



PEAK PERFORMANCE



Two mould-breaking British adventurers practise for their Antarctic expedition in the snowy Pyrenees with the new Land Rover Defender

Story Marisa Cannon **Photography** John Alexander

It's 7.30am, but here in the Andorran Pyrenees, darkness still reigns. Light from the full moon reflects off the conifers covering the lower slopes.

By the time the sun crests the peaks, the Land Rover Defender is making good progress towards our base camp, some 500 metres above the town of Canillo.

Driving the Defender is British adventurer Phoebe Smith, who manoeuvres the car up the mountain slopes, while fellow explorer Dwayne Fields plays DJ in the passenger seat. "Let's get some tunes on!" he declares, cranking up the volume. Phoebe grins and puts her foot down for the straight ahead, cheerily ribbing him about his taste in music.

The pair have come to this tiny European microstate on a training mission for their most significant expedition to date, an 830-mile trek from Berkner Island in Antarctica to the South Pole, set to take place in November 2020. They've just completed a 40-day trek from the northernmost point of Scotland to the bottom of England, and you can tell, as they fizz with energy and tease each other.

They met in 2017 while giving out Duke of Edinburgh Awards at Buckingham Palace and bonded over shared experiences, including racial and gender barriers, they had encountered in the world of adventuring. Together they have created the WeTwo Foundation, which aims to change the face of adventure, make the outdoors more accessible, and introduce underprivileged

young people to the way of life that has transformed both of theirs.

But first, there's a mountain in Andorra to conquer. The Defender, a 110 X in dazzling Fuji White, crunches through the snow towards the starting trail of one of the country's highest peaks, Casamanya. From there, Dwayne and Phoebe will continue on foot and camp close to the summit, 2,740m above sea level, where the icy conditions, sub-zero temperatures and wild camping expertise gained will provide valuable preparation for their time in Antarctica.

Dwayne first developed an appetite for the outdoors as a boy in Jamaica, but a move to London spelled an end to that. "I found it difficult to make friends when I first moved over," he recalls. "So one day, I dug up a load of insects in the school garden to show my classmates, to teach them what I knew, to impress them. As you can imagine, that backfired - all the children ran away in horror. I'd never felt so alone in my life. That's when I realised that the world I was now in was completely different to the one I'd known."

To fit in, Dwayne stuck to the status quo and did what the other kids did. As he got older, he fell into the world of street gangs, survived a knife attack and was shot at, twice, at point blank range. Both times, the gun misfired. He then decided to re-evaluate what he wanted out of life, and realised that his fondest memories were of the years spent in Jamaica climbing trees, foraging for his dinner and roasting it on a fire - free in the wilderness.



From then on, Dwayne made it his mission to make nature a part of his daily life as much as possible. But personal tragedy also played a part: "A friend was killed in 2007 and I wanted to do something that would make the people around me think more about what they could achieve if they didn't allow their postcode to dictate their boundaries."

In his twenties, Dwayne painstakingly raised money to fund a trip to the Arctic, becoming the first black Briton to walk the 400 miles to the magnetic North Pole. Today, he is a fellow of the Royal Geographic Society, and his list of accomplishments has only grown, from circumnavigating Jamaica in a kayak, to an expedition with inner-city kids to the summit of Ben Nevis.

Phoebe, a travel journalist who edited *Wanderlust* magazine and now writes for leading UK national newspapers, rarely saw female adventure role models growing up. Her interest was stoked when she was persuaded by a friend in Australia to sleep overnight in a swagbag (a roll-away bed used by local drovers) in the outback.

"I was terrified," she remembers. "I had never wanted to camp. Before I got in the bed, they listed all of the things that could kill you, and I thought, 'I'm going to hate this!'"

Of course, she didn't - and she has gone on to become the first person to sleep in all of the most extreme points of mainland Britain, overnights on the summits of the highest mountains in Wales, England and Scotland, and published ten books, including the best-selling *Extreme Sleeps: Adventures of a Wild Camper* and *Wilderness Weekends: Wild Adventures in Britain's Rugged Corners*.

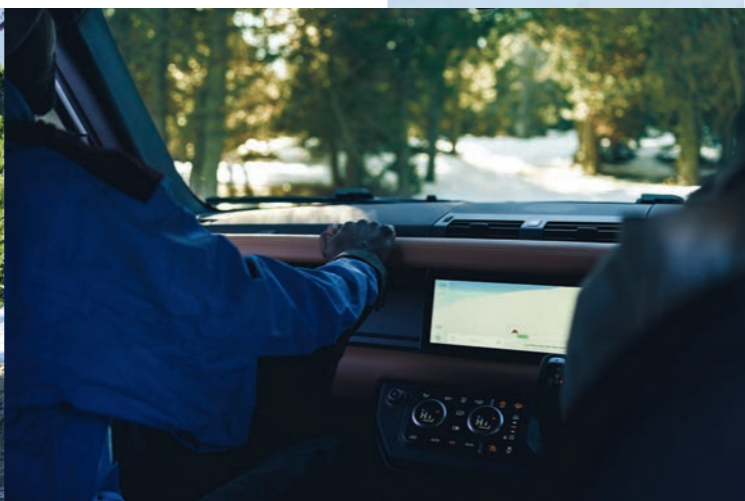
The number of women making careers out of adventuring has certainly risen since Phoebe's childhood, but a vast gender imbalance still persists.

As the Defender navigates the narrow hairpins towards base camp, Dwayne and Phoebe explain their core motivation for the South Pole expedition: to take a group of underprivileged young people from the UK on an expedition ship to Antarctica in 2021.

"The kids that we want to reach are from backgrounds where they've been told, 'You can't do that', or it's not even on their radar as something they could do," says Phoebe.

"We want them not only to see Antarctica and fall in love with it, but also to understand the issues that are being faced by the planet, and open their eyes to career options that they may have never come across otherwise. We really care about climate change, and we >

Have an ice day
Deep snow and bitter cold pose no barrier for the adventurous



Off road sequences on dedicated land with full permissions

**We rise above the
treeline, greeted by a
dazzling blanket of
untouched snow**

Trail blazers

Adventurers Dwayne and Phoebe begin their trek towards Casamanya's summit

both adore wildlife – one cannot live without the other, and Antarctica is so important to both. Our expedition intends to highlight this. We want to do what no other expeditions do – make it about the cause, not the glory.”

Driving the Defender is an unparalleled luxury in mountains like these – the tightest switchbacks are deftly despatched; packed snow poses not the slightest threat thanks to its immense off-road capability. You feel secure, completely protected from the elements, whether facing mud, deep water or ice. Here, there is plenty of all of them.

Arriving at base camp, the Defender glides through snow half a metre deep and parks up in a silent forest twinkling with frozen dew. Dwayne and Phoebe offload bags of kit from the car's capacious boot. Backpacks, snow boots, crampons for traction on ice, ice axes, walking poles and gaiters are all extracted and checked before being put to work.

“It's going to be freezing cold in Antarctica, average temperatures of -15°C to -20°C, with constant winds. And we'll be walking uphill almost 90 per cent of the way, too,” says Dwayne. “I feel like I have a good idea of what to expect. I spent time with a sport psychologist before I first went to the North Pole and learnt a few techniques to help me focus, and equally distract myself.”

Phoebe adds, “We'll be hauling everything we'll need on a sled to camp with us, but the main thing that people talk about is the boredom. The best training for it so far has been the 40-day walk through Britain. Coping was easy as long as we didn't take ourselves too seriously and can have a laugh. Achieving



that boosted our confidence so we realised we were ready and could cope with whatever is thrown at us in Antarctica.”

Andorra's high-altitude landscape will serve the pair well as preparation for camping in Antarctica. Known for its ski resorts, this tiny country, nestled into the mountainous border between France and Spain, enjoys 90 per cent forest cover and snow-coated peaks every way you look. Casamanya – the peak the pair are due to ascend – is one not to miss. It divides Andorra's east and west valleys, promising panoramic views of a sensational landscape. Just a few hundred metres below the summit will be Dwayne and Phoebe's home for the night as they test their resolve against bitter temperatures, exposed to the harshest of the Pyrenees' elements.

On the way up, the trail is hemmed in by dark thickets of black pine, whose indented trunks reveal the presence of woodpeckers, while high above, chiffchaffs dart through the upper tiers of the forest. Snow compacts underfoot with a satisfying crunch as the pair stride forward, alert for fallen branches or debris that might compromise their footing. A steep ravine extends below on the right. Walking poles plunge deeper into snow with every step taken.

Eventually, the treeline gives way to a dazzling blanket of untouched snow. The drift here is substantial, and Dwayne at the front trudges through, making deep, scruffy footprints across the pristine stretch. Further ahead, the summit comes into view and, just below it, a cluster of rocks to mark the small spot of level ground the pair have identified as the best place to pitch their tent. Bolstered >



by the sight, they quicken their pace and soon arrive at the saddle, shrugging off their packs before taking in the view.

Chestnut-coloured mountains define the horizon, and a white vapour trail from a lone jet aircraft courses through the cobalt sky. Wispy clouds gather around shorter peaks in the distance, and a griffon vulture drifts above the bottle green valleys. It's a breath-taking spot in which to spend the night.

Unpacking her equipment, Phoebe explains why they've chosen this location in particular. "Level ground is most important for camping. We need somewhere that we can get our pegs in but is comfortable enough to sleep on, and where there's nothing that can fall on us from above." Avalanche risk is something that the pair have also been mindful of - these commonly occur on a gradient of 35-40°, which is at a lower gradient than where they're camping.

After a final hike to Casamanya's summit and a mug of thawing tea, the pair pitch their home for the night, settling in to brace themselves for the cold that will set in as soon as the sun dips below the horizon.

The next morning, the sun is gloriously brilliant at 9am when Dwayne and Phoebe arrive at base camp. They're bang on time, excited and hungry. "Temperatures got down to -6°C last night, and we were lucky that the wind dropped eventually," says Dwayne. "It was a perfectly clear night, cold but gorgeous. It's what we're likely to experience in Antarctica. That'll be colder, of course, but we won't get the sudden shift in temperature



like we did last night because the continent will be in summer so there'll be daylight 24/7. It's crucial to get extreme training like this, because we can't replicate it in the UK.

"The other challenge was about working to monitor the conditions, manage the changes of terrain, and being efficient with our kit," Dwayne continues as the Defender's rear door swings wide, ready to swallow all the kit once again. "In Antarctica you've got to be so organised with your equipment. We will need to be able to locate and manage kit quickly - it could be the difference between a finger dropping off or not."

They're buzzing, almost evangelical about the views from the mountain last night before hunkering down in the tent. "Every so often we could hear the reverberations of controlled avalanche explosions in the distance," says Phoebe. "They felt so incredibly loud, like a gunshot against this eerie silence."

What does it feel like to be on the top of a mountain, completely alone? "It feels like the safest place on Earth," she says. "You're completely protected, sheltered. It gives you a chance to reset from the day in a kind of sanctuary, like a breath of fresh air."

As they pack the gear into the Defender, the vastness of the landscape extends in front, rays of sun strafing the powder-smooth clearing below an enormous sweep of sky. "It's stunning," says Dwayne, carefully positioning his razor-sharp crampons in the car's boot. It'll be an invaluable memory to draw on when fending off the White Continent's icy elements later this year. ●

Roomy with a view

Practice makes perfect for the Antarctic expedition

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