

living and travelling with the inuit

Story & Photos: David F. Pelly

The temperature outside our iglu is -35 C. Howling winds and swirling snow have reduced visibility to just a few paces. We are over 100 km from the settlement of Baker Lake, in the Northwest Territories, travelling across the barren lands in mid-April to check Tularialik's traps for fox pelts. A sudden blizzard has trapped us in the iglu.

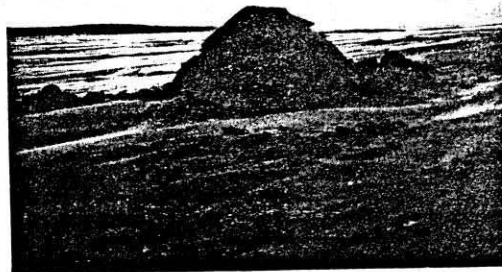
Seated on a bed of caribou skins, my Inuk friend's grinning face exuding confidence through the cold, steamy air, clad warmly in bulky caribou parka and oversized kamiks (muk-luks), I am comfortable - surprisingly so, I feel - as I fondle the warm mug of tea just made from a melted block of the river upon which our shelter sits.

The next morning the storm abates. We emerge to see the snow sparkling under a clear blue sky, an endless tract of whiteness, the most pristine wilderness I've ever seen. The skidoos are exhumed from beneath the drifted snow. Our trip continues, as if the storm was only a short coffee-break.

The scene shifts. I have returned to Baker Lake, to renew friendships, to see the mysterious barren lands in another season. The summer has just passed. Birds are winging southward. The tundra sports a profusion of autumn colours. No trees, but every lichen turns a different shade. Caribou gather for the winter migration. The wilderness has a new face.

The Inuit family around me has left the "civilised" comforts of its settlement home to go out on the land in search of their primary sustenance: caribou meat. Upon the first kill, we feast. Boiled ribs with intestine garnish, leg-bone marrow, raw meat cut from the tender flank. Tomorrow is another day, a time for serious hunting, to gather provisions enough for the weeks and months ahead. Tonight we celebrate.

I hear stories of the old days, before contact with white man, of famous hunters, of lean years. I listen. I learn. I marvel. This is a people with pride and tradition as I've never known.



Travelling the barrens with the Baker Lake Inuit has opened a new world to me. A world where man lives in harmony with nature. The vast stretch of unpeopled, treeless territory west of Hudson Bay is not an inhospitable wilderness. It is a beautiful place. Where you can sit in a meadow filled with dozens of wildflowers. Where countless birds migrate every summer. Where the fishing, for giant lake trout and arctic char, is unsurpassed. Where the sunsets and midnight twilight create a beauty you can never describe to anyone back home. Where caribou roam in mighty herds. It is a land of tradition and legends. The tundra today is still home for the Inuit of Baker Lake.

Just a few years ago these people eked out their isolated lives alone in the barrens. Only the occasional hardy explorer or missionary came in contact with them. Today the hunters of Baker Lake remember their youth in that past era, though they participate in the social and commercial reality that is Canada today. But they are a unique generation: born and raised in traditional camps, yet socialised and at ease in our technological world. That combination will never be repeated.

For me, living and travelling in their way, on their land, was simply the experience of a lifetime.



For anyone interested in travelling the arctic barrens with the Inuit, Tularialik of Baker Lake runs an outfitting and guiding service that offers trips of one week or more "out on the land". Groups of at most four participants travel with an Inuk guide by freighter canoe or skidoo and qamatik, depending upon the season, and experience the traditional life of an Inuit camp. Your guide will provide food and shelter, and will open the door for you to discover the culture and the traditional lifestyle of the Inuit.

For a detailed brochure describing these unique arctic trips contact:

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