



Pack ice breaks off from the Arctic floe edge in Canada's Lancaster Sound.

*land
of the*
MIDNIGHT SUN

In Canada's high Arctic, you'll see seals and polar bears, but even 24 hours of daylight on the ice-floe edge might not be enough to photograph the elusive narwhal

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY TODD MINTZ

Despite three layers of thermal underwear beneath my drysuit and an extra pair of warm socks, I'm shivering as I sit at the edge of a small hole in the ice.

I'm about to make my first dive under an iceberg, and this hole is part of a long crack in the spring ice-floe edge, which is just now beginning to slowly break up here in Lancaster Sound in the Canadian high Arctic.

Our dive guide, Mike, clips a bailout tank to the lower side rings of my BC as a precaution in case my main regulator freezes up. He then clips me on and locks me into a safety line, which he will tend to at the surface to ensure that I can find my way back to the entrance if any problems occur.

I slide off the ice shelf into the water and signal to my dive buddy, Joe, that I'm ready to descend. We drop through a hazy halocline, with reduced visibility for the first 6 feet, which opens up to a spectacular view. The iceberg's base is rounded, with a dimpled surface similar to a golf ball. Crystals within sparkle like embedded diamonds; I swim up to the iceberg and touch the smooth, slippery ice.

We're shallow enough that rays of light work their way down through the small cracks in the ice, gently lighting our way. Down below it's a much different story — from my vantage point, the water is almost pitch-black.

I swim around the base of the iceberg — marveling at its underwater texture

and the various jellyfish that float past me, wondering if I'll find a seal around the next curve — all the while thankful for the safety line clipped to my BC and Mike at the other end. Though Arctic waters seem calm above water, they're subject to tides and currents just like warm-water dives. Fortunately, the currents seem negligible, yet as I turn back I'm confronted with another challenge: The breathing in my reg changes, with the airflow slowly increasing to a persistent hiss. I've done many dives in cold water and am well aware my first stage is beginning to freeze open. Disappointed that I'll have to turn back, I click off a final image and head for the exit.

Images of the iceberg weren't what I'd come here for, but the dive was a great diversion from my quest to photograph a mystical creature in an unforgiving environment. In elementary school, I'd read Farley Mowat's *Never Cry Wolf*, which details his trek to northern Canada in search of wolves. This remote, unknown land to the north captivated me — I would visualize the unique terrain he portrayed in his story, and ever since have maintained a fascination for the Arctic.

Years later, while flipping through the pages of a magazine, I saw images

of a tusked whale: a narwhal whale. The narwhal possesses a tusk — really a tooth that has broken through the skin of the whale — for which it is often called the “unicorn of the sea.” This cigar-shaped body and unicorn-like head gripped my imagination like nothing since Mowat's novel. I had to get up to the Arctic. I had to photograph this whale.

In Search of the Unicorn

Every spring, life congregates on the floe edge, where open ocean meets ice. I traveled up to Canada's high Arctic in hopes of swimming with the narwhal found only in these frigid waters.

I arrive in the belly of a twin-prop plane and immediately know I'm in for an adventure. From that dirt-gravel runway in Pond Inlet on Baffin Island, Nunavut, we make our way to the floe edge across the Pond Inlet ice on Inuit *komatiks* — traditional sleds — pulled behind snowmobiles, our guides always on the lookout for thin, weak ice and cracks that might have formed in the surface. Seated on the komatik, I'm largely sheltered from the wind coming at us from the front but exposed to its freezing grip from the sides. At times, the bone-chilling winds even push the komatik sideways.



What It Takes >>

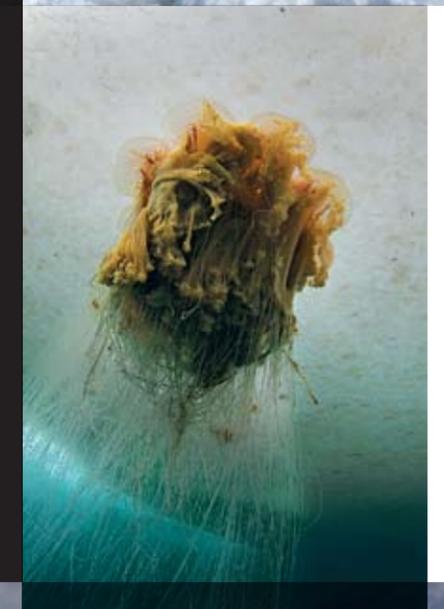
Along with an adventurous spirit and willingness to get away from it all — this is the high Arctic and so incredibly remote — it's strongly recommended you have certification and experience in ice diving prior to joining the trip. Familiarity with bailout tanks and line use can help to increase your comfort in the water.

Since water temperatures hover around freezing, it's a good idea to bring environmentally sealed regulators that are rated for ice diving. Redundant gear configurations are also required. This is also drysuit diving, and you should be competent using yours — with no

visible bottom, this is considered open water, and you need to be competent in your buoyancy.

Topside, you'll need to layer with quality merino-wool underwear (multiple pairs to allow the moisture from the day to evaporate) combined with proper wool socks. These complement well with expedition-rated jackets, pants and boots.

Strong SPF sunscreen and polarized sunglasses are recommended, as the sun is impossibly bright and the snow reflective. A pair of snow goggles can also make the treks by komatik more pleasant by cutting down on wind in your eyes.



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Need to Know

Getting There

Fly from Ottawa to Iqaluit, Nunavut, on Baffin Island, then catch a smaller flight to Pond Inlet. From there you will reach the floe edge on an Inuit komatik.

When to Go The best time is in June when the ice begins to slowly break up, allowing the narwhals to make their way to the floe edge.

Diving Conditions Though the water

is a frigid 29 degrees F, the visibility is 80 feet.

Operator/ Accommodations Arctic Kingdom (arctickingdom.com) supplies the technical logistics, gear and

experienced Inuit guides. If you don't want to buy Arctic-rated dive and land gear, you can rent it. Accommodations in Ottawa and Pond Inlet are included in the price of the

expedition. On the floe edge, you'll be staying in Arctic-rated tents with cots, an air mattress and an Arctic-rated sleeping bag. **Price Tag** The price of an expedition is

\$900 per day on the floe edge, and includes accommodations, meals, bailout safety tank, unlimited diving during the day and daily sorties to view the wildlife.



Clockwise from top: Staying vigilant at the floe edge; at midnight, a narwhal descends; male polar bear, 2 a.m.



The guides are on the lookout for spots to camp that are close to the floe edge, strong enough to withstand multiple trips and known areas where Arctic char pass on their way to inland areas. Narwhals are drawn to the floe edge in search of char, similar to salmon; the narwhals dive deep under the spring ice-floe edge in search of char, and so the floe edge is often a flurry of activity. Thick-billed murres dive below the surface searching for tiny fish sheltered under the ice. Jellyfish of varying sizes and types drift by in the currents, and flocks of eider ducks fly past in perfect formation. On occasion, a ringed seal lifts its head out of the water to see the icy intruders, and we're lucky



enough to spot a larger bearded seal — but never the focus of this expedition: The elusive narwhal.

We establish new base camps regularly throughout the week, not just to give us a better chance at finding our quarry, but because it is spring and the ice is beginning to break up, and large pieces of the floe edge are susceptible to breaking off at any time. It's disconcerting, considering we're camped in tents on this very same ice. Moving camp proves to be tiring, but the alternative

— floating out to sea on a piece of ice in freezing water, waiting to be rescued — is unthinkable.

On one of these late-day repositions, I find myself sitting at the floe edge after a late dinner. The wind has finally settled and the ocean is flat clam. The currents have pushed the pack ice out, giving us a nice, clean floe-edge line — good conditions for narwhals, according to our Inuit guide, Billy.

Our remote position brings amazing quiet as the winds settle, but this silence is broken by a distinct exhale of air. "Narwhal!" I shout instinctively to the group, as I jump behind my camera, which I have religiously set up on a tripod each day, settings and equipment double- and triple-checked seemingly every hour. On this night the light is low in the sky, and it's magical as it gently touches the water. I recall Billy's words of advice: "The narwhal will take three breaths before its lengthy dive in search of the char." I've been dreaming of this opportunity for years, and here it is right in front of me.

The narwhal appears to be resting at the surface like a free diver readying for a world-record attempt. I can see it filling its lungs with air each time as its body slowly rises in the water. Then it happens: The whale takes a final, deliberate breath

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and the tail slowly rolls and rises into the air, water cascading off its smooth fin as the whale dives. My camera's motor purrs as it fires off shot after shot. I pump my fist in joy, knowing I've just captured one of the images I'd hoped for when I planned this expedition months ago.

As satisfying as the encounter is, I don't have my underwater image. So the next day, I pass up a dive farther from camp in order to sit at this same spot and watch for the narwhal. I sit at the floe edge fully geared in my drysuit, fins, mask and snorkel — my camera inside its housing, resting in the snow at my side — hoping for an opportunity to snorkel with my unicorn.

After a few hours of sitting in the small foldout chair, my patience is rewarded. Another lone narwhal — maybe the same one as the day before — approaches the floe edge. It's so close, I feel as though I can almost reach out and touch it. Toes and fingers frozen due to the inactivity, I quietly slip into the water and snorkel toward it, lifting my head out of the water to track its progress.

I swim to within 30 feet, checking and rechecking my settings, almost holding my breath so as not to spook the large mammal. I lift my head once more to check its progress, but don't see it on the surface. Frantically, I start kicking toward its last position, keeping my eyes peeled in the dark gloom below. But it's gone, and so with it the perfect image that has eluded me.

My failure to capture that perfect shot of the narwhal doesn't mean the trip isn't a success. I've shot topside images of narwhals and polar bears; I've spent hours stalking the narwhal and enjoyed one of my most memorable dives under an iceberg. And when I think about not getting the elusive shot, a thought crosses my mind: Clearly this gives me a reason to return.

Tips for Imaging in the Arctic

1 Dry gloves Arctic water temperatures are below freezing, so be familiar with your camera settings. Dry gloves are encouraged but will provide some obstacles to manipulating your camera functions — practice changing settings before the trip.



2 High Dynamic Range The deep, open Arctic ocean turns black quickly. Combine the black depths with the crisp, white floe-edge ice, and you're pushing your camera's limits. Remember to use your ISO to accommodate the dark depths but be careful not to overexpose highlights. Highlight readings can be 1 to 1 1/3 stops high due to the white of the ice.

3 Strobes While most of your shooting doesn't require strobe light, remember to carry strobes for the jellyfish, which can add a nice foreground subject. A touch of strobe light can bring out the amazing colors.

4 Split shots Split shots can provide an incredible look into this unique environment. Larger domes can make this easier, allowing for a greater range of view.

5 Batteries Because Arctic salt water is below freezing, it drains batteries at a much faster rate. Monitor your batteries, which can drain even from sitting on the ice edge in the cold (not to mention being in cold water). Charge them much more regularly.



Todd Mintz is a multi-award-winning photographer with work featured in the Smithsonian Natural History Museum. He is also a senior moderator on wetpixel.com, an underwater photography resource and community. More of his work can be found at tmintz.com and pbase.com/yahsemtough.



Want the Complete Package? For an Arctic expedition, consider using the Aquatica A7D housing with the 9.5-inch glass Megadome. The massive dome and optics are optimal for Arctic split shots, and the HD video capability of this camera allows you the opportunity to switch to video should you want to capture a moving record of the experiences above or below the surface. Pressure tested to 300 feet, Aquatica housings can also withstand the rigors of the cold Canadian Arctic. The Inon strobes are compact and provide enough punch to light any foreground subject but don't add too much to the weight of the rig. **SD**