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## "Character building"

Gavin Kemp  
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Allot of things come along in life that test us, most come without warning and few we would want to repeat. Usually we choose holidays that allow us to relax and to feel grateful not to be at work – but there comes a time when this has to change. Safe is easy – it's also dull!

In a sub zero environment with a handful of other people, 30+ huskies, and 5 days ahead of you with none of the creature comforts that come with 21st Century living, the journey you are about to make is more than as described on the web site.

The easy bit is to tell you the number of kilometres, how many nights you will camp in sub zero temperatures and show you pictures of bright blue sunny Swedish skies – that gets you there, but it does not get you through it. When you are alone on your sled, almost silently gliding through forests and across frozen lakes on day 1, despite having all the correct equipment, the notion that there are 4 more days to come is daunting. In a location where there is no mobile signal in a crisis there is no such thing as quick help. As an individual and as a group you are almost alone.

Getting through the week is both a physical and a fascinating mental process. The physical bit takes you through the how to operate the sled, how to keep it on an even keel when it acquires a mind of its own as you become tired later in the day, and how to bring it back together when all goes wrong. Then you have to survive the climate. The bright Swedish sun is warn in the morning, and when it continues through the day is a pleasure, but when the snow is coming at you sideways or you're soaked because of the rain, this is a whole different mental approach. In these conditions the frozen snow on the surface of the lake becomes slush and rather than glide sled sinks into the surface. This brings the 6 dogs to something less than walking pace, they struggle and you have no real choice but to push to assist the dogs. This is tough and the only way out is to keep going. Exactly the same can be said for climbing through mountain tracks where it is simply too steep for the dogs to pull your additional 65+ kg in addition to the 100kg of the sled. Physically this is not easy. Then there is dealing with the cold – this is a matter of planning and organisation, too many clothes, too few, too much in the sleeping bag with you at night, or too little for the morning. It's as easy to be too hot as too cold and then you have to make sure clothes that need to be dry are!

To make the physical side work there has to be a mental process – a process that deals with physical demands. The mental process not only has to sort out the immediate, it also has to make sure that the next 3, 4 or 5 days will come through too. This has to work on a number of levels, whilst dealing with a wide range of new things to learn, along with understanding how the mental process itself

works from way out of the normal comfort zone and bringing it all together in one go.

In this environment you find out what you can do, in reality there is not too much of a choice, and if there was to opt out would be to miss out.

What you can say with confidence is that once you have got through the first day and proven to yourself that you can, the next day outside your comfort zone is easier. By the final day your are itching for the next challenge to come so you can push a different boundary. Every day is different – every day becomes exciting.

At the end of the week you have a clear mind, you feel physically more fit than you have for a long time, you have pushed the boundaries and not actually found the limits – limits that at the beginning of the week you thought you knew.

At the end of the week the feeling of being refreshed is incredible – in no small part this is brought about because the a week on the extreme dog sled tour asks questions that in reality you don't have a choice but to answer, and in giving those answers the holiday affects you, and it is the effects of this test that builds character – at every level.

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