

Felicity Aston
at Gigjökull
glacier on the
south coast of
Iceland, where
she lives.

GIRL

VS

BRITISH EXPLORER

FELICITY ASTON

SKIED MORE THAN

1,000 MILES ACROSS

ANTARCTICA.

WHAT'S CRAZIER?

SHE DID IT ALONE

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MACIEK POZOGA

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ELICITY ASTON, 37, has a thing for Antarctica.

It's where the British native went as a 23-year-old with a master's in meteorology and an aversion to desk jobs, to live at Rothera Research Station alongside just 20 other scientists through two lightless winters. It's where, nine years later, she led an all-female team of seven Antarctic newbies on a group expedition to ski from the coast to the South Pole—shattering the notion that polar treks are strictly the domain of the pros. And it's where, two years ago, she set out to become the first woman, and third person ever, to ski unaccompanied across the continent, a harrowing journey of more than 1,000 miles in 59 days that cemented her place in Antarctic legend—and nearly cost her her grip on reality.

That last quest is the subject of this month's *Alone in Antarctica* (Counterpoint Press), Aston's memoir of the two months she spent on her own in arguably the coldest and most solitary place on earth. Though the physical asks of a solo trans-Antarctic journey are major—temperatures to the tune of 40 below, skiing more than 20 miles a day (at times over mountains) while dragging nearly 200 pounds of supplies, traversing crevasse-riddled ice fields in which one misstep means near-certain death—Aston says the psychological toll is greater. “The real shocker was just how much being alone affected me,” she explains from her home in Iceland. “When the plane left me, it wasn't just like, ‘Oh, God, I'm alone.’ It was physically manifested fear. I



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was shaking, my heart was thumping. It felt absolutely wrong on an intuitive level.”

A grueling pace, omnipresent peril, and the disorienting landscape soon drove Aston into a more terrifying state of mind: She describes hallucinating, carrying on a conversation with the sun, and wandering dangerously far from her highly flammable tent sans skis in a storm while her stove blazed away inside. “It felt like a form of hysteria,” she remembers. “I felt very unrooted in any kind of reality.”

So what do you do when you fear you're losing your mind, with hundreds of miles of ice between you and the nearest human? You dig deep, fall back on routine, and, in

Aston's case, focus on the many people rooting for you to fail. “I found the hurt and the injustice of being underestimated a very powerful motivator,” she says, recalling curmudgeonly Rothera scientists who judged her for wanting a social life, and expedition mates who told her she lacked mental toughness. “Those people were not to be right about me, so I needed to get out of the tent and get on with it.” She finished ahead of schedule.

Today, her Antarctic brain scramble has proved temporary, but her Antarctic fever persists. She's since sought out similarly frozen places—like the Pole of Cold in Oymyakon, Siberia—and hatched her plan to return to Antarctica, in a hush-hush expedition that she'll only say will likely involve another female explorer. “This idea was planted in me that Antarctica was where you went to pit yourself against nature and see what you're made of,” Aston says. “And the fact is that I love it.” She laughs. “Something about it really sings to me.” Hear, hear. —*Julia Felsenthal*

HEAR