

INSPIRED

Into the Northwest Passage

Photo Credit To Melody Wren

Before I boarded, I knew surprisingly little about the Northwest Passage, except that it has more polar bears than humans – and no trees. As I read about the Arctic temperatures in August, and necessity to change schedule according to movements of floating ice, it became a powerful lure as well as a challenge. I joined 113 other passengers as we set out for 17 days on an expedition ship through the Northwest Passage with Adventure Canada.

The Northwest Passage, which describes the route from the Davis Strait to the Bering Sea, is ice-locked for most of the year and has no deep-sea ports or stopping-off points. Only four per cent of these waters are fully charted and the quickly fluctuating weather changes the ice formations overnight with travel delays not uncommon.

I stocked up on the appropriate winter gear before boarding the ship in Kangerlussaq, Greenland. We cruised past icebergs, saw the largest glacier in the world, hiked through starkly beautiful tundra and travelled in inflatable zodiacs around icebergs with close ups of arctic wildlife, including polar bears, muskox, arctic hare, humpback whales and pods of beluga whales. It was evident from the beginning that the master of the journey was the ice, with the ship's expedition leader, Denise Landeau, keeping a watchful eye on satellite images of the flow and direction.

As we cruised up the coast of Greenland for the first few days of our journey, we hiked through villages including Sissimut and Ilulissat. Dotted with houses in vivid colours, the lack of trees wasn't noticeable as the houses enhanced the stark landscape.



Photo by Melody Wren.

An announcement boomed over the loudspeaker: our itinerary and the route was changing completely because of ice blocking our passage. We joined the rest of the passengers in the lounge to hear about the new route. Historical author Ken McGoogan was very enthusiastic as we were going to a place that Victorian explorer Lord Franklin had journeyed but the ship never had. This meant McGoogan hadn't either, even though he had travelled with Adventure Canada into the Northwest Passage many times before. McGoogan regularly gave lectures on the fate of Franklin's ships as our route was attempting to retrace his.

One of the highlights of the trip was the hike to the Ilulissat Icefjord. Since 2004, it has been on UNESCO's World Heritage list. Approximately 250 km north of the Arctic Circle, it sits in Disko Bay in Qaasuitsup, West Greenland. We walked through the village to an extensive boardwalk, which took us to the edge of the largest glacier in the world. The beauty was inescapable at every turn and no comparison is

possible. I have never been so overwhelmed by a natural phenomenon and couldn't stop crying. As it is longer than 65 km, we hiked along one edge of it, then traversed up a steep hill overlooking other parts of it. The glacier moves at an astonishing 25-30 metres per day, resulting in approximately 20 billion tonnes of icebergs calving off and passing from the fjord every year. The majority of an iceberg lurks unseen beneath the water, making this enormous sight even more jarring. If ice was the Master of this journey, Ilulissat Icefjord was the King.

Later that afternoon, we were able to see the other side of the Icefjord, travelling in small zodiacs, the sculptural forms of icebergs belonging more in an art gallery with different colours, shapes and textures. They were endlessly fascinating to cruise around. Occasionally, we heard the splintering of an iceberg, huge pieces falling into the water in front of us. The sound was alarmingly loud and quite startling, but the sheer pristine splendour was fascinating as all the icebergs were so different from one another.

Speakers on board lent a richness to every excursion, including: an archeologist who spoke about the sacred artifacts we were witnessing on some of the islands; a marine biologist talking us through the marine life we could expect to see daily; a comedic Monty Pythonesque Ornithologist who taught us how to recognize Arctic birds; and native Inuk from different parts of Nunavut and, each day, we learned a new Inuit word.

The onboard local Inuk shared their background, stories and knowledge, which added to the diverse learning experience. I learned how to play the ukulele from Juno award-winning singer Susan Aglugark, took a water painting class from Carolyn Heller, and made a fish print with award winning filmmaker John Houston and his wife, marine biologist Ree Brennan Houston.

I was inspired creatively in a sketch journalling class with artist Sheila McGoogan, wife to author Ken McGoogan and made a lifelong friend with Nunavut politician Tagek Curly through many chats over meals and on outings.

Even though we were disappointed we couldn't leave the ship due to the ice jams a few of the days, we were suddenly undecided between so many appealing choices of workshops, lectures and movies.

One day, we visited the first RCMP outpost on the south coast of Devon Island, in Nunavut. The old abandoned RCMP detachment looks out to sea, as if plonked there to watch over the opening to Lancaster Sound and the Northwest Passage. It is a desolate, but starkly beautiful spot, its soft weathered colours gently merging with the textured surrounding landscape.

Established in 1924 by the Canadian government, they created the presence to curb foreign whaling and other activities. They travelled little due to the rugged ice of the frozen sea and for the first three years of their existence at the post, the men did not even have radio contact, waiting for the annual visit of a government ship to receive news.

Wandering inside was a glimpse into their bleak lives: remaining bottles, books, including one by Farley Mowat, iron beds, chairs and tinned food. Even a jar of peanut butter was still there as if waiting for the toaster to pop.

It is hard to imagine such isolation today. During most of our voyage, guests had access to a satellite-based internet connection. Understandably, it was sporadic during our time in the Northwest Passage, however, our ship's officers were in constant contact with the outside world.

Continuing, we sailed to Beechey Island, admittedly one of the islands I was most looking forward to exploring. It is a speck on a map, but one of the most important and sombre historical sites in the Arctic.

The day brought one of the worst blizzards we trekked through even though it was early September. It didn't dampen our enthusiasm for the island and all there was to see. Every day, we had choices of lengths of hikes, and I chose the medium length hike to see the three graves of Sir John Franklin's crew members. Sharing the hike with author Ken McGoogan added a historical dimension to the visit. As we stood at the gravesite, McGoogan reminded us that in 1845 Sir Franklin took his expedition of 129 men and two ships into the Wellington Channel, with not one returning.

Photo by Melody Wren.

Aside from the bodies buried on Beechey island, only relics were found as clues to the disappearance, and there was no indication as to the rest of the British party. In the fall of 2014, Canadian archeologists discovered remnants of HMS *Erebus* in the frozen waters, and later HMS *Terror* while we were in the Passage.

We hiked past the gravesite to the other end of the island and, because there were possibilities of polar bears, we were being picked up at the other end instead of returning to our drop off point. Every time we visited an island, armed guides went to the island first to mark off a perimeter and paced it while we explored, keeping watch for polar bears, muskox and any other animal that could compromise our safety.

As we boarded the Zodiacs to return to the ship, we were asked if we wanted to return or cruise the cliffs to look for birds. I am quite sure I said I was frozen through and wanted to return to the ship, but thankfully, I wasn't heard, and we putted in Zodiacs underneath the overhanging cliffs of Beechey island looking for birds.

Something large and white swam beside the Zodiac, but thinking it was a small iceberg, I paid little attention. Then I heard excited shouts "Belugas." We slowed down, to see so many belugas we lost count. They all had babies with them, and we found out later from our onboard marine biologist, Ree Brennan-Houston, that baby belugas stay with their mothers up to age three. The belugas continued to float past us. Near frozen and hardly able to move my feet or hands – even though I was well bundled – I begged our driver to return us to the ship.

After our island explorations, there was hot tea and soup, snacks, sandwiches and cakes waiting to welcome us aboard, as passengers would gather in the lounge excitedly swapping tales of what they had witnessed, often still wearing hats and coats, eager to exchange stories, mugs of tea warming our hands.

I have never been so far north; we got as close as 14 degrees to the North Pole. Parts of the trip will stay with me for a long time: the history; the phenomenal natural beauty; 22 hours of sunlight a day in some parts we travelled through; the singing of the sea shanties; the sharing of knowledge from the experts; storytelling from the local Inuit; and the feeling of community on the ship contrasting with the bleak vastness of Canada's north.

Even though there were 113 passengers, by the end of the voyage, it felt like a village. The itinerary capitalized on our Arctic experience, filled with storytelling, activities and expert information sharing. It is not a voyage for everyone, but those with a sense of adventure and spirit, it will open your mind and heart and stay with you for a long time.

IF YOU GO:

For more information: www.adventurecanada.com (<http://www.adventurecanada.com>)

Travel tips:

Dress brightly: While purchasing my exterior layers at our local Sail store, one of the helpful clerks mentioned that I should purchase an outer layer in a bright colour. Her cousin is a rescue helicopter pilot dealing with rescues; often people hike in drab colours, so if they need to be rescued, the colours – gray, black, brown – do not stand out against rocks, water, trees, so I opted for bright turquoise and could always be found in a group.

(<https://www.seniorlivingmag.com/linkout/1774>)

Test before you travel: I bought new waterproof hiking shoes and discovered on Day One of hiking they were not waterproof. Speaking to other passengers, one woman stood in a bathtub with several inches of water to test her new shoes, which I wish would

have thought of. Another passenger was getting soaking wet through on a zodiac as waves washed over all of us, and he was under the impression his two-piece attire was waterproof, but informed us through shivering and chattering teeth, it was not.

Lubricate: Due to the extreme cold and location, it is very dry. Bring a small tube of Vaseline or moisturized lotion, you can coat your nostrils with, otherwise you will be prone to nosebleeds from the dryness.

135 views

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