

# Of ICE and MEN

The Northwest Passage has taken the lives of many during the history of its exploration. **Roberto Serrini** boards a research vessel to make the icy crossing from Greenland to Canada and get a taste of modern-day adventure.

Photography by **Roberto Serrini**



**R**esidents of Kangerlussuaq, Greenland, are very proud of their tree. “See that tree? That’s the tallest tree. In all of Greenland,” one tells me. It is about 150 centimetres tall.

Viking Erik the Red named this tundra Greenland when he discovered it in 982. Evidently he thought it would entice people to move here from Iceland, making it quite possibly the ballsiest marketing move in history.

Kangerlussuaq is located at the head of one of the longest fjords on the planet and a bumpy bus ride parallel to it eventually leads to the sea, and my home for the next two weeks, the *Akademik Ioffe*.

From here we are taking the journey of a lifetime: a 12-day adventure with One Ocean Expeditions travelling westwards through the treacherous Northwest Passage that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans along the north coast of North America. It’s a journey few ships are able to undertake, but the *Ioffe* is a scientific research vessel built specifically to handle the harshest conditions on earth.

Outside the rooms there is a large dining hall, library, sauna and even a lounge with a well-stocked bar. On the top deck an outdoor hot tub offers the opportunity, if you’re lucky, to sip a cold beer and watch polar bears at the same time. Could you ask for a better setting for an adventure story?

The ship, however, is just a vessel for the experience, which is expertly crafted by the impressive One Ocean staff. Each has specialised skills that, when combined, create the perfect storm for their onboard companions. The set-up is similar to that of a video game, but instead of having a demolition expert, a sniper, a medic and a marine on your team, you have a glaciologist, a naturalist, a historian and a masseuse. Each and every person here is dedicated to this expedition and an authority on some aspect of the Arctic. They not only bring

“ Overnight sailing takes us to Jakobshavn Glacier, one of the largest in the world and thought to have birthed the iceberg that sunk the *Titanic*. ”

At 120 metres long, the ship is remarkable and packed with incredibly sophisticated engineering. Its two diesel engines crank at a massive 3500 horsepower and have the ability to thrust 360 degrees as they run almost silently. Gigantic sub-marine, high frequency antennas map every crevasse on the seabed up to 3000 metres away. This, along with the fact that it was launched at the height of the Cold War and operated by a fully Russian crew, has made it a notorious spy ship. As a result, it’s never been allowed to sail in US waters.

Even though it’s a working vessel, *Akademik Ioffe* is remarkably liveable. The berths, while small, are still larger than a NYC dorm room, and have comfortable bunk beds along with small sinks, desk areas and even a little couch.

the history of the Arctic within reach, but they bring it very much to life.

Safely on board, we’re ready to face the unknown, and head north up the coast to the ridiculously picturesque town of Sisimiut. Houses are strung along the rugged cove like Christmas lights, each one painted a solid primary colour as if the local hardware store had a sale on the brightest of hues. In the centre of town, below Greenland’s oldest church, Bethel-kirken, is an outdoor museum with a handful of houses from different epochs. The interior of the oldest, a basic peat house, is breathtaking – clean simple lines, large living spaces, oil lamps and simple decor. You can almost see where IKEA gets its inspiration.

Overnight sailing takes us to Disko Bay and



One of the highlights of the trip: spying a polar bear.



Taking the Zodiac out to explore.



The Akademik Ioffe off the Canadian coastline.





Crew and guests from the *Loffe* on Devon Island.





A Devon Island hike.

the Jakobshavn Glacier, one of the largest in the world and thought to have birthed the iceberg that sunk the Titanic. Walls of ice, 150 metres long, are calved in our wake as we explore in Zodiacs. We skim over frozen chunks of white, through blue-green canyons and over inky water, as glaciologist Jimmy McDonald waxes poetic about the different types of ice – candle ice, grease ice, pancake, white, black, brash, what is healthy ice and what isn’t. Seems it isn’t just a key ingredient in my frozen margarita, but also another life form on this planet – and one that is responsible for all the other life forms on the planet. “The ice is what controls global warming, not the other way around,” Jimmy explains. It soon becomes evident that if global warming didn’t exist we wouldn’t even be able to take this trip.

Crossing Baffin Bay we stop in Canada at Devon Island to go hiking. Chalk-white bones of fallen animals lie in our path as we cross gentle summits. Walking the shore of the Lancaster Sound, we wend through large warped ice chunks that give the pebbled beach the appearance of a sculpture garden. Finally we

reach the sweeping bay of Dundas Harbour, where two battered and abandoned houses sit trapped in time. These are the last remnants of a doomed Royal Canadian Mounted Police post that lasted a mere nine years, from 1924 to 1933.

On an embankment there’s a small cemetery where three bodies are interred – one is an Inuit girl who died of unknown causes, another belongs to an RCMP officer who was killed in a walrus hunting accident, and the final one is a Mountie who took his own life. In the ghost town below, you can peer into the buildings to see old cans, empty whisky bottles, and magazines and books left as they were when the inhabitants abandoned the settlement more than 80 years ago. It becomes apparent the cold here preserves everything, including the Arctic’s dark history.

On the southern side of Baffin Bay we reach Beechey Island, where a thick fog has settled in and visibility is about five metres. “It’s always like this,” says Ian, one of the expedition leaders. He is a big Nova Scotian who always looks as if he’s



Headstone on Beechey Island.



Inuit people at Pond Inlet on Baffin Island.

about to wrestle some wild animal. “Doesn’t matter if it’s sunny and warm on the water – as soon as you land, fog. Everywhere. All the time.” Traversing the island is like walking through an Ingmar Bergman film – a rocky beach stretches for miles, the horizon blending perfectly with the fog so that infinity surrounds you. Then, maybe 100 paces from us, we find four small wooden gravestones. This is the last sign of the great Franklin expedition.

Sir John Franklin is to the Northwest Passage what Madame Curie is to x-rays: a tragic figure whose death only brought on more discovery. You cannot travel to this part of the

we’re at today. A note was left with them saying things were going swimmingly, morale was high, and Franklin expected great results as the coming of spring would free his ships to travel further west.

That was the last anyone ever heard from him. Franklin’s wife Jane wouldn’t believe her husband had perished and, in the decades that followed his disappearance, championed to send dozens of rescue missions to bring Franklin home. Ironically, it was those searching for the sailor and his men who filled in the blanks on the Arctic map, and gave rise to the ultimate crossing of the Northwest Passage by Sir Robert

“The ice here dictates your path and plans for the day, and making it to the final port at Cambridge Bay sometimes seems like an impossible feat.”

world and not speak of Franklin. He was the glorious son of the British Empire, and the favourite to finally find a true passage from Greenland to the Canadian mainland. Outfitted with two immense ships, the HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror*, Franklin had a massive advantage over previous expeditions. Besides being well funded and loaded with the most advanced equipment, he had a tremendous amount of experience, having already made three successful trips to the Arctic Circle. Unfortunately, things turned out differently on his fourth. In 1845 he left England with 129 fit crew. In 1846 he wintered on Beechey Island, and buried three of the men at the gravesite

McClure and the crew of the HMS *Investigator*, by ship and sledge, in 1854. Franklin has since been heralded a hero despite his expedition being a failure and the discovery of evidence suggesting he and his men resorted to cannibalism in an attempt to survive.

What is truly outstanding is that for the following 150 years people searched for Franklin’s two huge ships with little success. It wasn’t until September 2014 that a Canadian expedition, using sonar, stumbled upon the wreckage of the *Erebus* in Queen Maud Gulf some 800 kilometres from Beechey Island. Unfortunately any sign of Franklin’s grave or those of most of his men are non-



The colourful township of Sisimiut.



A polar bear drags its prey over the ice.

existent. Many are thought to have perished trying to walk to the mainland. How do I know all this? Each night, Arctic historian Katie Murray, in her Scottish brogue, recounts the tales of lives risked and lost to discover the Northwest Passage.

Sailing away, we begin heading into the thick of the Canadian archipelago that makes up the Nunavut territory. Every day the crew checks charts and remaps the route to ensure safe passage through the ice-choked channels. The ice here dictates your path and plans for the day, and making it to the final port at Cambridge Bay sometimes seems like an impossible feat. It is possible to get trapped in an inlet or blocked from proceeding by changing ice floes, giving you a real-time sense of how treacherous this crossing can be.

On the morning of the tenth day we pile into the Zodiacs to tour the massive cliffs of Prince Leopold Island, one of the largest bird nesting

mouths, overloaded with jagged teeth, curl in the manner of a smile. They are captivating, and it's a rare treat to see one in the wild.

Which is why over the next two days, when we spy another 14 of them, our minds are blown. "They must have known you were coming to write an article," jokes expedition leader Boris Wise. Even he admits seeing this many bears is rare. We see them feeding on land, hanging out on icebergs, taking a dip and protecting their young from larger males. There are so many, in fact, that when I'm in the hot tub and the call comes over the ship's PA that another bear has been spotted off the port side, I simply crane my neck to watch it enjoy its fresh meal. It doesn't get much better than that.

With our expectations surpassed, we cruise silently into Cambridge Bay. On the final night the chef prepares a birthday cake for two passengers on board, and bartender Vanessa invents a drink special called Arctic Ice, a

“As we cruise past the clamouring, avian-infested precipice, we are greeted by another fantastic surprise – a large male polar bear.”

sites in the world. At first I'm taken aback by the sheer size of the granite wall in front of me, then I realise it is covered in thousands of birds. They come here to lay their eggs, which are an exaggerated conical shape. It's nature's way of ensuring that if the eggs roll they spin in a tight circle rather than off the edge of a 400-metre cliff. As we cruise past the clamouring, avian-infested precipice, we are greeted by another fantastic surprise – a large male polar bear.

Polar bears are unique creatures. Most people never encounter them, but we all have an idea of what they look like. Let me tell you, you're wrong. They are massive. Half-a-tonne massive, and pure white with large paws that give them the appearance of a huge puppy. Their obsidian eyes peer out over the surface of the water, as their

concoction that makes saying goodbye to new friends a little easier. We trade pictures, stories and contact information, then return to our cabins to pack.

At the airport we cross paths with the next group who are taking the ship back to Greenland. We smile at them, half envious that they're about to witness something that will possibly change them forever, and half proud because we've completed a journey that has challenged so many before us. As we board the charter flight back to civilisation I am reminded by Katie, our historian, that Queen Victoria called the Arctic *Meta Incognita*, which is Latin for 'the unknown limits'. That is exactly how completing this journey has made me feel – like there would never be any limit to my fondness for this experience.

GET PLANNING



GET THERE

Qatar Airways offers one-stop flights from Sydney, Melbourne and Perth to Copenhagen via Doha. Return fares from Sydney during August start at about AU\$1700. From Copenhagen, a four-and-a-half-hour Air Greenland flight will deliver you to Kangerlussuaq for about AU\$960 return. [qatarairways.com](http://qatarairways.com) [airgreenland.com](http://airgreenland.com)



STAY THERE

Stay on in Canada at Arctic Islands Lodge, located in Cambridge Bay. The hotel offers 26 basic but comfortable rooms, starting at about AU\$345 a night for two people. The restaurant serves local cuisine including musk ox and Arctic char, and there are rare artefacts from the Franklin expedition on display. Fishing trips and adventure tours, including by dog sled, can be organised at the hotel. [cambridgebayhotel.com](http://cambridgebayhotel.com)



TOUR THERE

One Ocean Expeditions has one westbound Classic Northwest Passage tour scheduled for 2016, from 12 August, for 13 nights. It costs about AU\$14,850 a person, sharing a semi-private twin cabin. Charter flights cost an extra AU\$1700. There are a number of other Arctic expeditions available between June and August. [oneoceanexpeditions.com](http://oneoceanexpeditions.com)



SUMMER VIBES PACK

grab this limited edition **BONUS**\* valued at \$135



ActiVent™



AWCover™



CradleFit™



FormShell™



MaxFit™



UltraCinch™

TERMS AND CONDITIONS

- 1) The promoter is Maxwell International Australia ("Promoter")
- 2) The Promotion commences on 01/12/2015 at 00:01 (AEDT) and concludes on 31/01/2016 at 23:59 (AEDT) or whilst stocks last.
- 3) Total 2,000 units of "Summer Vibes Pack" bonus items will be available for redemption
- 4) Bonus "Summer Vibes Pack" awarded on purchase of any item from the following Lowepro series: i) Tahoe Backpack ii) Slingshot Edge iii) Photo Hatchback iv) Flipside v) Pro Trekker vi) Pro Runner II vii) Fastpack II viii) Photosport II ix) Whistler

\* ONLY WHILST STOCKS LAST  
[www.lowepro.com/summer](http://www.lowepro.com/summer)