A Chilling Visit To Beechey Island To See The Franklin Expedition Graves

By Jennifer Ackerman
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Beechey Island, Nunavut is home to graves from Sir John Franklin's doomed Northwest Passage expedition (Jennifer Ackerman)


One of Adventure Canada's team members keeps an eye out during a foggy landing at Beechey Island. (Jennifer Ackerman)

The Zodiac transfer from the ship to the island would take less than 20 minutes with lots of stops and spring, so we each had each weather gear. But there was one catch: Instead of enjoying a chilly long walk between the graves and the ruins of a supply depot made in search of the Royal Navy's most famous explorer, Sir John Franklin, because the visibility was too low for normal tour guests to set a perimeter and keep watch over us.

Now the countdown was really on for the 129 passengers on Adventure Canada's High Arctic Explorer route. We had been stopped in the ice floes yesterday and the earlier landing had to be aborted. Beechey, my group was slated to go fifth — and not until 5 p.m. Anything could happen in the next two hours.

"We have seen polar bears from the ship, and if those bears can smell us we have to stand in the bear evacuation boat," Adventure Canada's Expedition leader John Blyth had warned. So just how thick could that if there's bear standing at those graves, I can't just scatter like a flock of birds, right? Or can I? Will I be able to run fast enough? Or, if it's extra extra foggy — so extra extra dead with no one the ship — we'll just have to wait!


A view of the Sacred Beechey Nunavut Island from a Zodiac on a foggy and blustery day in August (Jennifer Ackerman)

Beechey Island Sites National Historic Site may be a popular stop for expedition cruises that sail the Canadian Arctic every summer, but visits are never guaranteed.

The Franklin story began in May 1845 when he left England in command of the Royal Navy's most ambitious expedition ever launched to find the Northwest Passage, the fabled sea route to the Pacific through the tortured archipelago of the Canadian Arctic. Franklin and his crew of 129 men set sail in two ice-worthy ships and vanished from the human ken within the mute homeland in which now honored.

The explorers battled an stormy, bidimensional wood poisoning from improperly tinned food. Some were treated for lead contamination before they ever saw the next few years. The graves of Petty Officer John Hartnell, Royal Marine Private William Braine and Able Seaman John Hartnell were found at Beechey, where Franklin's men had overwintered on their ships.


Northumberland House was a supply depot set up to ease the Franklin expedition returned to Beechey Island (Jennifer Ackerman)

The weather held out the full day and I thought we would win more than I would have guessed. Then, around 4 p.m., the fog began to roll in. Soon we could barely see the ship from the shore. We had to cross our fingers and hope nothing would bring a real to the outings when they were in progress.

With a fancy binoculars and in ice-water boots and a good planning four-people group of 20, and get to visit each land for 30 precious minutes. We couldn't touch, move, pick up or turn over anything, or anything else. Our guides, Parks Canada staff, would be at the ground to keep us on the trail away from the rest archaeological sites.

Beechey — a peninsula connected to larger Devon Island — is mostly flat with a seashore seen limestone haunch and shale hills. When I patiently stepped on shore, I found myself in the narrow corridor over to a low pebble ridge. Puppies and Pushes Sandpiper Rumpsnail's official footed before being directed to the ruins of Northumberland House to begin the massive archaeological visit.


Archaeologist Ingrid Hodgins Spiteri provides interpretation of the ruins of Northumberland House on Beechey Island (Jennifer Ackerman)

"You're actually standing later in time," archaeologist Ingrid Hodgins Spiteri told the shore here seven years after the Franklin expeditioners were first stranded. His house was "very much a Hall Mary Ideal" in case the men somehow survived and returned.

The supply depot had stone walls and was made of wood from a wrecked whaling vessel. Now it's a pile of rubble and timbers, with a few rusty cans and bits of broken crockery. Some of the stone foundations were reused by Sadr. The party critical door of entrance for the Inuit and Europeans. It's a completely untouched staff of iron left in the house." Sadr explained. "Of course, with any human activity, there's always a bit of trash."

Sadr was trying to find out how people lived through Beechey looking for Franklin and how well they remaining to hunt for the Northwest Passage. Outside Northumberland House's crumbled walls are the remnants of a cute pet mysteriously used by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen during his exotic Arctic travels.


Parks Canada archaeologist Ingrid Hodgins Spiteri and Adventure Canada expedition leader John Blyth look for Franklin expedition artifacts on Beechey Island. (Jennifer Ackerman)

"This was definitely the hub for many a polar explorer," Baxter observed before teaming up on a stove to overlook the ruins. We passed several memorials cairns, some related to the Franklin saga and a few of the "we were here" ilk that we technically vandalism but have become part of the protected archaeology.

It was the second visit to Beechey, but admittedly I didn't fully appreciate the Franklin story the first time. Now I was able to see how history and check out the island's geology, plant life and wildlife. I was Beechey fish soil. The fact there were early hunt and Parker-hunt camp sites on a more protected bay on the island's north-western coast.

To me, this is definitely the more historical side of archaeology because we have the story" Baxter noted. "We have lots of written accounts of what happened and, of course, we have the physical evidence of what happened." Sadr's research is focused on the Inuit side of the story, how the Inuit lived and fit just through the physical remains left by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen during his Arctic travels. I could read about what were doing today almost completely today. Sir We have names and we have precise dates, so to read."

With that, she switched to "Inuit conductor" mode and went us back to the Zodiacs to just two of our archaeology outing.


A view Visitors were spotted on Beechey Island, where the Inuit hunted for the official Name of Nunavut Jennifer Ackerman)

We know that Franklin's crew entered on Beechey but became believed off they William Island the Inuit. Franklin's ships Erebus and Terror, trapped in the ice for two winters, were lost. Only the "Victory Point Note" that was left behind. The men had moved on foot and slowly died of starvation.

A flurry of search parties used Beechey as a base. Parks Canada now protects five separate sites on the island. Two of the graves were discovered in 1850 by Franklin search parties. Two more were found hacking rusty and the wrecks of HMS Breadalbane, which became trapped in the ice and was crushed in 1853 while searching for Franklin's lost expedition.

The flag was raising in and out when I got there, and through the grass, the most tangible place that Franklin built up last. The three graves are spread out in a row just steps from the ocean, beside a ridge of rock and gravel. Each is marked by a white headboard and a dead in dips during one of the dozens of expeditions to find out what happened to Franklin group.


The Lion Beechey Island, Nunavut (Jennifer Ackerman)

For Lion Beechey Island visit, Adventure Canada team were open to keep an about on foot from the Franklin graves (Jennifer Ackerman)

As with Northumberland House, the Adventure Canada team had laid down a rope to ensure we kept to the trail and didn't trample any of the fragile vegetation that's the Archaeological Society ambassador. Joseph Tree stood by to bring the same rule to life.

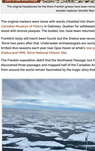
He explained that Franklin's tight-knit crew overwintered on the ships but built a storehouse, blacksmith's forge and smaller sheds on land. In spite, the bodies of the bright. Bones and framed were exhumed for autopsies that finally revealed they died of tuberculosis but also had lead poisoning. Cans had been lovingly buried, wrapped in different fabrics and tied to rot or reveal the others.


The original headboards for the Franklin graves have been replaced by replicas, but the originals are on display in the Arctic Cultural Gallery in Gjoa Haven, Nunavut (Jennifer Ackerman)

The original markers were done with woods shredded into them. Those have been moved to the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec for safekeeping and replaced with replicas made of aluminum. Each bears the name, rank, birthplace and birthdate of the man buried there.

Franklin's body still hasn't been found, but the Erebus was recovered by Parks Canada in 2014 and the Terror two years after that. Underwater archaeologists are racing to recover what they can during the summer months when the ice melts. Read what's now protected as the Wrecks of HMS Erebus and HMS Terror National Historic Site.

The Franklin expedition didn't find the Northwest Passage, but it did spark search parties that discovered three passages and mapped half of the Canadian Arctic. Nearly two centuries later, people from around the world remain fascinated by the tragic story that still hasn't been fully told.


To get to Beechey Island from Resolute the Grand Endeavour had to pass through the ice on the way to Devon Island (Jennifer Ackerman)

Beechey Island was still shrouded in fog when we left, limited and grateful for the brevity of our shore visit and the absence of polar bears. Under the unimaginable challenges that Franklin's men endured, our discomfort was fleeting and we were whisked back to our ship for a barbecue lunch (indoors) to celebrate our last full day aboard.

That afternoon, Inuit cultural educator Francis Ikuutaraq shared photos celebrating the wild beauty of Nunavut's Baffin Island, his home. Expedition leader John Blyth presented a slideshow of the Franklin expedition's team Rae Preston, who has called out to ships in the Arctic and historical shipwrecks. And what life is like for the Ocean Endeavour's multinational crew who spend most of the year steering a freight job as we be home here.

Blyth, our expedition leader, expressed relief at being able to return Beechey, knowing that Franklin's men had been there. "I'm glad we got to see it," he said, adding that he'd love to one day circle the ship around an Arctic predicted irrelevant to Canada. In the end, a decision to divide to Greenland to give the ice a chance to break up was the right call.

"It's a very special place," he said of Beechey. "I'm glad we got to experienced an ethic is in charge in the Arctic. We are seeking to share with you what we love," he said. "We are doing what nature allows us."


Officials aboard the Grand Endeavour as she ran through ice en-rout to Canadian Guard, Nunavut (Jennifer Ack

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