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SUB ZERO HEROES

Matt and Tom are back from riding across the frozen wastes of Finland, and they've still got all their fingers and toes!

Words Matt Orton Pics Antti Kurola and MBUK

As my front wheel sinks hub deep into soft powder I instinctively put a foot down to stay upright. My leg plunges into the snow, pitching me sideways and depositing 23kg (50lb) of bike and gear on top of me. After months looking forward to this race, the adage "be careful what you wish for" is running through my head. I've covered an unknown distance from the start line and have no idea how far the next checkpoint is. The sub-zero temperatures have drained the batteries in my aging GPS unit and I don't have the right adaptor for my portable charger.

Luckily, a line of reflective markers leads me through the white landscape like a trail of breadcrumbs. I have 42 hours to complete the 150km course and avoid disqualification. All I need to do is keep pedalling, and if it gets unridable, then keep pushing. I'd like to find a checkpoint soon though. It's cold, getting dark and my hydration pack is feeling worryingly light. This is my first mountain bike race. »



TOM'S SARMA SHAMAN

If I was going to take part in a 150km race I wasn't going to do it on anything other than a carbon race bike, and that's just what the Shaman is, only one designed around fat tyres. With a rather fancy build, my Sarma wasn't far off the weight of a conventional XC bike. The humongous down tube and BB area and bolt-through back end meant as much power as possible was transmitted to the monster truck tyres, and although the fork only had a QR axle, I never hit anything technical enough to warrant a stiffer front end. Carbon rims minimised wheel weight – vital for a sprightly feeling bike – although at over a kilo a piece, plus tubes, they weren't exactly super-light. If you want to cover ground quickly on a fatbike, we'd not look much further.

£1,650 (frameset)
www.ison-distribution.com



RACE DAY SPEC
FRAME Carbon fibre **FORK** Sarma Hoboy (rigid, carbon fibre) **TRANSMISSION** SRAM XX1 with Grip Shift shifters (1x11) **BRAKES** Avid Guide hydraulic discs **WHEELS** Salsa hubs laced to Sarma Naran 80mm carbon rims with DT Swiss Comp spokes **TYRES** Surly Nate 26x4in **FINISHING KIT** Renthal Fatbar Lite Carbon bar, Renthal Apex stem, Genetic Syngetic seatpost, Charge Scoop saddle, Nukeproof Electron Evo pedals **WEIGHT** 11kg/24lb (unloaded)



RACE DAY SPEC
FRAME 4130 chromoly steel **FORK** Surly Ice Cream Truck (rigid, 4130 chromoly) **TRANSMISSION** SRAM XO with Grip Shift shifters and Surly OD cranks (2x10) **BRAKES** Avid BB7 cable discs **WHEELS** Salsa hubs laced to Surly Rolling Darryl rims with DT Swiss Comp spokes **TYRES** Surly Nate 26x3.8in **FINISHING KIT** Answer ProTAPER Carbon 720 Enduro 20/20 bar, Kalloy AS-025N stem, Kalloy SP-342 seatpost, Charge Scoop saddle, Nukeproof Electron Evo pedals **WEIGHT** 16kg/35lb (unloaded)



MATT'S SURLY ICT OPS

By Surly's own admission the Ice Cream Truck is a "trail approved ripper", not an adventure bike or race machine. Designed around RockShox's Bluto suspension fork and boasting some of the slackest angles you'll find on a fatbike, it didn't sound like the perfect choice of bike for this race. Which is why I was really impressed with its performance. Could it be lighter? Hell, yeah! Were the 3.8in tyres wide enough? Nope, there were times when I could have done with extra flotation on the unseasonably soft snow. This is a bike that's unlikely to trouble the podium but I've proven it can still complete an event like this in a respectable time. There's no doubting its versatility, and with a few minor tweaks I'll be ripping around the trails back home all year round.

£2,199.99 (complete bike)
www.ison-distribution.com

Rewind 12 hours and I'm stood on a frozen river at the start of the Rovaniemi 150 Arctic Winter Race with Tom from sister mag *What Mountain Bike* and 27 other riders from as far afield as the US and Australia, not to mention a surprising number of fellow Brits – around a third of the field. Speaking to the other riders, it's clear Tom and I aren't the only ones who are well out of our comfort zones.

Fraternity of fatbikers

Conversations are initiated with a squeeze of super-wide front tyre and an opening gambit about air pressures. My assertion that "6psi is great on the river but I'll need to drop it to around 5psi for the trails" is met with nods of approval, so I

As the air horn sounds, a hardy group of friends, family and locals cheer and shout. We're off!

THE LOWDOWN

The Rovaniemi 150, now in its fourth year, is a 150km (93 mile) fatbike race through Northern Finland's subarctic landscape. Of the 29 riders in this year's event, only two failed to finish. The win was decided by a sprint finish, with the top four riders all posting times within a minute of 10 hours 40 minutes – a new course record.
www.rovaniemi150.com

presume I'm on the right track. The safety briefing has done nothing to allay my concerns about the difficulty of this race though. The race director, Alex Casanovas, has covered every possible eventuality and hazard, including a particularly treacherous footbridge that left a previous competitor requiring emergency help. The €100 evacuation deposit suddenly seems like a sound investment.

I'm surrounded by a sea of fatbikes – steel, aluminium, carbon and titanium frames fitted with multi-coloured frame bags, racks, straps, pogies and cages that give them the look of a mechanical mule or packhorse. One bike that's receiving a lot of attention is an original Wildfire from the late 90s. That's right – fatbikes just went retro! While the bikes are clearly distinguishable, the same isn't true of their riders. There's a common look – weathered and windswept mountain man, generally a little over 30 and with a suitably rugged beard.

The race start comes without any great ceremony – it is, after all, below freezing. As the air horn sounds, a hardy group of

friends, family and locals cheer and shout. We're off!

The speed with which the leading pack disappears into the distance is staggering – it's almost as if no one has told them this is an Arctic race and they're riding fatbikes. Surely it won't be sustainable? Before long it feels like I'm trailing in last place. I push the negative thoughts to the back of my mind – all I have to think about is following the markers.

Snow angels

It doesn't take long before I encounter the first stretch of what will become a frustratingly common trail surface – soft snow. It's unseasonably warm in this part of Finland this year. On our second night it rained, which we're assured hasn't happened in February in living memory. With daytime temperatures hovering around -4°C, the snow isn't quite slushy – which is fortunate because that would mean a greater risk of getting wet – but it isn't as compacted as we'd like.

I see my first fatbike angel – the perfect impression of a rider and bike in the snow at



The start line was a bit different from your usual mountain bike race



the edge of the trail – and it makes me laugh out loud. It isn't long before I'm making my own versions though, with a little more flailing and rolling.

Riders in the front pack have dismounted to push their bikes through the soft snow, resulting in knee-deep holes and badly churned up sections that make the trail unridable for those of us following. Picking a safe line through the carnage is made all the more difficult by the handlebar roll that obscures my front wheel and makes every steering adjustment a matter of luck more than judgment.

I speed through the first two checkpoints, only stopping

to sign in and out. I've hardly touched my water and want to get as many miles as possible under my belt while my legs are still fresh. Immediately after the second checkpoint the trail diverts into woodland. This is the first of two sections that are inaccessible to snowmobiles and have been groomed for the race with snowshoes instead.

Push comes to shove

Unfortunately, by the time I arrive it looks like a stampede has been through. There's no way I'll be staying on the bike for this. The trees are tight and branches hidden below the snow snag my pedals and cranks. The

EAT

We knew we weren't going to manage 150km on a hotel breakfast alone, so nutrition during the race was crucial. With limited room we needed to pack as many calories in as little space as possible, so we stashed SiS GO Energy gels and GO Electrolyte drink sachets in and around our kit. While we munched on 'normal' food a lot of the time, gels are a quick and easy way to consume calories, and they don't taste as bad as they used to. SiS's range includes regular gels along with caffeinated versions for an extra kick when you're low, as well as pre-race nitrate loaded gels designed to improve blood flow and therefore oxygen delivery to the muscles.



only option is to take a firm hold of any available part of frame or fork and wrench my bike and gear through the snow using sheer brute force.

Eventually the trees thin out and I find myself on the edge of a lake, with a flat and rideable trail stretching as far as the eye can see. I soon find my rhythm and feel like I'm making progress. The whiteness of the landscape makes judging distance difficult though, and with no landmarks and only a pixelated map printout to navigate by I'm keen to reach the next checkpoint so I can put a definite mark on the route and top up my water. It isn't long »



A third of the field were fellow Brits, like Paul Hollis on the right here



One of the seven race checkpoints



The snowshoe groomed sections were tough, filled with deep snow you could only push through



It seems beards and fatbikes make happy bedfellows (but no bearded ladies in our race)



until I catch the telltale whiff of woodsmoke from the fire pit – an early warning system that I use for the rest of the race, almost trying to sniff out the next checkpoint.

Sign in. Fill up with water. Sign out. I'm feeling pretty good and forge ahead into the familiar white landscape.

Dutch courage

I've been leapfrogging another rider for the majority of the race. Constantijn, from Holland, has a lightweight carbon fibre frame and wheels and is running 5in tyres that are proving very efficient in the soft snow. When it comes to the pushing sections though, my North Face Chilkat 2 snow boots give me an edge and I quickly overtake him. Sharing boiling water to heat our boil-in-the-bag rations at the fifth checkpoint, we decide to set off together for the next stretch. It'll be dark soon and companionship will be welcome.

After another section through un-snowmobiled forest we break out on to a road and pick up the pace for a few miles as darkness falls. Falling back into a pattern of to and fro, we catch up with a German rider called Sacha and the three of us ride on towards the last checkpoint before the longest 35km stage. With just a mile or so to go, Sacha's hub gear fails and, despite his best efforts and my expert torch holding, he decides to push.

The checkpoint is pure luxury – a round hunter's cabin with a roaring fire in the middle – and I'm happy to settle down for some soup and sausages. Leaving the warmth isn't easy, but with the longest stage ahead of us it's soon time to saddle up. Frustratingly, we're immediately faced with the longest push of the race so far. With darkness confusing our senses, the distance feels immense. I don't think I've ever been so happy to see tarmac as I am when we eventually emerge

at a small hamlet. After a quick stop to add a few psi to our tyres to help with the upcoming ice road riding, the next 20km is a blur of sleepy villages and town streets. My Surly Nate tyres work exceedingly well on the lightly gritted sheet ice that covers the Finnish roads to a depth of several inches.

With one final push and pedal through dense woodland we come upon the penultimate checkpoint and the prone forms of sleeping racers. It's late now, probably 4.30am, and the urge to join the slumbering riders is strong, but after a brief stop for hot soup and as much dry food as I can manage, I make myself get back on the bike. I'm now determined that I'll finish this race – and more than that, I'll do it within 24 hours.

I've never felt exhaustion like this before. I try to force an energy gel down for a caffeine boost but my stomach turns and I find myself retching over the side of the bike. That's that then – no supplements for the rest of the race. After hitting the final lake, Constantijn and I part company. He has his sights on a faster time than I'll manage. I wish his distant blinking rear light luck and consign myself to a solo final 25km.

Tripping

Absolute darkness and utter exhaustion makes for a heady combination. I've been tired before but never to the point of hallucination, but here, in the remote subarctic wilderness, my sleep-deprived mind starts playing some pretty weird tricks on me in the periphery of my head torch beam. Exotic animals that have no place anywhere near the Arctic Circle pop in and out of sight, my imagination triggered by the sounds of large animals, probably moose, moving behind the curtain of pine branches.

Sleep becomes a serious consideration. My winter »

I've been tired before but never to the point of hallucination. Exotic animals pop in and out of sight



COLD WEATHER KIT

To survive the extremes of Arctic riding we went to the experts at Go Outdoors for advice on the best kit to keep the elements at bay

1 North Ridge Onyx men's gilet
Small and packable synthetic bodywarmer, an ideal part of a layering system to help keep your core warm
£70 (€49.99)

2 Marmot Thermo half zip baselayer
Close fitting baselayer made from waffle pattern fabric for superior insulation and wicking ability while remaining breathable
£100 (€90)

3 Rab Baseline hoody
Fast-wicking baselayer made from both Polartec and PowerDry material to make sure you stay warm and dry
£75 (€50)

4 Montane Sabretooth softshell jacket
Highly breathable windproof jacket that's a perfect pairing with the Terra trousers
£175 (€118)

5 Montane Terra Thermostretch mountain pants
Stretchy and well vented softshell trousers with a water repellent treatment
£110 (€64.97)

6 Scarpa Manta mountain boots
Alpine boots with sufficient insulation and a stiff sole ideal for pedalling
£249.99 (€149.97)

7 Rab Latok Alpine gaiters
Perfect for keeping snow out of your boots when pushing through unridable sections
£40 (€36)

8 Rab Andes 1000 sleeping bag
Rated to -26°C, this mandatory kit item is designed for fast and light adventures
£460

9 Lifeventure Dri-Store bags
Ultra lightweight dry bags for keeping spare clothes and equipment dry
From £8.99 (€8.09)

10 Hi Gear First Aid Kit 3
Safety is paramount on any kind of adventure. Being able to patch yourself up is essential
£17 (€11.99)

11 North Ridge Valiant 100l holdall
Huge water resistant bag to keep kit safe in transit
£89.99 (€69.99)

12 Lifesystems survival bag
If things go bad, keeping warm and dry will save your life. An essential item you hope you'll never need
£4.50 (€3.99)

13 Hi Gear Ultralite lightweight sleeping mats
Sleeping mats aren't just for comfort. The extra space between you and the ground helps to insulate you from the cold too
£40 (€22.47)

NB: Blue prices are with Go Outdoors discount card (£5 for a year)



ADVENTURE ESSENTIALS

There's no such thing as packing light for an Arctic winter race. Self-sufficiency and safety are important factors when selecting your kit. Here are the things that got us through...



- 1 POC** Fornix Backcountry MIPS helmet **£174.99**
www.2pure.co.uk
- 2 Alpkit** Stem Cell bag **£18** www.alpkit.com
- 3 ANSWER** ProTAPER Carbon 720 Enduro 20/20 bar **£119.99** www.hotlines-uk.com
- 4 CamelBak** Classic 2l hydration pack **£44.99**
www.zyro.co.uk
- 5 CamelBak** Antidote thermal control kit **£22.99**
www.zyro.co.uk
- 6 Topeak** rescue box **£4.50**
www.extrauk.co.uk
- 7 Salsa** Anything cage **£17.99** www.charliethebike.com
- Porcelain Rocket** frame bags:
- 8** Booster Rocket seat pack **£165**
- 9** Salsa Anything cage bags **£100**
- 10** Single compartment frame pack **£180**
- 11** MCA handlebar system **£125**
All www.porcelainrocket.com
- 12 Petzl** Ultra Rush Belt head torch **£305**
www.cyclestore.co.uk
- 13 Brunton** All Day GoPro HERO 3+ power supply **£40**
www.brunton.com
- 14 GoPro** HERO 3 White action camera **£169.99**
www.madison.co.uk
- 15 Gerber** Outdoor knife **£39.99** www.gerbergear.co.uk
- 16 Light My Fire** Swedish FireSteel 2.0 **£15.50**
www.lightmyfire.com
- 17 Greenman Bushcraft** Natural Organic Down Tinder **£2.75** www.greenmanbushcraft.co.uk
- 18 Silva** Expedition compass **£25** silva.se
- 19 Surly** fatbike tube **£11.99**
www.ison-distribution.com
- 20 Topeak** Mountain Morph pump **£28.99**
www.extrauk.co.uk
- 21 POC** Retina Big goggles **£145** www.2pure.co.uk
- 22 Revelate Designs** Williwaw Pogies **£POA (approx £95)** www.backcountrybiking.co.uk
- 23 Gerber** Suspension multiplier **£50**
www.gerbergear.co.uk
- 24 Topeak** Hexus II multi-tool **£19.99** www.extrauk.co.uk
- 25 The North Face** Chilkat II boots **£100**
www.thenorthface.co.uk
- 26 Nukeproof** Electron Evo pedals **£34.99**
www.hotlines-uk.com
- 27 MSR** Pocket Rocket stove **£30**
www.cascadedesigns.com
- 28 JetBoil** Jetpower fuel canister (100g) **£4**
www.jetboil.com
- 29 MSR** Titan kettle **£50**
www.cascadedesigns.com

sleeping bag would cope with the conditions fine and I could get going again with a clear head and fresh legs. But I'm now chasing the 24-hour mark so I crank my twist shifter up a gear and pedal on.

As I emerge on to the river my head seems to clear. A pick-me-up is needed and I find this in the form of a Kendal mint cake I've been saving for just such a time. The rush of sugar helps and the flat river becomes a welcome final leg. I fly through the last checkpoint, feeling drunk and probably not making any sense to the marshals.

Ploughing into a faint headwind, I have just over an hour to complete the final 12km, the sun is coming up and I've had half a Kendal mint cake

– game on! But my newfound enthusiasm doesn't last long.

The home stretch turns into a battle of mind over matter as the minutes tick away and I don't feel like the end is any closer. The landscape is flat and the only landmark – a bridge on the horizon – isn't getting any nearer. I've resigned myself to the fact I'm not going to finish within 24 hours. I'll finish the race, but it'll feel like I've missed my main goal. I'll make sure I get close, though. Pedal!

Will he make it?

As I pass under the bridge and cross the start line from the previous day – although it feels like it was a week ago – I take one last look at my watch. I have four minutes left. Shit, I

HOW WE BEAT THE COLD

#1 Plastic pedals

Metal pedals conduct the cold straight into the soles of your feet. We swapped ours for plastic ones to slow the chill.

#2 Wrap it up

We wrapped any metal contact points on our bars to stop the cold travelling through our pogies (hand covers). Hockey tape was ideal.

#3 Give it the boot

Doing boots up too tight restricts your circulation and makes your feet colder so we left plenty of wiggle room. Walking got the blood flowing to our feet so it made sense to push for short periods.

#4 Power through the cold

Batteries hate the cold. Lithium-ion batteries proved the best bet. We stashed spare batteries and back-up power packs around our bodies to keep them warm.

#5 Cool snacks

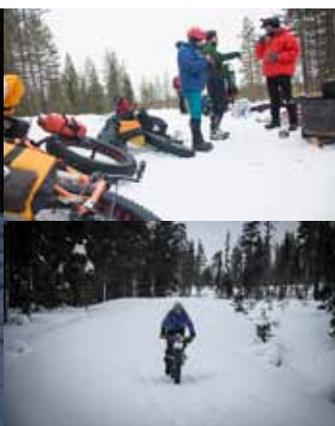
We tested how our food changed with the cold by sticking it in the fridge. Some cereal bars and snacks become difficult to eat when the temperature drops.

can do this! I don't know where the energy comes from but I'm out of the saddle and haulin' ass like never before. Without waiting for lights to change or traffic to stop I blast across the road, throw down my fatbike in front of some startled smokers and sprint into the foyer of the Pohjanhovi Hotel, to cheers from several guests who point me in the direction of the race operations room and the official finish line.

I burst through the door shouting for the time like a crazy man, punch drunk and delirious. When the answer comes – 23 hours, 59 minutes – I collapse into the nearest chair. Bloody hell that was close, and one hell of a way to pop my racing cherry! 🍒



As dusk fell we knew we had to ride right through the hours of darkness



The end of the race was a sprint finish, right to the official finish line inside the hotel