

Polar Explorers



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There have been many famous polar explorers throughout history, including:



Sir Ranulph Fiennes



Robert Falcon Scott



Roald Amundsen



Ernest Shackleton

Throughout history, people have strived to explore new places and make new discoveries. Early polar explorers were looking for the North-West Passage – a short-cut for traders. Later in history, explorers began the race to the North and South Poles. More recently, explorers have set even more dangerous challenges for their polar exploration.



What is the Antarctic?

The Antarctic is the polar region at the southernmost part of the Earth. The South Pole is the point at the southernmost part of the Earth. Antarctica is an enormous continent. Britain could fit into it more than 50 times! More than 99% of it is covered in ice. In places, this ice is more than three miles thick! It is windy and extremely cold. No people live there permanently and there are no life forms at all except from around the coast.

What is the Arctic?

The Arctic is the polar region at the northernmost part of the Earth. The North Pole is the point at the northernmost part of the Earth.

Unlike the South Pole (which is on the continent of Antarctica), there is no land beneath the North Pole. Instead, the North Pole is found on top of a floating Arctic ice sheet. During the summer months, this ice sheet melts to half of its size.



Robert Falcon Scott

Captain Robert Falcon Scott was born in Devon in 1868 and became an officer in the Royal Navy. He led two expeditions to Antarctica. The first took place between 1901 and 1904.

In 1910, he sailed out for his second voyage there. The purpose of the expeditions was to find out more about the animals, the weather and the land of Antarctica. Scott and his fellow explorers also wanted to be the first to reach the South Pole. Scott set out on his journey with the latest technology, including mechanical sledges.



When the technology failed, he had to rely on the few dogs he took in case of such an emergency. Most of the men pulled the sledges by themselves, which was exhausting! They slept in sleeping bags made from reindeer fur. However, they became wet and cold because the floors of their tents could not keep the snow out. They also struggled with frostbite and snow blindness. When they reached the South Pole on 17-18th January 1912, they discovered that a team of Norwegian explorers had arrived before them.



Scott and his companions had to travel back 800 miles through freezing temperatures and ice. They had a disastrous time with blizzards, gale force winds, poor clothing and little food. Eventually they all died. Many months later, a search party found their bodies, wrapped them in their tent and buried them in the snow.



Ernest Shackleton

Ernest Shackleton was born in Ireland in 1874. His father was a doctor and wanted Ernest to follow in his footsteps. However, Ernest had a different idea about what he wanted to do – he wanted to be an explorer. At the age of 16, Shackleton joined the Merchant Navy and became a sailor. By the age of 18, he had been promoted to first mate (the officer second in command to the master of the ship).

He was able to fulfil his dreams of having adventures and sailing all over the world. Shackleton wanted to be the first person to reach the South Pole. In 1901, he went on his first Antarctic expedition. He joined another explorer, Robert Scott, and he came closer to the South Pole than anyone had before him. Unfortunately, he became ill, and had to return before reaching the South Pole. Shackleton's second expedition was in 1907. This time he was a leader on a ship called Nimrod.

Despite terrible weather conditions, Shackleton and his team managed to come within 180km of the South Pole before turning back on 9th January, 1909. On his return, he was regarded as a hero. He received a medal from the Royal Geographical Society. He also received a knighthood and became Sir Ernest Shackleton. In 1914, he began an exploration on a ship called Endurance. In January, the ship became trapped in the ice.

Shackleton and his men abandoned the ship, and had to live on the ice for several months. In the spring, the ice began to thaw and Shackleton's men were able to board small boats and head for Elephant Island. When they got there, nobody was on the island. Shackleton and five men took a lifeboat to South Georgia. Once they arrived, they were able to organise a rescue mission for the other men. Shackleton and his men were on the ice for almost two years but thankfully, no one died. During an expedition, Shackleton died from a heart attack in January 1922. He is buried in South Georgia (a small, remote Atlantic island).



Roald Amundsen

On 16th July, 1872 Roald Amundsen was born in Borge, Norway. He studied medicine, he but dreamed of exploring the world. He acquired various positions as a crewmate on expeditions to the polar regions, including a Belgian expedition. On these expeditions, he learnt a lot, for example, animal skin is a better insulator than woollen coats. He also learnt the importance of preparation and maintaining high spirits, especially during the long winter days.

Amundsen had a thirst for exploration and set his sights on reaching the North Pole with his ship, the Fram. The Fram was a ship specially built for ice travel - it had a round bottom and its width was one-third of its length. The ship was designed to withstand the pressure of the ice crushing the ship. When Amundsen heard that Robert Peary had reached the North Pole, he continued his preparations but set his sights on reaching the South Pole rather than the North Pole. He told no one of his new goals, except for his brother.

Roald Amundsen

They departed Norway in June 1910 with enough supplies for 2 years and 100 sled dogs. They arrived in Antarctica on 14th January, 1911. Amundsen used his Arctic knowledge and spent three months preparing. He set up base 100km closer to the pole than the base of the English explorer Robert Falcon Scott, who was also challenging to be the first to reach the South Pole. Finally, they set out in early spring with eight men on sleds, pulled by 86 dogs. However, their fears came true and as the weather turned much colder than expected, they were forced to return to their base.

Their second attempt involved five men travelling on five sleds being pulled by 13 dogs. They progressed well, they fed their dogs seal meat and blubber that they had packed and they rationed their own food. As the food supplies dwindled, they made the decision to make the final push to the pole. They endured poor weather, bad snow conditions and blizzards.

On 14th December 1911, they arrived at the South Pole, the first party to reach it! While here, they recorded scientific data which would prove useful later. They had been concerned that Scott may have beaten them, so they built a tent and put a letter inside it and on 17th December began travelling back to camp, safely arriving 39 days later with 5 men, but only 11 dogs. It had taken 99 days for the expedition and they had travelled 2897 km in total. Amundsen used the money he earned from his South Pole expedition to continue exploring the polar regions. In 1925, with explorer Lincoln Ellsworth, he flew and landed within 250km of the North Pole. They both dropped their countries flags onto the North Pole as they flew over it in their airship.





Sir Ranulph Fiennes

Sir Ranulph Fiennes is a British expedition leader who has broken world records. He was born on 7th March 1944 in Windsor, UK. His father was killed during the Second World War and after the war, Ranulph's mother moved the family to South Africa. He lived there until he was 12 years old before returning to the UK.

Ranulph joined the British army, where he served for eight years in the same regiment that his father had served in, the Royal Scots Greys. While in the army, Ranulph taught soldiers how to ski and canoe. After leaving the army, Ranulph and his wife decided to earn money by leading expeditions.

In 1979, Ranulph, his wife Ginny and friends Charles Burton and Oliver Shepherd embarked on an expedition to the Antarctic which was planned by Ginny, an explorer in her own right. They were the first people to circumnavigate the world along the polar axis during the Transglobe Expedition. This means that they travelled around the globe from the North Pole to the South Pole. This 52,000-mile expedition took three years to complete. It took a lot of careful planning and complex communication while travelling. In 1993, Ranulph and Mike Stroud became the first people to cross Antarctica in an unsupported expedition. This was the longest unsupported polar journey in history.

Sir Ranulph Fiennes

In 2003, Ranulph experienced a massive heart attack, leaving him in a coma for three days and resulting in major heart surgery. Just three months later, he completed seven marathons in seven consecutive days! In 2005, Ranulph began supporting the British Heart Foundation and climbed Mount Everest in Southern China, raising £2 million for the charity. Sir Ranulph Fiennes started the Global Reach Challenge in 1982 by crossing the polar ice caps. The challenge also includes climbing the highest mountain in each continent.

He went on to climb:

- Mount Kilimanjaro in Africa in 2004;
- Mount Everest in Asia in 2009;
- Mount Kosciuszko in Australasia in 2015;
- Mount Elbrus in Europe in 2016;
- Mount Vinson in Antarctica in 2016.

Some of Sir Ranulph's greatest achievements are:

- discovering the lost city of Ubar on the Yemeni border;
- being made an honorary doctor of Birmingham City University;
- receiving the Sultan's Bravery Medal and the Polar Medal from the Queen;
- winning the Man of the Year Award;
- being presented with the Millennium Award for Navigation.

He has also endured temperatures of -30°C , removed the ends of his own frostbitten fingers, written 19 books and been named as top celebrity fundraiser having raised millions for the Marie Curie charity.

