

Going For Inner Gold

Paralympic gold-winning hand-cyclist Karen Darke takes on her toughest challenge yet with South Pole quest

by FIONA RUSSELL



Left: Sit-skiing

Far Left: Hand-cycling on the snow

Below: Climbing El Capitan



If successful in her latest mission, adventurer Karen Darke will achieve two world firsts, yet this is not what motivates her.

Rather, The Pole of Possibility, Karen's two-week Antarctic ski journey, offers a new opportunity for the Highlands-based athlete to inspire in others what she believes are the advantages of adversity.

Karen, who is paralysed from the chest-down after a climbing accident aged 21, is aiming to propel herself

249km (155 miles) to the South Pole by her arms only. It will be the first time a female has sit-skied to the South Pole, as well as a world record for the furthest distance travelled to the pole by sit-ski.

The challenge early next year is 50-year-old Karen's ninth – and final – expedition in an ambitious project, Quest 79, which she launched after winning a hand-biking gold medal at the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games. She had previously taken silver in London 2012.

"After an exciting year of sport in 2016, topped by my win, I felt suddenly burned out and emotionally flat," Karen, who lives in Inverness, says. "I needed something to give me new meaning and purpose."

"My medal was the 79th British medal of the games and I already knew that 79 was the number for gold in the periodic table, so I decided to build on the gold theme to give myself a goal and also to inspire others."

"More important than winning a gold medal, it seemed to me, is our 'inner gold'. I believe we find inner gold when adversity pushes us out of our comfort zones. We discover what is possible and find new perspectives and solutions through the power of thought, clear

"We find inner gold when adversity pushes us out of our comfort zones"

intention and when good people come together."

Over seven years, Quest 79 has seen Karen hand-cycle thousands of miles on six continents and compete in the 2020 Tokyo Paralympic Games, which took place in 2021.

Karen, who was born in Yorkshire, moved to Scotland to study for a geology doctorate in Aberdeen in the 1990s. It was while climbing on sea cliffs in Aberdeenshire that she fell nine metres (30 feet) and broke her back. She was told she would never walk, cycle or climb again.

In her 2006 book, *If You Fall*, Karen says, "I always thought I'd rather be dead than paralysed... one slip, one moment and everything changes."

But she also proves that disability is not a barrier to achieving the seemingly impossible. Although she struggled with regaining independence and fitness, her

determination and ability to adapt, as well as the support of others, allowed her to combine wheels – and kayak and skis – with the wilderness she craved.

After six months of recovery, she bought a racing wheelchair. A year later, she completed the 21km (13-mile) Great North Run followed by the 42.2km (26.2-mile) London Marathon. In 1996, she hand-bicycled from Kazakhstan to Pakistan, followed by further cycling trips in the Indian Himalaya and the Tibetan Plateau.

In 2002, she sea kayaked through the Inside Passage from Canada to Alaska. In 2006, she took part in a ski expedition that crossed Greenland's icecap and 16 years after her accident, Karen climbed the iconic rock-face of El Capitan in Yosemite, California.

Her experiences led to an MBE in 2017 for services to >>

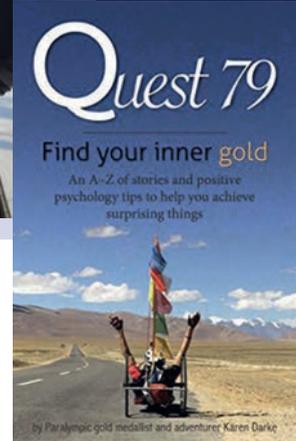


Gold at the 2016 Rio Paralympic Games



Left: In action on the snow

Below: Her latest book



Quest 79 Challenges Completed

▲ The Express Way

Arm-powered land speed record attempt at Battle Mountain and 3000km (1862 miles) from Canada to Mexico.

▲ The Water Way

Following Australia's water lifeline, the Murray River, from source to sea – 2500km (1553 miles).

▲ The Sacred Way

Following the River Ganges from its Himalayan source to the city of Varanasi 1500km (932 miles).

▲ The Hot Way

Cycling 1250km (777 miles) of Africa to the Cape Town Cycle Tour, the world's biggest open bike race.

▲ The Wild Way

1240km (770 miles) of Chile's Carretera Austral, from Puerto Montt to Villa O'Higgins through Patagonia.

▲ The Continental Way

1250km (777 miles) along the Atlantic Coastal Trail from the UK to Spain.

▲ The Spirited Way

10,000km (6214 miles) of riding the world culminating in 20km (12 miles) at the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games.

sport, the 2022 Scottish Award for Excellence in Mountain Culture and she's written two more books.

"The mountains, scenery and nature have always felt like the fabric of my being,"

Karen says. "The outdoors has been my salvation in every respect.

"Also, the adventures allow me to show other people what is possible. Just like my latest South Pole trip. It's a chance to inspire others."

Karen will be joined in Antarctica by 21-year-old Scot Iona Somerville, who is a graduate of The Polar Academy.

The Scottish charity works to build teenagers' self-esteem to become leaders and role models.

Until this year Iona has skied only once before and Karen is acutely aware of the potential pitfalls following a training camp in Norway with her adventure partner.

"There are some obvious challenges for me, such as monitoring and managing my body temperature and circulation and also coping with other personal hygiene needs.

"In addition, my sit-ski can all too easily fall to the side leaving me unable to right it and then there's the issue of pulling a heavy pulk [sled] on unpredictable terrain.

"For us both, there are new demands, but this only adds to the attraction because it pushes us to find new ways to succeed.

"To me, and hopefully those who are inspired, it's another opportunity to find inner gold through challenge."



Iona Somerville



At the London Paralympics

See www.quest79.com and www.karendarke.com