



northern exposure

EXPLORER **TOM AVERY** GOT TO THE NORTH POLE FASTER THAN ANYONE IN HISTORY. NICK DUERDEN FINDS OUT HOW HE'S PLANNING TO TOP THAT. PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOM OXLEY

It doesn't take long to pick polar explorer Tom Avery out of a lunchtime crowd—even if you've only ever seen a photograph of the man with a gargantuan hood concealing much of his face. Avery is the one wearing a pair of rough-hewn sealskin gloves—a souvenir, you could assume, from a recent Arctic expedition, during which he faced temperatures as cold as -40 degrees Fahrenheit. It's considerably warmer on

this late January afternoon at London's Royal Geographical Society which, for Avery, is a shame. "I prefer the snow and the ice," he says, preposterously. "The more you're exposed to it, the less you feel it." At the moment, London is exposed to temperatures of 38 F. For us normal people, that's plenty cold enough. Sealskin gloves aside, Avery looks little like an archetypal explorer. He is a baby-faced 33-year-old, tall,

lean, and handsome in a Paul Bettany kind of way. His features are disarmingly smooth, unravaged by the elements to which he has so frequently been exposed; you could easily imagine him spending his life behind a desk. Nevertheless, as his new book, *To the End of the Earth* (St. Martin's Press), so volubly attests, Avery is an extreme-action man, one of a select group of people who have trekked to the North Pole. What made this journey particularly notable was his attempt to recreate history, and controversial history at that. In April 1909, American explorer Robert Peary claimed that he had become the first man ever to reach the North Pole, and in just 37 days. "Few believed he could achieve such a feat in such a short time," Avery says now, explaining that all subsequent expeditions to the Pole have taken at least two months. "But I looked into the story and had an idea he might just have been telling the truth."

Avery decided to meticulously follow in Peary's footsteps, eschewing all modern technology in favor of nothing more than a dog team and replica wood sledges with which to navigate the treacherous pressure ridges and deadly channels of freezing open water. In April 2005, he and his five-person team covered the 500 miles in just 36 days and 22 hours, shearing five hours off Peary's record.

"It was unbelievably difficult, but we did it!" he laughs, citing cases of

near-death accidents (blind plunges into the sea) and copious frostbite (on his cheeks, which turned black, oozed pus, and burned like hell). "Suffering aside," he adds, "the sense of achievement was out of this world."

Avery always wanted to become an adventurer. From age four to eight he spent much of his time exploring the jungles surrounding Rio de Janeiro, where his banker father had been posted. He then returned to England, where he devoured the stories of British Antarctic explorer Captain Robert Falcon Scott. By 20, he was scaling the Andes. A few years later, he was mapping uncharted mountain territory in Kyrgyzstan, before, at the turn of the new century, he retraced Scott's steps all the way to the South Pole in a record-breaking 45 days. (Avery immortalized Scott's adventures in his first book, *Pole Dance*.)

Avery's ambition now is to write about his travels through whatever is left of the Earth's virgin land. He is currently planning his next expedition to yet more icebound territory, but will reveal no details just yet. Explorers, he explains, need to remain secretive. Avery will say this, though: He is already bracing himself for the day-to-day realities of another grueling undertaking. "Going to the toilet outdoors when there is a wind-chill factor of -63 Celsius (-81 F) is horrific," he says, wincing at the memory of frozen ass cheeks. "That's one thing I never get used to."