

# Expedition to the KINGDOM OF ICE

The Northwest Passage has intrigued and fascinated Arctic explorers for centuries. Now this challenging route across the top of the world is entering a new era of exploration, discovers Nick Walton.

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.

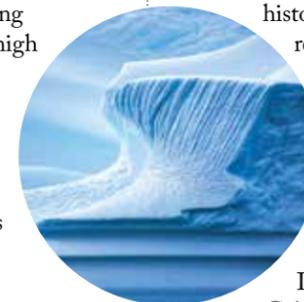
Save for the lapping of water against the Zodiac's hull and the symphony of camera shutters, there is silence as we soak in this blissfully close encounter. The adolescent male has done the opposite of what polar bears usually do when they encounter camera-toting travellers in Canada's high Arctic and 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. >

Passengers make the most of calm conditions as *Akademik Ioffe* navigates the Northwest Passage



Clockwise from far left: a Zodiac carries passengers close to a glacier; on-deck Jacuzzi; hiking at Low Point; getting to grips with the ice

## FACT FILE

**CRUISE LINE:** One Ocean Expeditions

**VESSEL:** *Akademik Ioffe*

**PASSENGER CAPACITY:** 96

**TOTAL CREW:** 65

**PASSENGER DECKS:** 4

**ENTERED SERVICE:** 1989

**TONNAGE:** 6,230

**FACILITIES:** Dining room, lounge and bar, library, presentation room, gift shop, fitness room, massage room, hot water spa, sauna, plunge pool, mud room, 10 Zodiacs, use of wet-weather gear.

**BOOKINGS:** One Ocean Expeditions' Classic Northwest itinerary on *Akademik Ioffe*, departing August 24, 2017, is priced from US\$9,195 per person, triple share. The voyage starts from Edmonton on a charter flight and ends with a charter flight to Ottawa. Charter flights cost an additional US\$1,995. Air Canada flies from Sydney to Edmonton via Vancouver. See [oneoceanexpeditions.com](http://oneoceanexpeditions.com)

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 desolately beautiful landscapes 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.

I had joined the 98-passenger *Akademik Ioffe* in Cambridge Bay, a tiny hamlet on Victoria Island that's a common departure point for Arctic Ocean research vessels.

Cambridge Bay spans eras of Arctic exploration. In the inlet, the timber and

iron remains of *The Maud*, Amundsen's ship from his second Arctic expedition, have been returned to the surface in a multi-million dollar salvage effort. Her blackened hull is a stark contrast to the low-slung buildings of the state-of-the-art Canadian High Arctic Research Station, which is set to open at year's end.

After a welcome from village elders we set sail southeast into Queen Maud Sound.

*Akademik Ioffe* may not have a spa or room service, but she is perfectly suited for the high Arctic. Leased by One Ocean from Russian's Shirshov Institute of Oceanology, *Ioffe* has an ice-rated hull, comfortable ensuite cabins, a dining room, bar, sauna, presentation theatre and a rooftop

Jacuzzi. My cabin has plenty of storage, a comfortable single cot and a cabin attendant who giggles shyly at my stumbling Russian.

The ship is run by a Russian crew, but a full complement of guides and naturalists bring the destination to life with lectures, daily excursions, Zodiac cruises and kayaking itineraries. Our guides include the ever-smiling Atuat Shouldice, an Inuit guide and

environmental inspector from Rankin, David Begg, a New Zealand mountain guide, and Katie Murray, a Scottish historian with a serious crush on Sir John Franklin.

Franklin's ill-fated 1845 expedition, in which his two ships and 129 crew disappeared, inadvertently opened the Canadian Arctic Archipelago to exploration, with more than 50 unsuccessful rescue expeditions helping to define this vast and hostile territory. The expedition's demise has remained one of the most fascinating Arctic mysteries, baffling researchers until September 2014, when the Victoria Strait Expedition, which included *Akademik Ioffe*, discovered Franklin's *HMS Erebus* submerged west of O'Reilly Island in Queen Maud Gulf. This major historic discovery was bolstered this September by the discovery of *Erebus*' sister ship, *HMS Terror*. Now all eyes are on the Northwest Passage and the secrets the ships may reveal.

After our close encounter with the polar bears of Cunningham Bay, we trail shy beluga whale pods back to the ship as the low-slung sun casts the clouds in a warm amber hue, rays of golden light occasionally penetrating the canopy.

Cruising Bellot Strait the next morning,

passengers brave wicked winds on the bridge wings in search of musk oxen, ivory and herring gulls, and arctic foxes. *Akademik Ioffe* has an open-bridge policy, allowing guests the chance to watch the Russian crew in action as we navigate this 25-kilometre, wafer-thin waterway between Somerset Island and the Boothia Peninsula, passing Zenith Point, the northern tip of mainland North America.

After cruising Prince Regent Inlet we cross Parry Sound and reach Beechey Island, a tiny islet at the southern tip of Devon Island, the world's largest uninhabited island. First visited by European explorers in 1819,

Beechey is where Franklin and his crew wintered in 1845-46 before disappearing. Remnants of his camp, discovered in 1851, still remain, including the three grave stones of crew who didn't survive the winter. Researchers believe many of Franklin's men died from lead poisoning, either from the lead-soldered tins of provisions or from the ship's water distillation system, although there are more macabre tails of cannibalism.

As the wind whips across a natural breakwater between Lancaster Sound and Wellington Channel, expedition leader Boris Wise cracks open a bottle of whisky

and we toast the explorers who sought to tame this lonely land so far from home.

We encounter our first real ice in Croker Bay as we follow the southern coast of Devon Island, a scene so devoid of life it's used as a simulation of Mars by NASA. The northernmost point of our cruise, Croker Bay is home to two towering glaciers, their jagged faces pockmarked with caves that reveal a shimmering aqua blue interior. We give way to a massive herd of harp seals before cruising the Zodiacs close enough to the glaciers to hear the ice creak and groan.

The Arctic weather starts to flex its muscles that afternoon and we're forced to view the abandoned Royal Canadian Mounted Police barracks at Dundas Harbour from afar. As ocean swells heave the ship, a pair of arctic wolves watch us from shore, white dots on a coffee-coloured landscape of rocky peaks.

The captain sails us into Navy Board Inlet, protected by the towering peaks of Baffin Island to the west and Bylot Island to the east. On the cusp of Eclipse Sound, we land at Low Point, hiking to the top of a lichen-encrusted hill that offers views down to a grounded iceberg the size of an office block.

Emerging 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 as we cross 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.

**Lows:** 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.