

Trekking the Line

After two years traversing the Arctic Circle, Mike Horn and his Panerai both reach Siberia intact

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i Dubbed 'the man who walks', Mike Horn has already covered 17,000 kilometres of his north polar circumnavigation – the latest addition to a CV that would put any self-respecting 'adventurer' to shame. *QP* catches up with Horn in Siberia and learns that while he circles the Arctic, the only watch circling his wrist is a Panerai Arktos – a tough nut to crack in the arctic extremes, having already outlived eight GPS units and 12 compasses.





(Above) Horn carries one of everything in his sled – a cigar-shaped Kevlar carcass with two runners, weighing 150 kilos fully loaded. The bulk of the weight is the benzene tanks for cooking and his food, vacuum-packed into 7,000-calorie portions.

(Right) The Panerai Luminor GMT Arktos, driven by the calibre OP III. The arrowed 24-hour hand indicates the second time-zone and the subdial indicates the seconds.

I should have guessed by looking at the Siberian Airlines stewardess that the weather forecast was wrong. A hooded, ankle-length duvet coat suggested that the woman stationed at the foot of the airplane stairs was expecting very cold weather at Norilsk, Northern Siberia, rather than the balmy 5°C predicted.

Whatever the weather, after a 24-hour delay at Moscow's Domodedovo airport, I was only too glad to be boarding this midnight Siberian Airlines flight to one of the coldest places on Earth. From Norilsk, we were scheduled to helicopter out to meet professional adventurer Mike Horn, in his element and at the mercy of the elements: the frozen tundra.

Home straight

Horn has been walking around the Arctic Circle for the last two years – an expedition partly sponsored by Panerai, whose Arktos watch has adorned Horn's wrist for the duration. To put into context the magnitude of his endeavour, consider that the journey to the North Pole from the edge of the ice cap is a three-week, 1,500 km trek. This intrepid adventurer and record breaker is attempting a far greater feat by completing a 20,000 km, unmotorsed journey through snow, ice and water, hoping to finish in September 2004 when he arrives back at 2002's point of departure, North Cape, Norway. When QP joined him on the Tundra wastelands, he was 2,000 km away from the finish line.

Throughout the journey, a Swiss-based logistics team headed by his wife Cathy have met up at a dozen different locations to re-supply Horn and provide the appropriate equipment for the changing geography and weather. It was with one of these parties that we 20 journalists and sponsors found ourselves travelling across Russia. This particular pit-stop was providing food and a new sledge – unfortunately held up by Russian red tape in Moscow – for the last stint of the Arktos expedition.

Not that Horn, a native South African, is used to dealing with the changeable Arctic conditions. His previous adventures have taken place in far warmer parts of the world, but are no less impressive. Four years ago he made his way solo around the globe along the line of the equator and in 1997 he broke world records by crossing South America by foot and paraglider, using a only a hydrospeed board to aid his 7,000 km swim down the Amazon river.

In the flesh

My first glimpse of Horn was through the scratched porthole window of the bright orange M16 Russian helicopter as it landed on the deep tundra snow. I could see the tall, bearded Horn, energetically skiing towards us, his sledge in tow – exactly how he has travelled the overland section of his journey, covering approximately 50 km a day, or even as much as 500 km if he is using his pink and green kite to pull him along.

His robust Arktos has withstood –60°C temperatures, severe impacts, the magnetic pull of the Pole and has been a key navigational aid.





Replacing his sled temporarily in June 2003, the Prijon kayak – fitted with floats and a sail – enabled him to cross the Canadian Arctic's ice floes.

"Thank you for making the effort to come," were Horn's first words, his thick Afrikaans accent audible above the din of the helicopter rotors as the gold-toothed Russian pilot waved goodbye from the cockpit. This was characteristic of Horn's modesty, as he had already journeyed some 18,000 km through temperatures as low as -50°C , which – one assumes – entailed considerable effort on his part...

Once camp was set up on the frozen lake, Horn was eager to talk and share his adventures. By kayak, catamaran, on skis or pulled by his kite, Horn has travelled in a west to east direction and survived hungry polar bears, cyclones over the Bering Straits, crushing ice blocks in Alaskan waters and Kalashnikov-wielding Pogranichnik Russian border guards.

After an Arctic cooking demonstration, I ask Horn about his watch. He slaps his hand to his chest and brings out from beneath his jacket the Arktos Panerai that he wears strapped to his harness. "I don't wear it on my wrist because the metal steals my body heat and my hand starts to freeze," explains Horn. "But by having it here I can see it easily. I am on to my eighth electronic GPS and my twelfth compass, but this is still my first watch. Liquid crystal displays pack up at -11°C and compasses are affected by both the magnetism and the cold, so the one instrument I always rely on

is my watch. My watch has to be very precise because I am navigating by it. If it loses time, I am off course. When you are travelling 20,000 km, without the help of any machine, every millimetre counts."

Bespoke specs

Horn is right to be proud of his watch, as the robust automatic Arktos GMT has been developed and tested by Horn himself, in conjunction with Officine Panerai. "We followed Mike's suggestion for this watch," explains Marco Di Dionigi of Panerai. "So the product has really been developed for him."

To survive its travels with this hero of extremities, the Panerai Arktos has been equipped with special oils that do not thicken, leaving the delicate workings of the watch unaltered even in the coldest months of the year. The OPIII COSC movement is also protected from magnetic fields by a double case with an inner lining of soft iron. And should Horn plunge into the icy waters, his watch should be the least of his worries, as it is resistant to 300 metres.

The four cardinal points are marked on the rotating bezel for navigating by the sun – a method based on the principle that at midnight, the sun is due north. Horn also uses skills honed whilst sailing around the world: "I use the tell-tale on my ski pole to keep an eye on the direction of the wind. As the wind always

The Arktos has special oils that do not thicken, even in the coldest months.

comes from the same direction in the Arctic, I can keep on course by maintaining the angle of the tell-tale constant. It's like sailing a boat."

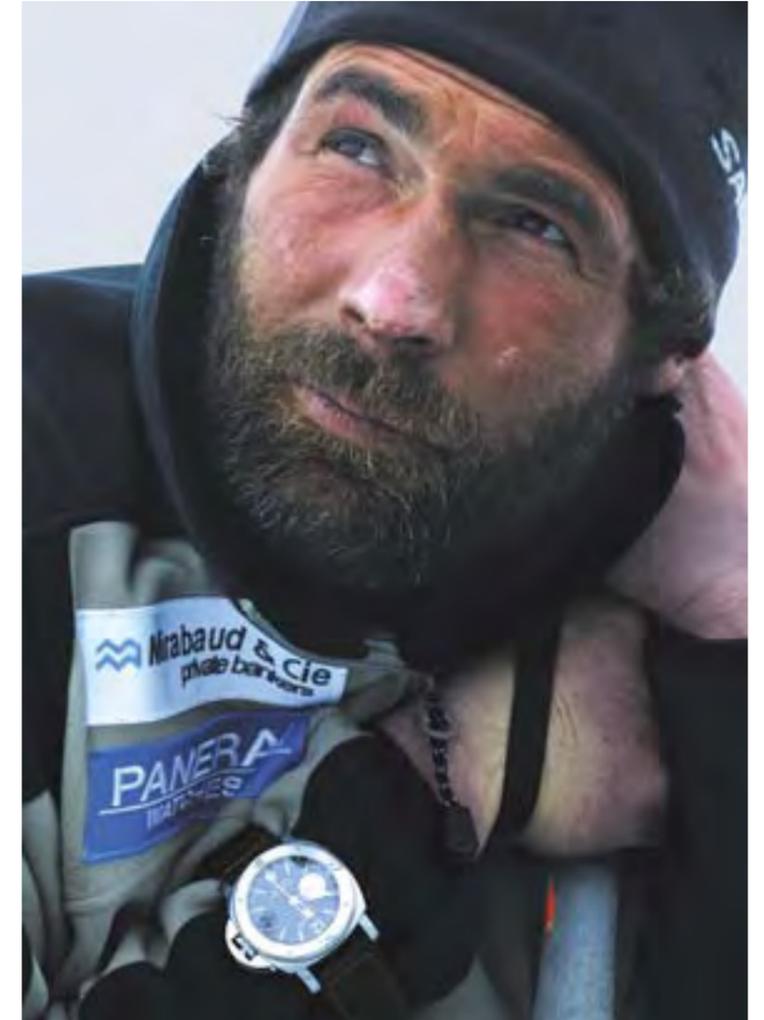
Ease of use is vital and the bezel's high markers make rotation easy – even for Horn, with two frost-bitten fingers. Unlike other explorers, Horn continued his travels throughout the year, so the Luminova reflective markers were essential in the winter, when there is no daylight for six months. Horn charges the markers using the torch attached to his helmet.

Power of endorsement

So how did Horn become Panerai's man in the first place? Via far less corporate means than you would expect, given the current ubiquity of sponsorship frenzies and tie-ins. Johann Rupert, CEO of the Richemont Group – which owns the Panerai brand – used to play rugby in South Africa with the Horn brothers. Horn's easy relationship with his fellow countryman made him a natural choice for Panerai and the two chat regularly in Afrikaans over the phone. Horn enjoys recounting the tale of when he had a suggestion for improving the watch. It was straight to Rupert that he went, setting off a hopping frenzy in Panerai's Milanese head office.

So far, the only Arktos is Horn's, but Panerai will launch the first commercial model in September, to coincide with the end of the expedition. It will be a 44 mm Luminor GMT (£3,400), featuring a subsidiary seconds dial, rotating bezel and engraved caseback showing the Arktos expedition route. Like all Panerai's, it will be produced in small quantities with no more than 500 pieces being fought over by retailers worldwide.

With a playful twinkle in his eyes, Horn turns the watch over to reveal the engraving: "This is handiest part of the watch – this way I know where I am going!" But, of course, there was never any doubt of this, as he sets off on the final leg of his journey –



already promising to be difficult, as the tundra snow begins to melt, turning the region into a mosquito-infested swamp.

And what next? The North Pole perhaps, as he has often been tempted "just to pop up, as I have been so close." But for the moment, as he prepares to swap his skis for a kayak and re-align his Panerai's bezel once again, he is nothing but focused on completing this incredible journey. ○

Intrepid explorer Mike Horn, wearing the fruits of his Panerai partnership with Panerai. The Italian watch company is using him as a walking laboratory, testing the Arktos watch in authentic climatic conditions.

Further information: Panerai UK, Tel: 020 7961 1744, www.panerai.com
Follow Mike Horn's adventures online: www.mikehorn.com