



Photos: Thomas E Muller ©

Northern Exposure

Armed with a trusty GPS, Thomas E Muller boards a nuclear-powered Russian icebreaker and heads for the North Pole in a lifelong quest to savour every single slice of planet earth.

The nuclear-powered Russian icebreaker ploughs its way through the 4-metre-thick ice. Standing at the bow of this 23,445-ton, red-and-black behemoth, I can hardly grasp the 75,000-h.p. brute force behind its steel plate knifing through sea ice that spreads out as a single, desolate sheet in every direction, all the way to the horizon.

The constant grinding, groaning, cracking noise of compressed ice finally snapping under the monster's weight and being heaved aside, to the left and right of its path, is sheer forward power I have never witnessed before.

Glancing back toward the ship's stern, I briefly see a narrow ribbon of liquid water before the multi-year sea ice closes in again behind the ship. The ice-encrusted Arctic Ocean is not disturbed for very long.

I hold tightly onto my GPS receiver strapped around my neck, my hand trembling with excitement as I trust this treasured piece of satellite-based technology to tell me exactly when the moment has arrived.

It shows 89 degrees 58 minutes North. In just a fraction of a degree, we will be at the geographic North Pole – the mathematical point around which the planet spins on its ancient axis, creating night and day for all those living below this latitude and giving rhythm to the entire human race.

My heart races. Eighty-nine degrees, 59 minutes, 42 seconds. Every expeditioner it seems is up on the bridge, camera in hand, straining to catch the moment on the ship's GPS when it reads precisely 90° North. I avoid the bridge crowd and stand in the freezing wind outside, on top deck, monitoring my hand-held Garmin GPS receiver.

Then, the magic moment I had come for, all the way from Australia: 90° 00.000' N. "North Pole!" I cry out, my free arm with clenched fist shooting straight up, as if to extend the Earth's rotational axis by 2 feet. A woman hears me over the howling wind and runs over to point her camera at my GPS readout.

But in a splinter of a second it's all over. The North Pole ice beneath the ship is a constantly shifting mass driven by ocean currents. Locating the North Pole is a fleeting experience and must be savoured in the mind, long after the exuberance of that rarest of GPS readouts. You've been there; you've done it; you're in your own, highly personal record book.

Upon reaching that magical geographic point in the Arctic ice cap, Captain Alexander Lembrik orders the icebreaker to a safe spot where it can be moored in the thick ice and the engines shut down. No point in dropping anchor here; the sea bed is 15,000 feet (4,500m) down.

I had started this journey in Brisbane, three weeks and 23,500 kilometres earlier, having booked the voyage through Wild Earth Travel, a division of Heritage Expeditions, in Christchurch, New Zealand.

It was planned in order to get me one step closer to achieving my travel goal of experiencing every one of the planet's 54 slices. What's a slice, and what are the 54 slices? It is my geographic invention for getting to know planet Earth's every aspect—cultural and physical.

If you divide the planet longitudinally, by creating 10-degree-wide slices of the Earth's surface, you will get 36 slices going right round the globe – 0° to 10°E, 10°E to 20°E, 20°E to 30°E, and so forth, until you have come full-circle with the 36th slice: 10°W to 0°. To me, each longitudinal slice represents a different sampling of the planet's human civilisation and culture.

Similarly, if you divide the planet into latitudinal bands, each 10° wide, you will get 18 of these bands, going from South Pole to North Pole: 90°S to 80°S, 80°S to 70°S, etcetera – until you're at the 18th band, which is 80°N to 90°N. I regard each 10-degree-wide band as a unique aspect of the physical planet—geologically, climatically and in its distinct flora and fauna.

Put the two together, and you get 54 slices (36 plus 18). I was still a few slices short of my travel goal and the target, this time, was to visit the band 80°N to 90°N.

In late July, I flew from Brisbane to Dubai and spent a week exploring each of the seven United Arab Emirates, in temperatures that hovered in the high-40s Celsius.

Next, it was on to Moscow (via Frankfurt) where I took a few days to explore the Russian capital, before being flown on a two-hour charter flight to the port of Murmansk, the world's largest city north of the Arctic Circle (pop. 370,000).

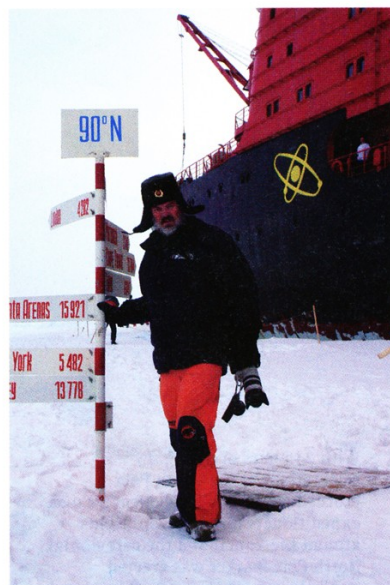
On August 1 we boarded the Yamal, a nuclear-powered Russian icebreaker which is normally used to keep the Barents Sea coastline navigable for other ships in winter. It was her 38th voyage to the North Pole with a Russian crew of 150.

About half of the 98 expeditioners were aged over 50. Among the 38 women and 60 men, half were Germans and the remainder consisted of 11 other nationalities. Only two Australians were on this voyage.

The voyage to the Pole is a two-week affair, with brief landings on a few of the islands of Russia's Franz Josef Land – an ice-covered archipelago of some 200 islands – on the way to the Pole and on the return voyage to Murmansk.

Our first landing was at Cape Flora, on Northbrook Island, the southernmost part of the group, with the ship's helicopter being used to fly passengers, about 12 at a time, from ship to shore and, later, back to ship.

Glancing back toward the ship's stern, I briefly see a narrow ribbon of liquid water before the multi-year sea ice closes in again behind the ship. The ice-encrusted Arctic Ocean is not disturbed for very long.



North Pole Marker planted by crew

Precarious Helicopter used for landings at Cape Flora, Franz Josef Land



With 24 hours of daylight, celebrations at the North Pole proceeded briskly. The helicopter took expeditioners for photo-op flights around the Yamal and the ceremonial North Pole marker was erected (with the sea ice in constant motion, there cannot be a permanent marker at the Pole).

Down on the ice, the crew busily barbecued meat and served hot soup, a dozen picnic tables were laid out, and the most daring passengers took polar plunges in a water lead created in the ice for this purpose. By now, the wind had picked up and the ceremonial flags of the 12 nations fluttered furiously in the bone-chilling strong breeze.

All the while, The Carpenters' song, "Your Love's Put Me at the Top of the World" played over and over in my head. So, I set this insistent tune to different words:

I'm at the top of the world
And looking down on creation,
And the only explanation I can find,
Is the ship that I'm on
Has a hull that's very strong;
Yamal's put me at the top of the world.

After spending 24 hours at the Pole, everything was dismantled and stowed, and we headed south again to a landing, two days later, at Cape Fligeli on Rudolf Island in Franz Josef Land. At 81°51' N, this is the northernmost tip of the European continent. And it has to be one of the most desolate and barren places on Earth.

We made two other landings, one at Cape Norvegia, Jackson Island, where Norwegian explorers Fridtjof Nansen and Hjalmar Johansen had been forced to winter in 1895, after failing to reach the North Pole on foot. The other was at Cape Trieste on Champ Island (80°38' N), home of the perfectly spherical stones and boulders.

On August 13 we were back in the port of Murmansk and disembarking for the return flight to Moscow. As the loaded bus drove through Murmansk on its way to the airport, I gazed out my window and reflected on all that I had seen and heard and felt.

One usually doesn't voyage to the geographic North Pole to see scenery and enjoy the wildlife. Except for a few polar bears and sea birds along the way to the Pole and back, we saw very little wildlife.

One travels to the North Pole to set foot on a unique geographic boundary where you cannot go any further north, there is no east or west, and every direction is south from here.

It's a pretty special place, spinning on an invisible point and permanently clad in white, like a Russian ballerina in silent slow motion.●



Party Neptune celebrations on the icebreaker



Cape Fligeli Europe's most northerly point



Hearty Hot soup served at the North Pole



contents

- 18 Space Age** How on earth does an Adelaide boy end up a NASA astronaut? Abby Campbell speaks to Andy Thomas and discovers an intelligent, modest man for whom the sky's the limit.
- 22 Where's My Empty Nest?** Clinical psychologist, Amanda Gordon, explains why your twenty-something children are still living at home, and how to deal with the deafening silence when they do leave.
- 24 Budget Blues** The Rudd Government handed down its first federal budget in May. What's in it for the over-50s? The National Seniors policy office reports from Canberra.
- 28 The Pioneer** Gap years are a given for today's youth. But imagine heading across the continents in the 'sixties. Gerald Davis, an overland travel pioneer did just that. London to Bombay, he shares the adventure.

- 32 Eco Spin** Canny marketers are catching on to growing environmental awareness amongst consumers, and some of them are cashing in. Don't fall for the green-spin, warns ACCC chairman, Graeme Samuel.
- 44 Just Perfect** With perfect Margaret River waves and some of Australia's best food, life doesn't get any better for Cape Lodge's head chef. Tony Howell offers us a taste: seared scallops and roast venison.
- 50 Northern Exposure** Armed with his trusty GPS, Thomas E Muller boards a nuclear-powered Russian icebreaker and heads for the North Pole in a personal quest to experience every inch of the planet.

Cover: **Long Way from Home** Australian NASA astronaut, Andy Thomas, suited up and ready to launch.

every issue

Executive Diary	9
Letters	11
First Up	14
World Watch	16
Working for You – Policy	35
Working For You – Benefits	37
Health	41
Events	56
Garden	58
Books	61
Movies	62
Agony Planner	65
Crossword	68
Compton	70

editor



When NASA granted *50 something* an interview with astronaut Andy Thomas, I almost fell off my perch.

A ping in my Inbox. A message arriving at dusk, days after

it was sent due to downed telephone lines.

Here was one of the highest achieving Australians, no, *people*, of our time and he was willing to talk to us!

NASA's instructions were clear: Andy would be available tomorrow only; 7.30am on the dot; and for no more than 15 minutes.

"Goodness, is he about to head off into space?" I wondered.

As I assessed the situation I felt the panic rise. There I was sitting thousands of kilometres away on a Pacific island without tape recorder, speaker-phone or even a back door (but that's another story).

My message to *50 something's* Brisbane headquarters was hasty and garbled.

NASA. Astronaut. Thomas. Andy. Anyone? Anyone? Now! Now! Now!

I could sense my journalists rolling their eyes: Crazy woman! And we thought she'd gone on holiday!

They were snowed under with media, a *7.30 Report* crew was arriving at 8am, the CEO needed briefing, and there was no time to prepare. Protestations, tears and then all went silent. I waited with bated breath.

Lunchtime the next day I tentatively fired off an email, daring to ask: "Sooo... how did it go?"

The unflappable Abby Campbell, all of 24 and hard to impress, had risen to the challenge.

She was excited. Andy was lovely. He was intelligent, open, engaging and down-to-earth, she said. And they'd talked well over the time limit.

Whoever would have thought? Read the interview on page 18.

Sarah Saunders

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contributors



Gerald Davis was inspired to email us after reading the "great journeys"-themed Feb/Mar edition of *50 something* featuring Vietnam War photographer, Tim Page. Gerald did his first overland trip from London to Bombay in 1966 and went on to work for Penn in the early 1970s. He set up Penn's South American operation, driving the first group of passengers himself from Rio to Lima in 1971.



Thomas Muller is exploiting his retirement years travelling to the Earth's remotest and least accessible places. His latest adventure was a 7-continents-in-80-days journey around the world. Thomas is a National Seniors life member and before retirement was a professor studying and writing about the travel motives of seniors and retirees.



Australian Competition and Consumer Commission chairman, Graeme Samuel, has been president of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, a Macquarie Bank executive, National Competition Council president, Australian Opera chairman, and an AFL commissioner. As ACCC head, Samuel is committed to open and fair trading.



Amanda Gordon is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Sydney, a well-known broadcaster and author of *Amanda Gordon Talks about Relationships*. She is also president of the Australian Psychological Society which represents over 16000 psychologists throughout Australia. Read more about Amanda at www.armchairpsychology.com.au



Abby Campbell, a member of the National Seniors communications team, is responsible, amongst other things, for the weekly *Connect* E-newsletter. She has a Bachelor of Journalism and experience in magazine work. Abby has a passion for print media and learning languages and devotes her time to the written word in all its forms.

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