



Polar OPIPOSITES

As she prepares to become the first Arab woman and UAE national to trek to the North Pole, Elham Al-Qasimi is also bidding to change a few preconceptions along the way

Why on earth have you decided on the North Pole?

Well, you said it. It's the end of the Earth. If one is to do an expedition to push them beyond their comfort zone and their physical limits, it's probably best to do it in the most challenging environment you can think of. For some people that's a mountain, for some it's canoeing down the Amazon. But for me it's the North Pole.



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researches it and thinks about what it would take out of them and commits to it, then they've already won from the moment they decide to do it. You're facing the fact that you're going to be out of your comfort zone, and you desire that. Going through all the training and

the preparation and the sacrifices along the way, that's the learning curve. So for me, just going is succeeding. The public image that goes along with it, and the fact that there might be young people who might be inspired and motivated by it and the fact that we're shaping a little tiny piece of history – that definitely creates a little bit of nervousness. I really want to make sure that young people, who need something symbolic like a flag at the North Pole, get what they're looking for.

What were the initial reactions when you told people?

I have found support, enthusiasm and excitement in the most unexpected places. My grandmother's sister-in-law wrote me the longest email, the most inspiring email – it really brought tears to my eyes – about how excited she is about the expedition. My brother-in-law, who I thought was very conservative and very traditional, has been my biggest supporter. And I've found that kind of support in corporations and local companies and from the general public too. They follow me on Twitter and stuff like that. It's better than I ever would have thought.

Have you faced any opposition?

It's funny, when the first announcement of the expedition went out, one of the first comments was from a local man. He was like "she's 27, she's young, she should stay at home with her husband." There are a lot of presumptions in there. There's the presumption that I'm married, that I'm happy in the home and the presumption that I'm married to someone who likes staying at home as well. So there are all sorts of opinions. He immediately got a whole bunch of responses saying that people were really excited about what I was doing. For every one comment like that, I've had 30 that are the opposite.

Why are you doing it unassisted?

I think that everything I've done in my adult life, I've pursued challenges that are a bit out of my comfort zone. A lot out of my comfort zone in fact. Those are the times where I got the most out of the experience. For me, if the purpose of going out there is to do something challenging in order to gain from the process, then why take short cuts?

How important is it for you to be the first Arab woman and the first UAE national to reach the North Pole?

I decided to do it before I knew I'd be the first Arab woman. When I spoke to my family and my brother-in-law about it, he started researching and he realised that there hadn't been an Arab woman who'd done it before and that there were UAE nationals that had visited the North Pole, but none who had trekked there. When I sat and thought about it, the first thing I thought was that when I was a teenager, I didn't really have a role model; a female role model that went out and did fun stuff. It was always the boys that got to go out jet-skiing and got to go camping in Hatta, while we stayed home. We followed the rules. If I can set a new norm for what's possible for women in the UAE, then I'm happy to share that with the public. In that way, it's important to me.

You're doing this on behalf of the entire UAE. Do you feel any extra pressure because of that?

That's a great question. Anyone who decides to do something,

Will you be taking huskies?

I'm still raising money. If I don't raise enough, I'll be pulling the sled on a harness. I prefer the huskies because, contrary to what a lot of people believe, it's harder work, because you have to go as fast as they go, but you can't sweat. If you sweat, your clothes get wet and when you stop, they freeze. And there's an element of unpredictability because the sled they carry is huge and you get ice ridges that you might have to pull and yank the sled through.

Do you like dogs?

Growing up here we don't really have the environment for them, but in Minnesota we trained with huskies. They're pack animals, they are essentially wolves, but when you learn how to connect with them they're amazing animals to be around. They're so enthusiastic and so energetic. On day one I was told I had to learn all of their names if they were to respect me. You learn pretty quickly that you don't want to be the disrespected one among seven wolves.

How will you find time throughout the trip to update your Twitter and Facebook?

We're working on satellite phones and it takes a long time. It takes 20 minutes to transfer a short blog entry. And if you don't have full reception, you can lose it after 15 minutes, and then you have to start all over. But so many people are excited about what I'm doing, it would be a shame not to share it. It will just take a little bit of patience.

Do you have plans to do something afterwards?

I've loved training for this, but I think it would be hard to make a career out of being an expeditioner. It would be fun, but I think it would be hard. But I can easily see myself doing one of these every 12-18 months, depending on how big the expedition is. ★

You can follow Elham on Twitter and Facebook by searching under 'PolarBent' or 'PolarBent Elham Alqasimi'



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