

CALLS FROM THE WILD

BY GREGORY B. GALLAGHER



PASSIONATE TRAVELLERS READING THIS ARE LIKELY FAMILIAR WITH THE PLEASURE OF DAYDREAMING ABOUT THEIR “BIG TRIP,” WHETHER IT BE AN AFRICAN SAFARI, A TREK ACROSS THE ANDES OR A WORLD CRUISE.

What never seems to be on this agenda for Canadians is exploring our own northern landscapes, such as Nunavut, our newest and largest territory (1999).

It covers more than two million square kilometres of tundra, ancient rock formations, pristine ocean, colossal icebergs, Northern Lights and stunning wildlife favourites such as muskoxen, wolverine, beluga, white wolf and polar bear.

As global warming increases, and the ice pack melts more each year, the industrial push to capitalize on the ever-available natural resources hidden in this fragile environment is frenzied. This is where tourism holds a critical role, and where your precious travel dollars may have supreme impact.

BATHURST INLET LODGE

So how do we change our mindset about travelling north to Nunavut rather than south to Mexico? In my mind's eye, the North has always meant stories by Jack London, and scenes of dog teams pulling sleds against howling winds, peppering travellers with snow in all 50 forms.



NUNAVUT

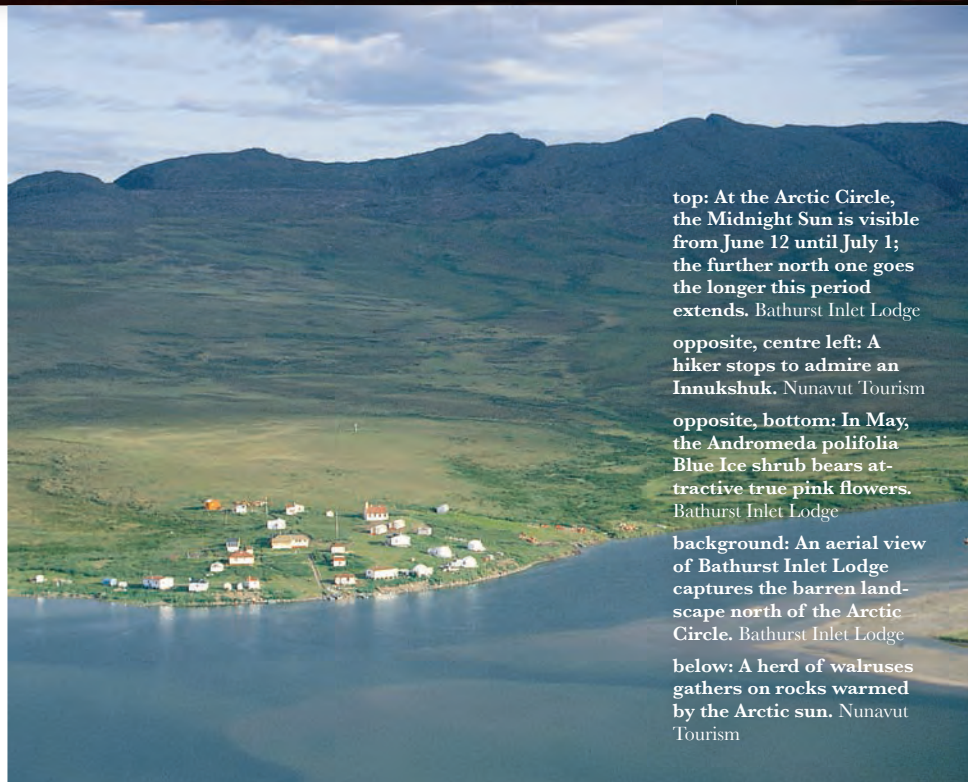
My rather jaded view of this mysterious Arctic landscape is typical of most “southerners” and I am determined to change this bias. They have summer in the North, right? So, what is it like in Nunavut without the stress of blizzards, etc.? I had to find out for myself. I made arrangements to experience a week at the legendary Bathurst Inlet Lodge north of the Arctic Circle.

A former Hudson Bay Post on the Burnside River, this is the legendary hunting realm for Inuit following the massive Bathurst caribou herd once consisting of more than 300,000 animals. It is filled with archaeological treasures such as stone tent rings, seasonal campsites and sacred graves. This wild and powerful land is also inhabited by grizzly bears, Arctic fox, millions of birds, and ablaze with more than 89 flower species that bloom during the summer.

FOUNDING FATHER

Glenn Warner, the RCMP officer in charge of the entire Canadian North in the 1960s, first visited Bathurst Inlet in 1964, and together with his wife Trish, became enamoured with this unique perch on the Burnside River delta. The couple would return and purchase the property from the Hudson Bay Company. It remains one of the few private land holdings anywhere in Nunavut.

They organized their business game-plan and opened as the first ecotourism resort in 1969, before the word “ecotourism” had even been coined. The Warners also set it up as a 50/50 partnership with the local Inuit, unheard of in the corporate world generally, but reflecting the long and trusting relationship between the Inuit and non-Inuit families here.



top: At the Arctic Circle, the Midnight Sun is visible from June 12 until July 1; the further north one goes the longer this period extends. Bathurst Inlet Lodge

opposite, centre left: A hiker stops to admire an Innuksuk. Nunavut Tourism

opposite, bottom: In May, the *Andromeda polifolia* Blue Ice shrub bears attractive true pink flowers. Bathurst Inlet Lodge

background: An aerial view of Bathurst Inlet Lodge captures the barren landscape north of the Arctic Circle. Bathurst Inlet Lodge

below: A herd of walrus gathers on rocks warmed by the Arctic sun. Nunavut Tourism





SECRET INGREDIENT

I arrive to a full Bathurst Inlet community welcome, all 20 people or so, replete with every mosquito on the planet. My research told me to expect these little pollinators, but reality is a sobering shock. Everyone dons a personal bug jacket, while I decide to employ Zen principles to temper the constant presence of mosquitoes during my stay.

The Warner family continues to operate the lodge during the summer, with son Boyd and his family taking over operations. I also meet Page Burt, the on-site biologist, who proves to be the secret ingredient for maximizing an enjoyable stay. Page allows the surrounding landscape to come alive in a multitude of dimensions, sharing stories with us in the field about the Inuit, flora and fauna species, and history of the ancient rock formations speckling this seemingly endless landscape.

SAFARI NORTH

If you've ever entertained the notion of an African safari, you might consider coming here first. It's considerably closer than Kenya, and although the wildlife is admittedly sparser in sheer numbers (except for the birds), the overall experience is similarly dramatic, poetic and unforgettable.

You will not find the level of peace and tranquility found here anywhere in Africa. The spectacle of being able to gaze at the 360-degree beauty of this place from the privacy of our "Blu Loo" pontoon boat each day has an immediate effect on travellers which defies words. It often seems like we are floating through a pristine dream.

We follow the graceful flight of huge white swans, red-throated loons, eider ducks and Canada geese each day, not to mention spying on bald eagles and peregrine falcons in

their natural habitats, plus sightings of seals, caribou and white Arctic wolf. It is simply a privilege of the highest order to be in Nunavut. However the highlight of my visit comes on Cultural Night, when our main Inuit guide, Sam Kapolak, shares with us the intriguing insights into the traditions of his nomadic ancestors.

Inside the main lodge, the walls are covered with Inuit tools, photographs and memorabilia, which Sam carefully explains to an audience hushed by the rarity of the lifestyle he describes. Following his extensive tour through the habits of the Inuit, there is a mini fashion show of handmade clothing, and then throat singing by Sam's daughter Bernice and friend Brandi.

FINALE

Canadians have a glorious opportunity with the opening of Nunavut to tourism, and no better place exists than Bathurst Inlet Lodge in summertime. But your window is only a few weeks each July, and the costs are significant, so you may want to make plans early.

A rare weave of experiences feels exclusively yours in Nunavut, from wildlife viewing to pontoon island tours, birdwatching, archaeological hunts, photo-shoots, mountain hikes, Arctic Ocean swims, char and trout fishing, kayaking, and the cultural exposure to our Inuit neighbours.

As my group watches a white wolf hunting seagull eggs on the sand dunes in front of the lodge, eventually catching a huge adult gull for dinner, I think to myself how incredible to be able to travel to such a remarkably wild place, where time seems to have been left to others, and dreams have room to prosper and grow. ■

travel planner

For more information, visit:

Nunavut Tourism:
nunavuttourism.com
 Bathurst Inlet Lodge:
bathurstarctic.com

opposite, top: Muskoxen live in herds of 12 to 24 in the winter and eight to 20 in the summer. Nunavut Tourism

opposite, bottom: Inuit resident, Bernice Kapolak poses with her pup. Gregory B. Gallagher

Recommended Reading

- 1 *Narrative of a journey to the shores of the Polar Sea in the years 1819, 20, 21 & 22*, by Sir John Franklin, M.G. Hurtig, Edmonton, 1971.
- 2 *The New Northwest Passage: A Voyage to the Front Line of Climate Change*, by Cameron Dueck, Great Plains Publications, 2012.
- 3 *Barrenland Beauties. Showy Plants of the Arctic Coast*, by Page Burt, Outcrop, Yellowknife, NWT, 1991.
- 4 *Summer North of Sixty: By Paddle and Portage Across the Barren Lands*, by James Raffan, Key Porter Books, Toronto, 1990.
- 5 *The Man Who Ate His Boots*, by Anthony Brandt, Knopf, 2010.



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