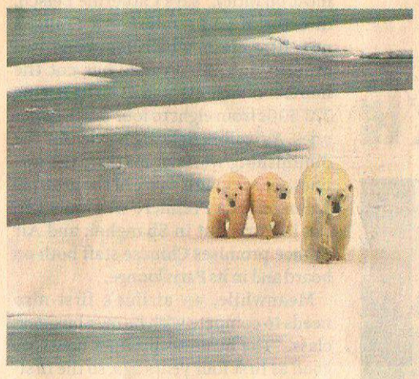


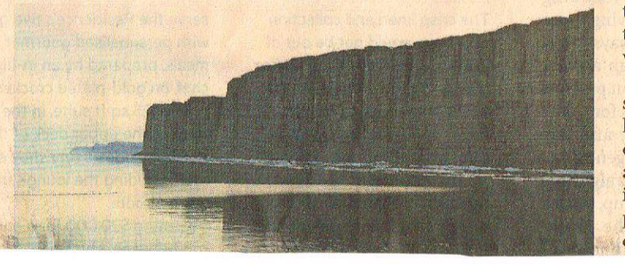
'Walrus on ice at two o'clock'

Canada | Sought in vain by generations of explorers, the Northwest Passage is now drawing growing numbers of adventure-hungry cruisers. By *Nigel Tisdall*

Gam", "frazil", "inukshuk", "esker"... Among the multiple pleasures of sailing the Canadian Arctic is a blizzard of new and intriguing words to wrap your tongue around. As I soon learn, these terms describe a school of whales, ice crystals, a stone cairn, and a ridge resulting from glacial meltdown.

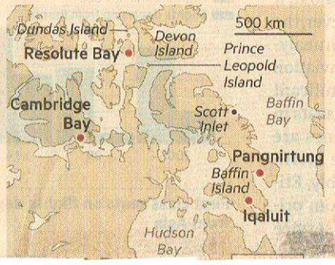
Then there are the entertainingly blunt place-names bestowed on this raw landscape by the indigenous Inuit, such as Nuluujaak ("this land is shaped like buttocks") and Uqsuqtuuq ("lots of fat"). Not to mention the equally absorbing "thank-yous" splashed across the map following more than 300 years of exploration in search of the fabled Northwest Passage.

As early as the 1580s, crediting your sponsors was clearly as much a part of expedition etiquette as it is today. Get ready to doff your sou'wester to all manner of royals, punt-taking merchants and political fixers. There is Lord Mayor Bay, Cape Walsingham, Prince of Wales



the best photo ops and rests broadside to shelter us from the bitter winds when we return from shore excursions.

We sail so near to bears I see their fur smeared with blood and gore from a seal kill. They look cute out on the ice, but no one's allowed ashore if the bears are about. Armed guards are essential, and in this respect an Arctic voyage compares unfavourably with its Antarctic counterpart. Down south, where the



barques and pinnaces to the stalwarts of the Royal Navy, man-hauling their sleds in the Victorian era. I develop a soft spot for John Davis, who sailed here from Devon in 1585 with the sweetly named Sunneshine and Mooneshine, and who at first thought polar bears were monstrous goats. My admiration likewise reaches out to John Ross, who was forced to spend four consecutive winters here from 1829 yet emerged with 19 of his 22 men still alive. And, like everyone else, I ponder the fate of John Franklin, who disappeared in 1845 while searching for the Passage. It was indeed a tragedy to lose such a master of understatement, who wrote in his journal of an earlier expedition: "Drank tea and ate some of our shoes for supper".

We visit Beechey Island, where the graves of three of his crew rest in a supremely forlorn landscape. It is just off Devon Island, the world's largest uninhabited island, which is now used by Nasa as a test landscape for vehicles bound for Mars.

A complete traverse of the Northwest Passage was only achieved in 1906 by Roald Amundsen, who profited from learning the survival techniques of the Inuit. Even now, visiting their communities is a thought-provoking encounter. How do you cope with -25C and up to three months of winter darkness? With throat-singing, face-pulling games, indoor mini-golf and high-class printmaking, to judge from the residents we meet in Pangnirtung, population 1,300.

Is climate change making a difference? "The sea ice is thinner," explains Madeleine Qumuatuq, who was born here, "and now every summer there are bugs flying around". Once an icebreaker

We sail so near to polar bears I see their fur smeared with blood and gore from a seal kill

was virtually essential for transiting the Passage; now yachts sail through every August.

The number of visiting cruise ships is rising too, which is made clear when we call into Dundas Island for a much-needed hike and are joined by another 300-passenger vessel. The perils of tourism are highlighted when its guests come swarming over the hills to look at the lonely huts of a Royal Canadian Mounted Police camp abandoned in the 1930s. While our group has obeyed strict instructions not to enter these historic buildings, these interlopers charge

Island – my favourite is the Gulf of Boothia, which honours the 19th-century gin magnate Felix Booth. Just add ice.

If the 97 passengers on my 2,000 nautical mile voyage east from Resolute Bay to Iqaluit were to carry on this tradition, the atlas would now be graced with such tokens of gratitude as Overdraft Inlet, Cape Retirement Bonus and Thanks Aunt Wilma Island. This is a hang-the-cost, trip-of-a-lifetime journey, ideal for lovers of wildlife and wilderness, icebergs and Arctic history. If you value kittiwakes above pillow menus and prefer Zodiacs to stretch limos, here is your adventure.

Our home for the next 13 days is the doughty, Kaliningrad-registered Akademik Ioffe, a characterful, ice-strengthened research vessel that has been ploughing through freezing waters for 25 years. In 2001 I sailed to Antarctica aboard her sturdy decks, and not a jot has changed – not even the captain, Poskonnyi Gennadi. Same lugubrious Russian crew, same hit-and-miss cuisine, same functional cabins. The only difference is that our brilliant, enthusiastic and very safety-conscious guides, who make or break such trips, are now known as "adventure concierges" (sigh).

One Ocean, the company operating the trip, insists this is an expedition, not a cruise – something banged home when I find our charter flight north from Edmonton is bound for Resolute Bay, one of the coldest inhabited places in world, rather than the scheduled start-point of Cambridge Bay. Unseasonably thick ice has forced a change of plan, as it did for so many explorers before us. Until we reach the open waters of Baffin Island, our fate is determined by the daily 4pm arrival by satellite of the latest ice chart. When I pad up to the ship's noticeboard in my thermal socks, the itinerary usually says, in between the lecture on Arctic birds, the photography masterclass and outdoor yoga on Deck 7, "Exploring". And then, after lunch, "More Exploring". I like that.

"Every day we'll see how it goes," our dependable leader Boris Wise explains. I've barely unpacked before the Tannoy bleats a deadpan announcement from our English naturalist, Simon Boyes. "Walrus on ice at two o'clock." That's not an invitation to cocktails, just the opening salvo in an astounding cavalcade of wildlife that has me glued to my binoculars for the entire trip.

On my personal wishlist is a dream to see "a polar bear". Ha! So sweet, that singular hope. By day three we've seen eight, by day nine 22. Well, we are in Nunavut, a Canadian territory the size of western Europe but with a population of just 33,000 people – and 50 per cent of the world's polar bears. And these aren't distant sightings. I never knew you could make a 6,450 tonne vessel stalk wildlife, but Captain Gennadi can. He spins Akademik Ioffe round icebergs for wildlife is abundant and relatively unthreatening, you can get much closer.

Every morning, I wake up thinking "how will Boris cap this?" But he does, day after oh-my-gosh day. At Prince Leopold Island we find towering cliffs populated with hundreds of thousands of auks, fulmars and kittiwakes. It is like some avian Manhattan. "They're fledging," Boyes explains, which means the chicks, booted out by their mothers, must make a falling glide 800ft into the sea, then set off on a perilous, 400-mile journey to Greenland.

Musk oxen, snowy owls, ivory gulls, Arctic hares, white gyrfalcons – the sightings just don't stop. At Navy Road Inlet, a pod of orcas swims right under our bow. In the marine wildlife sanctuary of Isabella Bay, Captain Gennadi finds us 70 bowhead whales, blowin' and a-rollin' like an underwater steam train.

There's another Arctic mammal on my wishlist, but Wise has cautioned us not to mention "the N-word". And then, as we glide into super-calm Milne Inlet early one morning, the Tannoy does it again. "We have narwhal on the port side." It's hard to spot the barley-twist tusks of the males but yes, there they are, the unicorns of the sea.

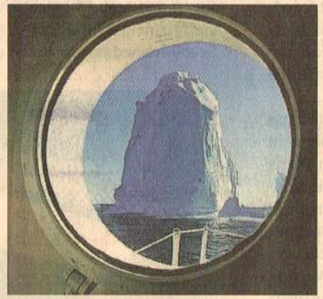
Rising up behind all this is the austere Arctic landscape, increasingly monumental as we sail east. Why bother with trees when you've got glistening icebergs? Pumped out like popcorn from the glaciers of Greenland, they bludgeon their way through Baffin Bay in a long white trail. At Scott Inlet we sail deep into the heart of a 15-mile fjord where mighty cliffs rise up beside us like the molars of a giant dinosaur.

Meanwhile, it's time for a barbecue on the stern deck. And a wedding, to which we are all invited. A few nights later, just after I've got into bed, there's another merry chirp from Tannoy. "If you've always dreamt of seeing the aurora borealis . . . " You have to get up, of course, and the reward is a celestial light show all the more romantic for being seen from a windblown deck as we charge across the icy waves.

On day 10, the hitherto glorious weather changes. Thick cloud descends as if a mischievous God were clamping a dustbin-lid down on our fun. The mood swing is a reminder that life up here can be grim as well as glorious. Those place-names have their dark side, too. Deception Bay, Hopes Check'd, Starvation Cove, Qimivvik ("place where a hunter was strangled with his dog team ropes").

Part of the thrill of sailing the North-west Passage is that this wild world comes with a vivid companion literature. Every night we lie in our cabins reading of those who ventured here before us, in unthinkably less comfort, from the brave Elizabethans with their straight on in."

It is a dismaying sight, but a sign of things to come. Next summer at least six cruise ships will sail these waters, and in 2016 the 1,070-capacity, 13-deck Crystal Serenity will pass through, complete with casino, nightclub and butler service. It all seems a far cry from the days when cartographers simply wrote "Meta Incognita" (Limits Unknown) and "Loom of the Land" on the blank bits of the globe. Now the Canadian Arctic has been mapped, and the several routes of the Northwest Passage defined. But as this voyage proves, it is, for now, still a wonderful place for making discoveries.



Clockwise from main: passengers on the deck of the Akademik Ioffe; approaching Prince Leopold Island in a Zodiac; view from a porthole; the town of Pond Inlet; 50 per cent of the world's polar bears live in the Canadian territory of Nunavut

For more pictures, visit ft.com/northwest

Peter & Beverly Pickford/Nigel Tisdall/Mark Robinson

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Nigel Tisdall was a guest of One Ocean Expeditions (oneoceanexpeditions.com) and the Canadian Tourism Commission (keepexploring.ca). The next Northwest Passage voyage with Akademik Ioffe departs Greenland, on August 12 2015 and sails west to Cambridge Bay. The 13-day trip costs from $8,395 per person (triple-share cabin), not including flights. For more information on the region see nunavuttourism.com