

The Ice Maidens...



Gaby took a once-in-a-lifetime trip

It's -30°C, there's no electricity, a few hours of daylight and don't mention the loo – but Gaby Huddart says her Arctic adventure gave her the thrill of her life

The wind is so brutally cold it feels like pins are pricking at the little patch of skin open to the elements around my eyes – the only bit of my face not covered by a balaclava – and I'm struggling to blink as my eyelashes are so heavily laden with thick frost.

My hands are painfully frozen in position around a wooden handrail, despite the specialist protective mittens I'm wearing. But I can't help giggling like a small child as I feel my sled being pulled across the snow by a team of four huskies, yelping and howling with delight as they scamper along.

We're travelling at about 15 miles an hour in a convoy of one-man sleds that we're racing around a 35km figure-of-eight route in the Swedish Arctic.

My team, which we've christened the 'Ice Maidens', is made up of three women, all 50 plus, and, while we may be the oldest on this adventure (a combined age of 179!) we're determined that's not going to hold us back on this husky-sled time trial.

Such is the breathtaking nature of the scenery – vast frozen lakes, snow-covered trees that look like they belong in Narnia, and a kaleidoscopic sky that changes colour every few seconds – it's tricky not to lose focus, but as we hurtle around a tight bend and my sled tips precariously to one side, I'm brought back to my senses, and cling on tightly as I shout "mush, mush" at my wonderful dogs.

It's the ride of my life and, when we arrive back at our lodge a few hours later, we discover that our team has



The team use an ice drill to catch fish

put in a decent performance – we've come a respectable third out of the four groups in this activity.

There are 16 of us participating in the four-day 'Arctic Challenge'. We're all here because we're raising sponsorship for the National Literacy Trust – a charity that works in communities to give children reading skills and access to books – and because we want to push ourselves out of our comfort zones.

And we are a very long way out of our comfort zones indeed. Although a hot shower would be the ideal tonic after the sled race, at the Wilderness Lodge accommodation, there's no running water, no electricity and, for the 19-and-a-half hours a day that it's dark during the depths of winter, there are only candles or our head torches to see by.

When we need the loo, there's an unheated long-drop toilet in a hut – not very tempting as the thermometer is stubbornly holding at -30°C (everyone is very careful not to drink anything after 8pm as we really don't want to get up in the night and put on fleeces, ski kit and walking boots just to do a wee!).

The husky-sled time trial and lack of bathroom facilities are just two of the tests of our mental and physical endurance...

On the very first full day in the Arctic wilderness, we are challenged with an orienteering race, following just a short briefing on how to use a compass and map to work out where we are and how to navigate when everywhere looks the exactly the same – thick, white snow blanketing everything in sight.

We must make our way to five checkpoints on the course, and I find myself completely absorbed in the task of taking our bearings and figuring out the route, though on several occasions going the shortest way possible means trudging through waist-deep snowdrifts. With one of our team standing only a little over 5ft tall, this is an activity she finds particularly difficult, and it takes a lot of cheery banter from

me and the third Ice Maiden to keep her spirits high.

Fortunately, we all find it entertaining, when we're sent onto the middle of a frozen lake with a shovel, augur (drill) and a fishing line to try to catch supper. It takes several minutes to clear about 10 inches of snow before we get to the ice layer and then about another 15 minutes to drill our way through approximately a foot of ice.

We then patiently cast our fishing line through the hole and wait... and wait... and wait! Nothing bites for us, nor indeed for any of the other teams. 'Not really surprising at this time of year when all the fish are asleep at the bottom of the lake!' laughs John, the event leader, 'but we like you to get the sense of what ice fishing is all about.'

Arguably the toughest test of all comes on the third day of our trip, when we set out on a 14km cross-country route on old-fashioned wooden skis. 'These skis were state of the art in the Forties,' says John, 'so you won't have any advantage if even you've skied before.' He's not kidding – as the long, narrow planks of wood are decidedly tricky to balance on and manoeuvre forward. It's a good 45 minutes before we can get into a rhythm and push on through the forests and across several frozen lakes.

While a few participants choose to quit the ski course and get rescued by snowmobiles at various points, us Ice Maidens are doggedly determined to finish it – and we



Gaby (left) and her fellow Ice Maidens



IT'S BEEN THE RIDE OF MY LIFE!



quietly push on for three-and-a-half gruelling hours, completing it together with huge smiles on our faces. We've proved to ourselves that we can achieve more than we ever thought possible and that age isn't a barrier to this kind of challenge.

On the final night, as everyone gathers around the woodburner and talks about their trip 'highlights' and 'lowlights', it's clear the highs have far outweighed the lows. For me, I confess I'm looking forward to getting back to hot water, central heating and a lovely toilet – but the sight of the Northern Lights, harnessing my own team of amazing huskies (oh, how I would love to bring one home!) and being out in the Arctic wilderness have given me precious memories to last a lifetime.



The Ice Maidens' incredible husky-sled



It was all worth it to see the Northern Lights

● It's not too late to sponsor me! Visit justgiving.com/page/the-ice-maidens-arctic-challenge. Donations will help children from deprived communities improve their life chances through developing literacy skills. Read more about the work of the National Literacy Trust at literacytrust.org.uk