

# Below Zero<sup>o</sup>

RIDE

TRAVEL

EXPERIENCE

WANDER



BY  
**MOUNTAIN  
LIFE**

# MARRIED LIFE ON THE ICE

Antarctic expedition reveals relationship secrets

words and photos :: Chris Fagan

**M**y husband Marty and I met while on separate self-guided climbing expeditions to Denali in Alaska and married a year later. Over the past 20 years, we've canoed the Zambezi River, biked through remote Tanzania (with our seven-year-old son in tow) and run thousands of miles on rugged mountain trails. Adventure is every thread of us individually, as much as it is the tapestry that binds us together.

At midlife, the white wonder of Antarctica called to us for our next expedition. Aware that climate change threatened to melt the mammoth ice cap covering the continent we envisioned travelling across—we listened to the call. We wanted to experience, for ourselves, the wild and pristine landscape that may change forever.

After three years of preparation, we set off to undertake one of the hardest challenges on the planet: ski 570 miles from the edge of Antarctica to the South Pole. While dragging 220-pound sleds. With no guide or re-supply. And on day 48 of our expedition, Marty and I stood at the bottom of the earth and became the first American married couple to complete such a journey.

But how did our marriage fare?

Not a typical couple's getaway, the expedition revealed valuable lessons about creating an environment that fosters a healthy relationship—on and off the ice. ►



Marty Fagan pulling a 220-pound sled near Union Glacier Camp in Antarctica with the Ellsworth Mountains in the background.





**TOP LEFT** Keeping faces completely covered at 20 below to avoid frostbite makes conversation a challenge. **TOP RIGHT** A typical campsite on the Fagan's 48-day expedition with 24-hour daylight during summer in Antarctica.

### SAVOUR THE SOLITUDE AND SILENCE

For much of our time skiing across Antarctica, I felt alone. Full face masks protected our skin against the 20-below cold, and the whipping wind blew away any chance of conversation.

One night, stretched out in our sleeping bags, Marty reached over and held my hand, our arms entangled across fluffy down for a few silent minutes. I never realized how much quiet could communicate. Silence wasn't to be filled—it was to be felt.

*Getting away from the busyness of life and quieting the mind creates a peaceful and open environment conducive to meaningful communication.*

### LIGHTEN A TEAMMATE'S LOAD

On our voice blog one night, Marty reported, "Today represents why Chris and I make such a good team. I had no energy, down to my very core. Chris led the entire day. At one point, she hugged me, and I cried on the trail. We know we'll get through this together. That is why it's great to have my spouse as a teammate."

A few days later, I struggled at a plodding pace to make progress. Marty moved 15 pounds of my gear into his sled. As I skied on, I instantly felt the difference from a lighter sled, and from his kindness.

*When you're up, and your teammate is down, lend a helping hand to ease their struggle.*

### ACCEPT WHITEOUTS

In Antarctica, the cloudy sky and snowy landscape often merged into one. There was no up or down, only white. I squinted through foggy goggles to see my compass, my guide through the whiteness. Whiteouts completely disorient and wear nerves thin. On these days, practicing patience and acceptance was the only way through the uncontrollable weather.

*Whiteouts—like any challenge in a relationship—will eventually lift to reveal blue skies and a path forward.*

### TIMING IS EVERYTHING

During a short break, I told Marty I was sick of sticky snow, that it feels impossibly hard, like dragging my sled through sand. "Unless you're having a real problem, I don't want to hear about it," he said. "For days, I've been dealing with pain shooting down my leg from my harness pressing on a nerve."

These words—out of character for Marty—demanded a discussion. That's what couples do in the civilized world where there is time to reflect and say you're sorry without fear of hands becoming frozen claws.

*Sometimes it's best to circle back with a loved one when the environment is more conducive to listening and resolving hurt feelings.*

### A BOOST FROM BEYOND ANTARCTICA

After seven weeks, the intense cold, relentless wind, bone-deep exhaustion and mind-numbing isolation pushed us beyond our physical and mental edge. We fell into self-preservation mode, with little energy to lift each other. Help came in the form of satellite phone calls with a gymnasium full of thrilled kids at my son's school and one-on-one pep talks with family and friends.

*When you don't have the energy to boost your partner, loved ones can help fill the void.*

### IN SUMMARY:

Standing at the South Pole, Marty and I turned 360 degrees to memorize the powdery white of the glacier extending out in all directions. Today, this wild place lives inside us. Beats within the heart of our relationship. ❧

*Chris Fagan is an adventurer, speaker, and consultant who shares the outdoors with her husband, teenage son, and lab Winston. She's the author of The Expedition: Two Parents Risk Life and Family in an Extraordinary Quest to the South Pole. Learn more at [chrisfagan.net](http://chrisfagan.net) or follow her on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.*