

HOW TO GET TO ANTAR

Captain Harpreet Chandi, aka **Polar Preet**, had to Google how to get to Antarctica. She now has three world records for Antarctic expeditions and will forever be the first woman of colour to complete a solo expedition to the South Pole. This is the story of how she achieved the extraordinary from the most humble beginnings.

INTERVIEW: ANNA SMITH

OPTICA



Credit: Canada Goose

Preet talks openly about the financial struggles of her expeditions and how important sponsorship is

Credit: Canada Goose





I dodged and weaved through the crowds on the tube platform as I raced to get to my interview with Preet Chandi. I'd made the mistake of not dropping her a text politely warning her that I might be a few minutes late, thinking instead I could out-run time. As I threw myself into the café we were meeting in, I looked around, horrified that the little shop I thought would be quiet at 11am on a Tuesday was rammed. Our poignant conversation about her 2023 expeditions, the longest solo, unsupported journey across Antarctica and the female speed record to the South Pole, would be backdropped by clattering mugs, plates and screaming babies.

I knew what Preet looked like from all of my research into her record-breaking Antarctic expeditions, so it didn't take me long to spot her, ready and waiting at a small table by the wall, with an empty plate and half-full hot chocolate (a staple for her as I've since found out via her Instagram). She didn't stand out amongst the other café goers and as our conversation lurched from the Marathon Du Sables, her deployment in South Sudan, her Antarctic expeditions and the details of her polar thigh injury, I wondered how many people were eavesdropping. If I overheard stories like these on my lunchbreak I'd at least have edged my chair a bit closer, wondering who this random woman was and what she was doing in my local coffee shop.

It's important I say now that I don't think Preet Chandi is random. She's extraordinary, but hidden amongst the tales of her remarkable adventures is a stark honesty and pragmatism that allows her to be both a world-class adventurer and a physiotherapist from Derby, newly-wed, aunt, and many other normal things. It lets her blend in to coffee shops and tube platforms and stand out on frozen tundra. This is a rare thing to find in a world of inflated egos and wafer-thin records, but for the first time in my career, when someone who had achieved the impossible told me 'if they could do it, I could too', I actually believed them. And that, I think, is the magic of Preet Chandi.

A Quick Google

"I didn't know where to start. I Googled 'how to get to Antarctica'. It wasn't that long before I found the company Antarctica Logistics and Expeditions and they do pretty much what they say on the tin. So I contacted them and they sent me a questionnaire and I felt quite nervous because I couldn't answer yes to a lot of questions; 'Have you ever camped on snow? Have you ever been ice climbing? Have you ever walked on a glacier?' It was no to everything. So I went to Iceland, walked on a glacier for like 15 minutes, tried ice climbing and came back and filled in the questionnaire. I didn't want to appear a novice, I didn't want people to think 'oh, what is she doing?'. Which is funny because a lot of the time that stuff is in your own mind. People were super helpful, no one made me feel stupid or like I didn't know what I was doing, but I didn't and it's okay to start from that point. It wasn't a world that I knew. Everyone starts somewhere."

It was funny hearing the person who has spent the most time out of anyone on earth on a single, solo journey across Antarctica say they had to Google how to get there. Even though 35 year-old Captain Preet Chandi didn't have much experience on the snow four years ago, she was far from an adventure novice. Her first half-marathon at 20 soon turned into her first full marathon and then her first ultra-marathon in the Peak District Dusk til Dawn race. She started her endurance journey whilst training to be a physiotherapist in London at the same time as becoming an army reservist. By the time she was a full-time medical officer in the British Army endurance running was a big part of her life and she thought she'd give the Marathon Des Sables (156 miles through the Sahara) a go.

"Before MDS I didn't train because I was silly. I'd just come back from a six-month tour in South Sudan in January and on my post-operational tour leave I went to South America. I sprained my ankle, nothing serious, on one of the walks I was doing. I was really nervous about the race. The first day was something like ten miles and it was the first time I'd done ten miles in a little while. With stuff like Antarctica you just can't do that."



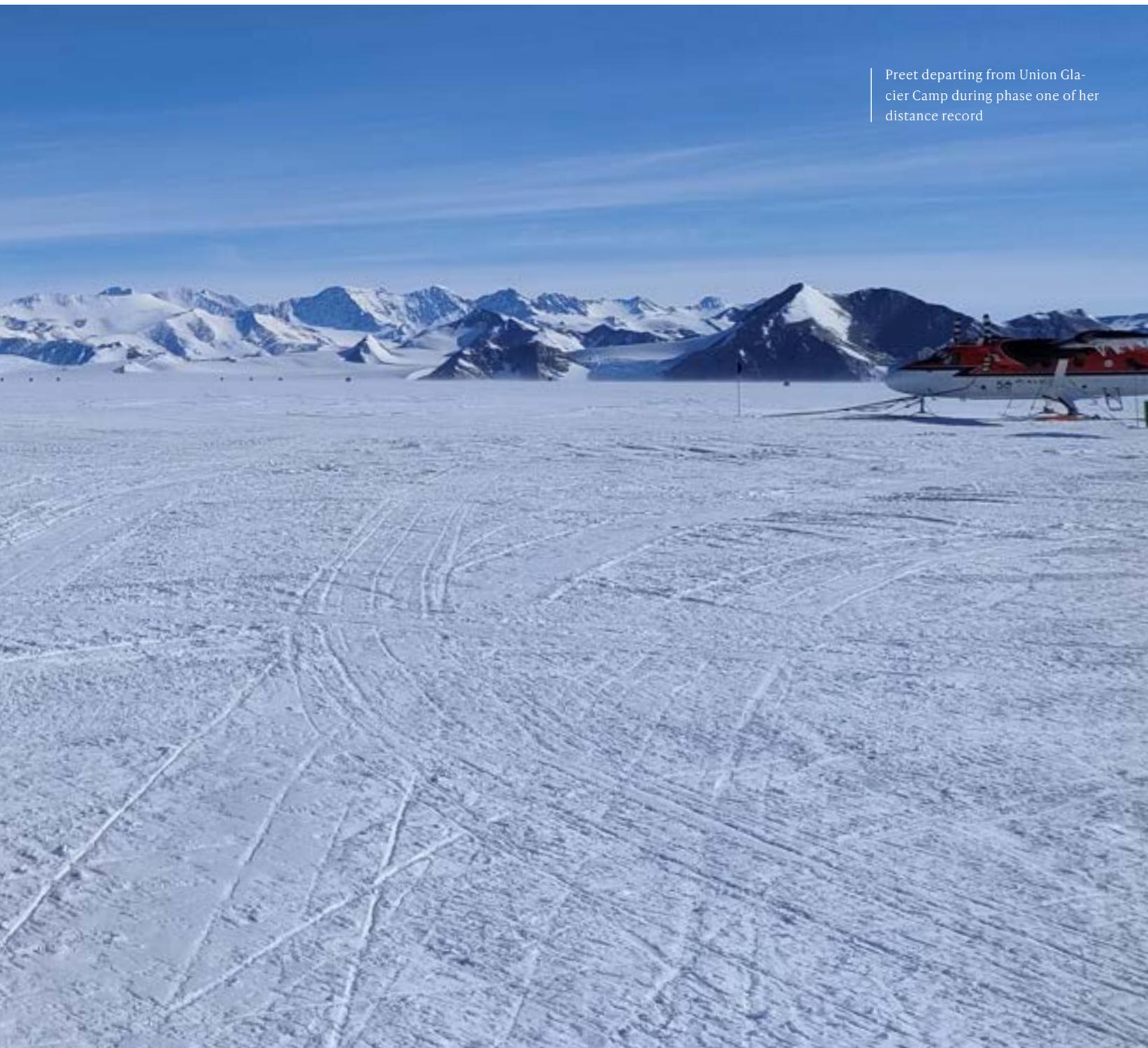
With the Marathon Des Sables in the bag, Preet decided she was ready to “do something big”, another turn of phrase that made me laugh seeing as, for most people, completing MDS would be pretty big.

“I knew I wanted to do something big, I just didn't know what the big thing was. Antarctica came afterwards, it was an offhanded comment but something about it stayed in my head. I started researching it in summer 2019 and the Polar Preet website and social media pages were created at the end of 2019. It's really hard to put something out there. I didn't know anything about it and thought 'everyone's going to laugh'. But people are great, I started following anyone who had been to Antarctica and messaged everyone. At that point I thought all of the questions I had were stupid. But there's no such thing as a stupid question, I asked them all.”

Coldest, Highest, Driest, Windiest

Once the persona of Polar Preet was settled on and Google had answered her many questions, then came training.

“So the first training was a polar training course in Norway and that was perfect. The two instructors on it have done so many expeditions between them, so there was just so much expertise. The course was from basics, like the clothing you wear, and the first week was lessons and a bit of navigation stuff. The second week we went and did a mini training trip, four or five nights, which was really helpful. That's what I wanted. I wanted to go from basics - but everyone has crossover skills. I learned to navigate with the army, actually. Although I thought I was starting from nowhere I did have some crossover skills, like I knew how to put up a tent but I'd not done it on snow before. So that was really helpful. And then the logistics company had given me kind of a checklist. It was



Preet departing from Union Glacier Camp during phase one of her distance record

things like 'camp on snow, do a two-week trip'. I had places in mind - I wanted to go to Greenland with a guide to get that experience which I tried to do in August 2020. It didn't go as planned at all. We got stuck in some storms and I felt terrible. I used my life savings for the trip and because we were picked up I then had to pay that fee and it took me a year and a half to pay it off. At the time that was the worst bit but it then ended up being one of the best experiences I'd had, because it helped me."

It's when talking about the bad times that Preet's charming honesty shines through. On every platform and in every interview, there is the acknowledgement that going further or faster than any other person has before isn't necessarily fun. Even stranger to hear is an admission of the costs. Preet joined the army full time in 2017 as a physiotherapist, and that remains her full-time job and source of income,

currently stationed in a rehabilitation unit in Buckinghamshire. She uses annual leave for training and typically unpaid leave for her expeditions - though she has teamed up with the army to encourage polar exploration and inspire young people through army projects. Adventuring is essentially a side-gig for her and that means large-scale funding is hard to come by.

Her most recent record-breaking pursuit in November 2023 was a speed record from Hercules Inlet (the edge of the Antarctic land mass) to the South Pole. She skied this 700 mile journey in 31 days, 13 hours and 19 minutes, making her the fastest woman to ever do so. The twist though, is that no one knew she was doing it, and that meant no one was footing the bill either. I wanted to know what the reason was for this decision and whether the debt was worth the privacy.

“It was a lot less pressure on me and, I’ll be honest, I didn’t decide I was going to go until August. Then in September I was like, ‘I think I’ll try and get funding to go’. So it was quite late. I wanted to keep it low pressure as well. I’d had a really intense two years - and not just the trips - I go straight back to work. You take unpaid leave to do the expedition and then straight back into a full time job and I found it quite a lot. So I think it just helped. Someone said to me the other day, ‘having people following the trips is great’, and of course I want to inspire people. I thought, ‘am I not doing that if I don’t announce it?’ But it’s still a message, isn’t it? And it’s okay to have a break. There’s pros and cons. Pros; it was better for me, there was definitely less pressure. Cons; I didn’t get any funding and obviously people didn’t then follow the journey as I was there.”

Who is it For?

In the same year that Preet set this secret speed record, she had set the record for the longest single, solo, unsupported journey across Antarctica. She spent 70 days covering 922 miles (beating the previous record of 907 miles) from Hercules Inlet to the Reedy Glacier. Picking up a neck and polar thigh injury (a rash-like, cold-exposure injury that scabs and then breaks to leave an open wound) early in her attempt, and failing to meet her original goal of crossing the landmass, this trip appeared to be the marker by which all of her other expeditions were measured.

“That trip was just brutal. I felt broken when I came back and that’s why with this trip [the speed record], I didn’t even think about it until the summer. I’ll be honest, I came back thinking ‘no way am I going back this season.’ It wasn’t like I thought to myself, ‘oh I might secretly’, I genuinely thought ‘no chance’. It just took me so long to feel back to myself. But, like with anything, I’m glad I went through it. It’s context. When I was out there this time there were some tough days and in the back of my head I was like, ‘okay, last time I went through something pretty tough’ so I knew I could do it. I already knew it was going to be shorter because I’m not trying to cross the landmass. Then add a lighter sled. I can’t explain the difference, it’s just like; the snow was a bit soft, but it’s a lighter sled, and there’s a lot of sastrugi, the wind-shaped ice ridges, but it’s a lighter sled. And it’s still hard to get through but it’s nowhere near as hard.”

The context I had for the suffering Preet endured on her two and a half month stint was distilled into one image in my mind; her polar thigh injury. If you

aren’t squeamish, there’s an image of the wound on her Instagram (@polarpreet). Managing that injury, on top of the other struggles presented to her, was simply unimaginable to me. I asked how she knew when enough was enough.

“This is why I use a logistics company. It’s why we have them. When you’re not in your right mind someone else calls it. I have to check in with them every 24 hours. If I didn’t one day, the next day they then come looking for me based on my last GPS location. So I have that. Obviously, I saw this [polar thigh] injury forming on my calf and was like ‘crap’. It looked like a bruise, and I’d fallen a few times, so I thought that’s what it was. Then, as it got darker and started to scab, I knew what it was and to be honest I was annoyed, because once that comes it’s hard to heal while you’re on your trip. So then I was just trying to stop it from getting worse. I started putting steroid cream on but I don’t know if it was too late or I was out for too long, but it kept getting worse and then it eventually broke and I put a dressing on. I was still chatting to the doctors and I said ‘should I take it off and change it?’ and they said no. So I’ve got this dressing on and in my head I’m imagining what’s going on, I’m not looking at it and that’s hard. Mentally, the neck pain was horrible as well and I was rationing my pain relief. I didn’t think I was going to pick up injuries so quick. For the last 14 days I only had one tablet left, one codeine tablet, and I said to myself, ‘I can only take it on the last day’, but mentally it was tough. I’ve always thought I’m mentally pretty strong but I would say I went past where I thought I could go. Towards the end there it was dark.”

“Then what about it keeps drawing you back?” Felt like the obvious next question.

“To start with, it was a place that I didn’t think I would ever go. It’s not something that I’d ever had conversations about. And it’s an incredible place to be, it really is amazing. There aren’t many places where you can feel like you are alone. Obviously I’m not alone, there’s a lot of people who help support me, but it’s a beautiful place to be. It’s a place that I didn’t think was for me. And I think that’s a lot of places - there are a lot of spaces I’ve been that I thought weren’t for me and I didn’t belong, but then you go into them and you’re like ‘oh, I can be here’.”

It’s a bizarre thing to think about; who is Antarctica for? And certainly not something I’d ever considered before Preet mentioned it. The first woman stepped on the continent 114 years after the first man in 1821 and 200 years later Preet would become the first woman of colour to complete a solo journey to the South Pole. Whether she wanted it to be or not,



Top Left

Preet trained for two years before her first trip to Antarctica

Bottom Left

Preet joined the army as a reservist when she was 19

Top Right

She was deployed all over the world with the army including a humanitarian mission to South Sudan

Middle Right

The Marathon Des Sables was a jumping off point for her bigger trips

Bottom Right

Preet had never camped on snow before deciding to take on an Antarctic expedition





Credit: Canada Goose

Preet Chandi holds three world records in Antarctic exploration and was the first woman of colour to complete a solo expedition to the South Pole

her journey was socially and historically significant in the world of exploration, simply because of who she is.

“I can say I’m super proud of myself and what I achieved, whereas a few years ago I probably would have paused because I would think ‘is that me sounding arrogant?’ Now I’m like, ‘no it’s not, it was silly to think that’. Or, I was so nervous to use the term ‘woman of colour’, because of how it would be perceived. And it’s not the one thing that defines me, there are a lot of things, I’m just talking about myself. The fact that someone like me is even capable of doing stuff like this still amazes me and it excites me, because, if I can do it, that means other people can do it too. I’m talking about people who didn’t think that this was for them. That didn’t think this world was for them and who’ve been discouraged. I’m not even talking about from the wider community. I’m talking about from their own community. It starts at home and a lot of the barriers come from your own.”

Explorer of the Year

If there’s one thing Preet has proven in her expeditions, it’s that she’s persistent. Even though she didn’t know Antarctica was the goal, she wasn’t going to let anyone stop her getting there.

“I saw an advert for the army in Derby City Centre. It was people smiling on the posters and it looked really interesting. You don’t really know what it is until you go into it. I signed up as a reservist, so it was just part time. I didn’t tell anyone in my family and, what I did tell them, some people were not very happy. But I joined and it opened up a different world. I was doing my access course at the time and wanted to get into uni. I remember being told I wasn’t smart enough, so I thought ‘I need to do everything I can to get in’. I don’t have A Levels and I was working at burger king. I thought if I joined the medical section of the army I would shadow as many physios as I could. Then I went to uni in London, I got into St. George’s Uni in Tooting. I got into three out of the four unis I applied for and I was so happy. Someone telling you that you’re not smart enough at that age can be hard. Now I don’t really listen when people tell me I can’t do things but when you’re younger it’s hard because you think the people older than you are right and that they know something that you don’t know. It just made me think, ‘how can someone tell me what I can’t do when I don’t even know what I’m capable of?’”

As she eluded to, despite her achievements, there are plenty of people who attempt to pick apart her expeditions.

There are entire articles in major industry publications dedicated to diminishing her records.

“It’s funny, I won an award for explorer of the year last year and there were some comments on some forum saying ‘is this exploration?’ And I understand that, exploration to a lot of people is where people haven’t been before and I would never claim that I’ve done that. I haven’t been to places that other people haven’t. But then I think it means different things to different people. So what is exploration to you? To kids we say, ‘let’s go explore!’ because it’s new to them, and I think that’s okay to do. Exploring for me is going to different places so I’m always going to keep exploring, it just might not be exploring to other people. On the other side of that, can we go to places that people haven’t gone to before? I’m sure there are places even in Antarctica, it’s massive. I’ve covered the tiniest bit of this massive continent and I know where I’m starting from and where I’m finishing, so there’s a huge part of that continent that can be ‘explored’. But the exploring that I feel like I’ve done has opened up a whole new world for me.

Would I have done it without the record? I think so, it’s always been bigger than that. So, why did I want to do it? I wanted to push my own boundaries, I wanted to show other people they can do anything they want to do. I guess the records do help in the media sense. It gets the story out there so then more people hear about it, so I wouldn’t say they aren’t important. That wouldn’t be me being honest at all. I would definitely do it without them too. I don’t know what I’ll do next, it might not have a record attached to it.”

I would be shocked if we didn’t hear about Preet’s next polar expedition soon. She has shown time and again that her draw to the world’s extreme places sits miles away from a want of fame or notoriety, though it’s undeniable that she deserves some. Between achieving her speed record and the time you’ll be reading this, Preet has recuperated, written a book to inspire children to get outdoors, continued to speak in schools and gotten married – and yes, if you were wondering, she honeymooned in the snow. Under the ‘What is Next?’ section on her website (www.polarpreet.com) it simply says “I’m currently recovering and already planning my next steps. Watch this space!”. Bowled over by her honesty, charm, and the casual way she does extraordinary things, I will certainly be watching on as she changes the world of polar expeditions one Google search at a time. 