

Interview: Anja Blacha on Skiing to the South Pole



Ash Routen

Antarctic Climbing Poles © 16/10/2019



Anja Blacha on the summit of K2. Photo: Anja Blacha

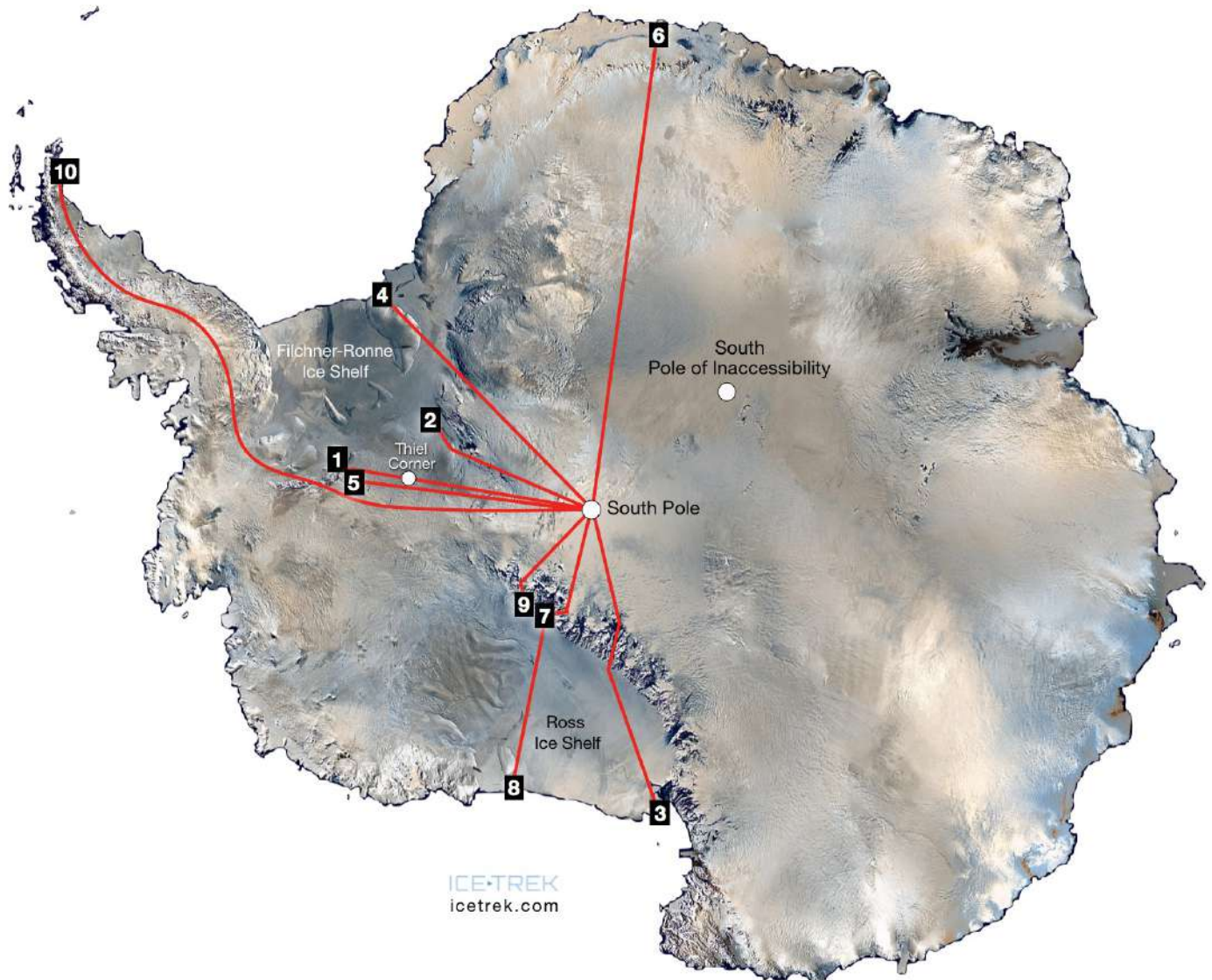
Anja Blacha only started mountaineering in 2015, but by 2017 she had become the youngest German to complete the Seven Summits. Already in 2019, she has climbed K2 and Broad Peak without oxygen. Now, next month, the busy 29-year-old will ski solo to the South Pole. She plans to cover the 1,400km unsupported and unassisted in around 60 days. ExWeb caught up with Blacha as she prepared to head south on the season's first flight.

You intend to start right at the shoreline on Berkner. Why there?

Well, I want to go and see the penguins obviously. I also want to start where common sense tells me that the Antarctic coastline begins, rather than at a point based on a geographic definition with limited practical value. The closest a traditional expedition with a ship could possibly get to the South Pole before

hitting ice is about 78°S, and I want to start no closer to the Pole than that.

Secondly, I want this solo expedition to be just that: solo, and an expedition. The far more popular Hercules and Messner routes would take away from that, given the number of teams and soloists there every season, and how well-known and explored these routes are. They are exciting too, but in a different sense: maybe more as a sport and speed record challenge. The Berkner route has rarely been travelled, and I look forward to adding to the knowledge about it myself.



The 10 most popular routes to the South Pole. 1. Hercules Inlet 2. Messner Start 3. Ross Island 4. Berkner Island 5. Patriot Hills 6. Novo 7. Axel Heiberg Glacier 8. Bay of Whales 9. Leverett Glacier 10. Larsen Ice Shelf. Map: Eric Philips/Icetrek

Is this the usual Berkner drop-off, or are you starting a little closer to the coast than normal?

Unless there is a massive weather delay, the drop-off point for me will be Gould Bay Camp Cache. This is further north than any expedition has ever started on this route. It's as much as 200km further than some past Berkner starting points.

Why go solo, when it increases risk?

It is true that there is no one to help you if you fall into a crevasse, no one to vet observations and decisions with, no one with whom to share the heavy load, no one to get you going when you are feeling weak. However, to me, going solo is also the purest, most intense experience I can make. I will be fully self-reliant, fully in control, I will be the single point of failure or success. It will be a great challenge for the mind, to see whether I have what it takes to persevere and push through for 60 days.



The summit of Denali. Photo: Anja Blacha

Why go unassisted as opposed to using kites?

In polar travel, going unassisted is somewhat equivalent to high-altitude climbing without supplemental oxygen. It is a different style, a different category. I do not want to use aids such as a kite when I have not reached my physical limits yet. Having said that, I believe that kiting would be good fun, and I will surely find myself dreaming of a kite many a day when the sled hauling gets tough!

What other polar journeys have you done in the past?

I am fairly new to the world of polar travel. My first trip was some one-to-one training with a guide, followed by solo training in Norway at the beginning of the year. Later, I went off to cross Greenland. I also intended to go to the North Pole for further experience, but politics would not let anyone to fly out there this year, so that has been postponed to 2020.



Greenland training. Photo: Anja Blacha

Are you taking any custom or special pieces of equipment?

Most of my gear is off-the-shelf. However, I am a bit of a gear nerd, so I can spend hours and hours doing research and building Excel spreadsheets to compare options before I eventually decide. Also, I consulted many of the experienced polar explorers. As a result, I got a lot of tips and ideas to customize and optimize my equipment. It is a countless number of small details: silicone rubber for the pot handles, zipper extensions everywhere, fleece-lined pockets, a couple of modifications around the sled, kit that can be re-purposed for other repairs...nothing very fancy, but all those little things add up, and will help me along the way.



On the way to Vinson. Photo: Anja Blacha

You climbed K2 without oxygen recently. How did this mix of polar travel and high-altitude climbing affect your training?

Because I spent the month preceding my Broad Peak and K2 climb on a Greenland crossing with less than 48 hours between the two trips, I did not really have the chance to specifically prepare for K2.

The requirements of these expeditions are quite different, though. I painfully realized this when after two weeks on skis, all of our team struggled to climb even a flight of stairs in the DYE II military station.

Polar travel uses different muscles and is mainly about physical strength, discipline, and efficient routines. You are building a new camp every day, every minute you chip in gets you closer to the goal and there is rarely any room for a bad weather or a rest day. Climbing K2 without oxygen, by contrast, was much more about acclimatizing well, waiting for the right weather window and moving with minimal exertion from camp to camp. Being lean certainly helps with that, whereas for the Antarctica expedition, I am actively gaining weight.

Also, as polar training, I have started pulling tires, making a complete fool out of myself on the streets of Zurich. I guess it is both: strength-endurance training and character building...

The one commonality between these two expeditions is the extreme mental and physical resilience required, and this, I believe, is what ultimately makes the difference between succeeding or not. We saw this on K2 this year, where most people returned home rather than attempt a second summit push.



Descending on K2. Photo: Anja Blacha

How much will your sled weigh?

The magic number I am working towards is 100kg.

Anything else you want to say?

Two things: There is a huge difference in how safety and environmental protection are managed for Antarctica, largely enforced by ALE, as opposed to the big mountains. You undergo a thorough expedition-readiness check before being allowed to undertake such an expedition, and throughout the planning and execution, safety remains a top priority. Likewise, they are very forward-thinking when it comes to keeping Antarctica pristine, such as by prohibiting microplastics or prescribing wag bags. Of course, it adds bureaucracy, and some elements of risk and environmental impact remain, but I would hope that their approach becomes more of a blueprint for managing other expedition grounds.

Finally, the polar community is really that: a community where people help and support each other, and want you to learn and grow. I surely would not be about to embark on this expedition, had it not been for the people who shared their advice and help along the way.



High on Everest. Photo: Anja Blacha

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About the Author



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Ash is a postdoctoral scientist, globally published outdoor writer and arctic traveller. Ash's next expedition is a 700km trek along the coast of Baffin Island in spring 2021.

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