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Travel: This cruise includes exploring shipwrecks in the frozen Arctic

A trek north of the Arctic Circle includes a visit to archaeologists who are searching two 19th century ships on the ocean floor.



Towering ice looms over Zodiacs in Croker Bay during an outing along the rarely transited Northwest Passage in Canada's Arctic. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

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It may be the Arctic's greatest and most ghastly maritime mystery — two well-outfitted ships lost at sea for nearly 170 years, all 129 sailors presumed dead amid harrowing tales of cannibalism, starvation, lead poisoning and a subzero march across the bleak tundra.

Despite countless books, songs, poems, movies and an AMC TV miniseries, no one really knows what happened after Sir John Franklin infamously set sail from England in 1845 to find the coveted Northwest Passage route with the ill-fated HMS Erebus and bad-omen-named HMS Terror. The plot thickens, though, because after more than 40 search missions failed to locate the ghost ships, the Erebus was finally discovered on the ocean floor in Canada's high Arctic in 2014 and the sunken Terror nearby in 2016.

Which leads to my groundbreaking outing. This bone-chiller afternoon above the Arctic Circle, I'm Gore-Tex-garbed, super-hyped and skimming in a 10-person Zodiac raft across choppy legendary seas en route to the restricted Erebus shipwreck site where underwater archaeologists are retrieving silt-coated clues, some as personal as part of an officer's leather boot.

How did I become an eyewitness to epic polar history? By booking a 17-day Northwest Passage expedition cruise with tour operator Adventure Canada, which had an exclusive partnership with government agency Parks Canada to bring passengers to Erebus' top-secret watery grave (on orders, we turn off GPS on our phones and cameras). Adventure Canada planned to take guests here on five previous cruises over three years but impassable ice and mighty winds scrapped any attempts while at sea. In September, by Zodiacs in small groups one at a time, we're the world's first-ever tourists to make it.

The trailblazing experience is part of remarkable Arctic journey I share with 170 fellow passengers traveling 3,325 miles aboard the Ocean Endeavour through the isolated indigenous Inuit territory of Nunavut in Canada to rugged, barely populated Greenland. One morning, from our ship's deck, we watch a magnificent polar bear feasting on its fresh-killed seal atop a blood-stained ice floe.

On Zodiac rides, we're deliriously dwarfed by opaque-blue skyscraper icebergs, some resembling frosted witches' castles and humongous molar teeth. Inuit culturalists teach us about their subsistence lifestyle (be forewarned, those fuzzy polar bears are dinner and pants for them), and we drop in on tiny Inuit hamlets in this harsh extreme north. The Inuit, we learn, play a crucial role in the shipwreck saga.

By the time we layer up for our Erebus visit, I've been glued to onboard lectures and videos about the two doomed British Royal Navy vessels that carried vast provisions for its crew including 64,000 pounds of salted pork and beef, 9,400 pounds of chocolate, 3,600 gallons of high-proof booze and 200 gallons of "wine for the sick." Officials from Parks Canada — our informative shipmates for three days — put on a fascinating show-and-tell with replicas of earlier found artifacts, including the only written record from the disaster.

In 1859, a hand-scrawled note was discovered rolled in a tin cylinder on King William Island near where the Erebus and Terror had been stuck in pack ice. One message, from May 1847, said the crews had wintered at Beechey Island, that Franklin was in command and "all well." Eleven months later, Terror captain Francis Crozier ominously scribbled on the edges that Franklin and 23 others had died and that the remaining 105 men had just abandoned the ice-locked ships after 19 months, and set off on foot. Then they vaporized.

After our 20-minute Zodiac ride, we clamber up onto the Parks Canada research ship, RV David Thompson, which is home for eight divers who have as little as two days each year to comb the Franklin wrecks due to icy, perilous Mother Nature. Marine archeologist Ryan Harris points to screens showing sonar images of the well-preserved Erebus and Terror, the latter about 50 miles away and an astonishing time-capsule.

Harris explains how the submerged Terror is upright, the glass windows and wheel intact, with muskets hanging on walls, and dishes and bottles tidily sitting on shelves, all as if the vessel gently sank. "You never see that on shipwrecks anywhere. It's a breathtaking scene," he says. A robotic camera filmed 20 cabins, doors open, toilet chamber pots still next to beds. "Most tantalizing" is Crozier's desk, a thick sediment protecting tightly shut drawers that may contain charts and documents to unravel the nautical nightmare.

Our Zodiac next motors to the cramped dive barge at ground zero. Churning swells make it impossible to see the Erebus, but the long-sought polar prize hauntingly lies adorned with kelp and sea anemones just 36 feet beneath my waterproof boots. We watch mesmerized in real time on a monitor as a diver swims below us to a new discovery — a half-dozen blue willow-pattern ceramic plates neatly stacked up in a mess area as if dinner will soon be served. Later, we move into the barge's artifact lab, where latex-gloved archaeologist Brandy Lockhart unveils six just-salvaged relics from the Erebus officers' quarters, the items soaking in tubs of water draped by white wet towels for preservation. Photo-taking is prohibited, but we gaze at a black glass bottle that likely held wine; a ceramic bottle probably for ink; a glass decanter; a knob that may be a stamping seal; and the sole of a rubber boot.

"A couple years ago, we took DNA from another boot we recovered but we couldn't make a match," Lockhart says. The DNA profile was compared to existing data about the crew and descendants.

What strikes me are the dainty sugar cube tongs discovered in an officer's drawer. Juxtapose that with this: For generations, the Inuit have passed down accounts of seeing groups of gaunt frostbitten white men, some with blackened faces possibly from scurvy, trudging along even years after the ships were deserted. But Inuit testimony was scorned — particularly in 19th century Victorian England — after it recounted men devouring each other. Decades later, cannibalism was confirmed when modern-day scientists analyzed scattered skeletal remains on King William Island; knife cut marks and cracked-open bones suggested starving sailors dismembered comrades before eating them and desperately sucked out the marrow.

For more than a century, the Inuit also described the ships' present locations, although past searchers discounted the information because the vessels are much farther south than where they were stranded. Which is another mystery — were the Erebus and Terror re-manned at some point and sailed again?

The heralded discoveries have made a mark on Gjoa Haven, a struggling, remote Inuit enclave that means "place of plenty blubber" in the Inuktitut language and is the nearest settlement to the shipwrecks, about 80 miles from each.

"We are proud our people gave stories to find the ships," says Leo Uttaq, a grandfather who is carving a polar bear figurine from soapstone in his dirt yard. Two decapitated, hairy horned heads of muskox lie near his feet, the bodies' flesh already consumed by his family. Survival depends on hunting in the sea and on land — "we use every part of the animal" — especially when groceries are brought by cargo ship only once a year. (And they are pricey — in the co-op market an eight-count box of Eggo waffles costs \$6.50; a 1.5 quart of ice cream \$12.)

Earlier, on our own ship, we meet the “Guardians.” Parks Canada hired these young Gjoa Haven men to camp on shores near the wrecks and watch for looters and trespassers. Back in town, Gjoa Haven’s heritage center features a Franklin exhibit with a replica of the now-excavated bronze bell that regularly rang to signify activities aboard the Erebus. Last year, though, after a string of sudden deaths in the hamlet, residents feared underwater archaeologists were stirring up a ships’ curse and departed souls. A Gjoa Haven elder had already blessed the Erebus by sprinkling sand collected from an ancient Inuit burial site. Now the Guardians performed the same rite over the Terror.

And as Parks Canada official Tamara Tarasoff notes: “There is no evidence of human remains on the ships yet.”

Gjoa Haven, significantly, was named in 1903 by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, who spent two years there with his ship, the Gjoa, while attempting to navigate the Europe-to-Asia trade route that lethally eluded Franklin. Amundsen wisely learned survival skills from the locals (like dress warmly in caribou), before going on to become the first European to successfully cross the Northwest Passage.

Answers will come gradually for the Erebus and Terror; with just a slim weather window, it could take years to bring up and examine thousands of artifacts at the bottom of the Arctic Ocean. Since 2015, about 70 items have been retrieved, all from the Erebus.

During our own Northwest Passage journey, we stand in a moment of silence before three forlorn graves on Beechey Island, a dreary uninhabited moonscape shrouded in ghostly fog. Franklin and his ships spent the freezing winter of 1845-46 in this dinky harbor before sailing into the abyss. While here, three seamen were properly buried in mahogany caskets under wood headstones affixed with bronze plaques: one states John Torrington “departed this life” onboard the HMS Terror on New Year’s Day. He was 20. A fourth grave belongs to a sailor who perished in 1854 while looking for the lost ships.

In the 1980s, researchers exhumed the three Franklin mates — all eerily mummified by permafrost — and determined they likely died from pneumonia and tuberculosis. Tissue samples also revealed high levels of lead, bolstering another horrid theory about the missing crew — that they had been slowly poisoned by lead from the ship's canned food or water pipes and even possibly gone insane.

Further down on Beechey Island, we linger beside the decayed shambles of Northumberland House, built in 1852-53 by the British Admiralty's last search effort to find Franklin's fleet. It was a shelter, stocked with supplies, should the men ever return to Beechey Island.

Rusted food tins from the would-be rescue tell the ending. The cans are arranged in the shape of a Christian cross as a memorial on the desolate beach.

If you go

Adventure Canada sails two Northwest Passage trips in summer 2020 and, weather-permitting, is planning to visit the Erebus site. Sale prices available through Oct. 31 start at \$9,346 per person. Information: adventurecanada.com.

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