PHOTO STORY | NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR

Torngat Mountains National Park: A Treasured Gift to Canada

By **Dennis Minty** | February 09, 2021

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One of Canada's least-travelled coastlines, northern Labrador is more than just an adventurer's paradise. It is the Inuit homeland of Nunatsiavut, steeped in history, culture, geology, and wildlife. Learn why you should add the Torngats to your must-do travel list in this beautiful photo story by Dennis Minty.

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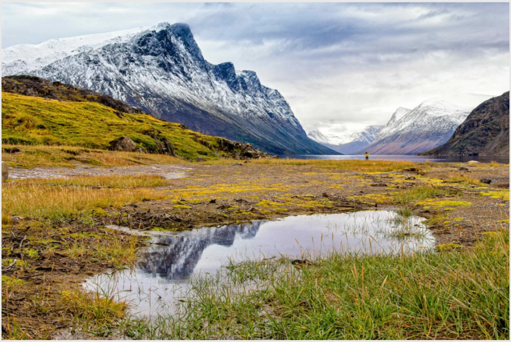
On the encircling hilltops, armed Inuit bear guards in florescent orange stand sentry while we explore the glowing land and coastline below. A radio message alerts the expedition team and the bear guards that a polar bear has been spotted swimming across the fjord towards us. In unison, the bear guards start closing the circle and herding people back to the landing site. There is no panic, just orderly movement, as two guards take up a position between the bear and the waiting Zodiacs.

© Dennis Minty

All is good—we are just giving way to the bear. After all, it belongs here. We are only transients. Everyone is safely back on the ship by the time the bear makes its landfall, and we get a chance to observe it from a safe distance. That's what expedition travel is about: immersion, respect, learning, sharing, excitement, and life-time memories.



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We are deep inside Nachvak Fjord, a finger of the sea extending far inland, surrounded by sawtooth mountains veiled in snow. Although there are green valleys between the summits, there are no foothills here—the Torngat Mountains surge up from sea level to a height of over 1600 metres.

They are the highest mountains in southern Canada east of the Rockies, yet the open sea is about forty kilometres away to the east. Whales and mountains, polar and black bears, caribou and wolves, northern lights and icebergs—all converge here within the deeply sacred heart of the Labrador Inuit homeland.

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My first visit to the Torngats was in the 1970s, when I was working for the provincial government to help identify and catalogue areas with outstanding natural value for inclusion in a provincial protected areas system for Newfoundland and Labrador. We flew north from Saglek in a helicopter over the jagged peaks, cirque basins, glaciers, and lush green valleys, landing in both Ramah Bay and Nachvak.

I thought it was the most beautiful landscape I had ever seen. I felt privileged and humbled to witness it first-hand. More than forty years later, though the province is still struggling with establishing a protected areas system, the Torngat Mountains are now protected and celebrated as a Canadian national park, and currently the only one operated exclusively by Inuit.

A Gift to Canada

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Torngat Mountains National Park came into being as part of the 2005 Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement, which established a 72,500 square kilometre region of Inuit land known as Nunatsiavut, an area roughly the size of New Brunswick. The 9,600 square kilometre national park is within this area.

The Agreement, signed by William Anderson III on behalf of Inuit living in Labrador (who call themselves Nunatsiavummiut or Labradormiut in the Inuttut language), was an historic milestone resulting from twenty-eight years of negotiation. It provided Inuit with a level of self-government, clearly defined rights, as well as governance over land, waters, and sea ice in northern Labrador.

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Inuit bear guard Maria Merkuratsuk

By establishing the park from within their territory, Nunatsiavummiut essentially made a gift of the Torngats to the rest of Canada and the world. Many see it as a portal for the better understanding of Inuit culture. Let's take a closer look at some of my favourite sites within the Park.

Eclipse Channel

© Dennis Minty

A still morning in Eclipse Channel is paradise. Here at the northerly end of the park, the mountains are a bit more subdued, more rounded, and less jagged than further south, but they will no less impress you. From here, they stretch on more than two hundred kilometres southward. Curious bearded seals break the surface of the glassy water and investigate the hubbub of Zodiacs filling with people. Those of us with the keenest of eyes (or the best binoculars) can spot the nest of a peregrine falcon on the cliffs above.

© Dennis Minty

A short ride into the sound brings you to a steep-sided incision through the rocks with a swift current flowing out, the mouth of the Eclipse River. It meanders down from higher ground near the border of Québec and Labrador to a sizeable lake on the last step above sea level. From there the mountain river tumbles down a magnificent waterfall and into a narrow channel about one kilometre long and barely wide enough for two Zodiacs to pass by one another. In a careful convoy everyone gets a breathtaking view of the boisterous falls.

Nachvak Fjord

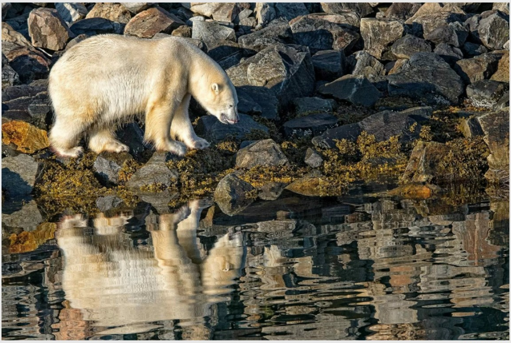
© Dennis Minty

Wildness. Power. Serenity. Humility. The breath of the Torngat spirit. That's what you feel as you sail up the long, glacially carved Nachvak Fjord. About two kilometres across and twenty kilometres long, it splits into two smaller fjords—Tasiuyak to the west and Tallek to the south. The highest peaks of the Torngats are in this area, including Mount Caubvick (1652 metres), the highest point in mainland Canada east of the Rockies.

© Dennis Minty

These cathedrals of stone create a spirited place. In fact, the word Torngat is derived from the Inuttut word *tongait*, meaning "place of spirits," where Inuit shamans travelled to connect with higher powers. It is not hard, even for a visitor, to feel the power of the place.

I once wrote in one of my books: "The transience of human life is palpable. If the mountains could talk, I'm sure that they would tell us that we humans really don't matter very much, that they will still be here in cold silence long after we have gone. But while we are here together, mountains and people, we would do well to understand the essence of this wildness, a tonic for those lucky enough to be in their midst."



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Often, we find polar bears here—hanging out, catching seals, and generally waiting for the freeze-up. In fact, locals report a general increasing trend in polar bears spotted in the area. The Torngat Mountains is one of the few places in the world where both black bears and polar bears are found in the same region.

Ramah Bay

© Dennis Minty

To land in Ramah Bay on a fine September day, when the first snows powder the peaks, has got to be one of life's finest moments. The tundra colour is simply unbelievable—we find the velvety magenta of arctic blueberry leaves, coppery orange of dwarf birch, golden yellows of willow and tamarack, and brilliant scarlet of bearberry and fireweed.

The greens of Labrador tea, some willows, and many mosses; the burgundy partridgeberries and dusty blue blueberries; and the soft swaying gold of dune grass on the flats are all punctuated by more subdued lichen-covered rock under a cerulean sky. If a painter created a palette of these colours, it would be almost too rich for the eye.

© Dennis Minty

On these colourful slopes and down through the valleys, caribou roam, black bears forage, and polar bears wait for freeze-up. Above, gyrfalcons, peregrines, and snowy owls scout for Arctic hare, ptarmigan, and lemmings. If the subarctic can feel lush, it does so here.

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In 1770 a group of Moravians based in London and led by Jens Haven, a missionary from Greenland, came to Labrador, with the sanction of the Governor of Newfoundland, Hugh Pallister, to establish missions along the coast of Labrador. Their story is a fascinating one. The remains of one of their missions, established in 1871, are found on the grassy flats of Ramah Bay near the shoreline.

Saglek Fjord

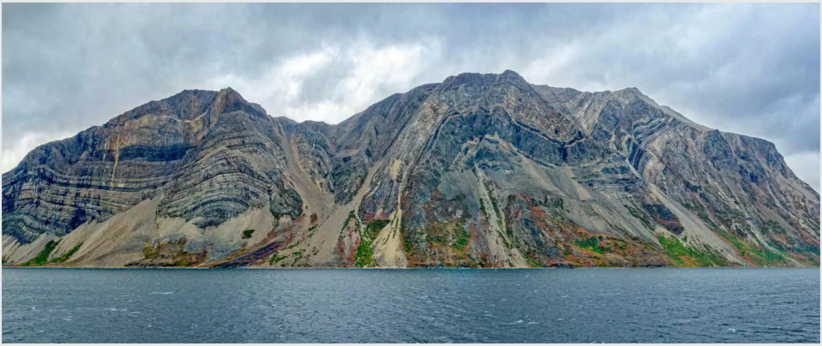
© Dennis Minty

The southern boundary of the park is at Saglek Fjord. Kangidluasuk (St. John's Harbour), on the south side of the bay outside the park, is the site of what's called Base Camp, a research station and hub for Parks Canada's visitation operations. Within the park there are no designated trails, roadways, signposts, or campsites—it is pure wilderness. Most access, whether by boat, air, or foot, begins here and, if traveling under your own power, an Inuit bear guard is recommended.

© Dennis Minty

Five sizeable islands exist near the mouth of Saglek Bay and each has important archaeological sites showing occupation as early as 4500 BCE, representing the Maritime Archaic tradition, as well as later pre-Inuit cultures. Sallikuluk (Rose Island) had more than one hundred grave sites that were excavated by Memorial University archaeologists in the 1970s.

The artifacts were removed and held by the provincial museum until 1995 when most were returned for reburial at the site. Some remains were overlooked until 2011 when, during a momentous and emotional ceremony, they were returned for reburial. Through the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement, the Nunatsiavut Government became the archaeological permitting authority in the region.



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The north side of the Saglek Fjord, with its cliffs rising to 1100 metres, looks like the spectacular work of a geological artist. This magnificently layered rockface, folded by immense pressure, is part of a geological zone known as the Ramah Group. As geologist Paul Dean explained to me, these sedimentary rocks are about 1.9 billion years old and originally formed as clean quartz sands interbedded with muddy layers in an ancient shallow sea. During the folding, the sandstones became recrystallized into quartzites, now seen in the lighter coloured layers.

These very pure quartzite rocks were ideal for stone tools made by Indigenous peoples of the region, among the most distinctive stone artifacts found in archaeological sites throughout eastern North America. The rocks underlying and adjacent to the layers of the Ramah Group are mostly unstratified gneisses, some of which are dated at 3.9 billion years old—the oldest rocks in Labrador and among the oldest rocks in North America.

© Dennis Minty

Deep in the bay is the majestic North Arm, a classic U-shaped valley carved out by the grind of a glacier that has since disappeared. At the end of the arm, a gin-clear river enters, beckoning Arctic char into their spawning grounds. An easy hike over the gravelly outwash plain takes you to a crystal finger lake that reflects the stunning colour of the surrounding slopes and peaks. A friend of mine, who was dying from cancer, chose to make this his last fishing post. Good choice.

Inuit Footprints

© Dennis Minty

Almost everywhere you can walk within the Torngats has been walked before—millennia before—by the soft-soled (and soft-souled) Inuit and their ancestors. The place of spirits might feel like a vast, empty wilderness, but it has a peopled history. The marks left are light and require a keen eye to detect—tent rings, stone fox traps and food caches, burial mounds, Thule house remains, and *inuksuit*. It may appear as one of the last untamed and unspoiled places on earth, and it is—

but more than that, it is Inuit land, part of Nunatsiavut. And it is treasured.

© Dennis Minty

Maria Merkuratsuk and Charlotte Edmunds tend to a qulliq.

Past the Torngats, the northernmost community in Labrador is Nain, over two hundred kilometres to the south. From there, many locals travel north with the seasons back into the heart of the Torngats where Inuit once lived year-round, harvesting the resources of the land and sea and warming in the evenings around the *qulliq* (seal-oil lamp).

So important is the qulliq that it is the centrepiece of every Tunngasugitsi welcoming ceremony on Adventure Canada expeditions, whereby Inuit expedition team members open their hearts, tell their stories, and embrace us—the visitors—in the hope that it will open our minds to who they are and what they value. We have so much to learn from them. Their gift is great.