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Cold comfort

How to dress for Arctic success

By Judith Matloff

Back in the day, arctic explorers had it easy. In order to dress for expeditions, they simply approached Inuit hunters and ordered the hides of whatever animals could be killed. Frederick Cook, who claimed to be the first white man to reach the North Pole, packed hare stockings, blue-fox coats, bearfur pants, and bird-skin shirts. His rival, Robert Peary, favored seal.

To my surprise, it was far harder to outfit a reporting trip to the Arctic Circle last winter, despite modern advances such as Gor-Tex. I am the size of a fifth grader, and for obvious reasons they don't typically make garments designed for minus-55 degrees to fit children. Finding a parka that didn't extend to my ankles was proving a challenge. Lest my concerns about wardrobe seem petty, please note that the Arctic is the planet's most forbidding environment, and even the world's great armies struggle to keep their troops warm there. The simplest things, like what to eat and wear, become life-and-death matters. I was planning to observe nato exercises, and the military manuals warned of the dangers of packing the wrong gear: Fingers could turn black and fall off; hypothermia could set in; the glare from the sun could burn corneas; you could freeze to death.

Such fashion concerns are likely to be shared by more colleagues in years to come. Climate change is defrosting the high north, and thus opening up reporting opportunities in a territory once off limits for all but science writers and madmen. What follows is a cautionary tale in case you, too, need to dress for success on ice.

Since I didn't know any Eskimo furriers, my first stop was Paragon Sports, where correspondents kit out for extreme missions. For a past assignment to the Indonesian swamps, I had purchased some nifty trousers there that were imbedded with mosquito repellent. Logic held that Paragon would stock for the climatic extreme. But when I arrived at the outlet on 18th Street in Manhattan, the salespeople reported that a recent blizzard had cleared out the winter inventory. They were now hanging up beachwear.

So it was onto Patagonia, a favorite of mountain climbers. The store was holding its annual Avalanche Sale, which sounded promising for a snowy trip. The "avalanche" turned out to be a hollering mob that fought over half-price fleece. A helpful saleswoman went on a recon mission and returned with terrible news: The lone anorak left in a small came only in lilac. Lilac. We agreed there was no way I could wear a sissy color among soldiers, and she got on the phone for half an hour to locate a women's **Das Parka** in Nebraska. Aside from being black, the jacket was made of high-loft 120-g PrimaLoft® Synergy insulation throughout, additional PrimaLoft® ONE insulation in core areas, and a lightweight, PU-coated nylon ripstop shell. In other words, it was waterproof and windproof.

Patagonia couldn't help with footwear, however. Ordinary hiking boots would not insulate from subzero temperatures; for that I had to venture down the road to Eastern Mountain Sports.

At EMS, the Holy Grail awaited: a pair of **Sorel Caribou** in size 6. The salesman noted that the boots were rated for minus-40 degrees Celsius, adding: "They feature waterproof construction, seam-sealing, removable ThermoPlus™ felt inner boots for warmth, wool/acrylic-blend snow cuffs, felt frost plugs, and vulcanized rubber shells." They also felt as though someone had poured cement over my feet. As I clumped about like a robot, something in my back snapped.

"They fit perfectly!" the salesman chimed.

He threw in waterproof gloves so thick they could hold their own in the boxing ring, and a balaclava like those worn by Chechen fighters. I was ready to go.

Finding the right clothes was more time-consuming than the three flights and a boat ride it took to reach my destination above the Arctic Circle. Once in the frosty fjords of Norway, I assumed all thoughts about apparel were behind me and I could focus on watching troops shoot in the snow. However, upon arrival at the barracks in Aasegarden, where nato trains its toughest men for extreme cold, I was steered to a conference room for what was billed as the most important briefing of all: The Clothing Lecture.

"Everyone must take this lesson," explained Lieutenant Colonel Lars Sundnes, as he switched on the PowerPoint. "For a 100-percent

chance of survival, 20 percent is the proper clothing and 80 percent is knowing how to use it.”



Bundle up A Norwegian Army officer at the Allied Arctic Training Center in Bardufoss, Norway, demonstrates the layers of clothing soldiers wear while conducting operations in the Arctic Circle. (Robert Nickelsberg)

The presentation included an assortment of brass from different military powers who held forth on the proper garments to fight the cold. One slide ominously showed men gasping as they tried to claw out of a glacial lake. Animal fur did not provide enough protection. Dogs that helped rescue people from avalanches were relegated to kennels when the mercury dipped below minus 4 Celsius. “There has never been a piece of research that shows you can acclimatize to extreme cold,” cautioned Major Simon Guest, a medic with the British Royal Marines. “Your body can acclimate to high altitude by producing more red blood cells. But you can’t get used to extreme cold.”

Got it. Then it was on to an exhibit room, where a young recruit who resembled a Ken doll stood at attention in his skivvies. A colonel barked orders to put on a succession of garments designed by scientists to maximize heat preservation and minimize sweat.

“Mesh!” On went a fishnet vest.

“Long shirt and pants!” The colonel fingered the material. “Seventy percent wool and 30 percent polyester. You have to get the right mix.”

“Parka! Gor-Tex! Shell!” Three layers of pants and jacket followed. The colonel stuck his fingers inside Ken’s waistband. “Note: Trousers should be a size too large to allow for air flow.”

Then it was “Headgear!” (a cap liner and balaclava). “Hands!” (mittens and a Gor-Tex shell). “Feet!” (the boots resembled my Sorels, and over them went an insulated sack).

Once Ken was layered up to resemble the Michelin Man, the colonel moved on to inspect my gear. He pronounced the \$800 worth of purchases “adequate,” and I was allowed to venture outside.

There awaited a majestic wilderness of fjords and peaks. The frozen landscape was pristine, except for men doing sniper practice. I quickly realized that black clothes were as bad as purple. Everyone wears white to blend in with the snow. Black makes you an easy target. I was a sitting, or standing, duck.

While the soldiers skied with 100 pounds of gear on their backs, I simply watched. The human body creates heat as it moves, and after a few hours of immobility, my lungs burned with each breath; icicles formed inside my nose; my toes were numb and the snow glare hurt my eyes. Worse, I couldn’t take notes. The gloves were so thick that I had to remove them to grip the ballpoint pen, which in any event didn’t write because the ink had frozen. The tape recorder wasn’t functioning either; the cold had drained the batteries. I managed to revive the equipment with a hand-warmer in my pants pocket, but the major showing me around grew nervous every time I took off the gloves to write. He checked for white spots on my skin, which was a sign of afflicted flesh.

Suddenly, he began to jump up and down like a frenzied kangaroo.

“Frostbite,” he said through gritted teeth. “Had it a dozen times in the toes. Hurts like anything.”

I began hopping, too.

Our next activity was avalanche mapping. My enthusiasm for arctic reporting was waning; all I could think of was food. The soldiers are fed 6,000 calories a day to make up for all they lose in the cold. I was probably burning off as much just by shivering. I fondly recalled breakfast, which consisted of a mound of salmon, herring, lamb, potatoes, hamburgers, liver, eggs, and sausages. Why, oh why, didn't I go back for seconds?

I was shaken from my cravings by the sight of the avalanche expert, Jacob Helgersen, scampering up the hill like Jesus walking on water. I, in contrast, sank knee-deep into the snow, pulled down by the Sorel blocks. A half hour later, I caught up with Helgersen. He was standing in a freshly dug hole five feet deep, and whacking at the side of it with a shovel. The snow crumbled at the third blow. "This is bad," he muttered, picking up his tools. Helgersen rushed off, calling over his shoulder, "If there's an avalanche, make an air pocket with one arm. Push the other above the surface. Hopefully, a rescuer can spot you."

I willed the Sorels to move faster.

The trip wrapped up with a camping excursion by the side of a frozen lake. Norwegian troops travel in comfort, and our tent came equipped with reindeer skins and a stove. The soldiers set up a florescent green stick outside to mark where to pee, so that we wouldn't get lost in the frigid dark. Overhead, the Northern Lights put on a spectacular show.

One of the guys warmed cocoa on the stove. It smelled divine, and the major reminded everyone to stay hydrated because of all the sweating in heavy clothes. But then I thought about standing by the pee stick in the permafrost. Temperatures had dropped and the wind was picking up. I politely declined the drink, and contemplated the long night ahead.

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