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Scott Forsyth

LAND

Exploring Torngat Mountains National Park is a lesson in responsibility, resiliency and respect.

BY JONNY BIERMAN





It's day six of our 15-day voyage from Kangerlussuaq, Greenland to St. John's, Newfoundland when the Torngat Mountains emerge over the horizon.

It's gradual: first a darkening of the horizon, then a silhouette, then full-scale peaks rising steeply from the Labrador Sea, the tallest mountains in mainland Canada east of the Rockies. Their flanks are streaked with ice in high, shaded basins; their feet are carpeted in copper-coloured tundra.

The rock on these shores is up to 3.9 billion years old—about 80 percent of the planet's entire history. The Inuit name for this place—Torngat, from the Inuktitut *Torngait*—means "place of spirits." Inuit guide Wayne Broomfield tells me the spirit is Torngarsuk: a great bear, master of the seals and whales, the most powerful being on this coast.

Fjords cut inland for kilometres, their walls narrowing until the granite overhead feels close enough to reach. Lone male polar bears rest on shelves of rock above the waterline. They are white against grey, easy to miss until one of their heads turn. In other spots, mothers and cubs move along ledges above the tideline, slow and deliberate, measuring our presence without alarm.

The nights belong to the aurora. Sailing this far north means your chances are high for seeing green curtains sweeping the full width of the sky, folding and reshaping. Vertical purple pillars rise from the horizon and surge overhead. Standing on the open deck in the cold, I find no edge to the aurora. The hot tub aboard our Adventure Canada ship is a comfortable observatory—steam rising into green light while the aurora moves overhead.

The days fall into a rhythm: the ship anchors in a fjord, passengers load into Zodiacs and go ashore to hike and meander as their ability allows, then return for meals. In between these landings, Elders' talks fill the lecture hall—Inuit knowledge keepers from Nain, Kuujjuaq and farther north speak about their families, this coast and the responsibility it carries—to return to it, to read it, to keep it.

Torngat Mountains National Park receives fewer than 600 visitors a year. Getting here requires a ship or a floatplane. Safety requires something more precious than either: an Inuit eye, trained over generations on a landscape that does not announce its dangers.

The park covers 9,700 square kilometres of northern Labrador. There are no roads, no permanent residents, the coastline running north from Saglek Fjord to the tip of the peninsula. Nunatsiavut—the Inuit self-governing region of Labrador—was created in 2005.

Three years later, Torngat Mountains National Park was formally established through the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement, making it the first national park in Canada co-managed entirely by Inuit. The Cooperative Management Board that oversees it draws from both Nunatsiavut, whose people have lived along this coast since time immemorial, and Nunavik, whose Inuit share deep ancestral ties to this landscape.

The land claims agreement included a specific commitment: within 10 years of establishment, every position in the park would be held by Inuit—from the superintendent down. They accomplished it in the tenth year. Every bear guard is Inuit. Every shore excursion carries a Parks Canada-approved archaeologist. These are not suggestions. They are conditions of access—and among the reasons Adventure Canada, which has the longest continuous history of any expedition operator on this coast, remains almost alone in making routine landings here.

On deck, Maria Merkuratsuk, one of the Inuit bear guards from the northern Labrador community of Nain, says, "Just over by that brown part over there." I can't find what she's found. A polar bear, lying motionless against dark rock, has been watching the ship. Merkuratsuk saw its head lift and turn as we approached. Expedition leader MJ Swan radios the call: we reroute for the safety of the passengers and the bear.

Later, Swan explains it simply. "That site was basically off limits," he says. "So we went to a completely different landing site. But that's the name of the game when you're in bear country."

Merkuratsuk learned to read bears from her father and from Elders whose accounts of bear behaviour have been passed on as operational knowledge—the kind that gets tested on a beach in real time. "My dad didn't agree with school. He taught us out on the land. I took a course to carry a firearm, but I never learned the rest from a course. I learned it from my dad, from the stories of what the great hunters did before us. It only makes sense when you're actually out there, part of it."

This sailing includes nine Inuit guides as expedition leaders, cultural educators, Zodiac drivers, archaeologists and bear guards—positions that put Indigenous knowledge and decision-making at the centre. Among them is Jason Edmunds, one of the expedition leaders, who grew up in Nunatsiavut. His father Randy is also on this sailing as an Inuit bear guard. Two generations of the same family, reading the same coastline as their ancestors have for generations before them.

"Having a national park—something at the national level—that is completely managed by Inuit is amazing," Edmunds says. "No matter what hat I am wearing."

He founded Nalunaiqsijiit, a training program designed to bring Inuit into expedition cruising not as cultural

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Dennis Minty



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decoration but as professionals, leaders and decision-makers. “Inuit were still underrepresented in an industry that operates throughout Inuit Nunangat,” he says. “That underrepresentation was not because of a lack of interest or ability, but because of barriers to access—training, experience pathways and the way the industry has traditionally understood expertise.”

The Torngats are one of the places where that is changing.

Broomfield leads our group onshore, up a slope above the beach. He stops in a few minutes, crouches and pinches a small green leaf from a low plant. “Mountain sorrel—good source of Vitamin C,” he says, “good in a salad. In the summertime, it’s really got a sweet scent to it, almost kind of like cilantro.”

Farther up, he points to a ring of flat stones set in a rough oval—the outline of a Thule structure, centuries old. “That was maybe an old Thule house that had fallen in,” he says, “and they reused the rocks around the edge for a big canvas tent later on.” He asks us not to walk through the rings or step on the stones. Once a rock is moved out of position, the record it held is gone for good.

Broomfield grew up in central Labrador. He has family buried at Hebron, which is on our itinerary to visit farther down this coast. “Just going back to where your ancestors were born and lived—it’s pretty amazing, because it’s not an easy place to get to,” he says.

On the ridge, the conversation turns to what has changed out on the land. The polar bear quota is set by the Nunatsiavut Government—roughly six bears a year for the whole region, allocated by lottery, and everything is shared among the communities after a hunt.

“We came into government, we established that policy,” Broomfield says. “We set the quota, we set the numbers.” Forty years ago, he says, hunting provided most of what people ate. Now the communities rely heavily on imported food, expensive and flown in. Climate change is the primary driver.

WILDLIFE SPOTTING IN THE TORNGATS

Polar bears are the headline animal, and every shore landing is led by an armed Inuit bear guard. The Torngats are also one of the only places on Earth where polar bears and black bears share territory. Out on the tundra, watch for caribou, Arctic fox and the occasional wolf; in the fjords and across the Davis Strait, minke whales and seals. The granite bird cliffs throng with razorbills, kittiwakes and Barrow's goldeneye, with falcons and eagles riding the updrafts. And in rivers, find Arctic char, the cold-water fish at the heart of Inuit diets.



Amory Wood



The sea ice tells the same story. "Growing up, we used to be able to go 30 kilometres out from our community on sea ice in June," he says. "Now you can't even go to the harbour." The knowledge his father passed to him—how to read ice, where to travel, what conditions meant safety—has become harder to transmit because the ice itself has become unpredictable. "You almost don't want to pass that knowledge on, because you can't understand it anymore," he says. "You gotta be really careful what you say, especially when it comes to travelling on sea ice."

SmartICE was built from exactly this kind of loss. After two men died in ice accidents near Nain in 2006, and after an especially dangerous winter in 2010, the Nunatsiavut Government partnered with researchers to develop technology and information products for ice travellers—built by and for the communities who depend on sea ice to move, hunt and live. The program received the Arctic Inspiration Prize and became a northern social enterprise in 2017. It now operates across 24 communities in Inuit Nunangat, the Northwest Territories and Yukon.

Rex Holwell, SmartICE's Operations Lead for Labrador, grew up in Nain. "I can recall, one year, I think I was seven or eight—it was Christmas day," he says. "My uncle and I took the garbage, and we actually travelled on the sea ice from our home to the dump. Nowadays, on December 25th, it's still open water. So, over the span of my 43 years since then, I'm seeing the sea ice coming a month later. We're getting shorter seasons on the ice to be able to hunt and practice our culture."

SmartQAMUTIKs—sensor-equipped sleds pulled by snowmobile along travel routes—measure ice thickness. SmartBUOYs track conditions across the season. But the equipment is deployed only in locations suggested by experienced ice users.

Community Knowledge Coordinators document Inuktitut terminology, elder knowledge of ice conditions, hazard locations and seasonal changes, and build that knowledge directly into the weekly travel safety maps distributed to each community. The sensor data tells you how thick the ice is. The language tells you what kind of ice it is, where it came from and what it means.

There is a word in the Natilingmiut dialect of Inuktitut—*Titpaqut*—that illustrates what this integration demands. In English, it translates approximately as: *beside the land is rough ice; small pieces that broke up in early fall, piled up and remained until spring; this can also occur in fresh water.* A person trained only in English-language ice services sees rough ice. An eye trained on a vocabulary built for this landscape sees origin, seasonality, texture and risk. SmartICE merges the two systems out on the ice, where it matters most.

The same principle runs through research conducted from Adventure Canada ships. Liz Pijogge, the northern contaminants researcher for the Nunatsiavut Government, first encountered issues with plastics not in a lab but in a committee room in Ottawa—at a Northern Contaminants Program Management Committee meeting, the kind of body that brings together people from the North and South, Crown and Indigenous representatives. Plastics came up as an emerging concern.

On the flight home, she opened a magazine and saw the work of Dr. Max Liboiron, a Memorial University researcher based in St. John's who studies plastic contamination in northern marine environments. She didn't follow up. About six months later, she was at the Nain airport picking up another researcher when Liboiron walked off the plane.

"Ain't you the plastic person?" Pijogge asked.

They got talking. That conversation became a seven-year collaboration and a microplastics sampling framework for the Labrador Sea—built on Pijogge's access to the communities, the animals and the land that Liboiron, based in St. John's, simply does not have access to. When Liboiron noted more microplastics in summer Arctic char catches and inferred that summer was the dirtier season, Pijogge stopped them. In spring, she explained, snowmelt carries everything the snowpack has collected through winter downstream. The water peaks in June—exactly when the char begin to run.

"I said, 'Are you sure?'" Pijogge says. Liboiron went back to the data. Pijogge was right. "Max, being a southern researcher based in St. John's, does not know what kind of animals we eat," she says. "They don't know where to find the animals to sample. So I kind of bring that to our work."

She has joined Adventure Canada voyages three times under the Researchers-in-Residence program. The ship gives her access to sampling sites too remote to reach any other way.

Since the pandemic, the number of expedition vessels requesting to operate in Nunatsiavut waters has grown. More ships, more operators, more itineraries that include the Canadian Arctic as a selling point. The access requirements for Torngat Mountains National Park apply to all of them: Inuit bear guards from Nunatsiavut or Nunavik, a Parks Canada-approved archaeologist on every shore excursion, registration with the Nunatsiavut Government. The conditions are universal. But meeting them requires something a permit application cannot provide—a staffing model built over decades of community relationships and a training program designed specifically to bring Inuit into the industry in roles that matter.

"Frameworks such as the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission should not sit on the sidelines as abstract values," Edmunds says. "They should inform standard operating procedures, decision-making, hiring, partnerships and how we measure success."

The question of who benefits from the growth of polar expedition travel—who guides, who tells the stories, who sets the terms of access—is no longer theoretical. In Nunatsiavut, it is being answered by the people who live here.

Two days before Nain, the ship anchored off Hebron as it continued south toward Newfoundland. A Moravian mission established in 1830, Hebron was the community from which 250 Inuit were forcibly evacuated in 1959—told to gather what they could carry and board a government vessel south to communities they had never lived in. The buildings remained. The people did not return for decades.

> "NOT ALL STORIES [ARE MEANT TO BE SHARED], IF WE START TELLING THEM [EVERYTHING], THE WHOLE WORLD WILL TRY TO COME."

Three stone plaques stand at Hebron now. One carries an apology from the Labrador Inuit Association. One carries an apology from the Moravian Church. The third records what the community said in response: the apology is accepted. Carved into the stone, in Inuktitut, is the word *Naligivagit*. It means: *I love you*.

On September 30th, the National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, Merkuratsuk spoke in the ship's theatre. She was five years old when her family was told to leave Nachvak Fjord—the deep fjord at the northern end of what is now the national park—during the mid-twentieth-century relocations that moved Inuit communities from their ancestral lands into government-designated settlements. She grew up in Nain in the years that followed. She has been sober for 31 years.

Her bear knowledge survived all of it. "If I did not hear the stories of elders, parents and that how they turned camouflage then I wouldn't see that," she says. "When I'm bear guarding, this is what I'm looking for."

In Nain, the ship anchored just outside of town. At Jens Haven Memorial School, youth from the community perform throat singing: pairs of young women face each other, breathing patterns interlocking, the sound built not from melody but from the rhythm of shared breath. At the Illusuak Cultural Centre on the waterfront, elders and young people move between rooms where traditional knowledge and contemporary Inuit art share the same floor plan.

Near the end of the voyage, I asked Merkuratsuk whether there are stories about this land she holds back from visitors.

"Not all stories [are meant to be shared]," she says. "If we start telling them [everything], the whole world will try to come."

They get to decide what the guest is ready to see. That is what it means to be hosted in someone's home—and why, two decades after Nunatsiavut came into being, the distinction still matters. ×

HOW TO BOOK THIS TRIP

Adventure Canada's **Greenland & Wild Labrador: A Torngat Mountains Adventure** is a 15-day small-ship expedition from Greenland's west coast down through Nunatsiavut and Torngat Mountains National Park to Newfoundland, with stops in Nuuk, Nain and the UNESCO World Heritage site at L'Anse aux Meadows. Its 2027 sailings are scheduled between August and October. The itinerary runs aboard the new Ocean Victory (175 passengers, all cabins with ocean views) and the smaller Ocean Nova (75 guests).

Trips start at $17,155 CAD per person based on double occupancy, including shore excursions led by Inuit guides, Zodiac landings and onboard talks. Book at **adventurecanada.com**.



Jonny Bierman