

Ice Capades

POWER TOBOGGANING IN THE ARCTIC

"If you want to snowmobile to the Arctic Circle, call Mike or Chris in Iqaluit." That was the message waiting when I returned from a Québec tour. Two months later, my Arctic adventure was underway. It started with a Parks Canada meeting in Iqaluit (pronounced "ee-ka-loo-eet"). Formerly known as Frobisher Bay, this town is located at the foot of a like-named estuary that slices into the southern end of Baffin, Canada's largest island. Iqaluit is the capital of Nunavut ("noon-a-voot"), which was part of the Northwest Territories until 1999, when that region became the first new jurisdiction to join Canada since Newfoundland.

So ten of us met with a Parks Canada rep about snowmobiling to the Arctic Circle. Said circle runs through Auyuittuq ("eye-you-ee-took") National Park, just north of Pangnirtung ("pang-near-tung"). I didn't like what I was hearing...

Pauline Scott of Parks Canada said that their Arctic Circle sign was located only 12 kilometres inside the park entrance, an easy hike. "Hold on a minute," I thought. "Did she say hike?" "Yes," she said, as if reading my mind (or maybe I'd inadvertently exclaimed out loud). "No motorized vehicles are allowed in the park, so you'll have to walk." "Not a chance," I thought. "I came to snowmobile!"

She casually dropped two other bombshells: "No guns are allowed in the park." and "We recently ascertained that our Arctic Circle sign is misplaced. The Circle is actually a few kilometres further north." My companions were upset not to have any defense against polar bears. I didn't care, because I had no intention of walking to the Arctic Circle — especially since it too was a moving target!

Fearing that I had mistakenly joined the Nunavut Hiking Club, I

expressed my opposition to pedestrianism immediately after the meeting. I was relieved by my companions' equally enthusiastic condemnation of hoofing it, which confirmed that I really was among snowmobilers, folks whose idea of out-running a bear involves 800ccs and a spinning track.

Nunavut means "our land". It has an area one quarter the size of the United States. About 27,000 people reside in this vast expanse, less than normal attendance at an NFL game. Polar Bears probably have a greater population density than humans. Hence the need for guns and fast snowmobiles.

Fortunately, we would have both. My initial call to Mike Erving (*Update: sadly, Mike has since passed away.*) and Chris Lalande of the Nunavut Snowmobile Association was less to express my interest as to reassure myself that these guys knew their stuff. I wasn't going anywhere with a bunch of amateurs, to disappear like Henry Hudson...

Their plan was to leave Iqaluit on Easter weekend. We would snowmobile a 770-kilometre, 5-day round trip to Pang (local jargon for Pangnirtung), including a day trip for Arctic Circle bragging rights. Unenthused at the prospect of camping for two nights, I was pleased to discover that Mike was a professional outfitter, who used GPS units, satellite phones, current sleds, survival gear, an Inuk guide and guns. I would even ride a familiar Ski-Doo snowmobile!

Contrary to expectation, this part of the Arctic doesn't get much snow. Under 600 millimetres of precipitation falls annually, less than many parts of the Sahara, so it's classified as a "polar desert". Meaning I could freeze my buns while dying of thirst. However, snow accumulates from October through May, with little melting. It also blows around a lot, depositing old

snow in new places. So locals ride their sleds from October to December, lay up for deep freeze January and February, and then resume riding when most snow falls from March to June. This is the best time to visit.

One of my first questions was what to wear. With daylight from about 5 AM to 7:30 PM, temperatures would vary from highs of -15 degrees Celsius, dipping to -40 at night. While low humidity makes this cold feel warmer than back home, Arctic gales often cause wind chill. Blowing is so common that many houses are secured to the ground by cables!

After the Hudson's Bay Company

ees and agencies.

My First Air flight from Ottawa quickly left civilization behind, soaring for hours over countless miles of white emptiness. Despite its 6,000 inhabitants, almost a quarter of the Nunavut population, Iqaluit remains a frontier outpost, clinging to a barren hillside on the north shore of Koojesse Inlet. Its best links to the world are daily flights, television, radio, telephones and internet. It has its own water treatment plant and power generation. But for all these technologies, this remote town survives at the whim of Mother Nature, who can

model vehicles (mostly pick ups and SUVs). Everything comes in by air or the annual sealift during the brief summer months when shipping lanes are open. I was also surprised by the number of new snowmobiles, especially performance models, and the conspicuous absence of working sled dogs, which have generally been replaced by technology.

My first impression of Iqaluit was utilitarian. The smallish houses resemble a cluster of school portables, perched on short stilts above permafrost that runs 1,000 metres deep. Most were wooden, with price tags that can run \$250,000 and up, thanks to material and building



opened in the early 1900s, Iqaluit received another boost when the U.S. built an air base there during World War Two. As the local population gravitated to these early centres of opportunity, Iqaluit also benefited from the establishment of the Distant Early Warning (DEW) line during the Cold War. Although the U.S. presence faded during the sixties, Iqaluit had become the regional administrative, commercial and transportation hub for the Canadian Government. After 1999, it also became the new territorial capital, attracting many businesses necessary to support and service all the government employ-

isolate it with harsh weather at any time — which explains the stocks of staples on hand and the two-year fuel supply at the depot.

Almost any commodity or foodstuff is available (or can be ordered in). There are several good hotels, a first rate hospital, a movie theatre, many schools, and most other amenities. I was delighted at the freshness of restaurant produce and excellent cuts of meat — there was even a Chinese food place!

Iqaluit boasts 42 kilometres of roads (which dead-end at the city limits), countless taxis (the only public transit system), and an unexpected fleet of late

costs. If their exteriors are built to last, the interiors accommodate long hours indoors, replete with entertainment systems, computers and most other modern conveniences. Outside, tanker trucks regularly patrol the streets, some ensuring that heating fuel tanks are full, others that waste holding tanks are not. The houses back on each other with few fences or obvious property delineations. Snowmobiles travel everywhere.

For our Thursday departure, fifteen of us (11 men, 3 women and a youth) gathered at Mike's. Although the long range forecast called for sunny, abnormally



warm days ahead, no one embarks in the Arctic without preparing to wait out a storm. From the accumulated gear, it was obvious little was being left to chance. Our crew was tying tents, sleeping bags, food, fuel, stoves, and 40 jerry cans of gas on qamutiks, the long wooden toboggans that would be pulled behind our snowmobiles.

Nonetheless, I was dismayed that local air Search and Rescue capabilities were minimal. Apparently, only one S&R helicopter was stationed in the region, so efforts often fall to the distant Canadian Forces in Trenton (Ontario), Halifax (Nova Scotia), Edmonton (Alberta) or Yellowknife (Northwest Territories). My guess was that none would arrive quickly

enough to do more than retrieve human popsicles.

An ant stuck on a large white platter. That's how I visualized my first hours of Arctic snowmobiling. In every direction, I always seemed lower than the surrounding land and never able to reach, much less see over, any identifiable horizon. With the tree line hundreds of miles south, not so much as a bush was available to help gauge distance or measure progress, much less to burn. So carrying stoves and fuel was necessary for melting snow, brewing hot drinks, heating prepared meals frozen in plastic bags, and keeping warm. We carried food like hot omelets and ham for breakfast, and

meatloaf, veggies and potatoes for dinner. Trail lunches included nibblies such as cheese and crackers, sausages, jerky, energy bars and hot drinks to combat dehydration.

On the high ground, windswept rocks were bare. Snow collected in pockets and valley bottoms, but we frequently had to pick around stones and occasionally, right over them.

Sometimes, we followed a trail of sorts — certainly not groomed — where other sleds had gone before. The trick is knowing which previous track to follow and where to go when they are obliterated. Our guide, Tim Evic, led the way using a combination of instinct, experience and rock cairns. Called inuksuit ("ee-nook-sweet"), these often human-shaped piles denote where Inuit have traveled before. They form gateways to follow. At least, so I was informed, but I had great difficulty spotting them.

Our pace was slow and steady, just like the lifestyle. Throughout the entire journey, we rarely exceeded 30 kph, except for one exhilarating run through untracked powder where the underlying ice was unusually smooth and unbroken. Mostly, we picked our way around rocks, boulders, and ice slabs. This is not a land that snowmobilers have tamed by cutting trails where they want to go. It's a place in which snowmobilers go where the land allows.



At first, we suffered numerous delays. On nine occasions, we had to repair or adjust broken hitches or loosened ropes on the qamutiks. One snapped a wooden runner. Another fell to pieces. Each time, our cavalcade stopped, and as if by magic, the necessary tools — hammer, nails, a saw, even a cordless drill — appeared. Three sleds also ran out of gas and had to be refilled, while one suddenly burst into flames, which were quickly extinguished with snow. I began to wonder what rag-tag parade this was, but hardly any other delays occurred for the rest of the expedition.

The weather was incredible. A vast cloudless sky stretched from horizon to horizon like the inside of a startling blue bowl inverted over us. I measured its magnitude by observing the contrails of numerous jets overhead. I'd spot one far ahead, looking like it was almost at ground level. An hour later, it would still be in plain sight near the opposite hori-



zon. Conservatively assuming a flying speed of 500 mph, that's a lot of empty space between those endless vistas.

By noon, we were off the platter, following a river valley bounded by high hills. It wound towards the next major inlet north of Frobisher Bay, called Cumberland Sound, where Pangnirtung is located.

Suddenly, we crested a hill overlooking what resembled a hunt camp. Several small shack-like structures were situated amid a confusion of parked snowmobiles, sheds, fuel containers, stacks of caribou bones, a pack of sled dogs, and what looked like small missiles sticking up in the snow, as if they had been dropped by a bomber. On closer inspection, I discovered them to be frozen seal carcasses, lined up nose down and waiting for the butcher's knife. I assume they had been hunted, not dropped.

This was the permanent home of an Inuit family, who live off the land, about six hours by snowmobile from Pang. Several generations were present, although it was hard to tell who belonged to whom since the husband and wife owners also ran a halfway home for troubled juveniles. My immediate question was halfway to what? Looks like I had finally found the middle of nowhere and was about to camp there...

Fortunately, an abandoned cabin was

available, so I sacked out on a saggy, old couch. With fifteen of us milling about to prepare dinner on small camp stoves, we probably raised the inside temperature up to a balmy -25 degrees Celsius by bedtime. The cabin's central stove either didn't work or was awaiting the growth of trees. However, the place was windproof and for my money, beat sleeping in a tent.

I quickly decided that sleeping in all of

my under layers might be warm enough. Also, that the only way to stay warm when I arose in the morning, was to put all my outerwear in the bag too. Crowded, but at least my boots leveled out a few of the dips in my decrepit bed. That night a regrettable urgency sent me shivering out to relieve myself. While an incredible display of Northern Lights danced overhead, I had visions of being found in the morning, fastened to the ground by a frozen stream of urine!

Good Friday morning, we snowmobiled on to the north end of Cumberland Sound, where ice ran all the way to Pang. There are three kinds of it: pan ice, which comes and goes annually in inlets and channels; pack ice which is the near-shore broken, jumble of slabs and pieces caused by the rise and fall of the seas (this area has the second highest tides in Canada with as much as 40-foot difference in level within a 24 hour period — second only to the Bay of Fundy!); and sea ice, which is old, perennial ice that runs out to the edge of open water and rarely melts. Frankly, I only cared about one kind: solid ice!

Entering the Sound, this ant was on a white plain as far as my eye could see. The only distinguishing features were hodgepodes of pack ice around numerous islands, and what looked to be mountains far in the distance. Along the way, we stopped at a quarry where soapstone is mined for Inuit art. Great deals can be had from local craftsmen who visit Iqaluit restaurants to sell their carvings for a fraction of their eventual worth. We also visited a fishing camp. Here, hundreds of feet of line, with as many baited hooks, are lowered through large ice holes to catch turbot for sale.

By mid afternoon, we rounded a headland to a breathtaking view of the fiord where Pang is tucked into the shadow of a small mountain. With more of a shantytown feel than Iqaluit, Pang had 1,200 hardy souls. It is one of the gateways for Auyuittuq National Park, whence resides the famous moving Arctic Circle to which one must walk unarmed.

Or not go at all, which was our final



“Thirty foot ice cliffs along shorelines, where the whole ice plate had frozen into place.”

decision, motivated in part by the very comfortable Auyuittuq Lodge, and the need to replace a broken clutch before returning. With no repair shops nearby, word of our need soon spread. Next day, a resident offered a clutch from his own machine for sale. Mike and several others did the repair, even though none of them had tackled clutch replacement before.

Meanwhile, Chris, Dennis, and I crossed the fiord, guided by Mark Houser, the manager of the local Northern Store. We snowmobiled into the mountains for powder playing and hill climbing, then returned by descending a river, where glare ice covered a long stretch of frozen rapids pocked with huge boulders.

Only eleven of us headed back that Easter Sunday, since several participants either lived in Pang or had other commitments. The fair weather continued, and with a degree of familiarity in our retraced route, I felt more comfortable sight-seeing.

I saw stark white ice, sparkling crystal ice and ice coloured a deep aqua. I observed thirty foot ice cliffs along shorelines, where the whole ice plate had frozen into place, then snapped off when the tide went out from underneath. I spotted a massive chaos of broken slabs, tumbled together like smashed white porcelain. We walked a hundred yards to the floe edge, where Cumberland Sound meets the North Atlantic. Huge ice chunks bobbed lazily in waves that rolled

to the horizon. I also saw several wide-open cracks across our trail, filled with dark, cold water that flashed under my track as we skipped across.

But I never did see any wildlife. Tim asked what I thought of the caribou, fox and seals along the way. He had pointed out wolf tracks, and a little blip on the horizon he claimed was a seal, but his eyesight was better than mine. I probably wouldn't spot a polar bear until it bit me.

We made excellent time, by mid-afternoon passing back through the homestead that had been our first camp. We intended to overnight at a small warm up shelter, but when we arrived at 7 PM, wolf hunters had already occupied it. With Iqaluit less than 5 hours away, there was talk about



Where We Stayed

Navigator Inn, Iqaluit, (867) 979-6201

Auyuittuq Lodge, Pangnirtung,
(867) 473-8955

Cost

A week's excursion to the Canadian Arctic can be expensive unless you make the proper contacts, such as calling the Nunavut Snowmobile Association which may be able to help keep costs down. For example, a full fare return flight on First Air from Ottawa ran about \$2,000, but could be as low as \$700. Sled rental, gas, guide and gear from a reputable outfitter could easily run anywhere from \$1000 to \$3000 for five days, depending on your requirements. Add another \$1000 for rooms and food. But if you bargain hard for Inuit carvings, your investment in art could easily cover your costs!

Who To Contact

Nunavut Tourism, 1-866-NUNAVUT or
www.nunavuttourism.com

Nunavut Snowmobile Association,
(867) 979-2207

riding straight through on this moonlight night. Until I opened my big mouth...

I reminded Mike and Chris that camping out would make a better story. Besides, I needed more photos and hadn't yet had the privilege of spending a sub-freezing night in a tent. There I was, Mr. Non-Camper, talking my way out of a warm bed. The Arctic does strange things to a man.

Seven of us stayed; the rest, being smarter than me, headed home. We erected two small, two-man dome tents, while Tim set up a huge canvas palace with standing room, a foam floor, and room for a cooking stove. In my unheated unit, I spent that night breathing frigid air through a small opening at the top of my "Arctic" sleeping bag, trying to decide which foot would freeze first. It was a tie. And I did confirm that laying my carcass on the permafrost, protected by only an extreme sleeping bag, a thin air mattress and a caribou skin, is not high on my do-again list!

We returned to Iqaluit on Easter Monday. At our farewell dinner, two weary looking snowmobilers in full gear trudged in to talk to Mike. They had been out riding, when one of their sleds malfunctioned, so they doubled up for

home. When that sled broke down too, they walked for hours, finally making it back to town at dusk. They were lucky; a little farther away and it would have been one very cold and lonely night.

We were fortunate to ride for five days in splendid conditions, without encountering a storm. We avoided problems thanks to the professionalism and experience of my companions, who know that the Arctic is not a place to fool around or take unnecessary risks.

Mike, Dennis and I went for a final ride Tuesday morning. By that afternoon, I was stuck in the Ottawa rush hour, suffering culture shock and thinking that snowmobiling in the Arctic is unlike anything imaginable. I'll remember this tour because it was so different, so beyond the realm of my normal experience. The Arctic may not be the right choice for casual snowmobilers or those looking for a familiar snowmobiling experience on groomed trails. But for veteran riders with adventure in their blood, it's an incomparable frontier experience.

Just don't expect to see the Arctic Circle without walking. But I figure that snowmobiling within 30 clicks is close enough for bragging rights. After all, they haven't got that illusive Circle nailed down yet!