No, it’s not a ski resort – it’s the South Pole
First the huts. Then a gift shop. Now a road. Is this the end for the last great wilderness?


“Great God! This is an awful place,” wrote Captain Robert Falcon Scott when he reached the South Pole on January 17, 1912. Tom Avery, a 27-year-old finance director with a ski company, had a similar reaction when he reached the pole at the end of December last year. But it wasn’t the cold and isolation that chilled him; it was the gift shop.

“We had walked 700 miles and from 12 miles away we could see the big American base at the pole,” he says. “When we got there, we found a gift shop, which had a sale and was selling half-price ‘I reached the South Pole’ T-shirts.”

Old Harrovian Avery, who has revered Scott and fellow explorer Ernest Shackleton since he was eight, wasn’t buying, not even at knockdown, new-year prices. Nor was he too impressed by the insignia at the pole itself: a plaque commemorating the race between Scott and the Norwegian Roald Amundsen (the latter won and the former lost his life on the way back to base) and a large Stars and Stripes marking the fact that the US now controls the South Pole and is building a new base there.

Last month it emerged that the US is also planning a 900-mile (1,450km) road, linking the pole with the town of McMurdo on the coast. That prospect worries those who see Antarctica as the last great wilderness. “With the road will come tourism and pollution,” says the British Green party’s international spokesman, John Norris. “That would destroy much of the value of Antarctica as a research facility. It is the one continent that hasn’t had human activity, and to lose that for the sake of affluent tourists is not a very good bargain.”

At present, such fears are overdone – this will not be a road in any conventional sense. It will be made not of asphalt but of snow and ice, and will be usable for only 100 days a year. “It wouldn’t be for lorries,” says Dr Karl Erb, head of the US Antarctic programme.

Erb insists that the US has no interest in developing tourism. “We tread a fine line as far as tourists are concerned,” he says. “We don’t say ‘y’all come,’ but if they do turn up we offer them a coffee and a shower.” There is no hostel at the base – exhausted trekkers have to sleep in their tents.

There is, however, already an easier way to get to the pole – by planes on skis. Avery is dismissive of those who take the easy option. “People pay $25,000 to fly to the pole just to say they’ve been there,” he says. “They are there for about four hours and spend most of the time in the gift shop.”

The high-rollers and trekkers are just the tip of the iceberg. It is estimated that 20,000 tourists a year now visit Antarctica – mainly people taking cruises around the coastline.

Attached to the romantic legacy of Scott, Avery imagines some future party trekking across the wilderness and suddenly seeing a lorry go past. “If you’re on a polar expedition and a truck rumbles past, it’s going to be a bit of a letdown,” he says with Scott-like understatement. “At the very least, I hope they don’t use the Beardmore route, which was the one followed by Scott and Shackleton. There are other glaciers through the mountains which a road could follow.”

When Avery reached the pole, he was the youngest person to get there on foot, following a 45-day, 700-mile trek. In interviews, Avery’s father praised his son’s “stiff upper lip” – a lip that was extremely stiff since he was suffering from frostbite.

\[^1\] Old Harrovians are people who studied at Harrow School, one of Britain’s top private schools for boys
“The record was a bit of a nonsense really,” says Avery bravely. “The real reason for doing it was to commemorate the expedition by Scott and Shackleton in 1902. We were celebrating their achievement in almost getting there.” Scott was his boyhood hero – famed for not quite being the first man to reach the South Pole. Amundsen got there ahead of him on December 14, 1911 and lived to tell the tale; Scott reached the pole a month later and didn’t, though he left a heart-rending diary to inspire later generations.

The pathos of Scott’s final diary entry has echoed down the years: “I do not think we can hope for any better things now. We shall stick it out to the end, but we are getting weaker, of course, and the end cannot be far. It seems a pity, but I do not think I can write more.” No wonder schoolboys wanted to retrace his frostbitten steps.

The contrast between exploration then (isolation, individual endeavour, likely death) and now (corporate sponsorship, likely appearances on 24-hour news programmes, cell-phones) is, of course, stark. So much so that even Sir Ranulph Fiennes, Britain’s best-known explorer, says that there is now nothing left to explore except space.

Sara Wheeler, who has written widely on Antarctica, has no time for modern-day adventuring. “[…] The most important thing about Antarctica is that it is unowned – it remains unowned no matter how many countries make a claim. We have to respect and cherish that. If the signatories of the Antarctic treaty are vigilant, there is no imminent danger of exploitation.”

The 1961 treaty, signed by the 12 countries then active in the region, agreed to demilitarise Antarctica, establish it as a zone free of nuclear tests and radioactive waste, set aside disputes over territorial sovereignty and promote scientific cooperation. There are now 27 “consultative parties” to the treaty, including not just the US, UK, China and Russia, but Belgium, Bulgaria and Peru, too. Each has a scientific base in Antarctica and at least seven – including the UK, Chile, Argentina, Norway, France, Australia and New Zealand – still make territorial claims, though these are effectively “frozen” under the terms of the treaty.

Antarctica, this beautiful, unspoiled continent, seems to provoke remarkable bitterness. The scientists think it is their playground and resent intruders; the followers of Scott resent the building of a base at the pole that cost their hero his life; and everyone resents the people who want to come for a day trip.

One day, however, these tensions may be replaced by bigger battles – over oil, minerals and territory – and then all those who love the continent will have to come to its aid. “In the Antarctic, nationality is dissolved,” says Wheeler. “There are no time zones, so it can be anything you want it to be. That is liberating. All that matters is the cold – and everyone has to face that together.”

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2 This refers to Scott and Shackleton’s first but unsuccessful attempt to reach the South Pole.
PART ONE : THE LANGUAGE OF THE TEXT

A. Answer 6 of the following questions in your own words with a complete sentence each time.

1. “It wasn’t the cold and isolation that chilled him.” (ll. 3-4). What are the two meanings of “chilled” in this context?

2. “[Avery...] wasn’t buying, not even at knockdown, new-year prices” (l. 9). What does this indicate about the prices?

3. “a large Stars and Stripes” (l. 12). What exactly is the author referring to?

4. “Avery is dismissive of those who take the easy option.” (ll. 27-28). What is Avery’s point of view?

5. “Scott reached the pole a month later and didn’t,...” (l. 45). What was it that Scott didn’t do?

6. “He left a heart-rending diary” (l. 46). What does “heart-rending” tell us about the document he left?

7. “Scott’s final diary entry” (l. 47). What does this refer to?

8. “unowned” (l. 56). What does this word mean?
B. Rephrase 4 of the following quotations. Use your own words whenever it is possible.

(4x3 = 12 marks)

1. “the value of Antarctica as a research facility” (ll. 17-18)

2. “the record was a bit of a nonsense really…” (l. 41)

3. “…has echoed down the years” (l. 47)

4. “We shall stick it out to the end,…” (l. 48)

5. “[Sara Wheeler…] has no time for modern-day adventuring” (ll. 55-56)
PART TWO : THE IDEAS IN THE TEXT (total 30 marks)

Answer in your own words, on a separate sheet.

A. Questions which require concise, factual answers.

Answer 3 of the following questions. (3x5 = 15 marks)

1. “First the huts. Then a gift shop. Now a road. Is this the end for the last great wilderness?” (Title). Show how the situation in Antarctica has evolved so far.

2. What does the article tell us about the race between Scott and Amundsen?

3. What are the threats to the future of Antarctica?

4. Contrast yesterday’s and today’s exploration of Antarctica so as to account for the “bitterness” (l. 66) that some feel.

B. Question which requires an overall view and development. (15 marks)

5. Make as complete as possible a portrait of Tom Avery. (Include personality, achievements, opinion).

PART THREE : A PERSONAL POINT OF VIEW (total 30 marks)

Write a text of at least 200 words on one of the following subjects.

Use a separate sheet. Please indicate the number of words that you have used.

1. Did you have a childhood hero/heroine? How did he/she influence your life?

2. Considering the growing need of resources for the human population, and knowing that Antarctica is extremely rich in minerals, oil and gas, would you rather defend the 1961 treaty or would you agree to open Antarctica to industrial exploitation?

3. “There is nothing left to explore except space.” (Sir R. Fiennes) Do you agree?

4. Would you find it “liberating” to be in a place where nationality and time were dissolved?

5. If you don’t put yourself at risk, you’re not exploring. Discuss.
MARKING SCHEME

PART ONE

A 6x3 = 18
B 4x3 = 12

Total Part One 30 marks

PART TWO

A 3x5 = 15
B 1x15 = 15

Total Part Two 30 marks

PART THREE

1x30 marks

Total Part Three 30 marks

OVERALL TOTAL  90 MARKS