

# Greenland and Wild Labrador – A Cultural Experience with Adventure Canada

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Our hiking group was scattered on the beach when our guide spotted three polar bears on the far side of the fjord. Suddenly, two of the bears started swimming diagonally not far from our protected zone. The guide quickly gathered us together and urged us to swiftly board waiting zodiacs. Returning from the zodiac outing, still warming up after hiking through the snow chatting about the polar bear sighting, four of us sat in the Compass lounge playing cards enthusiastically. Cards were hastily thrown on the table as carts of scones, cakes and fruit platters were wheeled in. It was time for afternoon tea and everything stopped. Fellow passengers barely noticed the boat dipping in the swells; they were focussed on getting their afternoon treats. Traveling on an expedition ship with

Adventure Canada is filled with different levels of treats from adventures with bears, afternoon tea, riding in zodiacs around icebergs, an onboard spa and hot-tub, wildlife spotting, and top quality food.

The fifteen-day journey with Adventure Canada on an expedition ship from Greenland to Wild Labrador felt as we were moving through layers as we learned about Inuit culture and traditions. Our home for the voyage was the Ocean Endeavour, a 156 ft. ice breaking ship, sturdy and comfortable and holding 160 passengers.

We started in Kangerlussuaq on the southwest coast of Greenland. On one of the longest fjords in the world, it is surrounded by dramatic, glacial carved mountains. Crossing the Arctic Circle, it doesn't freeze because of the ocean currents, allowing that part of Greenland open for whaling and fishing year round.

As the sun was setting, a bus from Kangerlussuaq airport took us towards the harbour where our ship was anchored. Travelling faster than our bus, a small group of muskox thundered along the cliffs next to it.

On the first night, we not only crossed the Arctic Circle but also were treated by our first sighting of the Northern Lights before tucking in.

The next morning, the view out of our cabin porthole was of the sun rising over snow-dusted mountains. Following breakfast, an informative lecture on glaciers and icebergs by the onboard geologist prepared us before we boarded zodiacs to see glaciers, icebergs and berettas (iceberg fragments) up close. With a clear blue sky and dazzling sunshine, it was an ideal beginning to the voyage. With a backdrop of beautiful rock formations at the side of cliffs, I was surprised to see purple and red jellyfish under the water's surface.

After a 125 nautical mile trek, we headed to Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. We were introduced to Greenland by Tina Kutse, a culturalist on board (who was from Nuuk) studying culture and natural history at the University of Greenland specializing in Inuit and indigenous rights. She shared very useful information, including the fact that there is a population of 56,000 people in Greenland, of which 50,000 are Inuit or Inuit Danish mix.

We disembarked at our first port of call in Nuuk, the northernmost capital in the world. Brightly coloured houses slope towards the Davis Inlet. This fairly large town belies its small population of only 17,000. Art galleries, craft shops, clothing shops, and cafés lend a European feel to the vibrant city. In the Cultural Centre, we explored a unique exhibit made completely out of driftwood – not unusual to the typical artist, but local Greenlandic artists have never seen a tree, so concepts using driftwood were creative.

What to buy locally to represent the culture of the local Inuit and Greenlanders? Muskox wool mittens, hats, neck warmers, silver jewellery and jewellery incorporating caribou antlers and iPad covers, boots and hats with seal fur. We had an unexpected bonus day in

Nuuk because of bad weather. It gave us time to explore the local museum and walk the town in more detail. The weather changed again as we headed towards the Torngat Mountains, the “spiritual homeland” of Inuit culture. There was a workshop where Inuit staff introduced themselves starting with the direction of the sun. They shared pieces of their background, their culture and traditions all of which set the tone for the rest of our journey. We were encouraged to ask questions to learn from them, abandoning pre-existing ideas. It can be difficult to talk about culture, requiring a lot of openness – on both sides.

Reconciliation would be discussed and “not to be afraid of it”. Talk to people and not about them. In communities you visit, engage. Being respectful guests is a big part of the experience.”



Nuuk, Capital city of Greenland . PHOTO CREDIT:  
Jeff Thomason

The Torngat Mountains National Park became the 42nd National park in 2007, is over 9,700 sq. km. and it took over 40 years to create the basecamp. Due to bad weather and a delay in clearing customs, we changed course and went towards Ramah to disembark the next day. At the northern tip of Labrador, the Torngat Mountains encompasses Ramah, Nachvek Fjord, Eclipse and Saglek.

According to Wayne Broomfield, assistant expedition leader, Adventure Canada and base camp manager of Torngat Mountains for 5 years, said “as it is so inaccessible physically, the average Canadian cannot visit the Torngat mountain base camp, the “lost corner of Labrador.” As the season is short (6-8 weeks), only 200 people visit the Torngats annually and most of those would be by an Adventure Canada ship, the only ship that accesses basecamp. (An airplane or helicopter from Goose Bay can be chartered and a stay at base camp igloos for a week would cost \$10,000 and more.

Adventure Canada has access to the Torngat mountains because of the Indigenous locals working as staff on board that double as bear patrols. A bear guard is considered a good job to have and with the high population of polar bears, it was important to send a number of bear patrols ahead of the zodiacs carrying hiking groups. The area of Eclipse was a transition zone where Inuit lived for a long time, travel to or from, it and we came across evidence of habitation.

We anchored and took zodiacs to a small landing site in Ramah, part of the Torngat mountains. Heavy rain cleared and the sun along with a full rainbow behind the mountains highlighted the same spectrum of fall colours in the tundra blanketing the hills. Snow-

capped mountains lured some hikers high up on the hills, while others lingered near the waterfalls next to caves waiting to be explored.

After intense Northern Lights the evening before, a new day dawned with sunshine as we cruised into Nachvak Fjord. Our Zodiacs went onto the beach giving us a chance to hike around the deep fjord in the that is 2 km wide and 20 km long. At one point we were high up on a ridge with a great look over the expansive fjord. On the beach, two of the zodiac staff were chatting and one happened to be looking high up in the valley and caught some movement and verified with her binoculars it was a black bear. About half a dozen of us were close to one of the perimeter guides when his radio crackled, "Mr. Black, up to the right past you". He quickly located the bear himself and called us all into a tight group, including another perimeter guide. He asked us to stand in one spot until he confirmed that "Mr. Black " was more interested in the blueberries nearby than in us. We waited it out until the bear moved across the valley then spent half an hour taking pictures of the bear before we came back down and returned to the ship.



One of the expedition team members described the next stop at Eclipse Sound as his "favourite place in the world". Referred to as a "polar desert" there is very little precipitation and water gets trapped there as opposed to the Sahara or other deserts.

Polar Bear just before he dove into the water and started swimming towards our group

We spent a sunny morning hiking in Eclipse Sound where fall colors were highlighted on the tundra. Rivers, waterfalls, frequent wildlife sightings, rainbows during the day and viewings of Northern Lights at night showed all the passengers the magic witnessed regularly.

An afternoon was spent in zodiacs cruising down the Niautalsivik channel with high sides like a canyon with an incredible waterfall at the end. The rocks on either side of the canyon were sheer geological magnificence with many of the Labrador-ite rocks being sent to Italy to be made into tiles. Purple, orange and yellow flowers dotted the landscape adding fall colors to the rocky backdrop.





Clear blue sky and bright sunshine the day of the barbeque on Eclipse Sound

Returning to the ship, the catering staff had been busy while we were out enjoying our explorations. A huge treat for the passengers, they had set up an enormous outdoor barbecue set up tables and chairs for outdoor dining. The sun shone in a clear blue sky, music played and all the passengers sat outside to enjoy the glorious weather and surrounding scenery which turned into a party atmosphere. Seals were spotted, caribou swam off shore and polar bears were seen once again. I remember thinking that I felt like I was part of a movie set because it was a record breaking memorable day. After anchoring near St. John's Harbour, part of the Torngat Mountains base camp, we set out in zodiac groups once again, breaking into three different hiking groups; extreme hike, ridge hike and a waterfall hike. After hearing so much about base camp it was intriguing to finally see it. It is literally a camp of permanent buildings with plastic igloos for people to stay in. Beyond base camp, colourful tundra and cascading waterfalls surrounded by multi-textured rock formations were a wonderful backdrop to our hike. The view from the mountain tops of the harbour was captivating. We toured through the base camp, opening doors of the little igloos where people stay for up to a week. While we waited for zodiacs to pick us up, Minke whale spouts could be seen offshore.

The sunshine turned into torrential rain in a gray and gloomy day that was ideal to walk through the abandoned village of Hebron. Glancing at the haunting landscape, I thought it would be an unpleasant experience, but there was an eerie beauty to the collapsing buildings, Moravian church and a graveyard. A glance back at the sea illustrated the incredible isolation of the community. Many Inuit were relocated in the 1950s and the community completely emptied.

After Hebron, the energy shifted as we arrived at the most Northern community in Labrador, filled with life and positive energy. Not only was the sun out, but the local brass band was playing at the dock to greet us along with two Minke whales spouting. The area is rich in whale habitat with many Humpbacks and Minkes. Nain is the administrative capital of Nunatsiavut is home to 1100 people. We walked to the Government building where the Deputy Minister for Language, Culture and Tourism spoke to us about Nain being the first Inuit region to set up a self-government.

As we were the first ship to arrive that year (and it was late September), the local community were excited to have us there, with everyone greeting us, chatting, asking questions, and hanging out of their windows to watch us. An artist studio was rich with local artisans showing their beautiful soap stone, Labradorite and wood carvings as well as seal skin mitts and shoes. Two passengers had arranged to be married in the local Moravian church and wore traditional Inuit tops and seal skin boots. The word “magical” was often used to describe our days exploring the North by small ship. Just when I thought it couldn’t get any better, it always did and the day in Nain was a high point for many.

We continued to sail down the coast until we got to L’Anse aux Meadows, one of the highlights for many passengers. One of the most important Viking settlements in North America, it was named a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in ’78. It has the remains of Norse house, a smithy and a reconstructed sod house. We wandered through the houses with demonstrations of how iron was forged. The costumed interpreters stayed in character as the Captain, the Captain’s wife and crew, while they regaled us with stories of their lives. Viking bread was baked over an open fire and served with locally made jam; we devoured many pieces as we warmed ourselves by the fire on this damp, cold day.



Costumed interpreter, L'anse Aux Meadows, St. Anthony, Newfoundland

Our next anchorage was at Terra Nova Provincial Park with sheltered inlets, islands, ponds, forests and bogs on four hundred square kilometers. Perched on the northeast coast of Newfoundland, it is a traditional island wilderness with lots of wildlife like black bears, lynx, osprey, moose and rare Newfoundland martens. After starting at the interpretative center, we hiked along the coast in a variety of groups with guides who shared information on the native plants and wildlife. Outside the cultural center, several staff played guitars beside a roaring fire and the artist in residence painted the scene in front.

On the last day, we anchored in St. John's. As our plane wasn't leaving until later in the afternoon, we walked up Signal Hill, past the colourful clapboard row houses to The Rooms (formerly the Newfoundland Museum) to explore the history of the area. From the top, an incredible view of the harbour, the old town and the outlying area is clear.

Small expedition ships have a focus on education including science, culture, and history. Cedar Swan, CEO of Adventure Canada refers to the experiences on board "Adventure Canada provides a space where local (Inuit) people have a voice, a voice seldom heard". She continues on to say that "some people come away changed and some people make it a focus in their lives."



Artist in residence painting the scene before her at Terra Nova Provincial Park, Newfoundland

Expedition team members included a geologist, a Moravian archivist, culturalists, a botanist, an ornithologist, an anthropologist, and a mammalian specialist. We learned daily in lectures, movies and interactive workshops. Several were from the Inuit community, which added a richness and depth to the cultural experience. Workshops on soapstone carving, watercolour painting, photography, jewellery making, beading, and cooking bannock were all part of the onboard experience.

A fellow passenger described the trip as a "cultural experience" in which she had the opportunities to learn about Inuit culture, history, and food."

We traveled through space and time to find answers to questions we didn't know we had. According to Andrew Bresnahan, Expedition team member, Adventure Canada, from Iqualait the Inuit word for the internet is "Ikiagqivik" which literally translated means traveling through layers, an allusion to a Shaman's travels through space and time to find answers to questions which is what we had been doing all along. It was Eva Arreak, Nunuvut's official languages commissioner who coined the word from traditional culture.



