

Arctic Fever

BY LIZ FLEMING

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There are moments in your life when you realize just how tiny your role is in Nature's grand scheme. It was in the vast expanse of the Canadian Arctic that I realized my own insignificance.

As a gargantuan breath filled the icy landscape and vibrated in our chests, our kayak group was stunned into awed silence. Water dripping from our paddles, we watched as a bowhead whale surfaced on the Baffin Island floe edge. Silent, we drifted in his gigantic wake.

It was a life-altering moment - exactly what we'd come so far to experience. Flights to Pond Inlet, Nunavut, from points as distant as Singapore, Melbourne, Seattle, Berlin, Calgary, Edmonton and Toronto had been followed by hours loading gear and provisions onto snowmobiles and komatiks (wooden trailers on skis). A seven-hour trek still further north lay between us and our base camp on the sea ice where icebergs towered and the sun never set.

Arctic Kingdom, a tour operator specializing in the remote north, had promised to show us the "real arctic for real travelers" and we were vibrating with excitement and anticipation. We wouldn't be disappointed. Our week-long safari to Sirmilik National Park challenged and changed us in ways we'd never expected.

We connected first in the Iqaluit airport, grinning with anticipation, lugging bulging duffel bags and wearing more down than the average goose. The plane we boarded felt too small to contain our excitement as we peered out at the frozen tundra.

Landing in Pond Inlet, we met head guide Mike Beedell, a bearded bundle of energy who cracked jokes, broke into sixties songs and told mind-boggling anecdotes about his decades of Arctic travel. "We're all looking for some magic in our lives," said Beedell, an acclaimed photographer, author and ultimate grownup's camp counselor. "This is where you're going to find it."

Tom Lennartz, tall and tanned from weeks on the ice, was both an Arctic SCUBA expert and our Arctic Kingdom expedition director. As he ran through the orientation checklist, Lennartz laughed at our sweaty tour group.

"You're hot now," he said, watching us peel off the layers of Canada Goose expedition-style coats, pants and mitts he'd provided. "But believe me, you'll need every bit of that gear when we're heading out to camp."

He was right. Next morning, when the skidoo engines revved and the komatiks pounded over the ice like a wagon train on crack, raw bursts of wind and sleet slapped our faces. We clung

to coolers and duffel bags, pulled our hoods tight, and burrowed gratefully into those bulky coats.

Komatiks have long wooden runners that allow them to glide safely over even the widest ice cracks, but snowmobiles are too short. At each gap, guides shoved the komatiks across, then, like mad acrobats, they gunned their machines and leapt across. We held our collective breath, but the imperturbable Inuit didn't blink.

After hours of leaps, laughter and tea-and-pee breaks, we arrived at our camp, an improbably tiny cluster of yellow and white tents in a vast, glittering ice field.

Though I'd been expecting the most basic accommodation, Arctic Kingdom surprisingly provided all the amenities of a good hotel. Warmed by kerosene heaters, we ate gourmet meals, slept in beds with fine linens and enjoyed hot showers and toilets that flushed. True glamping - and all without eco-guilt. The company buys and hires locally, creates as little waste as possible and packs out every speck, leaving the landscape pristine.

If the accommodation was a shock, the radical swings in temperature were even more so. At times, brisk winds shook the sides of our tents - then seemingly moments later - we were enveloped in thick mist that wrapped around the icebergs, followed by sunshine so warm we stripped down and posed for our own Sports Illustrated-style swimsuit shoot.

Whatever the weather, the shimmering world at the water's edge was ours to explore with Beedell, Lennartz and our Inuit guides. We wrestled into dry suits, grabbed snorkeling gear and climbed into inflatable kayaks to meet the wild, face-to-face. Grayish-brown narwals surfaced beside our kayaks, their long unicorn-like horns just breaking the surface. Below us, eerily white beluga whales rose like massive clouds. We shivered in chilly water, watched silently as polar bears watched us, tasted sharp air, felt the sun's warmth on our faces and listened to an undersea symphony of seals, walruses and whales playing on the headsets of a hydrophone slipped deep below the surface.

Arctic fever set in and the long hours at the floe edge soon weren't enough. After dinner, the tireless Beedell and Lennartz hiked with us through towering icebergs, laughed, tossed snowballs, jumped from ice ledges and played with us in the midnight sun. Nights and days blurred and sleep became difficult, not because we weren't tired but because we couldn't bring ourselves to go to bed until we were completely exhausted. We didn't want to miss a moment of our love affair with the north. As Beedell had promised, we'd found our magic in the stunning beauty of the high Arctic.