



Elham Al-Qasimi

Polar explorer

INSPIRATIONAL WOMAN



From left to right:
Elham in the polar circle,
at home, and in a snow
covered forest

The North Pole may seem like another world to most, but for polar explorer and UAE national, Elham Al-Qasimi, it's a very real destination and a very real dream. This month, Elham is attempting an unassisted and unsupported expedition to the North Pole and, if she completes it, she will be the first Arab woman to have set foot in the Arctic and the first UAE national to undertake such a mission to the North Pole, truly making her mark in the record books of this millennium.

Originally for Elham, exploring was more of a chore than a pleasure, spending her childhood years following her father around America on numerous trips. "My love for exploring is definitely an expansion of my father, who would take us on painfully long trips into the mountains to see waterfalls and caves. Although we spent the time conjuring up excuses so we could leave, somehow these trips have stayed with me."

Several years on and inspired by the likes of Sir Ranulph Fiennes, trips to National Parks have been replaced with intrepid explorations to far further and dangerous destinations. "During a tough fitness drive last year I lost the motivation to train and thought to myself, I need a physical goal with a difficult but rewarding training and

preparation path and a personal journey that would force me to look at my inner self." And so the April 2010 North Pole expedition was undertaken.

As the first UAE national and Arab woman to attempt this, Elham is setting records and breaking down barriers. "His Highness Sheikh Mohammed once said 'me and my people love the first place in every field' and this is about doing something because we can, despite the initial perception of difficulty." Elham believes that the best way to improve yourself is to first compete with yourself.

"There are many different people in the world that have a variety of opinions on the capabilities of women to undertake a mission like this," she adds. "But my challenge was not to change those opinions, but simply to complete my challenge."

The mission ahead is certainly a tough one, but with training and mental preparation, combined with her faith, Elham believes she's in the right mind frame to complete the task. "I have a four-stage physical training plan that I'm undertaking, but mindset is everything," she explains. "The mental requirements will be even more demanding than the physical."

But it is also Elham's personal drive that motivates her when launching herself into -20 degrees ice holes. "I have also been fuelled by

the public's response – I keep thinking of all the people who I don't even know who this might affect positively. Plus, when the masses join you then the sceptics shift their views."

And it is for these unknown faces who Elham continues her mission for, whatever the weather. "I'm still working hard at raising funds, but I feel very strongly about creating opportunity and fostering social mobility."

With Elham's snowbound deadline looming, she focuses on the mission at hand. "Our progress is as simple or as bold as we dare to dream. It starts with your own opinion of those dreams and it ends with genuine intentions behind achieving them. With genuine intentions and hard work, impossible seems to fade into nothing." And when asked what Elham's motto will be for her feat of human endurance, she simply quotes TS Eliot: "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go." ■

To follow Elham's progress and for more information about her charities, visit www.elhamalqasimi.com