THE GREAT RACE

Pole push powered by truffles and pemmican

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PUNTA ARENAS, CHILE -- This is the first of Vancouver writer Kevin Vallely's weekly progress reports as he and his companions try to reach the South Pole in record time.

Punta Arenas proclaims itself to be the southernmost city on Earth. Located at the tip of South America, it's a picturesque community of mansions and elegant shops that speak of a time when the city was a critical port of call for ships rounding the turbulent Cape Horn.

It still draws travellers to enjoy Chile's mountainous beauty (or simply to visit "the end of the world"), but for Canada's South Pole Quest team, it's a last taste of civilization before we reach Antarctica to run and ski 1,130 kilometres to where the world really ends.

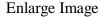
Extreme athlete Ray Zahab of Ottawa, Arctic adventurer Richard Weber and I left from Toronto on Monday with eight duffel bags and seven barrels stuffed with food and equipment. The mountain of gear raised many eyebrows at the airport (none more than ours when we learned the extra baggage cost), but our expedition is "unsupported." What we start with is all we'll have.

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Food for the 40-day trip needs to be light and still support a burn rate of almost 8,000 calories a day. So everything has an extremely high fat content, and includes butter, macadamia-nut chocolate truffles and deep-fried double-smoked bacon to pemmican, food of the voyageurs. They learned from native people that this concoction of suet paste pounded with fruit and dried meat makes an efficient, high-energy travel food . Arctic explorer Robert Peary, who claimed to be the first to the North Pole, is known to have used it on his expeditions. Although likely not the best for our hearts, a diet exceptionally high in fat is what we need to survive in the cold.

The truffles and pemmican were prepared by Les Fougères, a well-known Quebec restaurant not far from Ottawa, and couldn't be easily replicated in Chile. Fortunately, a detailed ledger and some smooth talking proved convincing enough for border officials to allow our unique delicacies into the country.

We will spend the next week poring over gear to ensure that everything works when we hit the ice. Our communication equipment gives us the greatest concern since mimicking the extreme conditions of Antarctica to test it has proved impossible. The cameras, video cameras and satellite phones need to be charged by solar panel and are essential to keep us connected with the outside world. This communication is vital not just for safety but also because we have thousands of students around the world tracking our progress via http://www.southpolequest.com, and we have

committed to letting them take part in the adventure.

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