

TRUE NORTH STRONG

In the Canadian Arctic, you'll find polar glaciers, epic icebergs, a frozen tundra—and a warm, warm welcome.

by OMAR MOUALLEM

I'D BEEN BLINDED by my own privilege. The child, no older than three, was clamouring for my iPhone, which I'd been directing down a gravel road like a wifi divining rod. My only weakness greater than Internet, I guess, is an adorable Inuit girl with eyes glinting in the eternal Arctic sun and a chubby grin smeared with deception. My stupidity didn't sink in the moment she made a run for it. Nor the moment she realized she couldn't outrun a grown man (only outwit him) and sent the phone tumbling down the gravel road until the screen was so cracked and blotched that it wiped out time.

It sunk in the moment she unlocked the home screen of my southern technology, opened the camera app and pointed it at me. This is the touch-screen generation of babies, after all, even in the Far North. Of course they have iPhones. And Internet—which is more than the 196 passengers and 124 crew aboard our ship could say.

It was day five of a 12-day excursion from Kuujuaq, Nunavik, to Kangerlussuaq, Greenland. Passengers had come from seemingly every continent but Antarctica, though at least a couple of dozen had visited it before, perhaps on this vessel, engineered with an ice-strengthened hull for both poles. Much of what sends someone to the southern pole sends them to the northern: camera-ready icebergs, awesome fjords and humbling wildlife, plus you get Viking ruins, Inuit art and maybe a nibble of beluga blubber. There's also the thrill of charting terrain rarely witnessed by the human eye, habited and uninhabited destinations accessed by small rubber boats called Zodiacs, but only if they're not first blown out of reach by wicked winds or choked off by ice floes.

But great forces of nature are matched by forces of habit. I checked my phone at the first spare moment. Following a five-hour flight from Ottawa to Nunavik (Quebec's northern Inuit region), a long wait in the Kuujuaq airport, a shuttle to the coast, a bumpy Zodiac ride from shore to sea to the great ship that would take us through the enigmatic North—there was her name! *Ocean Endeavour*, and beside her: four beautiful bars in the network list.

But. It. Just. Wouldn't. Connect.

Neither was there 3G, despite my "unlimited national plan" (thanks, Rogers). The receptionist explained to a small group of digital junkies that cell phone towers are rare here. Locals rely on satellite communications. The receptionist was trying to fix the onboard wifi.

Lee Naraway



They'd made fresh bannock and a cheesecake-like paste with fish eggs, and carved for us samples of cured caribou roast, jellied black seal and rubbery beluga. Two teenagers, throat-singing partners for over a year, hummed and croaked songs both beautiful and beastly.

The cruise company even flew in its IT guy. Heroic as it sounded, she wasn't optimistic, and that would be devastating for her family in Romania, as crew are assigned to the ship for months at a time.

For us, it was a simple nuisance, and by "us," I mostly mean the fraction of passengers not old enough to have read first editions of Farley Mowat. But we all knew the tales of Arctic explorers: they withstood deadly icebergs, storms, starvation, scurvy... syphilis. John Franklin lost 129 men upon *HMS Erebus* and *HMS Terror*, resorted to cannibalism and, worse yet, was sentenced to become part of Stephen Harper's legacy. And we were grumbling about email.

That subsided by about day two.

IT MAY BE the world's largest land carnivore, but to a blind eye, across the Ungava Bay, it looked like a flea. I twisted a longer lens onto my Canon and pulled focus. The pale white dot sharpened into a polar bear scraping up a Vancouver-sized cliff that jutted from the Arctic Sea like a helipad for the millions of murres for which the Inuit named it. Their fledglings make Akpatok Island a feeding trough.

"Spotting polar bears on Akpatok is like spotting yellow cabs in New York," said naturalist George Sirk, an exuberant guide aboard one of the seven Zodiacs surrounding the island, standing next to a gun-slinging "bear monitor." Sirk redirected our attention to a mother and cub on the rocky beach. Then, a few hundred metres west, to a lone male twice her size who had climbed ashore. In mid-July, bears prepare for winter by consuming all that they can, including cubs, which they can smell from kilometres afar and sneak up on with their massive pillowed paws. He sniffed the air and trudged toward them.

My camera rattled as the gap between predator and prey narrowed. Then, as suddenly as he appeared, the male slid back into sea. He was a 300-kilogram teenager, noted Sirk, with four to six inches of fat on his back. "He's not interested because he's full this time of year." But after we return to the *Endeavour*, the images are downloaded, blown up and an alternative story emerges: on closer inspection, the photos reveal that the male was not so healthful that the meal wasn't worth the fight.



All Aboard
Zodiac boats take explorers to see icebergs up close and personal (top left and opposite). Back on the *Ocean Endeavour*, acclaimed Vancouver sushi chef Hidekazu Tojo (left) coaches passengers—and locals—how to craft dishes that make the most of the area's fresh seafood.

Rather he's too emaciated to battle and may not survive the year.

The threat of climate change can't be ignored here. Glaciers melt, raise the sea, deplete the ice growlers (shards of icebergs) that wildlife relies on for hunting, and invite new species of predators that Inuit don't even have names for. But one thing it's good for is mass tourism. Melting polar ice caps have simultaneously expanded Arctic summers, permitting multiple excursions from various outfitters, and have attracted masses of people to this slipping beauty with the urgency of eclipse watchers. The endangered polar bear isn't just the symbol of this trend, but the symbol of Adventure Canada, one of the oldest of a few companies capable of sailing the Northwest Passage.

Adventure Canada selected midsummer for this route along the South Baffin coast and across the Davis Strait for the mammalian wildlife sighting opportunities, but, unluckily, I spotted only two bobbing seal heads, a whale breach and a rotting de-tusked walrus (and the aforementioned polar bears). If passengers were disappointed, however, they stayed hush. With wildlife lacking, the onboard programs delivered.

It's said that cruises are like summer camp on the water. Adventure Canada's Heart of the Arctic trip is more like community college at sea, but with pros who have lived it and bring you into their world. I took Inuktitut lessons with Order of Canada recipient Aaju Peter, a lawyer and activist critical to protecting Northern peoples' right to



sealing and whaling. I navigated marbling icebergs with Sirk, whose flamboyance is ripe for children's television (but, unfortunately for children everywhere, he only does talk radio). I retraced artist James Houston's steps in helping make Cape Dorset the artistic hub it is today, where as many as a quarter of the residents are working artists, and I did it with his son, John Houston, the prolific documentarian.

So this is not a cruise with magicians and Elvis impersonators. In fact, the word "cruise" draws shudders. Second-generation co-owner Matthew James Swan calls it an "expedition," and he our expedition leader. Though it does have Tom, heartthrob of septuagenarian women, who counts among his party tricks the uncanny ability to memorize every name on the 196-person passenger list—the 29-year-old company's largest ever.

Needless to say, this attracts a different kind of traveller. Among my shipmates are members of the Explorers Club and Royal Canadian Geographic Society; innumerable professors, researchers and writers; a dog-semen expert; a Kiwi sheep farmer on his twelfth Arctic excursion; and Japan's version of the Most Interesting Man in the World. Between them existed two-thirds of Wikipedia, plus a Google consultant for good measure.

But, habits. The second we were ashore in Kangiqsujuaq, on day three, passengers like me disappeared into the nearest community centre to bring the Internet to its knees. Only after the broadband

resources were pattering low were we deflected toward a people who take welcoming very seriously.

THEIR WORD FOR welcome is "tunngasugit." It quite literally means "being on solid ground." Inuit so wish for visitors to feel grounded that many of their villagers came out to meet us.

"This is all very new to us, but we like to think this is one of the more interesting places you could visit," said Yaaka Yaaka, Kangiqsujuaq's youth counsellor (and plumber, and electrician, et cetera), speaking into a microphone before a packed gymnasium. There are so many locals who share his name that he had the Js legally changed to Ys after one too many mistaken RCMP visits, and surely the other Jaakas were in the room too. They'd made fresh bannock and a cheesecake-like paste with fish eggs, and carved for us samples of cured caribou roast, jellied black seal and rubbery beluga. Two teenagers, throat-singing partners for over a year, hummed and croaked songs both beautiful and beastly.

It's a simulacrum, of course. "Youth today are caught between cultures," explained Yaaka on a walkabout of Kangiqsujuaq, past the Pingualuit National Park museum dedicated to a meteorite crash nearby and, as an afterthought, Inuit history. He pointed to contemporary murals blasting needed colour onto the barren town bowled in by mountains. The faces depict real people, living and deceased, who are



important to its history, he explained. More actively, he takes young people spear and harpoon hunting to retain traditional memories. “But those are the lucky ones,” he said. “The not-so [lucky] do what they want.”

This was apparent upon meeting three young men getting high in a plywood shed at 9:30 a.m. Mobile providers aren’t the only ones who have neglected these towns, obvious as the stark statistics Canadians read about, but rarely consider, were elucidated before our eyes. But the young men were unwaveringly warm. Following a brief conversation, I thanked them. A 20-year-old from the Jaaka clan, missing front teeth and wearing an outsized wool blazer over pyjama pants, replied, simply, “Welcome.”

“AS A CANADIAN, how does it make you feel?” a Japanese translator with a documentary crew asked me, citing the unpaved roads, teenage mothers and poor dental health among his observations of Nunavut. Some of the social ills were somewhat shocking to the international traveller who had held a different picture of Canada in mind, and even to one French Canadian woman whose hearing aid was looked upon as foreign by a young deaf Inuit man. But one

could also point out Inuit people’s resilience—in spite of isolation, Christianization, colonization, Greenpeace and climate change. It was apparent in the young throat singers, ubiquitous *ulus* (all-purpose knives found across numerous Northern cultures) and occasional passersby wearing *amautis*, embroidered cloaks with drooping pouches to cradle babies. It was especially apparent in the children with plastic dolls in their *amautis*.

The window to the past remains; I just had to look up to see it, a lesson reinforced when I met the girl on the road while dowsing for wifi. (Better: she’d been recording video so, in slow motion, I could relive the lesson frame by frame.) “Fifty percent of the welcome is your responsibility,” said Aaju Peter. “Nothing is more important up here than to show we are welcoming.” Throughout, Adventure Canada reciprocates not just with money but with its own cultural exchanges: inviting residents on board to the breakfast buffet to eat with passengers or to make sushi with Hidekazu Tojo, the legendary Vancouver chef who invented the B.C. and California rolls. Tojo hopes that with a little bit of cheap rice, this seed of knowledge will grow to become part of a sustainable, healthy Northern diet.

And there’s also Tom. On day six, in Kimmirut, where the Hudson’s

Andrew Stewart



Bay’s initials for old aviators faded in the hilltops, when we were treated to a tournament of Inuit sports, like muskox push (think sumo on your knees) and one foot high kick (think soccer meets high jump), Tom arrived in the gym in a bejewelled suit to perform “Hound Dog.” So the ship did harbour an Elvis impersonator all along—just not for the passengers.

He broke out the guitar again on the last leg of the cruise, in a concert he cheekily called “All I Want Is a Wifi Signal, Is That Too Much to Ask?” But by then, we’d all found a better connection in each other (enough to strip to our swim shorts and take a “polar dip” in the Arctic Circle) and in the communities we visited.

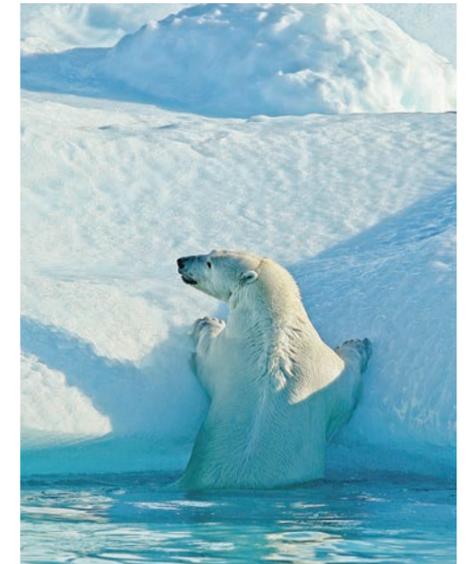
TOM’S GUITAR STRUMS must have been quite the force, because the next day I awoke to my phone pinging and pulsing. I glanced at the blotched screen. It was “CE” o’clock. The near permanent sunlight further betrayed time, but I could tell we’d arrived in Greenland. The capital city’s developed seaport and stacks of Royal Arctic shipping containers were directly outside my porthole.

For a city of 17,000, Nuuk punches well above its weight. It’s home to geometrically interesting architecture and Godthaab Bryghus, a brewhouse named after the capital’s former Danish name. There are also concept boutiques, an impressive contemporary art gallery and Qiviut, a fashion line of strictly seal fur, cashmere-like muskox yarn and other native textiles. To the city folk aboard the *Ocean Endeavour*, the minuscule Manhattan was a needed change of pace. But even as the ship sailed off the coast and into Evighedsfjorden (the “Fjord of Eternity,” appropriately named for its 75 kilometres of breathtaking vistas), the cell reception remained. Not that I needed it anymore.

It was the first sign of the many advantages Greenland’s Inuit ancestors had over Canada’s. Towns of 200 had not just developed

Eagle Eye Tours

Melting polar ice caps have simultaneously expanded Arctic summers, permitting multiple excursions from various outfitters, and attracted masses of people to this slipping beauty with the urgency of eclipse watchers.



Three Amigos
The North is where this trio of the continent’s largest mammals call home: the always well-dressed muskox; the super chill walrus and the big daddy of them all—the polar bear.

seaports but thriving fishing plants. The reasons were environmental, historical and political, explained Peter, who emigrated from Greenland to Canada in 1981 in search of her ancestral roots. Greenlanders had their nationalist movement almost 40 years ago and are closing in on independence. They’d long switched over to Roman alphabets from syllabics and had benefited from colonization’s undeniable advantages for hundreds more years. They could also fish year-round, since ice floes don’t drift northward. And there’s the plain fact that Greenland’s ruling empire, Denmark, is a high-tax nation.

But, she noted, when she sought to find and revive the forgotten tradition of Inuit women’s facial and body tattoos—which Peter now bears on her chin, head and fingers—memories of the practice were completely wiped from Greenlanders. It was Canada’s Inuit who had kept traces of it.

However much their culture and languages diverged, the essence of *tunngasugit* and *tikilluarit* was identical. After arriving in Itilleq, Peter’s hometown, there wasn’t a soul left in the 120-person town’s quaint, colourful houses. Instead they met us on a dirt pitch with a soccer ball for one last cultural exchange, a great goodbye and an unforgettable welcoming. **WLT**