

# Toughing it out

Imagine spending 190 days at sea, rowing in shifts of two hours, day and night, never sleeping for more than two hours at a time...

**A**dventurers Chris Martin and Mike Dawson did just this on their way to becoming the first to row across the North Pacific Ocean, the toughest of the ocean routes. After leaving Japan on May 8 2009 they reached San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge on November 13. During this time, Chris lost 24kg and Mick 18kg, almost 20% of their

bodyweight. Two months on and 18kg heavier, R&R caught up with Chris.

#### **R&R: What was the hardest bit?**

Chris: Physically, the worst bit was the last two weeks, because it took almost a week longer than we expected it to. That was down to the weather, our physical state and lack of food. And mentally, certainly for

“You know that cloud on the horizon – that’s land!”



## Sailing around Spitsbergen

Chris Martin reviews Ice Bears and Kotick by Peter Webb

**W**ell inside the Arctic Circle is an island called Spitsbergen. It's a place of cold, of snow, of ice and ice bears (polar bears). Ice Bears and Kotick follows the true story of Peter Webb as he struggles to realise his dream of using a 17ft open boat to row and sail round Spitsbergen. "Has anyone tried it before?" Peter asks. "Yes" comes the reply, "but he came back six hours later ... scared witless." Whilst circumnavigating Spitsbergen in a tiny boat isn't the most sensible idea - adventures rarely are - it certainly makes for an interesting read. Former

Royal Marine Peter selects his only crewmate, another former Royal Marine who goes by the name of Shaggy, and the two men take to the icy coastal waters.

Both of the crew have limited experience of rowing or being in the Arctic Ocean in a tiny vessel. In the early stages of their trip, there is a sense that the crew are learning on the job which did nothing to improve my constant concern for the twosome. Their differing styles and rhythms of rowing almost immediately cause tension between the two of them. (I'd get pretty annoyed with a bowman who

rushes too). It's not long before the first argument breaks out. Sharp words between crewmates become a common thread throughout the book. So does the shoe-horned inclusion of stories about historic boats or figures in some way linked with the island. Far from adding to the story, I found these sections irritating and felt they actually detracted from it. There are several beautiful passages describing the scene and it is obviously a breathtaking part of the world. Unfortunately these descriptive sections are often sandwiched between



Mick (left) and Chris on board Bojangles

Mick when his dad passed away. There's nothing you can say or do in that situation that will help.

### You rowed solo across the Atlantic in 2005 – how did this help?

It gave me the self belief. I had so many things that went wrong on the Atlantic so I knew I could cope with anything.

### What were the main dangers on the trip?

The worst thing that happened was when one of the solar panels short-circuited and started a fire, and sent the current through the hull so basically the cabin filled with smoke. The compass was going crazy! Mick was on watch and woke me up – we could have both been in the cabin sleeping so it could have been game over for us. Thankfully the smell of smoke was no match for our odour, so that was kicked quickly into touch.

Shipping was also a major danger. On the first night, we had 50 fishing boats around us. There were two tugs pulling two fishing boats off a mother ship while cargo was transferred between the three and we were trying to go in between them. We didn't see their tug line until we were 3-400m away! To make it worse, our boat

could only make 2-5 knots at most. On the journey we did an average of 27 miles a day, so slower than walking pace!

### It must have been great to have so much support from followers online...

When we were really low we asked people to send us text messages of what they would do when we reached the Golden Gate Bridge. We had texts from all over the world. One person said they'd cover themselves in custard! It was really nice to know that so many people were following us. We had messages from Xeno Muller and Sir Steve Redgrave.

### As a former GB medallist, how does your racing background help with ocean rowing?

Just that never say die attitude, no matter how much pain you're in, you just have to keep plugging away.

### And how did you get on with Mick?

There was a bit at the end when we were done. My waist had shrunk to 21cm – there was just no food. The worst it got was having a soup between the two of us and three Strepisils dissolved in hot water as a day's rations. I was wearing seven layers of clothing and, after rowing for two hours, was still shivering with cold so Mick said go and rest. He took up the rowing and kept rowing for 15 hours straight – he was amazing.

### On a lighter note, you saw some interesting wildlife...

Yes, at one point, we had 400 tunas circling our boat trying to get away from two swordfish. I was trying to fish for them by hitting them with the oar but it didn't work because they just ended up thrashing about!

### How did it feel to spot land?

Well, Mick said, "You know that cloud on

the horizon – that's land!" We did a little dance. We just sat there and turned round smiling as it became more visible. A little fishing boat came out to see if we were okay and the fisherman asked where we came from. When we said 'Japan' he didn't say anything. I don't think he believed us!

### And the best moment?

Rowing under the Golden Gate Bridge. The pontoon was so full with people that it was sinking! It was all utterly overwhelming. It seemed very strange that they were all there to see us – we didn't expect that. It made it a very special day for us.

### What's it like being back on dry land?

Just being able to stretch out in a starfish position and lie in comfort is amazing. I'm still so grateful for the ability to buy food. When I first got to San Fran, we went past Walgreen's, the food store, and it was incredible to think that I could just buy anything!

### So what's next?

I'm writing a book and I've been re-reading my journal. It feels unreal – it's as though someone else has implanted those memories in my head. When we were in San Fran, we were invited to a dinner and they brought out the globe and pointed to our route – now that was scary! 🍷

### Fundraising

Chris and Mick have raised over £4,000 for the Hamilton Lodge School for Deaf Children in Brighton and the Hearts of Gold Children's Hospice in Nigeria. Find out about how to donate and read more about Chris and Mick's epic row at [www.goldengateendeavour.com/](http://www.goldengateendeavour.com/)

## “I'd get pretty annoyed with a bowman who rushes too”

somewhat clumsy explanations, which on occasion, left me wondering what was going on.

There comes a point in most adventures when those taking part are tested to the limit. This tale is no exception and Peter and Shaggy are forced to re-think their plans when the sea runs out ... when it freezes. The ship that has been laying food depots on the island ahead of them damages its propeller on the ice and has to return to port. Amazingly Kotick and her crew make it through (just!) and have to push on further and faster to make sure they don't run out of food whilst making

sure that the polar bears don't make lunch out of them! The interaction between our crew and the bear is a thrilling passage and I shared the sense of privilege that the crew felt, and not only because they get to tick off the polar bear from their Eye-Spy book.

So why name the boat Kotick? Well, for the answer to that question and to find out how Shaggy managed to do a spot of waterskiing, you'll have to read Ice Bears and Kotick.

Priced at £9.95, *Ice Bears and Kotick* is available from Amazon.

