

TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH, *Westworld*, June 2002

OUR ELLESMERE ISLAND landing site is beside an old RCMP post, abandoned in 1963. Here is the scariest airstrip I've ever had the misfortune to glimpse from the window of a plane: 400 sloped and potholed metres of sand and scree. We circle and then, before anyone can protest, we're down and bouncing along the runway. Veteran Arctic pilot Doug McLeod receives a relieved round of applause. Welcome to Alexandra Fiord, latitude 78° 53' N: 2,200 kilometres from pavement and 1,800 kilometres from the nearest tree, but only 1,300 kilometres from the North Pole.

For more than two hours the heavily loaded Twin Otter had slogged north from Resolute Bay. Beneath us, under thick veils of cloud, the glacial tongues of the Prince of Wales Icefield scoured the stony terrain. Suddenly, over Ellesmere's east coast, we broke free of the overcast. Great white valleys appeared. Ice sheets cascaded from steep-shouldered mountains and dropped directly into unruffled Smith Sound. A confetti of floe ice sparkled in the blue-black inlets. As we descended through sunlit tendrils of mist, Doug made a tight, shuddering turn round Cape Sabine.

"There," shouted Jerry, over the roar of the engines. "The Greely site. Do you see it? Right down there." He was referring to a tragic Arctic expedition mounted by the US Army in the 1880s. I looked below and saw nothing but a rubble of red-brown boulders along the shoreline. Finally I caught sight of something unnatural: a straight line, then a tiny rectangle outlined by shadow. It was the remains of a pathetic rock shelter, as lost and forlorn in the primeval landscape as a

matchbox discarded in the Sahara. This dismal refuge at the edge of the known world was to be our destination.

THERE ARE NINE OF US, equipped with five folding kayaks, five tents, a pyramid of gear and food supplies. Ranging in age from our late-30s to late-60s, we're about to embark on one of the most ambitious wilderness tours available in Canada: a 12-day, 120-kilometre paddle along the Arctic coast, scouting historic sites and observing wildlife. Jerry Kobalenko, our lean, enthusiastic guide, is making his 20th trip to Ellesmere. Andrew Taylor, a mountain-climbing physician from Atlanta—and the fittest 59-year-old I've met—has been to the Arctic 25 times. French nurse Marie Christine Renard has skied and journeyed by dogsled in Greenland, Baffin and Spitzbergen. Three others—Neil Siemens of Edmonton; Karin Eberhardt, on leave from her agricultural aid job in Burma; and Alexandra Kobalenko, visual artist and assistant guide—are also no strangers to the North. Only Bob Cochran, a Los Angeles adult-education specialist and student of Arctic history, is new to off-track travel. Katherine Johnston and I, a painter/writer duo and both seasoned globe-trotters, round out the team.

Assembling skeletons of aluminum tubing and fitting them into the fabric-and-rubber kayak skins is sweaty work in the sun. But whenever we lift our heads we get a heart-pumping hit of scenery. The neat white ex-RCMP buildings, maintained by research biologists who live here each summer, look up the fiord and over Buchanan Bay to the stark, flat-topped cliffs of Bache Peninsula. Behind us, twin glaciers dispense torrents of meltwater that carve braided channels in the tundra. Near one stream, a cairn celebrates Group of Seven painter A

Y Jackson, who ventured to these mountainous shores by boat with a 1927 government expedition.

The tundra itself, a thick, tussocky mat of determined vegetation, is a marvel to us all. The region around Alexandra Fiord is an arctic oasis amidst an expanse of stone and gravel—a freak of geography where conditions conspire to support abundant life. Purple, pink and white saxifrages blossom, as do dwarf fireweed, bladder campion and Arctic bell heather; vivid orange jewel lichens cover the rocks; Arctic poppies nod delicate lemon-yellow heads; century-old willow trees writhe across the ground. Nothing dares grow more than 15 centimetres high.

Buntings, ptarmigan, Arctic hares, musk oxen and caribou browse the tundra. Foxes, wolves and polar bears patrol the shore. Rich offshore waters support seabirds and marine mammals: beluga and bowhead whales, narwhals, walruses and seals. As for humans, the first nomadic hunting families arrived here from the western Arctic more than 4,000 years ago. Many US and European explorers—Robert Peary, Frederick Cook, Otto Sverdrup on the *Fram*, Isaac Hayes, George Nares and Adolphus Greely and his ill-fated followers—also left their marks here in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

All these factors, plus August's abundant sun and calm waters, make the area a fine destination for intrepid, albeit well-heeled travellers. Tomorrow, God willing, we will venture into its remote and often treacherous reaches in search of history and the spirit of the land.

DINNER IS TASTY and unusual: rice, fruit and nuts cooked in coconut milk. Afterward, we settle down in our tents and try to sleep. In the land of the midnight sun, this proves difficult. For the next 12 days the light will be with us constantly, invigorating but also confusing us. I

am so used to an alternating regime of light and dark that this 24-hour brightness disrupts my entire being. We can do anything at any time. There is no "morning," no "evening." Yet it's hard to let go of such deeply engrained notions. Jerry suggests we get up two hours later each day. That way, in 12 days, we will have worked through an entire 24-hour cycle and be back where we started. "It will be an interesting experiment," he claims. The group thinks otherwise. Our thirst for adventure does not extend to time travel, apparently. We end up adopting a similar pattern anyway, sometimes eating dinner at 2 am, then going on a hike.

On our first morning we devour hot oatmeal, don the red survival suits we'll wear while kayaking and eventually set off. All along the coast, great chunks of pack ice have grounded in the shallows and been carved by the tide into wondrous shapes. Sometimes they split with mighty cracks. As we paddle among these sculptures, Katherine and I hear a regular refrain:

"Look, a rabbit . . . mushrooms . . . bird taking flight."

"No way. That's a castle . . . mosque . . . perfect apple core."

After two hours we're driven off the water by a sudden squall. We step ashore at an ideal campsite, a flat gravel terrace that was once an ancient beach. We have to brace the tents against the wind, anchoring each guy line with a huge rock; there are plenty of them, at least. And water is not a problem. We drink straight from crystal streams that wind through the tundra or from pure, clear ponds that reflect the mountains on their polished surfaces.

Dinner tonight is vegetarian chili and mashed potatoes. Most of the meals come in freeze-dried, powdered or pasta form. Jerry and Alex cook. We do the dishes. Lunches—beef jerky, crackers, cheese, smoked salmon, peanut butter, jam—are eaten picnic-style. All the

food bags are numbered. One bag holds the desserts and snacks, and from its endless depths flows a steady stream of licorice, chocolate almonds and cookies. As the days proceed, we become fixated on the delights of Bag Nine.

For five cloudless days the sun circles the horizon, a little higher at noon, a little lower at midnight. One afternoon, we paddle through pearly sea fog, out of which ice formations loom like great dragons. Dramatic fog-bows arc across the sky. The multi-year pack ice, far out in Kane Basin when we arrived, draws in with the season. We see icebergs in the distance. Growlers, or small pieces of sea ice, nudge us in the water. Greenland's cliffs and snowcaps, only 50 kilometres east, are clearly visible.

Jerry beckons us to a ridge with a fine view of Buchanan Bay. "This," he announces, "is one of the best Thule hearths I've seen." At first I can't make out what he means. Then I see it: a perfect square of stones, where meals were prepared long ago over a seal-oil flame. Other stones mark storage and sleeping areas. As our eyes get used to spotting man-made features, we begin to see ancient ruins wherever we go: summer tent rings, winter house pits, meat caches, fox traps, even raised kayak stands—all built from lichen-patterned rock.

The Thule people, ancestors of today's Inuit, were responsible for most of these sites. They lived on Ellesmere from about 1100 to 1650, when the Little Ice Age probably forced them to Greenland. Other ruins date back 2,500 years to an earlier wave of migrants from the west, known as the Dorset culture. A few are more than 4,000 years old. At one spot, we find a drilled, carved polar bear tooth—a shaman's amulet, perhaps. After photographing and admiring this priceless piece of antique ivory, we replace it in the dirt and leave it there. We have agreed to remove nothing; our passage will leave no trace.

WE ARE A compatible company. Jerry, a photojournalist who has written a book on Ellesmere, is a fountain of island information, and everyone contributes stories of their northern travels. Bob keeps us in stitches with his laconic LA humour. Late one night we find him leaning against a rock cairn, smoking a large cigar and reading Homer's *Odyssey*.

As time passes, we settle into a daily routine: set up and break camp, load and unload the kayaks, carry them up and down the slippery shores. It takes 200 kilograms of rock to secure each tent. We paddle four to six hours a day, with plenty of stops. It's hard work. Soon, sleeping is easy. Our hands grow rough and callused; our bodies ripen in the otherwise scent-free air. When the wind rises, the temperature drops fast, sometimes below freezing, and we huddle in our sleeping bags or else climb hillsides to keep warm.

"Why would you want to go to the Arctic?" friends asked us before we left. I had referred them to Katherine, whose dream this journey was. Me, I had reservations. What if we capsized? What if the charter plane couldn't get us out? "I've always wanted to travel in the Far North," Katherine would reply, "to float between the ice floes, see the midnight sun. I've longed to be in that elemental landscape, on the very edge of survival. Perhaps I'm testing myself."

The Arctic has a strange effect on people. A cavalcade of English mariners have cruised into the region, starting with Martin Frobisher in 1576. Many escaped with their lives and little else. Ships were abandoned, drastic retreats made over the ice by scurvy-weakened, ill-clad men pulling gargantuan sleds. In 1872, 19 sailors were separated from their vessel and drifted 3,200 kilometres on the ice before being rescued. Others were not so fortunate. The entire

expedition of British naval hero Sir John Franklin—130 men—was lost while searching for the Northwest Passage. And yet the travellers kept coming back for more. “A few toes aren’t much to give to achieve the Pole,” remarked famed US explorer and frostbite victim Robert Peary.

After several days of paddling, plus a rest day at Fram Haven, where Norwegian mapmaker Otto Sverdrup overwintered in 1898, we cross narrow Rice Strait and reach Pim Island. It has grown cloudy and colder. We are outside the oasis now, on truly barren ground, and I grow increasingly anxious as we get further and further from civilization. Our goal is the desolate spot on Pim’s north shore where 25 US soldiers, a scientific expedition under the command of Lt Adolphus Greely, were forced to winter in 1883. The Greely party was deposited on the north end of Ellesmere in 1881. When supply ships failed to reach their research station after two years, they tried to trek out, courageously dragging their provisions across the ice in small boats. By October, exhausted and undernourished, they could go no further.

The men built a rock shelter with a canvas and whaleboat roof; they had rations for 40 days and very little fuel. By June, when rescuers finally reached them, only seven were alive, including Greely. One had been executed after repeatedly stealing food, the rest starved. There were reports of cannibalism. Their camp is still there, surrounded by rusting barrel hoops, empty food tins, bits of canvas and clothing. It is a sombre, desperate place, notorious in the nightmarish annals of Arctic exploration.

Jerry wants to go further, to Payer Harbour where there is more historic debris. Some are not so keen; the pack ice has drawn very close. Fear lays its frozen claw on my shoulder: this is a serious journey, it whispers; here death can hide behind every headland. The

issue is moot, however, because at nearby Cape Sabine the ice reaches land and cuts us off. A strong current has the floes bouncing around like live things, uttering horrid groans and gurgles. We are forced to retreat—a relief to many of us—and begin the long journey back.

Two days later, as we recross Rice Strait, we must paddle through leads, or narrow passages, in the ice before reaching open water by the mainland shore. Seals and walrus swim in the distance. One walrus, a sharp-tusked, cement-coloured specimen as large as a compact car, surfaces two metres behind Jerry's kayak as we float beside him. The gigantic leathery head regards us solemnly for a long, adrenalin-charged moment, then disappears. Later, a refrigerator-sized bearded seal takes great interest in Katherine and approaches.

"I'd move away if I were you," advises Jerry. "They like to rub themselves against floating objects."

At Skrealing Island in Alexandra Fiord, we set up our last camp. We're almost out of food. It's -2° Celsius. Further south, at Resolute airport, we'll find 10 centimetres of snow on the ground when we fly out three days from now. It's the middle of August, and winter is closing in as we explore the best Thule sites in the region, replete with walrus, bear and beluga bones and entire bowhead whale skeletons. Norse artifacts were excavated on Skrealing: chain mail, boat rivets. Snow-white Arctic hares stand on hind legs to observe us; foxes sniff round our camp. We see many kinds of birds, including buff-coloured rock ptarmigan, perfectly disguised against the ground.

"No other journey I've made has left me with such a sense of accomplishment and feeling of oneness with nature," Katherine declares. I feel the same way, but it's the ruins that bring the land to life for me. In the frozen winters, it's true, people endured four months

without seeing the sun. And both the Thule and the early Western explorers were, at times, defeated by the overwhelming conditions they faced. But humankind not only survived here, it flourished. Babies were born, children played and grew to adulthood. Giant whales were hunted successfully from tiny skin boats. The Thule culture was an incredible achievement, a celebration of human ingenuity over great odds.

For some, Ellesmere may have “the highest misery-per-visitor ratio in the world,” as the *New York Times* once described it. But for me the island shines as a place of ethereal beauty, of otherworldly silence and peace. It is a land reduced to essentials, and those who wish to linger here must find something essential in themselves.