

Interview with an Arctic explorer

Polina Norina

“There are no obstacles that cannot be overcome”, Victor Norine says calmly. “Everything can be achieved, even if it takes a very long time and a huge effort”. He learned this, one of the greatest lessons of his life, at the age of twenty one, whilst part of an expedition in the Arctic.

Victor was one of two students chosen from his geography degree course at the University of St. Petersburg to spend five months at the North Pole. To modern-day geography undergraduates this probably sounds like the assignment from hell, but twenty-five years ago “everyone from the course wanted to be chosen to go on the trip”. Victor was an excellent student with a passion for the natural world and with an acclaimed botanist for a father, he was therefore the perfect candidate. His first impression of the Arctic is factual, rather than emotional: “All I remember is endless snow. The Arctic is a snow desert: all flat, no hills, no trees. Snow from horizon to horizon. White and cold.”

During his five months in the Arctic, Victor was required to make meteorological observations every four hours and to send daily reports to the national meteorological centre in Moscow. While BBC documentaries show reporters heroically overcoming all sorts of problems in similarly lost regions of the world, Victor does not mention any of his own difficulties. “There was nothing hard about it”, he says, shrugging his shoulders. “I really wanted to go, so I enjoyed being there and working there”. The only difficulty was the weather: eternal cold, snow and wind reaching up to 40 meters a second.

The North Pole has no permanent inhabitants, and Victor spent five months with the same team of fifteen people. Living in one of the world’s busiest capitals, it’s hard for us to imagine only having contact with a handful of people over five months, yet for Victor this was the best part of the expedition. “They were great people. They lived and worked in extreme conditions, and man’s best and worst

traits come through immediately in extreme conditions. They always helped and supported each other. From them I learnt that we must always stay patient and calm, no matter how difficult a situation is." This is certainly observable in Victor himself: today he sits, arms crossed, staring straight ahead with an expression of great concentration, remaining very still while answering all the questions: every word seems thought-out and carefully articulated.

Victor gave up his career in geography and research over fifteen years ago, but he nevertheless discusses the natural world with great professionalism and interest. *Are the ice caps really melting because of us?* "Nature leads its own life", he says simply "Whether the climate is changing because of humans or because of a natural process is hard to say with only two hundred years of official scientific observation. But one thing is sure: humans have to stop polluting and destroying". Hopefully, it won't take an expedition to the Arctic for us all to realise this.