



# A DESCENT INTO THE VOID

The new documentary **NORTH OF NIGHTFALL** tracks a month-long expedition to a ridiculously isolated Arctic island, where four iconic freeriders tackle a miraculous line and contemplate hard questions about climate change.

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Freeride pioneer  
Darren Berrecloth  
takes flight on the  
remote Arctic island  
called Axel Heiberg.





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rtic pace. That's what longtime Arctic guide Françoise Gervais calls it. It's the way time passes on a summer expedition in the far, far, far north—interminable, blurry, manic. You spend days waiting for the weather to clear—ratcheting open your dirt-gritty tent zipper to glimpse the pewter sky, sorting through gold-foil bags of dehydrated Quick Cook Vegetable Rice Pilaf, smothering your face with your sleeping bag—because the weather decides your schedule for you, and the sun goes around in circles without ever setting, and days and nights, up here, are really just endless days. But then the light sweetens and you decide it's the perfect time to ride the perfect line—the one you found on Google Earth a few years ago, the one you scouted from a droning DHC-6 Twin Otter utility aircraft last year, the one you've been searching for all your life. It's on a remote Canadian Arctic island called Axel Heiberg, less than 700 miles from the North Pole and the size of Switzerland. It's the one with the black-brown clay that your mountain-bike tires carve like soft butter. Freeriders like you don't go around with measuring sticks, but damn, the line in question starts at 2,700 feet and doesn't let up until your rims touch the sea, and it looks like some big routes in Utah—only it's way bigger. In a word: legendary.

Let's name it Dream Chute, the same straightforward way Norwegian explorers named nearby Bad Weather Cape. Naming it as if somebody might ride this line, much less lay eyes on it, ever again.

Before that, though, you said goodbye to your daughter, almost one year old and on the verge of walking. Before that, you were schooled in the use of electric polar-bear fencing and the etiquette of packing out a month's worth of human waste. Before that, you all determined that what's (technically) night has better conditions, calmer winds and more consistent light than what's (technically) day, so you turn your circadian rhythms upside down. Before that, you rode a disappointing line covered with sharp shale that clattered like teeth, and a GoPro caught one of you saying oh shit oh god before dropping in. Caught you being, as your director put it, "more Clark Kent than superhuman athlete." (Meaning: being human.) You were elated, frustrated and fried.

But now the Arctic pace picks up. It's your moment. You hike for three hours

with your bike on your back, you build kickers, your camera crew sets up giant lenses across the valley and you perform. Your turquoise jersey flashes against the starkness as you're swallowed up by the landscape of Dream Chute, which is swallowed by Axel Heiberg. You fly downhill for so long that your director doesn't know what to do with all the footage. It's the far, far, far north, so you can perform for 14 hours straight, then eat dinner at 4 a.m. and collapse in your tent. It's the far, far, far north—a place the Inuit call "the land beyond the land of the people." That's true, but you're here, right? You make your mark. You decide to call it *North of Nightfall*.

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he location demands a basic question: Why would there be deserts near the North Pole?

That's what director Jeremy Grant asked himself when he first heard about Axel Heiberg from freeride pioneer Darren Berrecloth. And that's what Berrecloth had asked himself when he dug up satellite photos of the place and shook his head in disbelief. Most of the Arctic is flat and covered in ice; Axel, nestled next to Ellesmere Island, has some 1,100 glaciers, but it also has mountains approaching 7,000 feet and swaths of dehydrated land with barely any vegetation. Forty-five million years ago it was a semitropical forest of 150-foot-tall trees; now it has just enough sustenance to host musk oxen and ghostly white arctic wolves. No European set foot on Axel until 1900, and it remains one of the least-visited places in the world.

After talking with scientists like Laura Thomson, a glaciologist at Simon Fraser University who has been researching Axel for nine years, Berrecloth discovered that parts of the island are in a rainshadow: The topography blocks the clouds and the ocean freezes any leftover precipitation, leaving what Grant calls "the perfect recipe for freeriding." (In a nutshell, good dirt and lots of vert.) "I've traveled the globe in search of big-mountain terrain," says Berrecloth. "And this was by far the biggest, tallest and most diverse place for riding I'd ever seen."

So Berrecloth drafted his dream team: straight shooter and calculated madman Cam Zink; soft-spoken up-and-comer Carson Storch; and young Tom van Steenberg, who pulled off an epic "caveman" jump (leaping off a cliff with his bike beside him, legs spread-eagled, and landing in the saddle) in the 2017 Red Bull Rampage. It was two veterans, two

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director **Jeremy Grant**

young guns, four bikes, one month and one big unknown—namely, what the hell are we getting into? “For other trips, like Nepal or the Gobi Desert or Argentina, someone had been there before, whether it was mountaineers or just tourists taking pictures,” says Grant, who’s been a filmmaker for more than a decade. “No one goes to Axel. I mean no one. It’s the biggest what-if we’ve ever done.”

Even Arctic Kingdom, the outfitter that coordinated the July 2017 expedition, was in uncharted territory. “We believe it’s the most northern feature-length film ever shot,” says Jason Hillier, vp of product management. “We had countless hours of meetings, hundreds of emails and plans B, C, D and E ready to go. We knew the final plan would end up being a mix of them all.” Expedition leader Françoise Gervais, who’s guided in the Arctic for almost 15 years, had never been to Axel. “When we stepped onto the bare ground, it was a whole other world,” she says. “I’m used to ice. I don’t deal with dirt.”

The remoteness, the otherness, the Mars-ness of Axel gives every frame of the film an edge. The athletes are there to ride hard and advance their careers and return home with the goods, but they all know it’s a 12-hour flight to a hospital. “It wasn’t really an option to get seriously hurt, like a burst spleen or a busted femur,” says Storch. “Even though it was crazy how perfect the riding was, there was a fine line between pushing it and staying safe.” In one scene, the crew’s doctor opens up a huge first aid kit—syringes, defibrillator, oxygen, IV supplies—and asks the riders to list their previous injuries. “Where to start?” one of them jokes, but the laughter stops quickly. Broken feet, ankles, legs, torn ACL, plates in both collarbones, “a pneumothorax that almost killed me,” broken back, PCL, meniscus, tibia, six knee surgeries, dislocated shoulders. As Zink says, “Our job is to get gnarlier and gnarlier.”

But the extreme situation on Axel forced the boldest icons of a dangerous sport to weigh risk and reward. “Death was a serious factor,” says Storch. And Grant was essentially directing a bunch of his really good friends. “We wanted to come back with a progressive mountain-bike film, but we also wanted the guys to come back alive. What is worth it?” Every time someone drops in during *NoN*,

that question hangs in the air. As Grant points out, most highlight reels and YouTube race crashes rarely let you see whether people even get up, but this film gave him an opportunity to deepen the narrative. “I think audiences are desensitized,” he says. “We wanted to show some vulnerability, and have the riders’ faces tell part of the story.”

Those faces tell another part of the story, too, one that’s part of the film’s setup and gives it a touch of melancholy: The freeride guard is changing, with Berrecloth, 37, and Zink, 32, slowly ceding the spotlight to the likes of Storch, 25, and Van Steenberg, 21. In the film, two of them leave young children behind; the other two gently explain to their parents that they’re going on the trip of a lifetime. Once the group starts exploring Axel, it’s obvious how much the outgoing generation is proud to teach—and the next generation is eager to learn. In fact,

the dynamic is crucial to the sport itself. “This type of riding is so inaccessible for most people that authentic mentorship is a huge part of it,” says Grant. Berrecloth adds, “I remember when I stole the torch from my heroes and ran with it, and now is the time to show the rookies a thing or two.” He and Zink explain to their charges how they like to choose lines, ride lines, abort lines. How to flip a step-down. How to say no. They’re encouraging—and, it seems, a bit wistful. “I’ve heard that advice is a form of nostalgia,” says Zink. “You wipe away the past and turn it into a better memory.”

**T**he trip of a lifetime. It’s overused. Diluted, even, to triteness, especially in extreme sports. What can be outdone is outdone, eclipsed, broken. But to the *NoN* crew, their adventure felt like an endgame. Is there any mountain-bikeable location more austere? Has any freeride project to date been more logistically complicated? “We’ve been to so many out-there places, and we always say, well, this is the furthest we’ve ever been—no one has ever been here before,” says



Berrecloth cooks as a crew member looks on. The expedition had supplies to be self-sufficient for 28 days.



Waiting was part of the game for (left to right) producer Clark Fyans, cinematographer Clay Porter and director of photography Greg Wheeler.



Only 21, Tom van Steenberg was one of two young guns on the expedition with two freeride icons.



Van Steenberg (left) and Storch (center) prep with cinematographer Porter in British Columbia.



The stars of *North of Nightfall* (from left): Storch, Van Steenberg, Zink and Berreth in BC.

Grant. “But Axel Heiberg made all those other trips sound like crying wolf.” Hillier and Gervais, of Arctic Kingdom, had to get one Twin Otter, one AStar B2 heli, two ATVs, six portable generators, 10 portable heaters and 64 containers of fuel to the salty shores of Lake Buchanan—plus enough food for 18 people for 28 days. Everything about it was prohibitive. “I don’t think anyone will ever go up there to mountain bike again,” says Storch. Begrudgingly, Berrecloth agrees. “Sadly, this was a one-way-ticket-home, been-there-done-that type of deal.”

But that’s what gives the film more weight: the pressure, the unpredictability, the danger, the now. “We knew from the beginning that we’d never, ever come back,” says Grant. Everywhere they stepped, it was a first ascent, a first descent. For 28 days, they’d film as much as they could, and then? Fin. “Time was very limited, resources were very limited,” says Storch. “We had to get everything on the first hit.” And while the final cut includes requisite highs and lows and flashes of human interest, it was the long stretches in between takes that were truly transformative. The waiting. The Arctic pace. Gervais noticed how the riders were at first frustrated by how much was out of their hands—then humbled. “And then,” she says, “they totally embraced it. In the high Arctic, the land is in control, not you.” Trapped for days at a time by low clouds and snowstorms, everyone drank tea and coffee and talked about life.

Even more alien, there was essentially no connectivity, no technology—which allowed the whole crew to be present, all day, every unbroken day. “Darren and Cam grew up and created their careers on iconic movie segments and social media, providing content every day or two, and being judged,” says Grant. “This allowed them to do something big and iconic one last time, not just fueling the machine.” For Zink, the trip came just a month after his son was born, and it was the longest he’d ever been away from his wife and older daughter. It was heavy—but also the trip of a lifetime. “Ironically, the best thing was being so isolated,” he says. “We were in the middle of some of the best riding in the world and had no distraction. It was surreal.”

**A**rctic pace has another meaning, too, and it’s one that *NoN* doesn’t gloss over: Places like Axel are warming faster than anywhere else in the world, and, according to Laura Thomson, the Canadian Arctic’s melting glaciers and ice



Berrecloth and the rest of the team spent four weeks launching themselves down Axel Heiberg, aware that they’d likely never return.

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**Carson Storch**

caps are the world’s largest contributor to sea-level rise. Grant didn’t intend to make a film about climate change, but what began as a search for adventure turned into a reckoning with the future of Axel. “As the project evolved, it became clear that it would be irresponsible not to tell this part of the story,” he says. Maybe it was when they flew across the island to McGill Arctic Research Station and asked Thomson about her work studying White Glacier. Maybe it was when Arctic wolves wandered by camp or the heli buzzed a musk ox. Maybe it was as simple as being present. Maybe it was when their Twin Otter first banked over Mokka Fjord and went in for a landing, and the Arctic, to them, came into existence. “Over all this time the ice retreated, and it unveiled perfect terrain, which gave us a reason to ride bikes there,” says Storch. “But it became our chance to bring awareness to how the Arctic is changing because of us.”

And that, beyond the tricks and the crashes, is how *North of Nightfall* could make an impact bigger than the ess-curves carved into the flanks of Axel Heiberg: It shows how humans can make their mark even in places they’ve barely touched and hardly know. According to Thomson, erosion will wash away the kickers and bomb holes, but our other collective divots may be too deep to erase. To hear a longtime Arctic guide say we learned that true wilderness is still out there—well, that’s saying something about how pristine this island is and how hard we should work to keep it that way. “All of us were less impressed by the crazy lines than by the feeling of our lack of significance in the landscape,” says Grant. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t make a difference.”

For release dates and screenings in your area, go to [northofnightfall.com](http://northofnightfall.com)