

Reaching for the summit

This month, Emirati **Elham Al Qasimi** will attempt to become the first Arab woman to set foot on the North Pole. Interview *Nyree Barrett*

Sounds exciting! Tell us a bit about the expedition.

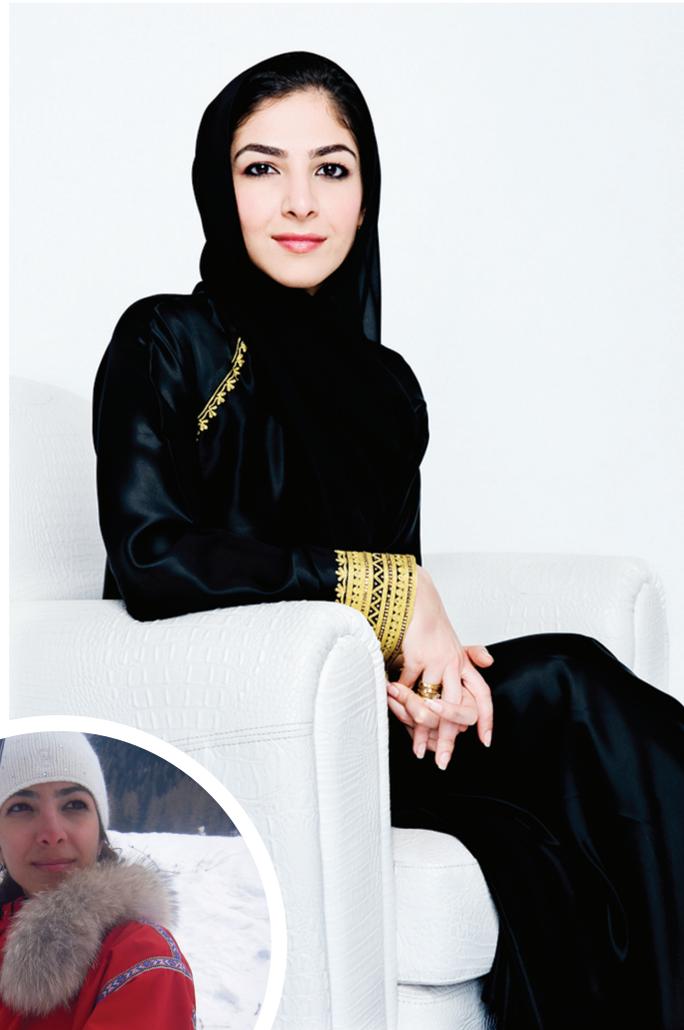
It's two weeks long and starts from Borneo, a Russian ice station that floats between 88 and 89 degrees latitude. I set off on April 10 and a guide and I will set off on cross-country skis pulling pulks [small toboggans] of equipment weighing up to 40kg. The trek is unassisted and unsupported, meaning we'll have to carry all the required supplies for the entire expedition with no motorised equipment to propel us forward. We'll typically ski for an average of eight hours a day, with a 10-minute break every two hours to snack. We'll cook our own meals, pitch our tent and generally live with little to no environmental footprint. During the expedition I will face risks such as thin ice, open water, polar bears, frostbite, hypothermia and injury.

You work in finance. What made you decide to branch out and do something so different?

The desire to stand on top of the world; to stand at the place where no compass points north and witness a part of nature that very few before me have and even fewer after me will. The polar ice continues to melt at an alarming rate, making such a trek increasingly impossible. This expedition will be a test of personal discipline, patience, drive, mental resilience and ability to follow through, which are all important for both my career and personal life.

All going well, you'll soon be the first Arab woman to set foot on the North Pole. How does that feel?

Very humbling. When I started planning the expedition I wasn't fully aware of the magnitude, I just thought I was undertaking a physical challenge that some may find interesting and some may not. So to be here today and have the opportunity to send a



message to Arab women is humbling.

I would stress that I did not reach this point by focusing on external challenges, but rather by focusing on my internal challenges. It has been a liberating experience for me and I'm not done yet.

How physically demanding will the trip be?

To me, this goal is just shy of impossible. It will involve juggling several challenges at once: the cold, the wind, the weight of my pulk, the lack of dexterity and camping challenges such as cold sleep, limited food selection and so on.

How will you deal with the cold?

I expect to face temperatures of around -30°C, so I'll use a layering

as well as doing strength training. Four trainers are supervising my training: an experienced triathlete, a mountaineer, a strength coach and a top 10 European extreme skier. Between them they have competed, broken records and faced failures, and so generally understand what it does to the psyche of a human to be so driven by a physical goal. Vital to my comprehension of the task at hand was a five-day polar training camp in Minnesota, and in March I had six days of glacier trekking in La Plagne in the Alps, which was supervised by two of my trainers.

The ice in the North Pole is constantly shifting. How do you mitigate this?

Weather conditions will dictate in which direction the ice I stand on will move. This means while I ski north the ice may be slowly drifting south, southeast or southwest. Therefore I may end up skiing a total of 15km to actually progress 12km closer to the

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pole. The ice moves slowly, therefore it's not a risk, but as ice moves it causes changes in the landscape of the terrain being crossed, such as the creation of ice ridges (sometimes as big as villas) and open leads (exposed arctic ocean).

Are you nervous?

Yes, but the ice is calling me. It will be twilight in the North Pole right now, and already two expeditioners I know of have set off on their respective expeditions. I feel nothing but exhilaration and excitement to be there soon too. It's a funny, butterfly-in-your-stomach kind of nervous.

The trip sounds pretty lonely – do you like your own company?

I think most would agree we don't spend nearly enough time with ourselves with our modern lifestyles. Spending more time with myself was one explicit objective of undertaking this expedition.

What will you miss?

My family. A warm bed. A shower. My hairbrush. My best friend.

What's the first thing you'll do when you get home?

I'll have bear hugs with my family – no pun intended!

See www.elhamalqasimi.com to track Elham's progress