

Hearts in the Ice



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The tale of two women tucked in a tiny hut amid the Arctic wild, braving darkness and danger to illuminate the global impact of climate change.

BY RACHEL GUYAH



At first glance, the premise seems hardly novel:

Two hardy Norwegians heading out into the (magnificently) vast, dark, unforgiving landscape of the Arctic, testing their physical and mental strength as they fight the polar elements.

Fridtjof Nansen did it. So did Otto Sverdrup.

In fact, the Sámi—Northern Europe's indigenous population—have managed to prevail in polar latitudes not just for centuries, but for millennia. But there are a few twists to this story that make it particularly striking. For starters, there are no men.

Last year, for the first time in history, a team of only women—Sunniva Sorby and Hilde Fålun Strøm, to be precise—survived an entire winter by themselves on the outskirts of Svalbard, the remote archipelago parked halfway between the North Pole and mainland Norway.

And they did it in an old trapper's

Sorby in their official announcement last September.

And so, the sequel begins.

Heart Story

At its core, Hearts in the Ice (HITI) isn't just a journey—it's a powerful



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hut, no less, devoid of running water or electricity.

What's more: They got stranded for months beyond their original return date, after travel restrictions resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic poked a big hole in their plans.

But if you think they're soaking in a hot bath right now after savoring a delicious hot meal, you are sorely mistaken.

At this very moment, these two brave women are back in that hut for a second long, dark winter and spring.

"Climate change does not take a break, so neither are we," said

Sorby in their official announcement last September.

And so, the sequel begins.

The Origin Story

At its core, Hearts in the Ice (HITI) isn't just a journey—it's a powerful

platform for social engagement. It's a launching pad to bring awareness to, and promote global dialogue around, one of the most pressing issues of our time: climate change.

The idea for HITI sprouted when Hilde Fålun Strøm met Sunniva Sorby. They conceived of the project, its name and its mission together. Strøm is a veteran expeditioner who has lived on Svalbard for more than two decades. Over the years, Strøm has fallen deeply in love with the high Arctic's landscape and wildlife—yet she has also witnessed firsthand the detrimental effects of climate change.

Her hut-mate, Norwegian-Canadian Sunniva Sorby, is an avid traveler. Sorby has ventured to Antarctica more than 100 times and was part of the world's first all-female team to ski to the South Pole in the early '90s.

The two polar pioneers also share many of the same passions: outdoor adventure, the environment, female empowerment and uniting humanity to harness our collective power in fighting climate change.

After many months of preparation, the two formally kicked off their journey in September 2019. The

plan was to stay on Svalbard for nine months, until May 2020—but then COVID-19 swept the globe and swiftly shredded those plans, and they chose to remain there until September. (Fortunately the midnight sun and milder temps made the summer months quite enjoyable.)

Like many of us, the women were forced to "recalibrate the compass" in the face of the pandemic, and it gave new meaning to their mission. Ultimately, they decided to head back to the hut for a second winter. They returned to Svalbard in October 2020 and plan to stay through the spring.

Heart Hut

Their home during the project is *Bamsebu* (BOMB-say-boo), which means "bear's den" in Norwegian. It's a tiny trapper's hut on the shores of Van Keulenfjord, and nearly 87 miles from the city of Longyearbyen. It is only accessible by snowmobile in the winter.

Originally built for whalers in 1930, Bamsebu spans just 215 square feet—roughly the size of an average master bedroom in the United States. There's a kitchen and living room, technically, though both convert into bedrooms at night.

There's no running water or electricity. They do have a wood burning stove, though, and little hints of "hygge": family photos, candles, inspirational wall signs and wine.

Living in the remote outskirts of Svalbard is a true "labor" of love. The sheer physicality involved is shocking. "We don't just go out and, you know, swing a little bag over our shoulder and whistle to the water," joked Sorby. "It's a serious endeavor to get dressed in survival suits."

Before leaving the hut, they must first strap on an extensive waist belt, complete with a multi-tool, knife and flare gun—and top it off by slinging

a rifle over their shoulder should any polar bear decide to pounce.

Strøm and Sorby are both in their fifties, but that doesn't seem to slow them down one bit. Here's just a small list of what these women do to survive in Svalbard:

- Fix boat engines
- Chop wood and ice
- Forage for firewood in whiteout conditions
- Repair doors blown off from the hurricane wind
- Take parts off a snowmobile in subzero temps
- Lift 60-lb. sacks of gear
- Haul sleds full of ice up to the hut
- Contort and crawl out a window when the door is snowed shut

Citizen Science

While the HITI project itself—overwintering on the archipelago of Svalbard—takes place somewhere specific and remote, its purpose has

always been multi-faceted and global.

This is not a vacation. This is a mission.

The hut's remote location enables the women to participate in important (but often hard-to-execute) citizen science projects, as well as test new technology related to climate, weather and science.

Despite months of darkness, they certainly kept busy throughout their first stay. Strøm and Sorby spent their days: documenting cloud formations unique to the High Arctic area through NASA's Globe Observer program; capturing dazzling panoramas of the Northern Lights for NASA's Aurorasaurus program; and observing changes to sea ice and local wildlife for the Norwegian Polar Institute.

The British Columbia Institute of Technology even equipped them with a special drone to gather data about surface air temperatures and collect aerial imagery of glacial sedimentary deposits. This project helped

Meet the Team



Sunniva Sorby

Age: 59
Born in Norway, raised in Canada

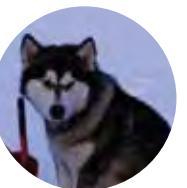
- ➔ Has traveled to Antarctica 100+ times as lecturer, naturalist and guide
- ➔ Youngest member of the world's first all-female team to ski to the South Pole (1992–1993)
- ➔ Has survived 200+ polar bear encounters



Hilde Fålun Strøm

Age: 53
Born in Norway, has lived on Svalbard for 23 years

- ➔ Seasoned expedition leader, big game hunter and snowmobiler
- ➔ Has survived 200+ polar bear encounters



Etra

Age: 3
Weight: 80+ lbs.
Breed: Alaska Malamute and Greenlandic Husky
Loves: Chasing reindeer and being scratched behind the ears.



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♥ The Power of Partnerships

The success of Hearts in the Ice has been a true group effort. The project has been able to thrive with generous support from several key sponsors and partners, including Borton Overseas—a tour operator specializing in sustainable travel journeys across Scandinavia, Asia, Antarctica, Africa and South America, and a longtime Sons of Norway business partner. bortonoverseas.com

researchers determine whether drones can be effectively deployed in harsh polar conditions to study climate change.

One project near and dear to Strøm was collecting data about phytoplankton—the tiny sea algae that consume CO₂ and produce oxygen. “Phytoplankton actually produce more than 60% of the whole world’s oxygen. Yes, for all of us!” she says.

But these little organisms have a big problem now: They need cold saltwater to thrive, but the melting glaciers are making the water warmer and sweeter. “They don’t have the ability to swim further north to colder water,” she says.

Through her studies of these creatures, Strøm has witnessed the effects of climate change firsthand. She notes that the situation has revealed interesting and unexpected findings, directly resulting from the evolving natural environment.

♥ Connecting with Classrooms Around the Globe

To help engage youth in the global dialogue around climate change, Strøm and Sorby shared their first winter experiences with classrooms around the world through monthly interactive satellite calls. The monthly chats were hosted through Exploring By The Seat Of Your Pants, an organization that uses technology to provide virtual events and field trips for students across the world.

Each session centered around a theme, and classrooms were invited to either listen in or participate in the lively discussions.

“It has been so powerful, and so fun, to engage with them,” Strøm notes. “They are so interested, and so well informed. They have some

great questions. Luckily, we've had experts together with us. It has all been very inspiring."

Sorby agrees: "They're smart. They are interested. It's incredible, the different projects they come up with in their classrooms either as a result of engaging with us or maybe as the end of project they've been focusing on."

♥ The Change Within

While the primary topics for Hearts in the Ice are climate change and citizen science, all that time spent in utter darkness and isolation has sprung forth other changes, too: the ones within themselves.

For Sorby, the experience has caused her to cycle through many unfamiliar thoughts and emotions: "I think that's the point sometimes of self-reflecting when we descend into quiet spaces," she says. "We swing high, and we swing low. Just like our planet. It swings up and down, but it's always able to adapt. So, we really felt connected to all things big. But we also felt so vulnerable."

Sorby adds that the whole experience has helped liberate them from the "hamster wheel" of modern life: "It's been an amazing experience to actually pull us out of this crazy world and take us back in time to a simple, thoughtful existence with a purpose." ☺



Get the Book!

"Hearts In The Ice" is a gripping account of the women's historic first overwinter on Svalbard. Action and adventure, courage and connection, sustainability and survival—many themes are explored throughout the book. Readers will also walk away with a blueprint for how to leave a lasting legacy in their own lives. The book is in English. heartsintheice.com/shop

Citizen Science Stats from the First Winter

