

*The Coolest Race on Earth:
Mud, Madmen, Glaciers, and Grannies
at the Antarctica Marathon*

BY JOHN HANC

The Antarctic has received an enormous amount of press over the past decade or so. The skilled exploits of Ernest Shackleton were revived in book and picture book and movie formats. Climate scientists have been scrapping over the Last Continent's hints at global warming while one end of the continent loses ice as the other end's ice thickens to record heights. Thousands upon thousands of penguins waddle over the barren landscape to meet up where they can hatch their eggs and a documentary team follows. And adventurers (from bird-watchers to marathon runners) converge on the bottom-most continent in search of the next big challenge/thrill.

For marathon runners, the allure of slogging through a marathon at the bottom of the Earth seems a natural: it is enticingly sitting there waiting, therefore we must run it. It must be done. No spot on Earth is safe from the waffle sole. And why should it be? This exploring/adventure stuff is what mankind has been doing since it left the safety of the caves. Look for the next challenge; cross the mountain in search of the next mountain; follow the nomadic caribou herds; get routed by the nasty skua bird; have a curious penguin undo your shoelaces; get attacked by cannibals; invest your fortune in junk bonds. Adventure and danger brings us alive—or at least it used to. And thank god it still invigorates a certain segment of our increasingly sedentary population.

The idea for running a marathon on Antarctica was originated by Thom Gilligan, owner of Marathon Tours and Travel, and John Hanc rightly starts off his book about traveling to Antarctica to run a marathon with the story of Gilligan and how he got into the adventure travel industry. Thom's story makes up Chapter 1; Chapter 2 is the story of how Thom brought off the first-ever Antarctica Marathon in 1995. It wasn't easy. But then, if it were easy, everybody would have already done it.

Flash forward a decade, and we meet John Hanc lusting for some appropriate

challenge that will satisfy his lust for filling out his life as he reaches 50.

In the hands of a less-skilled author, an entire book about traveling to the bottom of the Earth to waddle through a marathon would have been a turnoff. But John Hanc has all of the skills of a traditional journalist: he listens patiently to stories told by others on his expedition, he does research into Antarctica and the men—and women—who have made it a priority in their lives, and although the story is told through his eyes, unlike way too many writers these days, he doesn't make himself the center of the story. He is merely the eyes and ears of the reader.

Any long narrative like this that, in the final analysis, actually works is like a necklace: it is a series of small gems strung together to make a credible whole, a whole that sparkles. John's approach works well in that way. There are stories of daring explorers who first found the continent more than a century ago, of grandmothers who came to the bottom of the Earth to further their own string of outdoor adventures, and there is the story of John's roommate on the trip who wants to be the first wheelchair-bound adventurer to cover the course. (He fails; but so what?)

John weaves together all of the stories so that the reader gets a very good feel for the trip and the colorful characters—of their unique reasons for signing up for an adventure that is about as opposite of two weeks at Sandals as you can imagine.

The fact that the course and the conditions are more challenging than expected only makes the story more entertaining and enduring.

A trip to Antarctica to run a marathon may not be quite as hazardous and outlandish as Shackleton's 1914 trip on *The Endurance*, but shepherding a couple of hundred modern-day adventurers to the bottom of the Earth and bringing them back safely is no picnic. But both Shackleton and Gilligan did it without losing a single soul. And the runners came back with enough stories to liven up even the most boring cocktail party for many a year.