warmed up our soup and refuelled.

The second half of the day wasn't too bad. We ended up sledging the last bit in the dark again and that was tough. It's so hard to see what is in front of you and my head torch was dying. By the end of the day I was glad to hop off my sled really – it had been a long and cold one and my snood had frozen solid!

When we got back we all enjoyed well-earned showers, though I have to admit it wasn't quite as satisfying as a sauna! Yans parents cooked us a lovely three course meal and we took sooooo many group pictures – it seemed to go on forever! And of course Babs got his tripod out...

After dinner we really demonstrated how we had bonded and dropped our inhibitions as a group... Kelly suggested a game where we each put three words in a basket. Could be any words at all- rude or clean. Then the basket got passed around and we picked them out and described them without saying the words. This round too ages as there were so many words so we skipped the second round where there are only three words to describe it and went straight to the miming round. This was the point at which all the clean ones were taken out... and Myself and Catherine added a lot more rude ones in. It was absolutely hilarious watching everyone act them all out – Tony rolled all over the floor acting 'Auto-cannibalism' (which Matt later explained was not sexual as we had interpreted but in fact just people eating themselves...) and Rosanna bouncing around like a frog trying to work out 'froggy style'. Nicole even gave herself a camel toe in front of 12 people who had been strangers to her just a few days before and she was a 'prop' for Gideons miming of Vajazzle. It was certainly an entertaining end to the trip!

I feel like we've all really achieved something in the last few days. I can't believe we only met properly on Friday morning – I feel like I've known everyone for years! It's been great fun and a fantastic group! Definitely a challenge and a half but so worth it for the money we have all raised for our charities, you can tell how much it means to everyone. I'll miss it all but I am quite looking forward to the warmth at home!

Day 5 - Tuesday 3rd February 2015

Wow, I am so gutted the trip is over! It has been absolutely fantastic!

This morning we were up bright and early and packed and ready to leave. We rode to the airport on dog sledges and this time we were passengers. However I was too heavy so I had to take a snow mobile, which was a nice treat and was a lot of fun, the thing absolutely flew across the snow, It was by far one of the best airport transfers I've ever had!

It was so sad to say goodbye to Remi and Daniella and the dogs – it feels like we have been away doing this for longer than just a few days!

Our Kiruna flight was delayed due to a technical issue with 'one of the tree springs holding the frame' – which sounded a little alarming, especially with Tony elaborating on final destination style horror stories behind me! But we were up off the ground eventually – all be it over an hour late and made it to our connecting Stockholm flight. Though only just! Kelly got lost and at one point it looked as though she might get left behind!

It was sad saying bye at baggage reclaim- we've all agreed on the 25th of April to be a meet up day to catch up and see each other again.

What a trip, what an experience!!!