

A boom like thunder and a sudden shudder that jiggled my orange juice told me that here, north of the Bering Strait, near the top of Alaska, we had entered pack ice for the first time. People dropped cutlery and ran to the windows and the open decks. Around us was new ice, perhaps a yard thick, and not tightly packed, so the I/B (Ice Breaker) *Kapitan Khlebnikov* shoved it impatiently aside, surrendering not a knot. It was fascinating to lean over the bow and watch the ship at work on the frozen ocean – a fascination that would provide hypnotic hours of entertainment over the coming two weeks – but eventually people returned to breakfast. I had not finished my coffee when an announcement from the bridge sent people scurrying once again: “Polar bear to starboard!”

Everyone on board was anxious to see a polar bear, and already our first was in close range, stalking a walrus to boot. Captain Vasil'yev brought the ship to a halt in a white plain that stretched to all horizons, and we watched the magnificent animal through binoculars. The walrus, thanks to our interruption, had fled. The bear, muscles rippling under a shimmering coat, trotted away from the massive steel intruder, and the Captain brought up power again, carving a path through the ice in slow pursuit, tossing up chunks of ice the size of refrigerators.

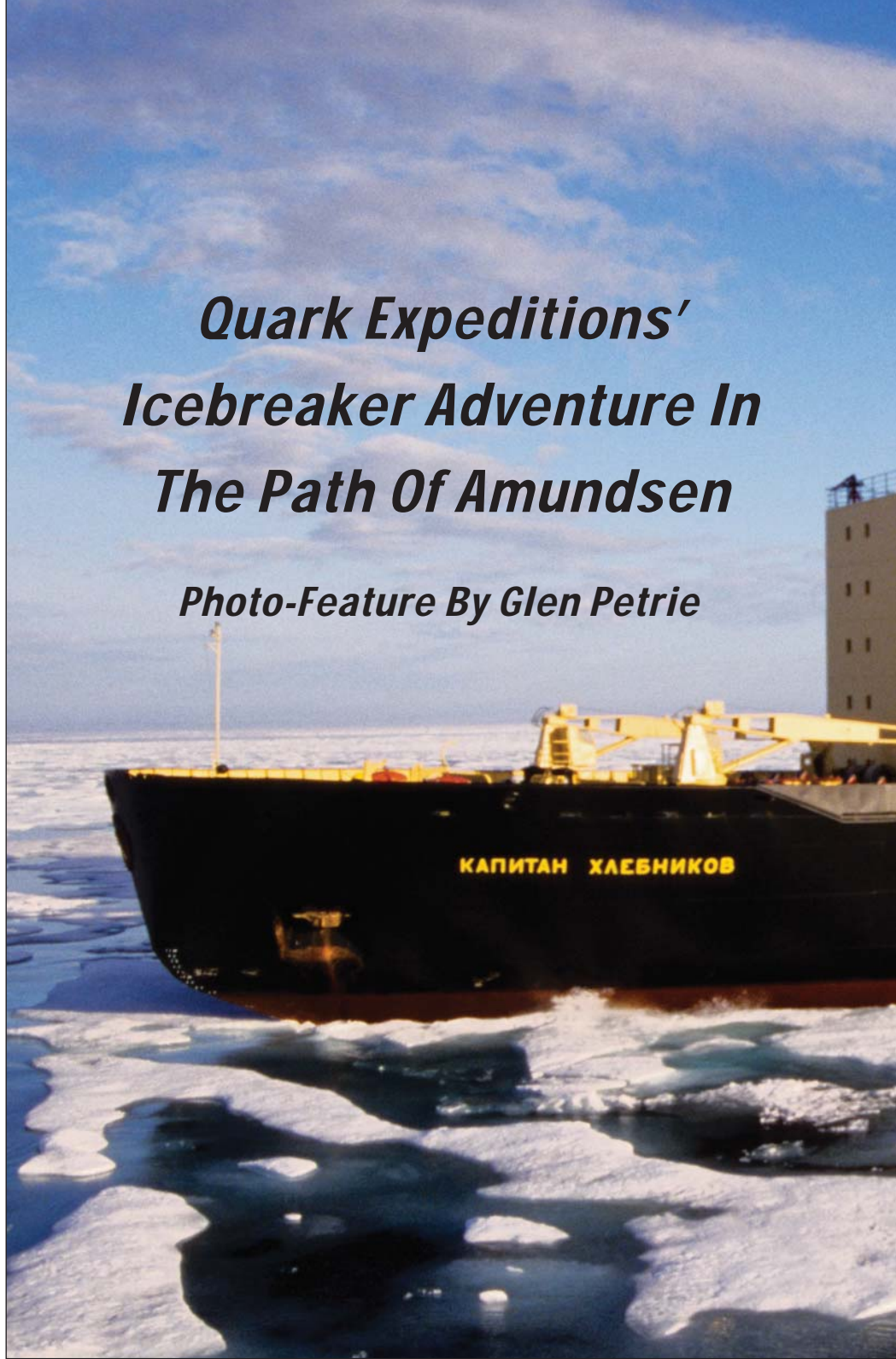
Not for the first time on this unique voyage I felt incredulous that I was actually here. With 60 other passengers, mostly retired high-achieving professionals from all over the world, I had embarked on a crossing of the famed Northwest Passage, the shortcut to the Orient sought by Europeans since Elizabethan times. The first successful crossing by ship would not occur until Norwegian Roald Amundsen set out in 1903. We retraced his approximate route 100 years later, in the reverse, west to east, from Siberia to eastern Canada. We would complete the journey in much less time – just under 3 weeks vs. Amundsen's 3 years – and in far greater comfort.

This voyage, and other polar expeditions just as extraordinary, is made possible by the vision of a former president of Salen-Lindblad Cruising, Lars Wikander. Salen-Lindblad operated the first tourist transit of the Northwest Passage, and when Wikander

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Quark Expeditions' Icebreaker Adventure In The Path Of Amundsen

Photo-Feature By Glen Petrie



NORTHWES



Arctic ice is no problem for the reinforced double hull and powerful diesel engines of the I/B Kapitan Khlebnikov.

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started his own expedition cruise company, Quark Expeditions, he saw opportunity in using Russia's decommissioned fleet of high-tech icebreakers for adventure cruises in the polar regions. Started in 1991, his company now charters several Russian ships for exotic journeys to the North Pole, Greenland, and Antarctica.

The modern, Finnish-built *Kapitan Khlebnikov* is a diesel-electric escort class icebreaker, built with a large accommodation superstructure intended for inter-village passengers as the ship plied the remote north coast of Russia, keeping shipping lines open from Vladivostok to Murmansk. Though

I was very impressed with spotlessly maintained vessel in all respects. Her cabins, renovated by Quark, are basic but roomy and comfortable, all with large windows that open, private facilities, a writing desk, large closets for winter clothes and two single beds, one of which converts to a day-time sofa. The ship has a comfortable bar, a library, a lounge, a lecture hall with the latest audio-visual equipment, a rudimentary gym and sauna, indoor sea-water pool (heated to only 70°), and two dining rooms that seat all passengers at once. Food is excellently prepared by four Austrian chefs and assistants, served by friendly Russian, German and Austrian wait staff. English is the primary language used.

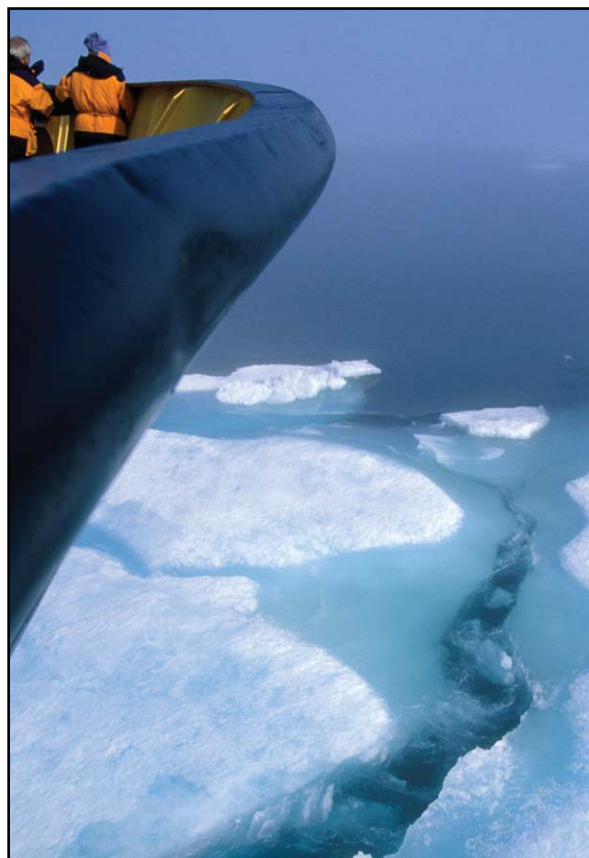
But it is the ship's technical abilities that impress most. Powered by six massive 4000hp diesel engines, which drive six electric motors which turn three hardened steel screws, the ship is practically unstoppable. She can cruise at 20 knots in open water, and smash through first-year ice at one- to nine-knots. In ice greater than 10 feet thick, she makes progress by reversing and ramming. Her hull is specially designed to ride up onto the ice, using her own weight to break it. Her hull is coated in a special polymer that reduces friction, and even features an air curtain system in which air at great pressure is forced through underwater vents to help push the ice aside. The ship is capable of breaking ice while in reverse; her heavy-duty 20-ton screws can chew ice like a Cuisinart.

The bridge is open to all passengers at all times, and everyone has a chance to visit the engine room. Quark even arranges for a pair of Bell Ranger helicopters to ride along on the aft flight deck, for flight-seeing and shore excursions in places where it is otherwise impossible for humans to visit.

The journey was fascinating. More than just ice, the Northwest Passage presents a wealth of history, seldom-visited geography, and rare wildlife. A staff of expert lecturers on board helped us appreciate all we would experience.

Our first landfall after leaving Siberia was a tiny island off the coast of Yukon Territory, Herschel Island, discovered in 1826 by British explorer John Franklin – who would later disappear with 125 men in an epic adventure that is perhaps the greatest saga of the Arctic. Though Quark markets the voyage as “The Amundsen Route”, it is actually reminders of Franklin we would discover most.

Franklin came to Herschel Island and indeed as far west as Alaska by land, not by



The two-inch-thick hull can break 12-foot-thick ice.

sea. In two overland treks, he mapped parts of the Arctic coast and filled in pieces of the puzzle that was the mysterious Northwest Passage – which, for all anyone knew at the time, might not even exist.

Much later, in 1845, he would lead the grandest of all Northwest Passage expeditions, with two large naval ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, 128 men, and provisions for three years. Not one ever returned home.

After the first year of that sea voyage passed, Franklin's wife, the redoubtable Lady Franklin, pressed the navy to launch a search, but they declined. The expedition, after all, was prepared for a three-year voyage. But in the second year, even the navy began to get nervous, and sent a party, which found nothing. After year three and

still no sign of the explorers, other expeditions were launched, many with Lady Franklin herself as the driving force behind them. She enlisted not only Britons but Americans in the hunt. Over a decade some 50-plus expeditions set out, often themselves getting lost, requiring searchers for the searchers. The Arctic had never seen such traffic. One side benefit is that the explorers mapped virtually the entire unknown Arctic in their search for some sign of Franklin and his men.

Lady Franklin, and many others, believed her husband was still alive. But where?

We came to Franklin Bay, also found by Franklin during one of his overland explorations, on the uninhabited coast of the Northwest Territories, and helicoptered ashore for a bit of hiking across a vast, treeless landscape. We spied caribou and grizzly.

Then it was into Coronation Gulf, sandwiched between mainland Canada and Victoria Island, and into the narrow Dease Strait. Using the helicopters for reconnaissance, a herd of Musk Oxen were found, and we landed by zodiac for a remarkably close look at these unusual and fearsome beasts.

Franklin knew this channel from his earlier treks, and with his 1845 sea expedition was in fact under orders to find a way to it from Lancaster Sound, which is the portal leading in from the Atlantic. That area was virtually the only uncompleted link, because ice always hampered the way. Lady Franklin for years insisted her husband was there, but year after year ice prevented ships from going in to search. Lady Franklin was right. In spring of 1846, the way was unusually clear of ice, and Franklin's *Erebus* and *Terror* sailed blissfully south. Yet in subsequent years, ice frustrated any attempts by searchers to follow him.

It didn't stop us, though we soon learned how difficult that ice could be. Pushed into the narrow maze of channels by strong currents from the Beaufort Sea, thick old ice becomes tightly packed from shore to shore. Even the *Kapitan Khlebnikov* had difficulty getting us through, often coming to a complete stop, reversing, and surging ahead with full power to ride up upon the 10-foot-thick ice and push it underwater. Each 100 yards was hard won.

And then we broke into open water in astonishing 60 degree sunshine and reached Cape Felix, on King William Island -- where ice had just as suddenly beset Franklin's *Erebus* and *Terror*, crushing and sinking them. Using zodiacs, we went ashore to a flat, unremarkable shingle with remarkable historic significance.



The comfortable library on the Kaitan Khlebnikov is well stocked with books on the Arctic.

After Franklin artifacts began showing up in the hands of local Inuit, a man named M'Clintock – again sponsored by Lady Franklin – led a small search party using ships and sleds. He came upon a human skeleton, exactly here, in 1859. Then the remains of a sledge. And finally a cairn, inside which were two brief notes: Franklin had died here, one declared, without giving the cause of death. The other men, according to the scribbled documents, suffering from scurvy, would try to stock sledges and travel overland to Inuit villages in the south. They never made it.

At least the mystery was finally solved.

It is possible they completed that final, frozen link in the Northwest Passage on foot. We'll never know. Amundsen would take the honors 50 years later, sailing through in his small fishing boat, the *Gjoa*.

The *Kapitan Khlebnikov* made it through. In fact, no other ship has completed more crossings. We explored Lancaster Sound and backtracked to Resolute Bay, where a chartered plane arrived to take us home. But not before stopping at Beechey Island.

We had seen whales, narwhals, polar bear, seals, walrus, musk ox, and countless other

natural wonders. We had trod the footsteps of history, visited remote Inuit villages, and experienced landscapes seen by few other humans.

But for many Quark passengers, Beechey Island provided a most poignant highlight. Here, on one of the coldest, loneliest, most desolate beaches in the world, lie the graves of three of Franklin's men. They had died during their first over-winter here. It was a somber visit, and filled me with the sense of wonder at men with the courage to explore such wild, unforgiving locales without the comforts and capabilities of a *Kapitan Khlebnikov*.

I felt compelled to my own small act of courage, and stripped for a numbing swim in the frigid waters of Erebus and Terror Bay.

Quark Expeditions offers a series of adventure cruises in the Russian, Canadian, and Greenland Arctic during summer, and several Antarctic voyages from November to March. The 19-day 2004 Northwest Passage voyage begins July 26, with fares starting at \$12,150, double occupancy.

For more information contact your travel agent or Quark Expeditions Inc. (Cruise Travel Magazine) 980 Post Rd., Darien, CT 06820; call 1-800-356-5699; or log on to www.quarkexpeditions.com. **CT**



Passengers land at remote Beechey Island, paying homage to Franklin's men at their gravesides.