

ARCTIC ADVENTURE

In the land of the midnight sun

By Kathryn Stocks

In August, my husband and I embarked on the ultimate Canadian journey: a 16-day cruise called "Into the Northwest Passage." When we signed up for this expedition with Adventure Canada, there was an itinerary but they couldn't guarantee any of it. Wind and ice were decisive factors in where we went.

We entered the land of the midnight sun with a charter flight to Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, where 177 passengers were taken by bus and zodiac to our ship, Ocean Endeavour. We spent four days in Greenland exploring the pretty towns of Sisimiut and Qeqertarsuaq with their colourfully painted houses. We also went hiking on the tundra, saw the Ekip Sermia glacier, and marvelled at the magnificent icebergs in Disko Bay.

After two days crossing the Davis Strait, we made it to Nunavut. Our first stop there was the town of Mittimatalik (Pond Inlet) on Baffin Island. We enjoyed a tour of the town as well as a cultural presentation the Inuit residents put on, which featured men's sports, women's throat singing and children's games. Back at the ship, we could see the mountains on Bylot Island that Group of Seven artist Lawren Harris had portrayed in some of his Arctic paintings.

Our next destination was Cape Hay, which appeared to be a massive, seemingly barren cliff. It wasn't until we got close that we noticed there were thousands of nesting birds there. It was an amazing sight!

One week into our trip, it was a highlight to explore Beechey Island. Grave markers on the island show where three of Sir John Franklin's sailors were buried in 1846, the first winter his ships were stuck in ice. There is also a fourth grave for a sailor who died on one of the many expeditions that later came searching for Franklin.

Beechey Island is covered in small smooth rocks and there is no plant life at all. The heavy fog we had that day combined with the cold barren land made this an achingly bleak and lonely spot. We could only imagine what a dismal time Franklin and his men must have had there.

The next day we had to pivot from the planned itinerary to anchor in Graham Harbour on Devon Island where we waited for an oncoming storm to pass. We went ashore for a hike, which was fine until it started to sleet.

The stop after that was Port Leopold, a wide flat area with a massive cliff that had been used as a base for bowhead whaling by the Inuit for generations. It also contained an old Hudson Bay Company outpost and a rusty boiler from a ship. We hiked to the cliff and enjoyed this rare sunny day.

That afternoon, we did the polar plunge off the ship! This is when you jump into the Arctic Ocean for a quick and frigid dip. It was way more fun than we thought it would be and so exhilarating.

Two weeks into our trip, we arrived in the town of Cambridge Bay, where we were given a tour by two delightful 13-year-olds. The town had a new library, new cultural centre, and the Canadian High Arctic Research Centre or CHAR, an impressive building that incorporated Inuit culture into its design.

Two days later we reached our final destination of Kugluktuk (Coppermine) where we caught our charter flight to Yellowknife. Although buses were offered, we chose to walk to the airport from the harbour because it was a rare opportunity.

Throughout the journey, the Adventure Canada team gave dozens of talks about everything from geology, history and anthropology to birds, plants, native art and music. Their Inuit staff taught passengers a lot about the land, the wildlife and the Inuktitut language. Also on board was Aleqa Hammond, a warm and gracious former prime minister of Greenland who told fascinating stories about her life.



The Inuit members of Adventure Canada's expedition team taught passengers a lot about the land, the wildlife and the Inuktitut language.

Top: Zodiac tour of the ice floes and icebergs in Lancaster Sound, Nunavut.

Insets: Polar plunge into the Arctic Ocean near Port Leopold, Nunavut. Brrr!

Colourful homes in Sisimiut, Greenland.

Above: Our 16-day route from Kangerlussuaq in Greenland to Kugluktuk in Nunavut.

Far left: Young Inuit woman and baby in Mittimatalik, Nunavut.

Middle from left to right: Cruising down the Sondre Stromfjord in Greenland. Inuit outerwear at Kugluktuk museum. Inuit elder in Mittimatalik.

Hiking to the cliff at Port Leopold, Nunavut. Arctic terns have the longest migration of any bird as they fly from their summer breeding grounds in the Arctic to spend their winters in Antarctica.

Below left: Sunrise at 3:45 a.m. lit up the snow on the mountains in Lancaster Sound. Group of Seven artist Lawren Harris painted in this area.

Below: An old ship boiler at Port Leopold.

Bottom: Grave markers for three sailors from the Franklin expedition who were buried on Beechey Island in 1846. A fourth marker is for a sailor from one of the many expeditions that searched for Franklin later on.

