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WHAT I LEARNED BRAVING THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

By **Melody Wren** - August 23, 2017



Village of Sissimut, Greenland. MELODY WREN PHOTO

Even though we travelled to the Northwest Passage last year in late August and early September, the tendrils of winter had already reached us, bringing six days of snow, heavy rain and ice. The ice made our 17-day journey considerably more difficult, re-routing our ship on a daily basis, as it did with 19th-century explorers John Franklin and John Rae. Satellite images of the ice flows were

shared by the expedition director, Denise, to aid in her explanation of the course corrections.

Adventure Canada's ship, the Endeavour, took us on a 5,000 km journey along the coast of Greenland, through the Canadian Arctic and into the Northwest Passage. It could only take place once during the year, due to ice.

Starting in Kangerlussaq, Greenland, my first glimpse of the largest island in the world was of a stark, barren land without a tree in sight. We crossed the Arctic Circle twice the first day – on the flight and after we set sail. The first evening we sailed out of Sondre Stonford and docked overnight in Sissimut, the second largest town in Greenland.

The vivid colours of the houses in Sissimut didn't mask the bleakness and constant heavy drizzle, as we walked through town that day.

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The early explorations into the Northwest Passage that I had only read about were brought to life by experts on board, including author and historian Ken McGoogan, who has written several books on the subject. The expedition followed part of Franklin's route and it was impossible not to get swept up in the excitement, enthusiasm and information on display in the talks we were given on the explorers who made the journey before us. The connection to the past was indescribable.





The first RCMP outpost in Devon Island, Nunavut. MELODY WREN PHOTO

Our primary focus became Franklin's course through the passage. Our original itinerary took us a different way, but the ice had other ideas and we ended up traveling almost the exact same route as his, ending up at one point in Cunningham Bay, a place that none of the staff had been to before. McGoogan's book, *Fatal Passage*, was brought to life as we ventured to Beechey Island, to pay our respects to three of Franklin's crew members who were buried there, as well as the cairn, where a note was found directing search parties to their whereabouts.

Canadian experts and local Inuit icons accompanied us on the ship. Referred to as a "voyage" or "expedition," a regular cruise it wasn't. In place of dancing and singing as entertainment, there were in-depth lectures on polar bears, Inuit culture, geology, marine biology and local birds. The lighter fare focused on creativity, offering instruction on playing the ukulele, water colour painting, sketch journaling and the art of making fish prints (using real fish!).

The passengers came from all over the world and included many Franklin hobbyists who had vowed to someday see the Northwest Passage. This group of amateur adventurers were willing to endure sometimes harsh conditions, including freezing cold and blowing snow, to experience one of the world's few remaining wildernesses. Until the last decade, traveling through the region remained as difficult as it was during Franklin's time. But due to the shrinking ice across the Arctic, caused by climate change, the route is more accessible now.





Karrat Fjord, Greenland. MELODY WREN PHOTO

Early in the morning on the seventh day, we loaded into Zodiac boats in cold drizzle for a 45-minute ride through Smith Sound, which served as the main route for explorers searching for the North Pole. It was quite something to be heading further north than many explorers ever reached. It was even more surreal when our Zodiac driver and on-board guitarist, Kevin Closs, sang Stan Rogers' sea shanty, *Into the Northwest Passage*, as our Zodiac dipped in the deep swells of the water and we all pulled our collars up and our hoods down, to avoid being splashed by the icy Arctic water.

As we approached our destination, Etah, in northwest Greenland, it began to snow. Our Zodiacs beached near an abandoned settlement that's still used by hunters, which was clearly evident due to the number of carcasses and skeletons on the beach, including an entire arctic fox, a caribou and a full muskox skeleton.

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A few of our guides armed with shotguns marked out a perimeter that we were not to cross because of the number of muskox in the area.

We hiked over rocky terrain and around Lake Alida, until we reached the sizable Brother John Glacier. Our group, dubbed the "glacier trekkers," covered approximately 4 km and while I was touching the glacier, a herd of muskox thundered past. It was a very rough, cold Zodiac ride back.

What was amazing from the beginning was the easy acceptance of whatever came our way – ice, wind, snow, heavy rain, sometimes all in one day. The flexibility of the crew and director was contagious and even though we were told

we couldn't go to Grise Fjord (which literally translates to "the place that never thaws") because we couldn't anchor, we were welcomed at Gjoa Haven, instead. A few of the on-board experts entertained the townsfolk, most of whom came to see Juno-award winning singer Susan Aglukark, YouTube sensation Kelly Fraser and guitarist Kevin Closs. Approaching the Heritage Centre, there were two local women in sealskin tents sharing chunks of narwhal (bit early for me for narwhal, but thank you) and tea, being cooked over an open fire. Even though they had little warning that we were coming, their excitement and joy was palpable.

Like the explorers before us, we learned so much from the people, their traditions, the Arctic and the weather. Even the sun and the moon are on a different schedule in the Arctic. Before I traveled, it was obvious that there would be 24 hours of sun, but I was surprised to find that in some places, the moon does not rise.

Adventure Canada has offered expeditions through Canada's Northwest Passage since 2009. If you board their 137-metre Ocean Endeavour thinking you are in for the cruising equivalent of cakewalk, you will quickly learn differently. But you will be enriched because of it.

Melody Wren's trip was sponsored by Adventure Canada, which can be found at adventurecanada.com. To read more of Melody's adventures, visit her website: melodywren.com, or follow her on Twitter: @soarwithmelody.



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