

Fridtjof Nansen (10 October 1861 – 13 May 1930)

Fridtjof Nansen was a Norwegian explorer, scientist, oceanographer, statesman, diplomat and humanitarian. He led the team that made the first crossing of the Greenland interior in 1888, and made several expeditions to the Arctic (1888, 1893-96) and oceanographic expeditions in the North Atlantic (1900, 1910-14). For his relief work after World War I he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace (1922).



At a glance...

- Nansen was born at Store Frøen, near Oslo. His father Baldur Nansen was a prosperous lawyer who became Reporter to the Supreme Court of Norway;
- Nansen's mother Adelaide Nansen was a strong-minded, athletic woman who introduced her children to the outdoor life and encouraged them to develop physical skills;
- Nansen started skiing at the age of two years old and had strong athletic prowess, becoming an expert in skating, tumbling, and swimming;
- He was a keen hunter and fisherman who possessed the physical endurance to ski fifty miles in a day and the psychological self-reliance to embark on long trips;
- He chose to study zoology in the expectation that fieldwork would give him the chance of an outdoor life and enable him to make use of his artistic talents;
- After 1896 his main scientific interest switched to oceanography; in the course of his research he made many scientific cruises, mainly in the North Atlantic, and contributed to the development of modern oceanographic equipment;
- In the spring of 1920, the League of Nations asked Nansen to undertake the task of repatriating the prisoners of war, many of them held in Russia. Moving with his customary boldness and ingenuity, and despite restricted funds, Nansen repatriated 450,000 prisoners in the next year and a half;
- In the final decade of his life, Nansen devoted himself primarily to the League of Nations, following his appointment in 1921 as the League's High Commissioner for Refugees
- For the stateless refugees under his care Nansen invented the 'Nansen Passport', a document of identification, which was eventually recognized by fifty-two governments
- In 1922 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his work on behalf of the displaced victims of the First World War and related conflicts;
- He continued to work with refugees until his sudden death in 1930, after which the League established the Nansen International Office for Refugees to ensure that his work continued.

The Greenland crossing...

In 1882 Nansen shipped on the sealer Viking to the east coast of Greenland, whose interior had never been explored. On this trip of four and a half months, Nansen first saw at a distance Greenland's mighty ice cap and was entranced. The idea of crossing it and in 1887, after the submission of his doctoral thesis, he finally began organising this project.

Nansen rejected the complex organisation and heavy manpower of other Arctic ventures, and instead planned his expedition for a small party of six men with experience of outdoor life in extreme conditions, and who were experienced skiers. Supplies would be man-hauled on specially

designed lightweight sledges. Much of the equipment, including sleeping bags, clothing and cooking stoves, also needed to be designed from scratch.

On 3 June 1888 Nansen's party was picked up from the north-western Icelandic port of Ísafjörður by the sealer Jason. A week later the Greenland coast was sighted. After a number of setbacks, including violent storms, treacherous terrain, and a necessary change of course the team completed the crossing. They had accomplished it in 49 days, making 78 days in total since they had left the Jason; throughout the journey the team had maintained careful meteorological, geographical and other records relating to the previously unexplored interior.

When they reached Godthaab, they were greeted by the town's Danish representative, whose first words were to inform Nansen that he had been awarded his doctorate, a matter that "could not have been more remote from my thoughts at that moment", said Nansen.

“Never stop because you are afraid – you are never so likely to be wrong. Never keep a line of retreat: it is a wretched invention. The difficult is what takes a little time. The impossible is what takes a little longer.” – Fridtjof Nansen