

What's it like to ski to South Pole?

"Scars are good stories," says one of few Americans to make solo trek

By [Aaron Claverie](#) [\(/staff/aaron-claverie/\)](#) 3 p.m. Feb. 25, 2013



Aaron Linsdau, 39, completed a trek on skis to the South Pole last month.

TEMECULA — One of the first things adventurer Aaron Linsdau did after returning to San Diego from Antarctica was shave his "scary guy beard" and get his long hair cut.

The reflection in the mirror showed a face that was gaunt from severe weight loss and scarred from frost burns. So why did that face show a broad smile?

"I was pleasantly surprised I didn't have more damage," he said during a phone interview.

And besides, as he wrote on the blog that chronicled his epic journey to the South Pole: "Scars are good stories."

Linsdau's Antarctica story started in the summer of 2011 when the former resident of Carlsbad and Temecula, he still owns a home here that he rents out, decided to trek to the South Pole — and back — without the aid of a kite, dogs or snowmobile. Just a man and his skis. For 1,400 miles, the equivalent of walking from Temecula to Reno and back in -40 degree weather.

To be the first American to pull off the feat, Linsdau trained for months, pulling a tire sled around Carlsbad in his spare time, and putting in serious hours in the cold and the damp of Jackson Hole, Wyo., his familial stomping grounds.

He landed in Antarctica in late October, touching down with a clutch of supplies that included duffel bags filled with butter: high-calorie sustenance he was planning to wolf down over the course of the trip to stay energized in the freezing cold.

Leaving the coast, Linsdau spent the next 20 days getting pounded by Antarctic blizzards, 75-mph gusts of wind carrying ice chunks that would make moving forward — much less putting in serious mileage — almost impossible.

On one of the days, the wind was so fierce that Linsdau was forced to hunker down in his tent, wasting almost an entire day waiting for a chance to venture out. Other days found the trim 39-year-old effectively buried by snowdrifts.

"If it's going to be like this forever I am toast," he remembered thinking.

To help get some sleep in the harsh conditions, Linsdau built up a six-foot-tall snow wall to protect his tent. But the chunks of flying ice ended up turning the wall into "Swiss cheese" and the pounding made it sound like he was living in a tom-tom drum.

The software engineer had hoped to ski about 17 miles a day. That pace proved too optimistic, as 6 miles a day ended up being a stellar outing during the early portion of what would turn into an 80-day excursion.

Ratcheting up the difficulty level was his equipment. Writing on his blog, Linsdau said his towing harness began to cut into his waist, "causing incessant trouble with my right hip."

"An adjustment of an inch was the difference between pain and relative comfort," he wrote on his blog.

During the phone interview from his family home in Jackson Hole, Linsdau said his hips still hurt and he is experiencing some off and on numbness in his fingers. His toes also are torn up from the intense skiing.

"Doctor told me it would be about two months before things start feeling vaguely normal," he said.

During the early portions of the journey, he had no issues with the harness. But once it started to chafe and cut into him, the suffering — and the frequent "fiddling" with his gear to achieve a quantum of comfort — became a constant companion.

"Many times it got to the point of suffering with low-grade discomfort rather than making an adjustment and having things become even worse," he wrote.

Slogging forward, propped up by the support of his family, girlfriend and friends who were monitoring his trip, Linsdau got an unexpected call on his satellite phone from Hannah McKeand, a British adventurer who had just gotten into the South Pole base.

"She actually got on the phone and started going through why I wasn't doing good mileage," he said.

Soaking in her advice — treat yourself like a machine and keep your speed consistent so you don't overheat — Linsdau boosted his per day mileage from 6 to 8.

"She alone saved me from not even possibly making it," he said.

To lug around his camping gear and food, Linsdau used sleds that were equipped with skis. This setup made navigating much of the terrain difficult because he frequently found himself zigging back and forth to get through areas covered with wave-like grooves called sastrugi.

The skis on his sleds would eventually break, but that turned out to be a silver lining. Talking to a trekker from Iceland, Linsdau found out it was actually easier to just plow through the wave-like formations with his sleds dragging behind.

That advice allowed him to push up his average daily output to 10 miles.

On Jan. 10, with the pole agonizingly close, the weather changed for the worse. The way Linsdau described it, the continent wanted to make sure that he knew it wasn't done with him yet.

For the next couple of weeks, he battled fierce cold, high winds and reduced visibility that forced him to rely on his GPS instruments. He also was losing weight because a good portion of his supplies had gone rancid from exposure to the sun.

And then, on Jan 21. — Jan. 22 in New Zealand — he made it.

The base at the South Pole is run by the National Science Foundation and Linsdau said the scientists there are extremely focused on their work.

It's not a sort of lodge that welcomes weary travelers and gives them a place to kick back on a recliner with a cup of hot chocolate and a cigar.

"You're not allowed to just march up there and repair things," he said.

Linsdau did snap some pictures of himself near the ceremonial South Pole pole and he was able to get a tour of the station, where he met some "super nice folks."

After the tour, he once again set up his tent and camped near the base, waiting for the plane that would take him back to the coast.

After 80 days of skiing, his weight had dropped to 145 from his starting weight of 170.

Although he had planned to do a round trip, Linsdau said he was happy with being the second American to solo to the pole and one of only a handful of worldwide adventurers to pull it off.

With the South Pole checked off, Linsdau has started looking into other adventures, such as scaling the Seven Summits, the highest peaks on each continent, and trekking to the North Pole. He's also working on setting up some speaking engagements — folks can contact him via his website: [aaronlinsdau.com](http://www.aaronlinsdau.com) (<http://www.aaronlinsdau.com/antarctica.html>) — and starting the groundwork for two books on his South Pole trip, including one that would feature a lot of tips for people looking to make a similar trip.

And possibly, more importantly, he's working to get his body back to normal — Oil of Olay for the facial scars — and put back on some of the weight he lost

"First meal I had when I got back: carne asada burrito," he said.

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