

# *Journey through* **THE INUIT HOMELAND**

An expedition cruise takes you to wild places and people who rarely get visitors. **JENNIFER BAIN** sails with Adventure Canada from Greenland to the Quebec Arctic, Labrador and Newfoundland

**W**HEN ELI MERKURATSUK launches into “Kimutsik,” most of his 63 years vanish and suddenly he’s a teenager again: proudly mushing a team of sled dogs through the fierce Labrador wilderness hunting for caribou and seal, sleeping in igloos and tents, sharing dried meat and fish with his Huskies, living off the land, loving his traditional life.

“Kimutsik” is the Inuktitut word for “Dog Team Song.” Eli’s weathered, working man’s hands are no longer able to play guitar so he asks Newfoundland musician Jordan Harnum to do the honour. I don’t need a translator, though, to see that Eli has been transported to his happy place, somewhere beyond the Labrador Sea, where we’re sailing aboard the Ocean Endeavour with expedition company Adventure Canada.

“Huit! Huit! Huit! Huit!

Ha’ra, ha’ra, ha’ra, ha’ra, ha’ra!

Auk! Auk! Auk! Auk!”

The euphoria is contagious as Eli sings the commands that, in practice, would make his ➤







This page,  
left to right,

Ramah Bay,  
Torngats  
National  
Park

Bear  
guard,  
Maria  
Merkuratsuk

dogs go, turn left and turn right in the soaring chorus that has made his song a cult classic in Nunatsiavut.

Nunatsiavut – “Our Beautiful Land” – is an autonomous part of Labrador and one of four Inuit regions in Canada, along with the Inuvialuit Settlement Region in the Northwest Territories and Yukon, Nunavik in Quebec and Nunavut. Together, these make Inuit Nunangat, the Inuit homeland of land, water and ice that encompasses 35 per cent of Canada’s land mass and 50 per cent of its coastline.

Travellers from Canada and beyond have joined this particular cruise to better understand Inuit culture as it plays out from Greenland, an Inuit stronghold and self-ruled Danish territory, to Nunavik and Labrador. We will be rare visitors to small communities and we will visit remote parts of the country that too few people ever get to see.

“We want you to find what you’re looking for,” expedition leader Jason Edmunds says during a safety briefing in a Toronto airport hotel the night before a charter flight to Greenland via Iqaluit. “And if we can help you find that, please come and talk to us.”

Like most of the 195 passengers, I don’t know exactly what I am looking for on the 15-day journey from remote Greenland to wild Labrador, other than the joy of taking lesser-travelled paths. Before we embark on the journey, Jason promises to keep us safe and informed. He warns us to prepare for physical and emotional challenges, and to be flexible and willing to embrace change.

We will soon find out that these requests are real.

Jason is Inuk and married to Cedar Swan, CEO of Adventure Canada, whose father co-founded the company 30 years ago. The family business specializes in Arctic travel with a focus on building community. Cedar hosts our voyage – an itinerary she calls her personal favourite

– and brings her daughters, in-laws and an astounding staff of culturalists, botanists, seabird biologists, archaeologists, scientists, students, geographers, historians, anthropologists, musicians, artists, photographers, cinematographers, health and wellness experts, Zodiac drivers and explorers.

We learn that Inuit – culturally similar people of the Arctic – number around 65,000 in Canada with more in Greenland, Alaska and Denmark.

Eli and his younger sister Maria are two of the bear monitors charged with keeping us safe from polar bears and black bears during land excursions. Maria holds nightly draws for beautiful pieces of Labradorite that she has collected at home and reveals that cruising to foreign lands is “like a dream,” asserting that her “soul heals” as we near the wilderness area where she grew up but no longer lives.

Somewhere between Quebec and Labrador, on day six of our journey, the weather turns. Facing hurricane-level winds, we must rise to Jason’s warnings about challenges as shore visits are cancelled and the captain seeks shelter behind Nunavut’s Akpatok Island, putting the ship into a holding pattern and crawling up and down a two-kilometre line in the stormy sea for 12 hours.

With expedition cruising, all itineraries are proposed itineraries.

When the Ocean Endeavour finally makes landfall, it is in and around Torngat Mountains National Park, the “Inuit gift to the people of Canada” established after Labrador and Nunavik Inuit settled land-claim agreements. Accessible only by air or sea, the park saw just 574 visitors in 2016, about half from this company and the rest through a Nunatsiavut-run base camp, plus other expedition and private vessels.



This page, top to bottom,  
Nachvak Fjord in Torngat Mountains National Park,  
Kangiqsualujjuaq artist Norman Snowball

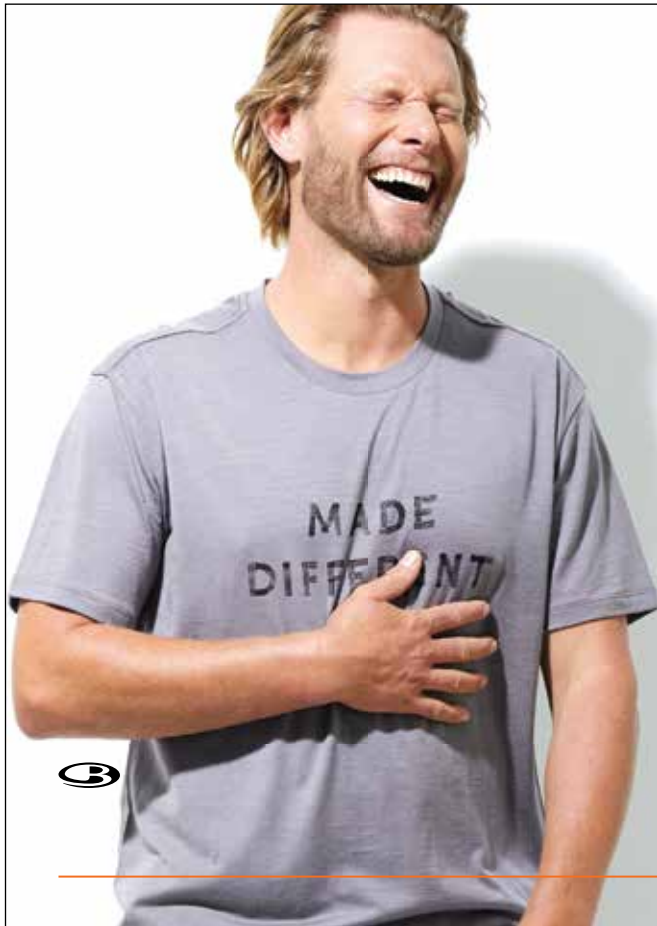
Cruising fjords, hiking, rock hounding, learning about Arctic plants and sod houses, Moravian missionaries, colonialism and forced relocations, we lose track of time during our cruise, changing time zones five times and even “holding on to an hour” as we move from Quebec to Labrador and need to delay losing an hour’s sleep. One afternoon we gather for Maria’s talk, “My journey living in Labrador.” In a deeply personal and emotional address, she shares 60 years of experiences as an Inuk woman, opening our eyes to what the universal struggles of poverty, alcoholism, abuse, divorce, education, relocation, health and employment look like in the north.

“Life is hard. Life is a struggle. Life is beautiful, especially when you are in an amazing place like this,” Maria says. “I’m doing a lot of healing here – even just talking to you.” She chokes up while praising Adventure Canada for insisting we “take care of the world” when we leave the ship to visit land.

In the Torngats and other culturally and archaeologically significant spots, we are warned not to disturb anything or even pick up rocks. We are asked to treat Inuit communities like giant living rooms, talking to people not about them, asking before taking pictures, smiling, respecting private property and never petting sled dogs.

Jason regales us with famous travel quotes during our daily wake-up calls, like “There are no foreign lands. It is the traveller only who is foreign” by Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson. But he puts it best when he says: “Just remember, the culture here may be different but it doesn’t make it any more right or wrong.” ➤

**Derrick Pottle,**  
*a hunter,  
fisher, trapper  
and carver  
from Rigolet,  
Nunatsiavut,  
proudly shares  
how he loves  
seal more than  
prime rib, and  
makes us laugh  
when he says he  
would pick  
“bad moose  
over a good  
pork chop”  
any day.*



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Greenland town of Kangaamuit

Which brings us to Ryan Merkuratsuk – Eli and Maria’s nephew and fellow bear monitor. The young, skinny hunter who loves raw food becomes our expedition’s hungry soul.

While I treasure the bannock the people of Kangiqsualujuaq make for us in Nunavik, and their dessert made of salmon roe, blackberries and whipped topping, Ryan enthuses about the smoked salmon and trout on the buffet breakfast aboard our “floating mansion” to “wherever we are going.”

After a tasting of Inuit country food (caribou, char, seal and whale) in the ship lounge one afternoon, Ryan shares how, when we first saw Greenland from the plane and marvelled at its barren but dramatic beauty, he immediately wished he could hunt reindeer there. Hunting is at the core of the traditional Inuk lifestyle.

Likewise, Derrick Pottle, a hunter, fisher, trapper and carver from Rigolet, Nunatsiavut, proudly shares how he loves seal more than prime rib, and makes us laugh when he says he would pick “bad moose over a good pork chop” any day.

I love seeing our voyage from other points of view. Like the exuberant and always grateful, Ryan reminds us: “Not every day you do stuff like travelling and making new friends.”

We are the only cruise ship to visit the 1,000 people of Kangiqsualujuaq this year. We deliver a Project North donation of new hockey gear, buy carvings directly from artists, and play floor hockey in the school gym after singing *O Canada*.

“Thank you for coming,” vice-principal Nancy Etok says as we stream out of the gym. “Now you know where we are in this corner of the world.”

Yes we do. Visits to Inuit community are my trip highlights, but Greenland’s glaciers and fjords, Newfoundland’s national parks and historic sites, polar bears, moose and the northern lights are highlights for others. Captain Donael Soto calls ours “a very unusual trip.” He’s referring to the storm that knocked us off course for multiple days, but what’s unusual to me is the chance to meet so many people who live outside the geographic and cultural comfort zone of most Canadians.

We will never forget Nain, Jason’s hometown and Nunatsiavut’s largest community with 1,100 people. We are greeted by a brass band with ties to Moravian missionaries and ushered out by minke whales when we take Zodiacs back to the ship. In between those memorable moments, we do Jason proud, wandering around town, smiling, chatting and connecting with everyone we see.

This is where we say goodbye to Ryan, Maria and Eli. It is day 11, four days before our journey ends, but their bear monitoring work is done and we are about to travel from Labrador to Newfoundland.

Eli confides that people have begged him for decades to write down his dog team song, and then translate it, so there are written, not just oral, records. He is finally ready to do this and lets me help by assembling a small team to record “Kimutsik,” go through the song line by line and wrestle with the translation, which is harder than expected because the Inuit use different dialects.

We do our best and as soon we leave remote Labrador and return to the parts of Canada where cell service is taken for granted, I e-mail the lyrics-in-progress to Ryan to pass on to Eli, grateful to be part of a new adventure for a treasured, old song and already yearning to return to the north. **CT**

## When You Go

**Adventure Canada's Greenland & Wild Labrador** expedition cruise runs once in 2019 (Sept. 18 to Oct. 2) and 2020 (Sept. 23 to Oct. 7). Cruise prices don't include flights. Trips start with a charter flight from Toronto to Greenland, and end in St. John's, Newfoundland. Adventure Canada offers water and land-based itineraries around the world. Insider tip: Greenland uses the Danish krone. Credit cards are widely accepted but have a little cash on hand. To buy from some artists in Labrador, you'll need Canadian cash.

Jennifer Bain