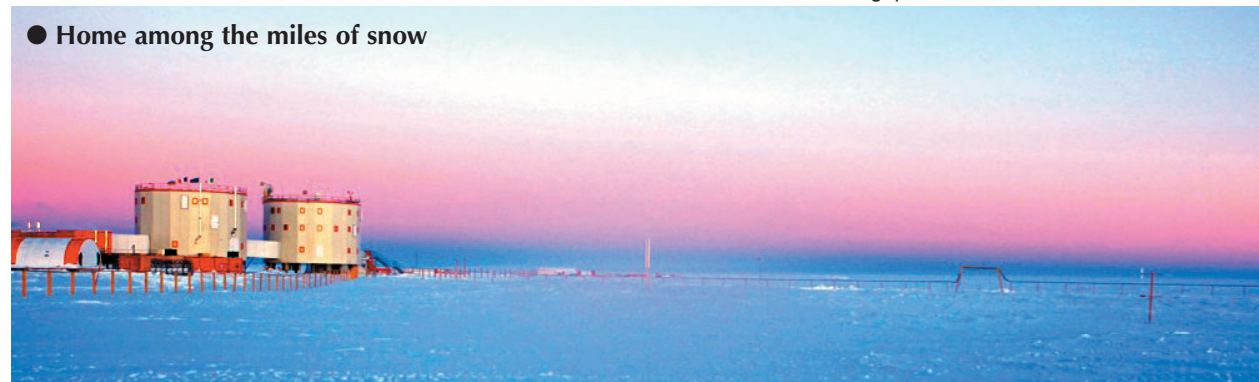


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● Home among the miles of snow

OUR Alex - as Whaley Bridge now thinks of young Dr Alex Kumar - is well into a year-long adventure in the coldest, darkest place on earth, Antarctica. And even before he comes back, he has booked up for another chilly adventure in 2014, retracing Sir Ernest Shackleton's planned, but uncompleted, route on foot across Antarctica.

Alex, now the most famous old boy of Whaley Bridge primary school and probably Stockport grammar school, too, is the medic to a team of 12 Europeans, spending a year at Concordia, the French-Italian research station. It is probably the place on earth with conditions most like those a future manned mission to Mars could face. The team's report at the end of their year will give the European Space Agency invaluable information about how - or even if - astronauts could survive marathon space explorations.

Alex, the 28 year old son of Indian-born Shant and Pat, who is English, is an aesthetics trainee doctor who left the John Radcliffe hospital in Oxford last December to spend the toughest year of his life as medical officer to the team. His job is to keep them healthy and treat them if anything goes wrong. If something very serious happens and he needs to operate, a surgeon in a centre of excellence will talk him through the procedure on a satellite link.

He will be running physiological as well as psychological research throughout the time he is in Antarctica. He has been an adventurer all his life. When he was 17, he spent a gap year in Nepal - 'going out a boy and coming back a man', says his dad. Alex's emails home and to friends would/will make a terrific book one day. He addresses one email to Shant Kumar and 'Prof Mummy Kumar', copies to his sister Natasha, brothers Ben and Neil and his partner Kathy Duong. Vietnamese born Kathy is a surgeon, at home in London with their new dog, a Siberian husky puppy Mishi. Looking to life after Antarctica, Alex says: "I owe Mishi a long run in Norway. It's always been a dream to dog-sled from Norway to and through Siberia. One day."

He has plenty of other ambitions - visiting Pacific islands, research posts abroad, working with Medecin sans Frontieres, the Shackleton expedition in 2014 and 'otherwise, marriage, a few kids and life in a cottage with a white picket fence.'

But first things first. Now in his third month of the job, it is still a huge series of discoveries. In his own words:

"What brought me here? It's the history of this unique, unmapped continent. 100 years ago, Scott died here and Shackleton was about to make his famous escape - probably the single best example of leadership and survival in human history."

"Antarctica is Planet Earth's most extreme environment and the only continent in which humans have no natural place. And yet here we are, a party of 13 Europeans, living, surviving up here at 3,800 metres altitude, in the Antarctic plateau, the

ALEX OF ANTARCTICA



● Flying the flag in Antarctica: Alex, the adventurer from High Peak

The boy from Whaley Bridge spending a year in the coldest place on earth and he's booked to retrace the steps of Shackleton in 2014

A DAY IN ANTARCTICA

"We wake up at around 8am and after breakfast start my research - studying two people per week on a rotating basis. We take lunch at 12.15 for 1 hour and then return to work until around 5-6pm. My research is lab based indoors, but I often help others on their base - e.g. glaciologists digging and collecting snow samples. I also enjoy photography and so get outside whenever I can. We eat dinner at 7.45pm. After dinner we play American pool in pairs - the same four people play each night. Sometimes we will watch a film in our cinema, or read, or catch up with friends and family by telephone and email. And then it's bedtime - we each have our own room."

FOOD AT CONCORDIA

Concordia is a joint French-Italian station and so we have fine French wine and Italian coffee. We have three meals a day. Despite being isolated we have plenty of variety - with frozen food stuffs. We have sea food, fish, meat, frozen vegetables and even frozen fresh fruit - which when frozen in minus 70 degrees Celsius outside in a shipping container keeps relatively well. We have fine multi-course meals quite regularly, on birthdays and on Saturday nights - last Saturday night we had a Mexican themed night - serving fajitas, guacamole, and mojitos."

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world's largest desert, with temperatures as low as minus 80 degrees, the coldest temperatures recorded in world history, with four months of 24 hour complete darkness and no opportunity of rescue of any sort.

"Outside there is a flat, white and featureless horizon. This is the closest you can come to living on another planet. You could be living a science fiction novel. Concordia station mimics in conception and design, a model for a station that would be built on the surface of another planet. The buildings we live in are cylindrical, so as to fit inside a space rocket. It's quite incredible. Outside the station, no flora or fauna can survive and there is nothing for over 1200km in most directions"

"Overwintering in Antarctica is completely unique. It scares the life out of you, but it invigorates your soul - challenging nature and pushing the limits of science."

Alex's 29th birthday will be on 31

May, two weeks before midwinter in Antarctica. Perhaps foie gras on the menu, as they had the other day. He heads home between November and January 2013, to the planning of the Shackleton expedition.

Alex gets lyrical about his reasons for joining the Imperial Trans Antarctic Century Expedition (ITACE): "Antarctica is an alluring and unexplored continent - a refuge and sanctuary for scientists and wildlife alike. Inspired by this legacy of science, recently I had applied and was selected as the expedition doctor and as the chief scientist will construct a research protocol for the Century Expedition."

"I will be the first Indian to cross Antarctica by foot and will be proud to carry both the British and Indian flags across the Continent for the first time. I will be responsible for setting up a research programme for the expedition as well as training the team in first aid, undertaking the role as the expedition doctor."

SCHOOLS - WHY NOT CALL ALEX?
 Alex would welcome any interest from schools, to hold a live video class with the pupils of any class, answering questions about Antarctica, by Skype. If you are interested, please contact Alex at www.AlexanderKumar.com email: AlexanderKumar@concordiabase.co.uk

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