

**INTO THE NORTH**  
*and* **OUT OF THE**  
*NORTHWEST PASSAGE*

Storms, *swells*, snow and *ICE*  
(topped with *polar bears*) are  
all part of this **EPIC voyage**

STORY + PHOTOGRAPHY BY Barb Sligl

Iceberg at sunset, 250  
km north of the Arctic  
Circle in Ilulissat Icefjord  
in Greenland, a UNESCO  
World Heritage Site



High Arctic sunset, like a Rothko painting



Touring Ilulissat Icefjord by zodiac



Polar bear on ice floe in Prince Regent Inlet, Nunavut



Remains of a musk ox at Anderson Bay, Nunavut



Long-abandoned RCMP building at Dundas Harbour on Devon Island, Nunavut ABOVE Navigation tools on the Ocean Endeavour's bridge BELOW Inuk girl in Arctic Bay, Nunavut



Caswell Tower, Devon Island, Nunavut



The graves at Beechey Island



Somewhere above the Arctic Circle, I see a fata morgana. Low-lying, barren islands—like so many sperm whales with their broad, sloping foreheads—float above the horizon in Coronation Gulf. As if I'm a long-lost sea captain of yore, it's a glimpse of what's called a superior mirage.

In 1818, on his search for the long-sought Northwest Passage, captain John Ross's route was barred by an insurmountable range he called Croker's Mountains. Yet there was no such thing. A year later, another explorer sailed right through the same spot in Lancaster Sound, as did doomed Franklin in 1845 and then the first man to make it through the Northwest Passage in 1906, Roald Amundsen. Today, this storied route is often still blocked—by sea ice. It's what makes it one of the last untouched places on earth.

I'm on Adventure Canada's Out of the Northwest Passage voyage, and after my fata morgana sighting, I continue to see fantastical things over the next 16 days of this historic-yet-still-novel voyage. From a strip of pink on the horizon that hovers between inky sea and dark swathe of clouds like a Rothko painting to storms and swells, snow and ice—all with the seductive whisper of peril. Like in those bygone days, our progress is at the mercy of Mother Nature, but as another intrepid explorer of this land, Knud Rasmussen, wrote: *In life, as / On the water, let / The arch of the sky / And the mightiness of storms / Encompass you. / Tremble with joy!*

It's hard not to tremble at the Arctic's vast beauty laid out in such starkness. The *Ocean Endeavour* bobs like a bath toy amidst primordial elements, stuck at sea for days. We bypass Gjoa Haven, unable to land where Amundsen found sanctuary, and lurch over the wrecks of Franklin's sunken ships, the second of which, the *Terror*, was discovered just days before we embarked on this expedition. The most passionate of passengers rise at 3 am to walk the decks, some with an honorary whiskey in hand, to look out upon the unforgiving Arctic waters that swallowed Franklin's ships.

Aboard the *Ocean Endeavour*, despite cancelled landings, there's precious little downtime. Lectures, like "Ice: the Shifting Constant" are interspersed with films and readings (Margaret Atwood has graced many Adventure Canada voyages, while this expedition's author is the award-winning Michael Crummey) as well as interactive workshops or tasting Inuit "country food" like *muktuk* (whale blubber, which on this voyage is a sampling of narwhal).

It's like being in school. The Adventure Canada crew is made up of biologists, botanists, historians, archaeologists, geologists, ornithologists... I learn Inuit words (from *silarluk*, "bad weather," to *aliana*, "it's fun") and listen to serious discussions on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and climate change. It's sobering. An Inuit throat-singing demo, deep and resonant, brings tears to my eyes.

But the gravitas is offset by *aliana*. Each recap, briefing and "good morning" announcement has a heaping dose of inspirational words. One of the Adventure Canada crew, Stefan Kindberg, a veteran expedition leader hailing from Sweden (who must have Viking blood coursing through his veins) tells us to make this trip what we will—be it history chasing, wildlife viewing or finding quiet to "sit on a rock and wait for your soul to catch up."

The wildlife viewing's apex is *Ursus maritimus*, when someone spots a sea bear on an ice floe off the starboard side of the ship. One of the crew's naturalists, George Sirk, compares the polar bear's colouring to vanilla ice cream. And this dollop of cream against stark-white ice and obsidian-like water seems just as soft, almost gentle, as he meanders to-and-fro on his floe. A young male of about 800 pounds, he's robust and unperturbed by the *Ocean Endeavour*, which the captain has managed to still to a halt at dawn so most of the bleary-eyed get a chance to bundle up and grab binoculars and long lenses.

Watching the bear in the context of this harsh land only underscores the futility of trying to tame such a place. Franklin, Ross, even Amundsen... foolish. I think of a line in *North with Franklin: The Lost Journals of James Fitzjames*, a fictionalized account of the ill-fated trip that I've borrowed from the onboard library: "Perhaps there are places where no man is meant to go." And yet this expedition follows in their footsteps. We're another group of interlopers. Place after place—the abandoned Hudson Bay Company's outpost at Fort Ross on Somerset Island, the long-gone RCMP station at Dundas Harbour on Devon Island, the haunting graves of Franklin's men at Beechey Island—is a blemish left behind by those who didn't belong. Only the Inuit have lived here in concert with the bear, for thousands of years and still now in hardscrabble Arctic Bay, our only stop at a

**IF YOU GO**

Adventure Canada is one of only a few operators that offer expeditions in the Canadian High Arctic and beyond. There is a narrow, four-week window in which ice-strengthened ships like the *Ocean Endeavour* can sail through the Northwest Passage. Next year, Adventure Canada has two such expeditions, **Into the Northwest Passage, sailing west from Greenland to Nunavut (August 22 to September 7, 2017), followed by Out of the Northwest Passage, travelling back east (September 7 to 23, 2017).**  
[adventurecanada.com](http://adventurecanada.com)

Canadian community in the High Arctic.

And then, just as I've become attached to the moodiness of the Canadian Arctic, we cross Baffin Bay for Grønland—and its big, bright icebergs. The first ones I spot are as magical as the bear. Living things—shifting, shedding, disappearing—the crenellated monoliths of ice are beautiful to behold. In Karrat Fjord we pass a limitless variety of giant shards, all calved off glaciers stretching out from Greenland's massive ice cap. I snap photo after photo but it's pointless, for each berg is a wholly new wonder, like trying to capture a snowflake. After not being able to land due to thick fog hanging between ice-bedazzled sea and towering mountains (for Greenland is like a lacy fringe of jagged peaks wrapped around its icy core), the ship turns around to continue south.

We circumnavigate a city-block-sized iceberg and the scenery gets more and more dramatic. The culmination is in Ilulissat at the mouth of a 56-km ice fjord into which icebergs calve from the most productive glacier in the northern hemisphere—some bergs the height of the Empire State Building and size of Prince Edward Island. "Ilulissat" means icebergs in Greenlandic, and this UNESCO World Heritage Site, which produces enough ice in one day to provide New York City with drinking water for an entire year, is a frozen wonderland.

Ironically, we end our expedition where most of those polar explorers started in search of the Northwest Passage. It's a surreal bit of backward reel, starting from the jewel-toned tundra and whale-like rock formations of western Nunavut, through the rocky archipelago of islands named for erstwhile men and their brethren (Prince of Wales, King William, Somerset and even Boothia, named for Booth's Gin, the sponsor of Ross's long-ago voyage) to the cliffs of Devon and Baffin Islands and then, on the other side of Baffin Bay and Davis Strait, the jagged coastline of Grønland and its fairytale-like icebergs.

In Ilulissat I look for a tupilak, a totemic carving of avenging creatures once used by shamans. Small, fitting in the palm of my hand and made of caribou antler, this piece of Inuit art is both exotic and somehow utterly familiar. I think of a passenger's comment overheard on the top deck shortly after the Greenland coast first came into sight: "This is the most savage land I've ever seen." Yes, savage. And *katjaarnaqtuq*. "It's beautiful." A savage beauty that few witness. Once witnessed, much like this mercurial land itself, something shifts inside. I grasp my tupilak and wait for my soul to catch up. ●



THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Colourful houses of Upernavik, Greenland; *Ocean Endeavour*, moored off Beechey Island in Nunavut; a Greenlandic Inuk woman in traditional dress; Arctic fox tracks on an uninhabited beach on Greenland's northwest coast. OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: The last Hudson's Bay Company outpost at Fort Ross in Nunavut; a tupilak; icebergs and mountains near the mouth of Karrat Fjord, Greenland; one of Adventure Canada's young Inuk mentees, Taya Tootoo

