



Sport: Going with the Floe

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The ceiling of dense, blue sea ice above us covers water that is a bone-chilling 28 degrees, and the end of the 60-foot yellow rope that connects my dive guide, Graham Dickson, and me to the surface has disappeared in the distance. Under the 4-foot-thick ice, the water of Lancaster Sound, off the north shore of Canada's Baffin Island, is alive with pulsating jellyfish and shimmering ctenophores. Swimming in a wide arc, we pass alongside stalactites of ice that are as clear as Waterford crystal. It is midnight, and I feel certain that we are the only humans in the Arctic Ocean.

Dickson, a University of Pennsylvania graduate with a degree in mechanical engineering and economics, has led diving groups in search of sharks in Australia and through caves in Mexico. In 1999 he founded Arctic Kingdom Marine Expeditions, an outfitting company that leads two- and three-week trips to this final frontier of diving. The expeditions take place in the late spring and early summer, when the sun never sets and the air temperature is at about the freezing level (and before the ice begins to break up and release algae that reduces underwater visibility to 10 or 20 feet). The first of this year's three expeditions begins May 28, and the last begins June 18. Each trip is limited to eight participants.

Our adventure began at the tiny Inuit settlement of Arctic Bay, where we packed enough food (the Arctic Kingdom staff includes a chef) and gear (heated single- and double-occupancy tents, a hot-water shower, diving equipment) for two weeks before traveling for 12 hours in a *quamotoiq* (a large wooden sled) dragged by a snowmobile along the icy causeway of the Admiralty Inlet to the floe edge, where the solid ice ends and the ocean begins.

While diving, we wear sealed dry suits rather than wet suits to better cope with the cold water. Three-fingered gloves provide better warmth than the standard five, and special regulators prevent the oxygen lines from freezing. For safety purposes, we are tethered to the surface.

These waters are home to beluga whales, narwhals, bowhead whales, walrus, and Greenland sharks, a rare species that we encounter during one of our dives. Capable of reaching 9 feet in length, the Greenland can be as imposing as a great white shark, but it is characteristically slow and lethargic, and this particular

specimen is nearly blind from parasites that have attached themselves to its eyes. It is difficult to imagine such a creature attacking a caribou as it drinks at a river mouth, as reports from Baffin Island have suggested.

The adventure involves more than diving. We spend one afternoon climbing grounded icebergs that had drifted south during the previous summer, and on windless evenings we kayak into Lancaster Sound, where the air and water are so still that you can hear your heart beat.

A return home from the Arctic Bay expedition may be followed by a period of reacclimation to the more mundane surroundings. I know that when I got back to northern California, I found that the night was too dark to sleep and the ocean was too warm to dive.

