



## Arctic Country

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By Eleanor Rodgeron, MD

**Our intrepid author ventures north this summer to behold the walruses, polar bears and wild birds. She also straddles a motorbike, grabs hold of its pudgy driver and takes a ride.**

"TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE BABY'S DUE DATE," a young woman trucking us up to the meeting house told me, "the mother is flown from Rigolet to Goose Bay for a wait in the hospital. She thinks it's pretty nice." I had no opportunity to ask how long the mother stayed after the birth, but I thought maternity care must be adequate.

We were in the community of Rigolet, in the Hamilton Inlet of Labrador off the Newfoundland Coast, population 320, mostly Inuit, the native people of that part of Canada.

We had sailed from northern Hudson's Bay, through the Hudson Strait, past Baffin Island and the extensive Province of Nunavut, the part of northeastern Canada returned to the native Inuits, into the Labrador Sea.

At one end of the meeting hall members of the community sat and scrutinized us, big smiles on their faces. The other three sides of the room held tables of merchandise for sale - toys of seal fur, shell jewelry, caribou moccasins, crayon pictures. English was spoken and there was a little chitchat about the warm weather.

The hall quickly became stuffy and I went outside for a breath of clear air.

While I hesitated, deciding whether to walk back to the dock or wait for the accommodating truck, a man hailed me from the porch. He waved his arms and shouted, "Lady, I'll give you a ride! Wait, wait! I'll give you a ride!"

He rushed down the steps and motioned me toward his 4-wheel motorbike.

I backed away. "I don't know - I don't think -"

"Yes, yes! Wait, wait! I'll give you a ride!"

He was persistent and I yielded. With a little help in the straddle, I settled down behind him, my arms half around his soft, fat middle.

Down the hill we bumped, the big tires making the ride somewhat smoother than that of the truck. We eased gently right up to the ship's gangway. The gentleman was pleased and so was I.

We had flown from Sacramento to Toronto and then on to Rankin Inlet, an Inuit settlement that had made elaborate preparations for our arrival. I was awed at the examples set up of living arrangements in earlier days. We were well above the tree line and the landscape was rock, a few plants, moss and an occasional flower in a crevice.

What man can do to survive! Rocks were used to help build shelters, to hold the sides of caribou tents, to cover graves, to build ovens lined with moss for baking fish, caribou, seal, walrus and polar bear.

For us, tents were set up for shelter from the strong wind and we heard ancient tales from the elders, recounted by interpreters. We were served beans, caribou, char and macaroni salad while watching a fashion show of native and fur garments. Our guide was a cheerful, pleasant woman, toothless, who spoke good English and answered all our questions. Younger Inuits have gone elsewhere for their educations and some have returned to occupy important positions in the community. Alcoholism is the disease that concerns them most.

With considerable help from the ship's crew down the ladder, we rode the Zodiacs to wet and dry landings - rubber boots being mandatory. Once, when the water threatened the tops of my boots, I was lifted in bodily. The seas were smooth or slightly choppy.

I was impressed with the way life adapts to the tundra and bare rocks and how the flat lichen nourishes the caribou. A variety of white, blue, purple and yellow flowers bloomed unexpectedly everywhere - saxifrage, moss campion, crowberry among others, and the lonely Arctic poppy. Flat willow branches hugged the ground and grew a little when the seasons permitted.

We sailed by Walrus Island and watched walruses tumble against each other. We moved close to the Digges Islands and photographed a few of the hundreds of nesting birds - guillemots, murres, a few puffins, gulls.

At Akabor Island, we watched from the ship as a polar bear and two cubs sniffed along the shore, probably picking up eggs dropped from cliff-nesting birds. Another polar bear swam near the ship, apparently comfortable in the frigid water.

At one point, the water glassy calm, the ship wove between rocky cliffs and past "dog island." Here natives left their dogs in the summer, asking neighbors to feed them every 3 or 4 days, and then picked them up for the winter.

Cape Dorset, located on an island which at low tide connects by land bridge to Baffin Island, has been set up as the center for Inuit Art, soapstone carvings, stone cut and lithograph prints, drawings by world-renowned artists. The natives are natural artists and are encouraged to pursue their own ideas. There are no schools of art. Collectors eagerly buy the work and prices have skyrocketed.

Found here were remains of an ancient Inuit people who flourished between 100 B.C. and 1100 A. D. The Baffin Inuit of Cape Dorset are descendants of the later "Thule Culture." The Hudson's Bay Company, which opened up Canadian lands, established a Cape Dorset trading post in 1913.

Our remarkable weather continued as we sailed to St. John and Viking remains on Newfoundland and then to St. Pierre, the only piece of French territory in the North American hemisphere. From there, we flew to Halifax and home. Our knowledge of geography and people outside our neighborhood and culture was expanded, and our appreciation of what it takes to survive under the harshest conditions imaginable, making use of all nature has to offer.

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