

The Mountaineering Council of Scotland
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10th February 2011



My sketch of Nordenskjöldbreen (Svalbard, 2010)

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to you as I am soon to set off on an expedition to the remote Arctic island of Svalbard with the British Schools Exploring Society. I hope that I may explain to you a little about myself, my motivations for joining such an expedition and tell you briefly about the expedition itself and why I hope that you may wish to help me in achieving this goal.

I am 20 years old and am currently studying Philosophy and Ancient History at the University of St Andrews. I am from London originally but despite such urban surroundings I have always enjoyed the outdoors and involved myself in outward-bound activities when possible. I was a member of the Woodcraft folk for some years, trekking and camping from a young age and in recent years I have been involved with the Wilderness Foundation, who work to protect areas of natural beauty both in the UK and abroad. During my gap year I worked a series of jobs in order to fund a trip to Svalbard, with the British Schools Exploring Society. I have a Norwegian family background and was keen to see this outpost of Norwegian culture about which I had heard a great deal. I wanted to explore it's political history and had an interest in its human geography having been reading about the 17th century Dutch whalers who first charted these lands. My first expedition lasted 5 weeks and was split between kayaking and mountaineering with a number of scientific experiments carried out on the Nordenskjöldbreen glacier and in the abandoned Soviet mining town of Pyramiden.

On this expedition I learnt firsthand that teamwork, as well as the ability to handle great physical and mental demands, are essential. Last summer's expedition provided a great entry level expedition whereby I could understand how a team of young people, with a range of different experiences and interests, could come together to form a resilient team which could handle whatever the Arctic could throw at us. I learnt the value of teamwork and the necessity of recognizing one's own place within the group, building on what strengths you as an individual have. But I also began to fully appreciate the significance of good leadership and expertise. Much of the time decisions were made collectively, with the leaders giving advice as to the conditions that should form our judgment. I had the chance on several occasions to make key decisions that would affect the whole group and I learnt a great deal from this and enjoyed the responsibility. But there were many points in the expedition where the power of strong leadership and the ability to make quick decisions relied on knowledge that we as inexperienced young explorers lacked.

The BSES leaders had the ability to stay calm when difficult situations arose. They were able to ensure our safety throughout the trip because of their immense knowledge of the landscape and their wealth of experience in such environments. I came to know several of the leaders well and at the end of the expedition I was approached by one of the mountaineering leaders who asked me if I had considered becoming a leader with BSES. I was intrigued and excited by the idea of leading other young explorers in the Arctic but I knew that before I would feel confident enough to do this I would need to gain a great many more skills.

I was invited to join the BSES *Arctic Skills* expedition this April. This expedition will be on a much smaller scale with just 6 explorers and 2 leaders. It will be a great deal more intense and focused as it is designed to prepare participants for leadership roles on expeditions and to equip us with the necessary skills to feel confident and safe in the Arctic environment. We will be doing a great deal of ski mountaineering, pulling pulks, ice climbing, orienteering, as well as route planning, avalanche detection and rescue, glacier crossing and defense against Polar bears (with rifles and bear traps). These skills are crucial if I am to lead others in such environments and all these skills can only be acquired in the Arctic itself.

I am keen to become a leader with BSES because I value the range of work that they do. As well as taking a wide range of different people, with different backgrounds to extreme places they are also very actively involved in environmental research; scientists working in a number of different areas use data collected on BSES expeditions. I would like to lead others in the future and be involved in BSES' ongoing work but I am aware that returning to the Arctic and gaining these skills is the only way in which I can do this.

Since returning I have been involved with BSES and I spoke recently at the Royal Geographical Society about my experiences. I have also become involved with the Mountaineering Club in St Andrews, where I have been learning from other students about their interests in walking, ice climbing and survival techniques. I recently organised a cross-country skiing trip for the weekend to the Cairngorms where we stayed overnight in a high mountain bothie. My university work takes much of my time but what I have to spare I try to get up in the mountains or to go cross-country skiing.

Inevitably participation in an expedition of this nature is costly and the overall sum for the entire trip is £2500 plus the cost of some specialist equipment and clothing which is likely to come to £500.. Therefore any financial assistance you may be able to provide in order to make this trip possible would be immensely appreciated.

On my part I would be more than happy to contribute to the Mountaineering Council of Scotland in any way you think might be beneficial. For example I would be happy to contribute an article with photos or artwork to your newsletter or website or to come in and give a talk about the trip and leadership in Arctic environments. If you would like to contact BSES (www.bses.org.uk) or I please feel free to do so.

I hope that you might be able to help and look forward to hearing from you.

With thanks.

Yours sincerely,



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BSES EXPEDITIONS
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To Whom It May Concern

'Come then, all ye who live in houses and go to offices, and taste the delights of the unknown'
Sir Martin Conway, First Crossing of Spitsbergen, 1897

Theo Borgvin Weiss is a member of the BSES Arctic Skills Expedition to Svalbard in the spring of 2011.

BSES EXPEDITIONS

Surgeon Commander George Murray Levick RN, a doctor on Captain Scott's last expedition to Antarctica in 1910-13, founded BSES Expeditions (the British Schools Exploring Society) in 1932. In 2007, BSES celebrated its 75th Anniversary having mounted over 100 highly successful expeditions for young people, to remote and wilderness areas of the world. BSES is a non-profit making educational charity, with only six full time members of staff and a lot of volunteer helpers. Our members are men and women who have all been on a BSES expedition. In 2011, over 200 people aged 16+ are being placed on expeditions.

WHEN AND WHERE

Svalbard is Europe's northernmost territory. Svalbard is the name for the archipelago situated between 74N10E and 81N35E latitudes. Svalbard has a total area of 62,700 km², two thirds of which are covered by glaciers. Distance from the North Pole is approximately 1,000 km. This expedition will be visiting Svalbard's largest island, Spitsbergen. Living out in the remote Arctic, the group will discover the joys of living minimally, the thrill of sleeping under the midnight sun in 24 hour daylight, and the beauty of wild camps in pristine wilderness as they explore this fascinating region and take part in intensive arctic skills training. The expedition of 6-8 people will be leaving in April 2011 for 2 weeks.

THE AIM

This is an opportunity for adventurous people to explore and experience a remote and challenging environment, under the guidance of experienced leaders, learning how to survive in difficult conditions and temperatures of down to -30 degrees Celsius, travel and camp safely, and work effectively together. The expedition carries a strong adventure objective, and all participants will be trained by expert outdoors leaders and mountaineers to tackle the magnificent terrain. This work will be challenging, at times involving long journeys and 24 hour shift patterns, however it will be extremely rewarding and involve the participants in a true opportunity of a lifetime - supporting BSES' fundamental objective of Personal Development, which will be facilitated and supported throughout the expedition.

THE TEAM

The expedition will comprise of 6-8 participants and a team of experienced Leaders. The Chief Leader of this expedition is Mr Ade Harris, who has been a Chief Leader for BSES for many years now, and has spent a huge amount of time expeditioning in Svalbard. The course instructor is Andrew Stokes-Rees, who is BSES's Operations Manager and an experienced mountaineer, climber, and all out adventurer.

The participants demonstrate a variety of abilities and interests. They are characterised by being positive, fit, enthusiastic, and possessing common sense, tolerance, a sense of humour and a willingness to work with others as a team in potentially very uncomfortable conditions. In short, we believe they are the leaders of tomorrow.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

The cost of mounting an expedition to such a remote and hostile region is the first challenge that each member of the expedition must face. Each participant must raise around £3000 in total towards their expedition, including flights and personal kit. All necessary food and equipment such as tents, ropes and stoves will be provided, but personal clothing and footwear will be the responsibility of individual expedition members. Any support, financial assistance or advice that you can give to Theo would help enormously. If you need further information please do not hesitate to contact BSES at the address above.

Thank you very much for your support

Founded by the late Surgeon Commander G. Murray Levick RN in 1932. Registered Charity No. 802196

Recipient of the 2007 Royal Geographical Society Geographical Award for engaging young people with scientific fieldwork through expeditions for 75 years

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