

travel

Out of the NORTHWEST PASSAGE

A true Canadian adventure

WORDS SUZANNE MORPHET

“I have a little bit of good news and some terrible news,” announces our expedition leader as we gather anxiously in the ship’s lounge. It’s only the third day of our voyage through the Northwest Passage with Adventure Canada and we don’t know what to expect. “We’ve had to cancel Gjoa Haven,” says Jason Edmunds, explaining that the 50-knot winds won’t allow us to land at one of our most highly anticipated stops. Not only is Gjoa Haven famous for its Inuit carvings, but it’s also an historic hotspot.

Along the way, we'll stop to watch polar bears playing on icefloes and get up in the middle of the night to catch the northern lights.



Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen overwintered here twice on his historic first sailing of the Northwest Passage. And it's the closest settlement to the underwater wrecks of HMS Erebus and HMS Terror from Sir John Franklin's tragic 19th-century expedition.

But in the Arctic, itineraries mean nothing.

Even in early September—the sweet spot between last year's ice melting and this year's ice forming—the weather rules.

"We can't go straight into the swells, so we're zigzagging," Jason continues, "and avoiding a lot of icebergs."

Adventure Canada's comfortable 137-metre Ocean Endeavour has an ice-strengthened hull but it's not an icebreaker.

While 153 of us groan in disappointment, one of the Inuit cultural interpreters aboard simply says "Ayurnamat. It can't be helped."

And to be honest, I wouldn't want it any other way. Part of the thrill of this voyage is precisely because it's not predictable.

Our journey begins in Kugluktuk, the westernmost community in Nunavut, where the tundra is a burnt orange and the temperature hovers just above freezing. For the next 17 days we'll push steadily northeast before sailing down the west coast of Greenland to Kangerlussuaq.

Along the way, we'll stop to watch polar bears playing on icefloes and get up in the middle of the night to catch the northern lights. We'll receive warm welcomes and curious looks when we go ashore at several Inuit communities. One night, when we pass within kilometres of Franklin's sunken ships, a few of us crawl out of bed at 3 am to go on deck and raise a toast.

When the weather turns, we lurch through hallways, sit through back-to-back lectures and eat too many cookies. Unless we're seasick, of course, and then we don't eat anything at all. For a couple nights we sleep fitfully, rolling in our beds with the waves, the clanking of metal keeping us awake.

Venturing outside one morning, I grip handrails that are sheathed in ice. For a moment it feels like I've stepped into one of those artist's renderings of a godforsaken, 19th-century expedition where the ship becomes trapped in ice.

Entering Bellot Strait at the northernmost tip of the North American continent, our ship slows to squeeze through the narrow passage. Further along, we visit Fort Ross—the last Hudson's Bay Company trading post. Built in 1937, the store and manager's house are still here, paint peeling from the walls and snow drifting across the floor and furniture.

Back on board, ice becomes an issue. Plans to anchor over-

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night in Erebus and Terror Bay off Beechey Island are scuttled. “It would be unlikely we would get trapped in there, but we’re not going to take the chance,” Jason tells us during a weather briefing, pointing to “red ice” on the latest chart, indicating a dangerous amount of year-old ice that’s moving with the wind and currents.

Instead, we anchor outside the bay and motor in by Zodiac. Trudging through the deep snow in single file, I imagine we must look a little like Franklin’s men out for a walk when they overwintered here in 1845-46. Before leaving, we pay our respects at the graves of the three who succumbed to pneumonia and tuberculosis.

Even on days when we stay aboard, our schedules are full, whether it’s listening to a lecture (“You have tears for polar bears, but walrus—they’re the ones that are really in trouble,” says naturalist George Sirk, while discussing climate change), watching a documentary (Vanishing Point by Stephen A. Smith and Julia Szucs, who are both onboard, is riveting) or curling up with a timely book (I’m savouring The Man Who Ate His Boots by Anthony Brandt).

After dinner one night, we celebrate our favourite figures in Canadian history and—to our great hilarity—Newfoundland author and crew member Michael Crummey dresses up as Margaret Atwood (who herself has been on four Adventure Canada expeditions through the Northwest Passage).

But it’s the dramatic seascapes that keep me mesmerized for hours. Crossing Baffin Bay, distant clouds and mountains cre-

ate a black-and-white tapestry and I recall another Inuktitut word we’ve been taught: Katjaarnaqtuq. It’s beautiful.

Half a dozen King Eider ducks herald our arrival at Upernavik, a town of colourful houses overlooking Davis Strait. Further south, we visit Ilulissat, where a few of us rent bikes from the ship and cycle to the Ilulissat ice fjord, the source of 90 per cent of the icebergs that travel down the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador.

“Every time I come here it blows my mind,” says David Reid, one of the ship’s crew and the last Scotsman recruited to Canada by the Hudson’s Bay Company, as we admire the slowly advancing glacier.

That evening, we cruise by Zodiac amongst the towering icebergs floating freely in the bay. We’re dwarfed by their enormous size, awed by their frozen majesty. As if on cue, three humpback whales break the surface, their noisy exhalations like misty exclamation marks.

If nothing else, this voyage has taught us “upiguhungniq,” or respect. Respect for the Arctic, its Indigenous people and our Adventure Canada crew, who guided us through one of the harshest landscapes on earth and brought us safely home.

If you go:

Adventure Canada will sail the Northwest Passage twice in 2021: August 16 to September 1 and September 1 to 17. For more information: <https://www.adventurecanada.com> 

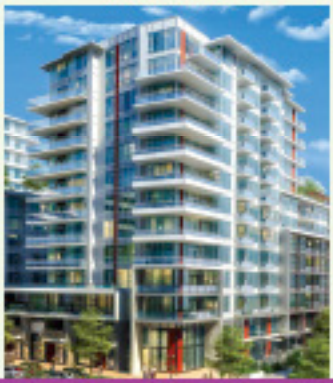
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