With a plodding movement that’s lumbering and elegant all at once, a polar bear traces its way down a finger of partially submerged land, nose in the air, the late afternoon light shimmering off wet stones beneath its massive paws. Save for the lapping of water against the Zodiac’s hull and the symphony of camera shutters, there is silence as we soak in this blissfully close encounter. The adolescent male has done the opposite of what polar bears usually do when they encounter camera-toting travellers in Canada’s high Arctic and has stuck around, giving our group, just feet away, the odd curious glance between nibbling the beluga whale skeletons that litter beautiful Cunningham Inlet.

The Northwest Passage, a 1,500-kilometer shortcut between Europe and Asia across the roof of North America has fascinated explorers for centuries, with many losing their lives in its pursuit. Only in the past decade has melting ice opened a seasonal window during which ships might pass through.

Despite an increasing number of cruise ships bound for the high Arctic in a tentative new era for the passage, its dangers remain poignant.

I’m attempting the journey with Canadian polar junky One Ocean Expeditions, which offers a pair of Northwest Passage sailings annually on its stout Russian research vessel Akademik Ioffe. It’s a route that draws travellers for many reasons. There are avid birders hoping to spy red-throated loons, cackling geese and gyrfalcons. There are expedition cruisers, ticking the emerging route off their own lists. And there are history fans inspired by recent discoveries that have brought the passage’s rich history to life again.

Explorers began searching for the Northwest Passage in 1497 when Italian navigator John Cabot first attempted the journey, with Norwegian polar pioneer Roald Amundsen finally succeeding four centuries later. Since that first successful passage in 1906, there have been less than 250 transits (only 50 by cruise vessels), with the majority taking place in the nine years since an “ice-free” summer window was created by global warming.
Despite the reduction of sea ice, the passage remains a treacherous undertaking. In 2010, it took 40 hours to evacuate 120 passengers from the grounded Clipper Adventurer and passengers on the luxurious Crystal Serenity, which transited the passage in August, were reportedly required to take out US$50,000 evacuation insurance policies. Less a defined route than a myriad of possible waterways, of which less than 10 per cent are charted, a cruise through the Northwest Passage is an adventure.

However, there’s a big difference between watching the desolate beauty of Nunavut, the newest, largest, northernmost and least populous territory of Canada, drift by while you wait for your sommelier to decide on a chardonnay, and tackling the destination like so many explorers past. It’s a fitting finish to our expedition as we share tea smoked with arctic heather with guides from the hamlet. Clockwise from far left: a Zodiac carries passengers close to a glacier, on deck at Nimgha, Low Point, getting to grips with the ice.

Emerged from Pond Inlet, our transit of the Northwest Passage is at an end and we sail south down the east coast of Baffin Island. We spot rare bowhead whales as we pass across Isabella Bay, a whale sanctuary, arriving in the calm waters of Cumberland Sound, where a whaling station has blossomed into the Inuit settlement of Pangnirtung. It’s a fitting finish to our expedition as we share tea smoked with arctic heather with guides from the hamlet.

**THE VERDICT**

Highs: Our close encounter with polar bears in Cunningham Inlet was unforgettable. Low: Internet access is still a tricky business and the ship runs a very dated service that was a little frustrating.

Best suited to: Those adventurous souls who have already cruised the Antarctic and want the ultimate Arctic encounter.