

Cliffs and floes are sculpted by wind and weather at Canada's Baffin Island.

NORTH AMERICA

In an icy landscape, wild beauty and warm people



THE Arctic's allure



An Inuit sings, drums and dances in Kangaamiut, Greenland, where music's role ranges from entertainment to a tool for resolving arguments.

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Before I learn to “throat sing” with indigenous women — and before I encounter 500-year-old, scarily human-like mummies — our rubber Zodiac boat putters up to an isolated hamlet in wildly vast Greenland where we are ceremoniously greeted by a female Inuit villager with a paint-tattooed face. She wears seal fur-trimmed britches, ritualistically beats a caribou-hide drum, and asks me, “What is your animal name?” Hers, she says, is Whale.

We're in the tiny settlement of Kan-

gaamiut, a picturesque hillside of Crayola-bright cottages and 340 hardy souls who largely survive in the forbidding Arctic by hunting and fishing. On the rocky shore, two locals gorily “flense” a freshly shot ring seal, stripping its skin with a sharp knife, then removing bloody organs and piling innards alongside crimson pools of sea water. Ugh. I prefer my seals alive and frolicking. But in this harsh environment, the dead pinniped will provide dinner and clothes for families and helps explain how this resilient aboriginal culture has been able to exist for more than

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Colorful houses cling to a slope at the water's edge in Kangaamiut.

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ABOVE: A boat from an Adventure Canada cruise ship scouts sea and weather conditions ahead of a landfall.



LEFT: Arctic wildlife includes thick-billed murres, which can number in the millions on Akpatok Island.

Arctic

FROM PAGE 1

4,000 years.

Along with 170 equally curious shipmates, I experience the untamed Arctic on a 13-day Adventure Canada expedition cruise. There is a raw, desolate beauty in this extreme region of Earth, deep-frozen and with little light much of the year but in summer sprouting purple wildflowers, puffy Arctic cotton and orange lichen on moss-specked tundra. The sense of solitude is staggering. We sail during July's mild, 21-hour days of midnight sun, passing jumbo, iridescent icebergs and soaring, billion-year-old granite cliffs and rarely seeing another vessel for 1,866 nautical miles. In no-man's land, an archaeologist leads us through haunting stone ruins of ancestral camps; I keep tripping over age-old whale bones and walrus skulls.

Ice and isolation

But most unforgettable: the welcoming, hardscrabble Arctic communities so cut off from the world that residents rarely see outsiders. With no roads, visitors usually are intrepid travelers like us who arrive on inflatable rafts launched from the anchored Ocean Endeavour ship, our floating hotel with outdoor hot tub. For surreal flair, when we descend the gangplank to board Zodiac boats to get ashore, the ship's musician — a fiddler who has performed with Led Zeppelin — plays a snappy jig.

This annual "Heart of the Arctic" voyage roves from barely inhabited Greenland to Canada's northernmost and least-populated territory of Nunavut and focuses on the Inuit people and their art. (They were once known as "Eskimos"; that term is now considered offensive.) If the itinerary intrigues,



PHOTOS: NORMA MEYER —CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER

The bow of the ship is a favored vantage point for wildlife spotters.



An Inuit artist in Kangaamiut, Greenland, carves a turtle from stone.

so does our 28-member, always-educating expedition team that includes a polar adventurer, marine mammalogist, geologist, birder, Inuit TV comedy star, massage therapist and "explorers," such as colorful Jon Turk, who six years ago at age 65 made history circumnavigating a rugged island near the North Pole by skis, kayak and foot.

The Arctic's allure? "It's the space and the wildness," Turk shouts through the salty sea spray. He wrote a book about a female Siberian shaman who transformed into a black raven and helped mend his broken pelvis from a mountaineering mishap.

Animal spirit

"There's something in our DNA that's ignored in modern society. When



Mummies on display in the National Museum of Greenland in Nuuk have provided insight into the Inuits' past.

you're here it surfaces. It's like a dog going for a walk and the wolf inside of them takes over."

My canine spirit probably drools pre-embarkation, then our five-hour charter flight from Toronto touches down in a barren place called Kangerlussuaq at a small airport that was a U.S. military base during World War II. Talk about casual. Greenland immigration officers stamp our passports on the hood of their police car parked on the runway.

The Endeavour eventually stops in Nuuk, the world's northernmost capi-

tal and home to four spooky, 15th-century, must-see mummies lying in a darkened cubicle in the Greenland National Museum. These are the scientifically famous Qilakitsoq corpses, accidentally mummified by nature's sub-zero temperatures. There is a 6-month-old boy with wisps of black hair who looks freakily like a doll (he made the cover of National Geographic) and three women preserved down to their fingernails and fully dressed in furs, sealskins and feathers for the afterlife. They were among eight bodies, probably all relatives, discovered in a cave by two grouse hunters in 1972.

Back onboard and sometime between afternoon crepes suzette and wearing a horned Viking helmet (explorer theme night), we cross the Davis Strait to northern Canada. Impassable sea ice soon cancels our much-anticipated jaunt to Pang, where Inuits crochet patterned "Pang Hats." (Adventure Canada's brochure forewarns, "it is highly probable" weather conditions will alter itineraries — and they repeatedly do.) Wildlife sightings are scarce this trip, mainly penguin-like murres, although a dozen Zodiac riders spot a polar bear and cubs ashore.

Arctic artistry

On a craggy island, we visit Cape Dorset, long hailed as the "Inuit art



A 4-year-old resident of Kimmirut, a remote Inuit hamlet in Canada's Arctic.

capital" for its slew of talented soapstone carvers and printmakers who work out of rusty sheds. In a no-frills gallery, hand-honed dancing bears sell for \$400, genuine walrus penis bones for \$38.

Earlier, we hop off Zodiacs in 425-population Kimmirut — again, so remote a Twin Otter plane delivers staples and occasionally a doctor. Every kid in town seems to be lined up waiting for us, and eager to chat about sports and our cameras. Inuit women slice up a young ring seal with an ulu knife and offer pieces to gung-ho passengers; bannock, a fried flatbread, is passed out. The real action kicks off after Adventure Canada distributes jerseys, horns and polar bear mascot outfits for a lively passengers-vs.-locals soccer match in the dirt.

"I like it when people come here because there's not much to do," says

15-year-old Kooyoo. She is one of two teen-age girls who in the school gym perform Inuit throat singing, staring face-to-face holding each other's elbows and making echoing guttural sounds, like "humma humma," geese squawking and a dog panting. (This is crazily hard, I later learn while gasping during the ship's throat singing lesson taught by two Inuit women.) Originally sung as lullabies, the dauntless duets are now a competition to see who laughs first.

For hours, we interact with these hospitable Arctic strangers. When it's time to reboard the Zodiacs, a Batman-shirt-clad 12-year-old boy named Joanasie gives me a hug. "Can you put me in your backpack?" he asks.

Unexpectedly, I feel strangely emotional knowing it could be months before new visitors arrive in this formidable but heartwarming hinterland.

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