

Russia and Canada Build Friendships on Icy Terrain

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March 26, 2013

The  Moscow Times

When asked what Russia has in common with Canada, one could be forgiven for sarcastically identifying "the cold" as their principal shared feature. In fact, this wouldn't seem to be too far from the truth.

On Tuesday, the Canadian Embassy marked 25 years since the 1988 Polar Bridge Ski Expedition, a joint mission undertaken by Canada and the U.S.S.R. to travel from Soviet to Canadian territory via the North Pole.

As Laurie Dexter, who was a radio operator during the expedition, pointed out, "the cold" was common ground in more than just a literal sense between these two countries. As well as shaping the icy terrain for the adventure, it also reflected the contemporary worldwide political situation, with the Cold War drawing to a close, thereby providing an opportunity for a thawing of international relations.

The team of explorers set out from the Severnaya Zemlya Archipelago in Russia on March 3, 1988, and spent a total of 91 days trekking across the treacherous drifting ice to Ward Hunt Island, then part of the Northwest Territories in Canada — the island is now part of the Nunavut Territory.

The group of 13, made up of nine Russian and four Canadian team-members, was met by ministers from both Canada and the U.S.S.R. at the North Pole on April 26, where a ceremony to celebrate this and future Canadian-Russian collaborative endeavors took place. The trekkers received numerous Soviet awards for the expedition, as well as the UNESCO Fair Play award.

But Dmitry Shparo, who led the expedition, was more apt to emphasize the seven-year preparation that went into the mission, and said it played as great a role as the expedition itself in fostering relations and furthering knowledge.

"If we wrote a book about the expedition, it would not be about 1988 but the years spent preparing for it," Shparo said.

Shparo also described how he received a telegram at the North Pole from George Cohon, chief executive of McDonald's Canada, who was ecstatic to have achieved his "very own North Pole" — permission to open the first McDonald's in the former Soviet Union after 15 years of failed attempts.

Aside from freezing temperatures and a penchant for fast food, Canadian Ambassador John Sloan said the two nations were also similar in their abundance of natural resources and their multireligious, multiethnic populations. In his opinion, the "Polar Bridge" could continue to set relations between the two countries, especially as Canada takes over the chairmanship of the Arctic Council later this year, though he was ultimately realistic about the status of Canadian-Russian collaborative efforts today.

"We've come a long way, but we are not even close to living up to our full political and expeditionary operations. We still have much more to do," he said.

It would appear then that this is very much the tip of the iceberg.

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