

## THE LAND THAT NEVER MELTS

*A ski journey through Auyuittuq, Baffin Island, 2002.*

*by Grant Dixon*



A visit to the Arctic had been on my wish list for some time, but the opportunity to join a four week trip to Baffin Island with Tasmanian friend Sarah and Canadians Greg, Louise, Trish and Vivian presented itself quite late, after my plans for another trip fell through. The best experiences often follow from the unexpected or unplanned so I set about compiling equipment and handed over lots of dollars to the travel agent (Arctic travel is expensive!).

Baffin Island, more than 1500 kilometres long, is the largest of Canada's Arctic islands. It forms part of the two million square kilometres of sparsely populated Nunavut ("our land" in the Inuktitut language), Canada's newest territory that came into being on 1st April 1999, the culmination of 20 years of Inuit land claim negotiations.

Despite having much pre-trip organisation taken care of by locals Greg and Louise, Sarah and my plan, concocted enthusiastically on our trans-Pacific flight, of getting organised in a couple of days and having time for some skiing in the Rockies before flying north remained just a dream. While anticipation can sometimes make the pre-trip tasks of shopping, sorting, weighing and packing seem less mundane and boring, after four days the attraction was wearing thin. Sarah and I went shopping at a supermarket, grabbing things from the shelves with gay abandon. Unfortunately, when sorted and weighed later, we found we had more than 40 kilograms of food each for the planned 30 days -

back to the drawing board. The food and other gear strewn over the floor of Greg and Louise's home slowly became organised into various piles and was packed for both the long flights north and subsequent stowage in the sleds. Items like cheese, margarine and bagels (very tasty for the first week!) were all pre-sliced because they would freeze solid for the duration when we set off in the Arctic cold.

An unplanned, and ultimately unnecessary, development was Sarah's need to re-equip almost completely in the few days before flying north, thanks to a mislaid rucksack by Air Canada, a feat achieved by much begging and borrowing. And then the missing bag turned up at the last minute, necessitating another late night repack in an Edmonton motel room just before departure, Sarah jubilant to be reunited with her Tim Tams and other Aussie delicacies.

The hiccups were not to end there. Delays at Edmonton airport next morning, while overnight snowfall was ploughed from runways and plane wings de-iced, provided time to ponder our seemingly huge pile of baggage. Airlines have different rules about excess, oversize and overweight baggage so we juggled some twenty items at check-in (including an overweight, 1.8 metre packed sled) in an attempt to minimise the extra charges.

Then Louise, travelling on a different flight, missed her connection in Yellowknife due to delays caused by the snow. However another delay provided the opportunity for her to catch up two days later. The rest of us spent this time stranded in Iqaluit, Nunavut's capital and, with 4500 people, its largest town, a sprawling mixture of modern insulated buildings and wooden shacks. We passed the time either sitting out a blizzard or shuttling between hotel and airport for repeatedly postponed or cancelled flights north, getting quite efficient at moving our substantial pile of bags around at the end of it all.



Eventually we were all together again, setting up camp on the sea ice adjacent to Qikiqtarjuaq. An Inuit settlement for 1000 years this village now has a population of about 500, much growth occurring in the 1950s with construction of a nearby cold war era Distant Early Warning (DEW) station by the US airforce. Now north of the Arctic Circle and more than 3000 kilometres from the

shops and scenes of the sometimes frenetic pre-trip organisation back down south, we were ringed by most of the curious village children as, late in the day, we prepared our first meal and watched the light change on a distant iceberg.

Auyuittuq National Park ,  
“the land that never melts”,  
was the first national park  
created north of the Arctic  
Circle, set aside in 1972. The  
park covers 19,500 square  
kilometres of steep-sided  
glacial valleys, deeply-incised  
fiords and dramatic  
mountain peaks on Baffin  
Island’s Cumberland  
Peninsula. The wilds of



Auyuittuq were to be our home for the subsequent few weeks; the plan - to cross the park via major glaciers and icecap, exploring some of the tributary glaciers and perhaps climbing a few peaks, then descending to South Panguitung Fiord via the frozen Weasel River valley, a total distance of some 260 kilometres, with side trips.

Qikiqtarjuaq is located on 16 kilometre long Broughton Island, just off the coast and surrounded by sea ice. This was why we were here at this time of year, early spring - after the dark and very cold days of Winter but before the sea and river ice broke up under the onslaught of Summer’s 24-hour sunshine. The Coronation Glacier, our route to the Penny Icecap in the heart of Auyuittuq National Park, lay more than 70 kilometres across the sea ice and up a long fiord. We had decided to avoid this long plod, minimise the potential for encounters with polar bears, and start our trek at the terminus of the glacier by utilising snowmobiles for this section.

Snowmobiles have replaced dogsleds in many parts of Nunavut today, although a few dog teams remain as nostalgic reminders of a traditional lifestyle and are used for transport and tourism in some places. We helped two local Inuuk men tie our laden sleds onto two qamutiiks (long wooden sleds, which were to be towed by the snowmobiles), wedged ourselves amongst the loads as comfortably as possible and then roared off. Travelling in this way was fast and efficient for our purposes but is certainly not comfortable. We were bashed and jarred continuously, the qamutiiks becoming airborne as we hurtled over pressure ridges and snow hummocks on the sea ice. And, travelling at up to 40kmh through the -20 degree air, the wind chill required us to don every item of clothing we had, looking like characters out of an old Michelin tyre advertisement.

Too busy hanging on otherwise, it was periodic stops to rest from the battering and stretch that provided opportunities to take in the surroundings. And they were stunning - the sun, shining in a clear blue sky, glistened off small crystal icebergs frozen in the sea ice, the flat expanse of which ended abruptly at the sheer walls of Coronation Fiord.

Approaching the ice cliff terminus of the Coronation Glacier, we crossed a line of polar bear tracks on the sea ice, apparently a mother and cub. This was to be the closest encounter we had with nanuq (the Inuktitut word for polar bears), the world's largest land carnivore, both disappointing and a relief at the same time.

A ramp-like break in the ice cliffs appeared to provide potential access to the glacier and this is where we parted company with our snowmobile drivers, travel for the next twenty five days reliant solely on our own physical efforts. However the first section was rather more physical than expected. The ramp at the edge of the glacier turned out to be an icy, moraine-covered slope covered with fresh snow and too steep for us to individually haul our sleds up, each of which was laden with a month's food, fuel and equipment weighing more than 60 kilograms. We devised a system hitching three people to a single sled and then dragged it up the slope, ignoring the grating sounds of crampons and sled on the rocks beneath the snow. The rest of the day passed getting all the sleds barely one kilometre up beside the glacier. Then all the next day was spent finding a route through snow-covered crevasses and more moraine, then unpacking our sleds and shuttling loads to camp at the edge of the open glacier. On day three we were finally able to don skis, hitch our sleds and commence pulling them up the wide white highway of the Coronation Glacier.

We climbed steadily up the Coronation Glacier, which is more than 40 kilometres long and up to three kilometres wide, over five days to an elevation of 1800 metres at the edge of Penny Icecap. Sore thighs at day's end for the first few days affirmed that we were exercising different muscles while striding on skis, the sleds pulling at our hips. It also took a few days to develop a system for establishing and dismantling camp each day but, even with practice, erecting and securing the tents, reversing the procedure next day and melting water for meals and day use consumed more than four hours daily. For the first few days we also erected an alarm tripwire around camp each night, to warn of the approach of any polar bears, until we judged we were far enough from the coast for the risk to be minimal.

The landscape changed gradually as we progressed up the glacier, with views becoming more



extensive as we left the confining valley walls behind. It was rarely windy, a situation that continued for much of the trip, and made for far more consistently comfortable and scenic travel in the sub-zero conditions than expected; even a slight breeze soon felt bitter on any exposed noses or ears.

The final day up to the icecap included a couple of steeper sections, and near continuous deep fresh snow, hard work for the leader ploughing a trench with his or her sled for the rest of the group. But there was plenty to admire when resting from such efforts. It was another clear day, with mist filling the trench-like valley below and hiding the Coronation Glacier. Rising from the mist, vertical cliffs were capped by the ice forming the margins of the Penny Icecap.

The rarely-visited Penny Icecap, covering 5100 square kilometres with ice up to 300 metres thick, is one of the last remnants of the huge ice sheet which blanketed Canada during last ice age. Its rolling dome-like summits rise to 2100 metres, the highest point on Baffin Island. We camped and undertook side trips to these summits, then spent several days following interconnected glaciers generally southwards and climbing another small peak, with a steep snow slope outflanking a rock wall and a narrow summit snow ridge adding excitement. These ascents provided our first views of the enormous walls and jagged summits for which Auyuittuq National Park is best known.

Descending from the icecap provided the first experiences of downhill travel with the sleds. Unlike skiing downhill generally, this was rarely something to be savoured. On steeper slopes the best approach was usually to leave our ski skins on, release a length of plastic chain which was dragged beneath the sleds as a brake, and head directly down the fall line. Attempts at traverses or fancy turns often resulted in the sled rolling and a need to unhitch in order to right it, potentially quite strenuous and with a risk the sled could escape if the slope was steep.

Glaciers flowing from the Penny Icecap have abraded the ancient granitic bedrock to produce the smooth, sheer cliff faces that characterise peaks southeast of the icecap, and provide near limitless climbing potential. The best known of these peaks are Mounts Asgard and



Thor, the overhanging (105 degrees) upper west face of the latter one of the most striking cliff faces on earth. I knew this, and had seen photographs of these famous peaks; nevertheless the sight of the 800 metre west face of Mt Asgard, falling sheer from its unique cylindrical twin summits, growing as we approached from beyond the pass at the head of the Turner Glacier, was still unexpectedly stunning.

We spent several days in the Mt Asgard area, undertaking a circuit of the Asgard massif and climbing Mt Alvit, the latter providing great views of peaks and glaciers in return for more than 1000 vertical

metres of effort. The day ski trip around Mt Asgard would have been pleasant if for no other reason than the fact we were briefly free of our sleds but it is an extraordinary outing, perhaps one of the best ski tours on earth. Our route took us up the aptly-named Kings Parade Glacier, granite walls soaring skyward on both sides, across two passes, then back down the Turner Glacier beneath Mt Asgard's west face.

Camping on the Turner Glacier we saw our first sign of wildlife since Qikiqtarjuaq, Arctic fox (tiriganiaq) tracks in the snow. Foxes travel extensively in search of food but we wondered what it was searching for up on the snow-covered glacier. Later, while climbing a peak east of the Weasel Valley, Greg and I came across Arctic hare (ukaliq) tracks on a mountain ridge at almost 1500 metres. So, perhaps the foxes pursue the hares up into the mountains, but who knows what the plant-eating hares are seeking up amongst rock, snow and ice?

The Turner Glacier steepens at its terminus and descending it proved exiting but Louise was the only one to roll (in spectacular fashion) on this occasion. We were now in Akshayuk Pass, where the Owl and Weasel valleys bisect Cumberland Peninsula and provide a 100 kilometre trekking route between South and North Pangnirtung Fiords in summer. We skied south, a fast and easy nine kilometres across the flat surface of frozen Summit Lake to the source of the Weasel River, our route back to sea level.

Partly as an experiment and partly out of environmental considerations we had decided to carry all solid human waste. This was easier than first thoughts might suggest - there was plenty of space on the sleds (after all, they carried the original food) and the continuously freezing conditions meant the shit soon froze and generally stayed that way. We eventually disposed of our sizeable brown lumps in the large fly-out drum in one of the trekker's toilets in the Weasel Valley.

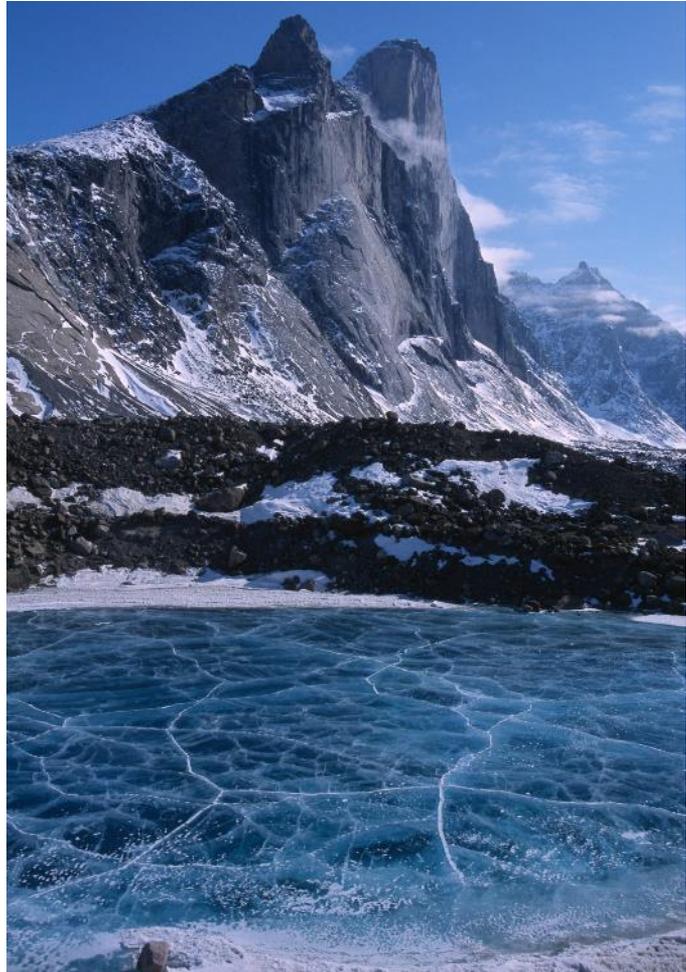


A couple of side trips were undertaken during our descent of the Weasel Valley. A long ski up the Tupeq Glacier, hot and sweaty once we climbed above the mist, then arduous step plugging up the final slope saw three of us on the summit of Mt Tupeq, with good views across the surrounding

country and back towards the Penny Icecap. A fast ski down the upper glacier, then an eerie one once we re-entered the mist, was followed by an entertaining descent (mostly side-slipping) down a narrow corridor of cascading ice through moraine below the glacier's snout.

Skis were stowed and crampons donned for the 35 kilometre descent to the head of South Pagnirtung Fiord. Crampon points barely penetrated the Weasel River's hard, glassy ice and the sleds glided almost without friction. So much so that, with any sort of slope, let alone a frozen rapid, it was virtually impossible to keep them behind. It proved easier to unhitch and allow the sled to find its own way, either in front (deemed the "shopping cart" method) or swinging from one arm to the side ("walking the dog").

Mt Thor rose fang-like ahead as we crunched down the frozen river. We eventually passed beneath its awesome 1000 metre west face, rising beyond blue-green kettle lakes, their frozen surface a crazed jigsaw pattern. On the river, areas of ice were now thin or plasticky and flexible, especially where water had flowed over the surface of older ice and subsequently frozen. On several occasions we broke through, fortunately resulting in little more than boots and crampons becoming encased in ice as the water froze. The sleds, of course, also broke through but usually floated happily in their self-created pool until dragged onto ice again.



The snow cover rapidly decreased as we descended the valley, patches of grass and sedges the first vegetation we had seen for three weeks. As we soon discovered, the disappearing snow was only partly due to the onset of the spring thaw. The valley is something of a wind funnel and, in addition to scouring areas free of snow, the winds deposit drifts of sand and grit across the surface of the frozen, braided channels of the river. Route finding for ice leads amongst the sand drifts, in one instance in a sandstorm, was a surprising development for an Arctic trip. As the valley broadened, and the number of braided channels increased, picking the correct channel became something of a lottery. On several occasions an ice lead ended requiring a gut-busting effort to drag the sled across mud or damp sand to another frozen channel.

Thankfully, South Pagnirtung Fiord was still frozen so less than 30 kilometres of leisurely sea ice travel remained. Rounding the final headland the small town of Pagnirtung, and a smoke plume from its rubbish dump, came into view. The box-like toy houses grew as we crossed the final bay,

route finding through a band of ice pressure ridges the last obstacle before heated buildings, hot showers and, the following day, the flight back south.

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