

on the kind of challenging solo trips that George Luste, Gail Ferris, Herb Pohl, and Victoria Jason do, and this looked like a good place to make a beginner's solo Arctic journey.

Why travel alone? When alone you tend to see more of the land: your interactions with the land are not diluted by your interactions with others in your group. Actually, one of the things I like about travelling with a group is sharing your thoughts and life experiences. But then you keep finding that while you are physically travelling through the wilderness you are often mentally back home in our human-dominated environment.

When alone, wildlife is more approachable, and you're more approachable. It's easier to leave more of your society and culture behind which makes it easier to learn from the native people you meet along the way. With a group, conversations between us southerners tends to impose more of our culture into the interactions. And the hope of visiting with the Inuvait was one of my motivations for taking this trip.

So in mid-July 1995 I flew from Toronto to Inuvik with my packs and my folding kayak. I had called the airline company to find out what the excess baggage fee would be for my third pack and described the dimensions of the bag holding the kayak frame. The helpful airline person said: "Too bad it's not two feet longer, because then it would travel for free as a ski bag." I immediately got out my sewing machine and lengthened the bag by two feet and thus managed to fit all my gear for five weeks, including my 17-foot tandem kayak, into the standard airline baggage allowance.

My hope was to spend the next two weeks paddling to Tuktoyaktuk and to then join my friends for the Snake River trip. I still hadn't made the final decision on whether I was experienced enough for the Tuk trip, and was planning on using any advice I could get about the coast from the locals to make that decision. I still had unanswered questions about surf, coastal elevations, freshwater, tides, currents, and polar bears. I figured that if I decided against the Tuk trip I could easily entertain myself for two weeks paddling around the Inuvik area.

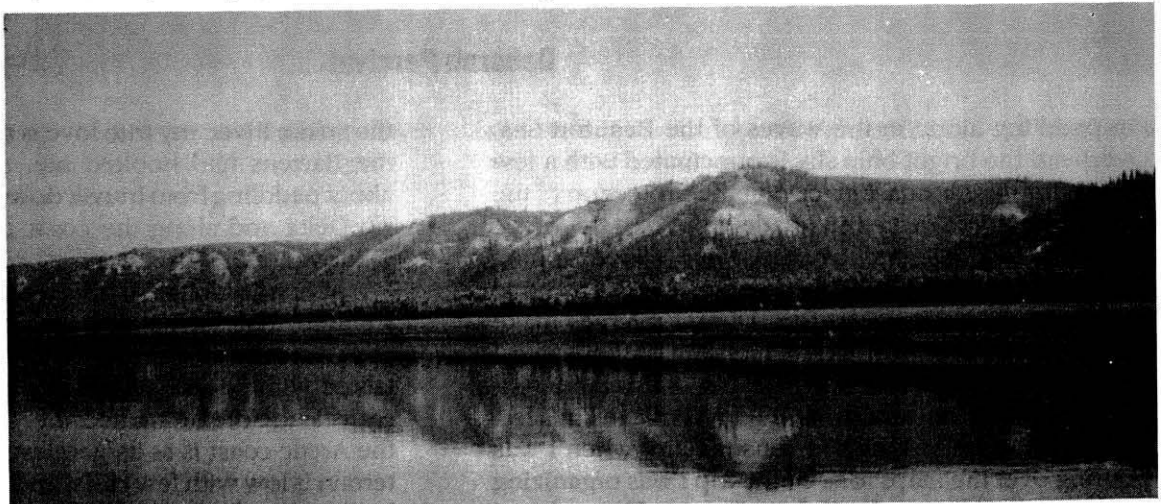
I started getting advice before I even got off the plane. When I was talking with a couple heading for a trip on the Horton River, their obvious advice for me came concealed as

a question: "Won't you be afraid being out for two whole weeks all by yourself?" The answer I gave was that my one-week solo trips had never seemed long enough. I wish I had thought to answer with a quote from my favorite polar writer, Apsley Cherry-Gerard: "If you are a brave man you will do nothing; if you are fearful you may do much, for none but cowards have need to prove their bravery."

In Inuvik I quickly got lots of useful advice. The taxi driver told me I would have to get up at three in the morning to see the midnight sun as sun time is three hours off from white-man's time up here. (If you look at a globe, you'll see that Inuvik is actually above a spot fairly far out into the Pacific.) From the Gwitch'n Tribal Office I got permission to travel their lands.

An Inuvait elder spent an afternoon with me pouring over maps of the coast while telling me tales from her childhood about going whale hunting with her family. She pointed out a protected inland route to use to avoid rounding a rough exposed headland. She told me about water so shallow that you have to pull up the "kicker" way offshore when you come in to land. She recalled the abundance of driftwood for fires, and showed me several good spots to get freshwater. She indicated the locations of whale camps I would be passing and told me to stop at them even if there was no one there and to wait for the occupants to return from their whale hunt, as the people would want to visit with me. All of the information indicated a doable trip, so I registered with the RCMP and set off.

I was camped just a kilometre from the Mackenzie River, so it was an easy initial portage; actually a very easy portage since I took a taxi to the mud beach which serves as the public boat launch. I gathered the usual interested crowd of young and old as I assembled my folding kayak. But Inuvik's crowd was a little different from the ones that have watched me down south since it included some boys who had just finished making a seal-skin-covered kayak and they were eager to compare my aluminum frame structure to their wooden one.



*Caribou Hills bordering East Channel*