

KRISTYN GRAY BIO

As an infant, one of the first words Kristyn Gray ever uttered was "dolphin". It spoke volumes about the direction her life would take.

Before she could even read, she clamoured for books on sea creatures. At age two, when her parents first took her to Sea World in California, they could barely tear the enchanted toddler away. The sea was in her blood.

By the time she was 16 she had earned her scuba diving license. At 19 she had her Advanced Open Water Certification.

Drawn to the aquatic world, Marine Biology was a natural course of study. A scholarship to the University of British Columbia paved the way. Summers were the best part: photographing and diving with whales off the north coast of Vancouver Island as part of a Grey Whale research/eco-tourism program for graduate students. Kristyn managed the logistics of the camp.

During her final year, a field course in biology and anthropology in Belize opened up a world of new people and new experiences. From that point on, Kristyn says, she was hooked: exploring off-the-beaten-track destinations would be her focus. And if it involved marine adventures, that would be a bonus. First stop: Taiwan.

Within three days she had landed a job teaching English. For the next two years, this was her base for travel to Hong Kong, the Philippines, Cambodia, India, South Africa and Thailand where she obtained her Divemaster Certification.

A fortuitous meeting in Taiwan with another English teacher, Eric Dickson, would change her life. He put her in touch with his brother Graham Dickson, a skilled diver, expedition leader and entrepreneur. Graham happened to be putting together a proposal for a 36-person French film expedition to the Canadian Arctic. Upon her return to Toronto, Kristyn looked him up.

"Graham had lots of good ideas that sounded very exciting," Kristyn recalls. Graham was struck by her enthusiasm and sense of responsibility. He invited her on board. Arctic Kingdom was the perfect forum to bring into play her training, her skills and her love for travel and the aquatic world.

She learned the business from the ground up – a lot of "grunt work", she says, learning how to prepare packing lists, order equipment, and most importantly, manage people.

"We have to make sure we hire the right guides for each particular trip, that we have the right equipment, tents, food, chefs, that the snowmobiles are ready to go, that all the activities – the diving, the filming, the still photography – are well thought through," Kristin says.

Everything must be planned in advance and all supplies flown in to the nearest hamlet from which the expedition departs. She was up to the challenge.

Soon Kristyn was taking on more and more responsibilities. In 2005, she left for the Arctic for what would be her own personal immersion course in expedition management: eight consecutive weeks in the Arctic seeing to every detail of a series of small expeditions for individual documentary filmmakers and small groups of adventure tourists. It laid the groundwork for the true test to come: leading her own expedition.

By 2006 she was ready. She accompanied a documentary film-maker to the Arctic to track polar bears and walrus. Kristyn was now solely in charge of everything from food and equipment management to the organization of fuel, sleds, snowmobiles, hiring guides and advance camp set-up.

"I was nervous, but confident," she says. "I knew there was no one else to rely on other than myself."

"So what does it take to be a top notch expedition leader? It's all problem-solving Kristyn explains. "What do you do if a food shipment is late? You have to put together a menu as quickly as you can with what is available in the nearest village's single store. How do you deal with bad weather? You have to keep morale up. Things don't always go according to plan. So you have to be flexible to handle changing situations quickly.

"It's important to keep in mind that our Arctic expeditions are not trips to an exclusive resort with scheduled activities. We have to expect the unexpected – like bad weather. But then something always happens to turn things around. The skies will suddenly clear and we will have 30 straight hours of swimming with whales.

"We always have good encounters, no matter what," Kristyn adds. That's because we have the experience built over time and know how to find the right people and the right guides who know and understand the Arctic and can help make those good encounters happen."

Kristyn Grey herself, is one of those people with the experience and skills to ensure that "good encounters happen."