

Roald Engelbregt Gravning Amundsen 1872 to 1928



Roald Amundsen set many records in such a short period of time. Originally from Borge, Norway, he is uniquely associated with arctic and Antarctic exploration, leading the first documented over-the-top trip through the Northwest Passage (a three-year slog), the first expedition to reach the South Pole, in 1911, and the first airship expedition to the North Pole, in 1926. Consequently he was the first person ever to reach both poles in one lifetime.

Amundsen was born into a family of Norwegian shipowners and captains in Borge, Norway. His parents were Jens Amundsen and Hanna Sahlqvist. Roald was the fourth son in the family. His mother wanted him to avoid the family maritime trade and encouraged him to become a doctor, a promise that Amundsen kept until his mother died when he was aged 21. He promptly quit university for a life at sea.

When he was fifteen years old, Amundsen was enthralled by reading Sir John Franklin's narratives of his overland Arctic expeditions. Amundsen wrote "I read them with a fervid fascination which has shaped the whole course of my life".

Amundsen was a lifelong bachelor, though he had a long-time relationship with the Norwegian-born Kristine Elisabeth Bennett, the wife of an Englishman, Charles Peto Bennett. He met her in London in 1907 and they remained close for many years, although Amundsen kept the relationship a secret from everyone outside his intimate circle. Later, he became engaged to Bess Magids, an American divorcée whom he had met in Alaska.)

1. Belgian Antarctic Expedition 1897-1899

Amundsen joined the Belgian Antarctic Expedition as first mate at the age of 25 in 1897. This expedition, led by Adrien de Gerlache using the ship the RV *Belgica*, became the first expedition to overwinter in Antarctica. The *Belgica* became locked in the sea ice off Alexander Island, west of the Antarctic Peninsula. The crew endured a winter for which they were poorly prepared.

By Amundsen's own estimation, the doctor for the expedition, the American Frederick Cook, probably saved the crew from scurvy by hunting for animals and feeding the crew fresh meat. In cases where citrus fruits are lacking, raw meat from animals often contains enough Vitamin C to prevent scurvy.

2. Canada's Northwest Passage 1903-1906

In 1903, Amundsen led the first expedition to successfully traverse Canada's Northwest Passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. He planned a small expedition of six men in a 45 ton fishing vessel, called Gjoa, in order to have flexibility. His ship had relatively shallow draft. His technique was to use a small ship and hug the coast. Amundsen had the ship outfitted with a small 13 horsepower paraffin engine.

They travelled via Baffin Bay and Parry Channel and then south through Peel Sound, James Ross Strait, Simpson Strait and Rae Strait. They spent two winters at King William Island in the harbour of what is today Gjoa Haven. During this time, Amundsen and the crew learned from the local Netsilik Inuit people about Arctic survival skills, which he found invaluable in his later expedition to the South Pole. For example, he learned to use sled dogs for transportation of goods and to wear animal skins in lieu of heavy, woollen parkas, which could not keep out the cold when wet.

Leaving Gjoa Haven, he sailed west and passed Cambridge Bay, which had been reached from the west by Richard Collinson in 1852. Continuing to the south of Victoria Island the ship cleared the Canadian Arctic Archipelago on 17 August 1905. It had to stop for the winter before going on to Nome on Alaska's Pacific coast. The nearest telegraph station was 500 miles away in Eagle. Amundsen travelled there overland to wire a success message on 5 December, then returned to Nome in 1906. Later that year he was elected to the American Antiquarian Society.

At this time, Amundsen learned of the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden, and that he had a new king. The explorer sent the new king, Haakon VII, news that his traversing the Northwest Passage "was a great achievement for Norway". The crew returned to Oslo in November 1906, after almost three-and-a-half years abroad. Gjoa was returned to Norway in 1972. After a 45-day trip from San Francisco on a bulk carrier, she was placed on land outside the Fram Museum in Oslo, where she is now situated inside her own dedicated building at the museum.

3. South Pole Expedition 1910-1912

Amundsen next planned to take an expedition to the North Pole and explore the Arctic Basin, but when he heard in 1909 that the Americans Frederick Cook and Robert Peary had claimed to reach the North Pole as a result of two different expeditions, he decided to reroute to Antarctica. (He was not clear about his intentions, and Robert F. Scott and the Norwegian supporters felt misled. Scott was planning his own expedition to the South Pole that year.) Using the ship Fram, earlier used by Fridtjof Nansen Amundsen left Oslo for the south on 3 June 1910. At Madeira, Amundsen alerted his men that they would be heading to Antarctica, and sent a telegram to Scott: "Beg to inform you Fram proceeding Antarctic – Amundsen."

Nearly six months later, the expedition arrived at the eastern edge of the Ross Ice Shelf (then known as "the Great Ice Barrier"), at a large inlet called the Bay of Whales, on 14 January 1911. Amundsen established his base camp there, calling it Framheim. Amundsen was thankful they had adopted Inuit-style furred skins instead of the heavy wool clothing worn on earlier Antarctic attempts.

Using skis and dog sleds for transportation, Amundsen and his men created various supply depots, along a line directly south to the Pole. Amundsen also planned to kill some of his dogs on the way and use them as a source for fresh meat.

Some of the team set out on 8 September, but had to abandon their trek due to extreme temperatures. The painful retreat caused a quarrel within the group, and Amundsen sent Johansen and two of his group to explore King Edward VII Land.

A second attempt with a team of five, including Amundsen, departed base camp on 19 October. They took four sledges and 52 dogs. Using a route along the previously unknown Axel Heiberg Glacier they arrived at the edge of the Polar Plateau on 21 November after a four-day climb. The team and 16 dogs arrived at the pole on 14 December, a month before Scott's group. Amundsen named their South Pole camp Polheim. Amundsen renamed the Antarctic Plateau King Haakon VII's Plateau. They left a small tent and letter stating their accomplishment in case they did not return safely to Framheim.

The team arrived at Framheim on 25 January 1912, with 11 surviving dogs. They made their way off the continent and to Hobart, Australia, where Amundsen publicly announced his success on 7 March 1912. He telegraphed news to backers.

Amundsen's expedition benefited from his careful preparation, good equipment, appropriate clothing, a simple primary task, an understanding of dogs and their handling, and the effective use of skis. In contrast to the misfortunes of Scott's team, Amundsen's trek proved relatively smooth and uneventful.

4. North Polar Expeditions and the Northeast Passage 1918-1925

The Northeast Passage

In 1918 Amundsen began his expedition with a new ship, Maud which lasted until 1925. Maud was carefully navigated through the ice west to east through the Northeast Passage. With him on this expedition were Oscar Wisting and Helmer Hanssen, both of whom had been part of the team to reach the South Pole.

The goal of the expedition was to explore the unknown areas of the Arctic Ocean, strongly inspired by Fridtjof Nansen's earlier expedition with Fram. The plan was to sail along the coast of Siberia and go into the ice farther to the north and east than Nansen had. In contrast to Amundsen's earlier expeditions, this was expected to yield more material for academic research, and he carried the geophysicist Harald Sverdrup on board.

The voyage was to the northeasterly direction over the Kara Sea. Amundsen planned to freeze the Maud into the polar ice cap and drift towards the North Pole— as Nansen had done with the Fram – and he did so off Cape Chelyuskin. But, the ice became so thick that the ship was unable to break free, although it was designed for such a journey in heavy ice. In September 1919, the crew got the ship loose from the ice, but it froze again after eleven days somewhere between the New Siberian Islands and Wrangel Island.

During this time, Amundsen suffered a broken arm and was attacked by polar bears. As a result, he participated little in the work outdoors, such as sleigh rides and hunting. He, Hanssen, and Wisting, along with two other men, embarked on an expedition by dog sled to Nome, Alaska, more than 1,000 kilometres (620 miles) away. But they found that the ice was not frozen solid in the Bering Strait, and it could not be crossed. They sent a telegram from Anadyr to signal their location.

After two winters frozen in the ice, without having achieved the goal of drifting over the North Pole, Amundsen decided to go to Nome to repair the ship and buy provisions.

During the third winter, Maud was frozen in the western Bering Strait. She finally became free and the expedition sailed south, reaching Seattle in the American Pacific Northwest in 1921 for repairs. Amundsen returned to Norway, needing to put his finances in order.

In June 1922, Amundsen returned to Maud, which had been sailed to Nome. He decided to shift from the planned naval expedition to aerial ones, and arranged to charter a plane. He divided the expedition team in two: one part, led by him, was to winter over and prepare for an attempt to fly over the pole in 1923. The second team on Maud, under the command of Wisting, was to resume the original plan to drift over the North Pole in the ice. The ship drifted in the ice for three years east of the New Siberian Islands, never reaching the North Pole. It was finally seized by Amundsen's creditors as collateral for his mounting debt.

Although they were unable to reach the North Pole, the scientific results of the expedition, mainly the work of Sverdrup, have proven to be of considerable value. Much of the carefully collected scientific data was lost during the ill-fated journey of Peter Tessem and Paul Knutsen, two crew members sent on a mission by Amundsen. The scientific materials were later retrieved by Russian scientist Nikolay Urvantev from where they had been abandoned on the shores of the Kara Sea.

5. Aerial expeditions to the North Pole 1925-1926

The 1923 attempt to fly over the Pole failed. Amundsen and Oskar Omdal of the Royal Norwegian Navy tried to fly from Wainwright, Alaska, to Spitsbergen across the North Pole. When their aircraft was damaged, they abandoned the journey.

To raise additional funds Amundsen travelled around the United States in 1924 on a lecture tour.

In 1925, accompanied by Lincoln Ellsworth, pilot Hjalmar Riiser-Larsen, flight mechanic Karl Feucht and two other team members, Amundsen took two Dornier Do J flying boats, the N-24 and N-25, to 87° 44' north. It was the northernmost latitude reached by plane up to that time. The aircraft landed a few miles apart without radio contact, yet the crews managed to reunite. The N-24 was damaged. Amundsen and his crew worked for more than three weeks to clean up an airstrip to take off from ice. They shovelled 600 tons of ice while consuming only one pound (450 g) of daily food rations. In the end, the six crew members were packed into the N-25. In a remarkable feat, Riiser-Larsen took off, and they barely became airborne over the cracking ice. They returned triumphant when everyone thought they had been lost forever.

In 1926, Amundsen and 15 other men (including Ellsworth, Riiser-Larsen, Oscar Wisting, and the Italian air crew led by aeronautical engineer Umberto Nobile made the first crossing of the Arctic in the airship Norge designed by Nobile. They left Spitsbergen on 11 May 1926, flew over the North Pole on 12 May, and landed in Alaska the following day.

Amundsen's Latham 47 flying boat

Amundsen disappeared on 18 June 1928 while flying on a rescue mission in the Arctic. His team included Norwegian pilot, Leif Dietrichson, French pilot Rene Guilbaud, and three more Frenchmen. They were seeking missing members of Nobile's crew, whose new airship Italia had crashed while returning from the North Pole. Amundsen's French Latham 47 flying boat never returned.