

# Ellesmere Island—Arctic Dreams

Dave Quinn

This article is about traveling to the Canadian Arctic. While hardly a winter getaway, it points out the possibilities which are open to those with folding kayaks.

Summer in the Canadian high arctic was somewhat of a sleep-deprivation experiment for this southerner. It was two o' clock in the morning and, try as I might, I could NOT get to sleep. The sounds of barking walrus, clamouring for a spot on the ice flows, echoed across the fjord. The mysteries of all I had seen today still swam in my head—too active to let me sleep.

And the sun! The never-setting sun had already begun its warm climb towards the East, and it cast long textured shadows across the water and land. As it rose it seemed to carry with it my own energy, and the possibility of sleep drifted away with the walrus on the ebbing tide. Such is the way in a place such as this—fraught with mystery, history, and life that belies its location near the top of the world.

I was at a place known as Eskimobeyn, in Flaggler Bay on the East Coast of Ellesmere Island. At nearly 80 degrees north latitude, the place bears little resemblance to my hometown of Kimberley, British Columbia. On first glance, Ellesmere appears to be little more than a staggeringly beautiful mix of rock, ice, and water. The Ellesmere Ice Cap covers much of the island, spilling over the edges of rock to meet the sea wherever it can. Giant ancient blue icebergs, calved from the glaciers as they march into the Arctic Ocean, look like giant ice sculptures as they float sluggishly amongst the remains of the winter pack ice in the bays. The circling summer sun seems to highlight every ridge and crack in the ice, and every vein and edge in the cliffs that rise up to 3000 feet from the frigid waters of the Arctic.

I was here as an assistant guide on a two week sea kayaking trip through the fjords of Ellesmere. Scott, my guiding compadre, and eight guests were snoring deeply in their tents below the rocky perch I had chosen as my bunk for the night, and our five double kayaks were pulled up on the rocky shore, well above the high tide line. This was my third trip to the Arctic as an assistant guide. The paddling itself was relatively easy, as the deep fjords are of-



ten mirror-like, but with ice in the water, one really has to be sure of the winds and currents before heading out of camp. So guiding was challenging.

Despite its barren facade, Ellesmere Island is home to one of the richest pockets of life on Earth. The nature of the long, narrow bays and fjords causes the formation of *polynyas*—large areas that remain ice-free throughout the entire Arctic winter. These wonders of the north mean Life for the large mammals of the northern seas. Walrus, bearded and ringed seals, the unicorn-like narwhal, and the white whale, or belukha, all depend on *polynyas*, and congregate around them in the winter months. This concentration of food inevitably attracts meat-eaters. Polar bears, arctic foxes, and man have hunted this region for thousands of years. (For more on the creatures who inhabit this mysterious and intriguing landscape, read *Arctic Dreams* by Barry Lopez.)

We had flown into Alexandra Fjord almost two weeks ago, on a Twin Otter plane from Resolute Bay in the newly created Nunavut Territory. After a breathtakingly clear flight over the Ice Cap, we bumped, bounced, and skidded to a halt on Alexandra's tiny, tilted runway. Now, 11 days later, we were paddling on the mirror-like waters of Flaggler Bay—applying yet another layer of sunscreen to our weathered faces. The presence of the huge Greenland Ice Cap to the East creates its own high pressure weather system that reaches over to the east coast of Ellesmere. This, combined with the mountains that run

down the spine of Ellesmere, blocking the weather systems coming from the West, creates some of the most predictably wonderful weather anywhere.

I was soaking up the warm 24-hour arctic sun, watching ice-rafts of walrus float noisily past on the ebbing tide, when I was struck with the intensity of the mystery

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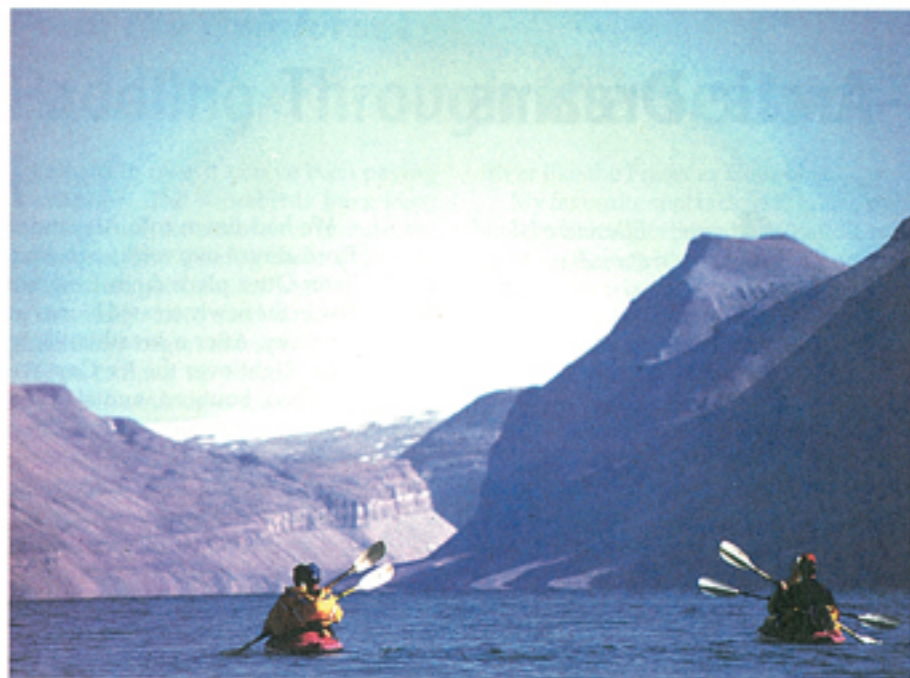
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Treeless terrain provides starkly beautiful vistas

of this timeless place. How and why did people come to this land in the first place? What happened to them? What must they have thought of the early European explorers in their massive wooden ships?

Canadian archeologist Peter Schledermann and his team spent many summers in this area trying to unravel these mysteries. Avoiding polar bears and legions of mosquitoes, Schledermann and his team mapped and explored many of the Thule and Dorset sites in the Ellesmere region. They uncovered beautiful carv-

ings and decorated weapons—symbols of a well-developed culture.

They also discovered something else. Iron boat rivets and bits of ancient chain mail were found in some of the ruins, relics of a European Viking culture. These finds were all dated to around 1200 AD, and the questions still remain: did the Thule acquire these items in trade, or were the Norsemen exploring the high Arctic much earlier than originally thought?

Such is the nature of the intense beauty of the high arctic. This land of 24-hour sun

and long months of dark winter is a land of mystery, a land of extreme contrasts. How can a land so seemingly vast and barren be so fraught with beauty and life at the same time? How does life survive months of dark, frozen winter? What is it that continues to draw human beings to this area?

Eskimobeyn is a site that has been used as a hunting camp for over 4000 years by the ancestors of today's Innu. Early cultures set up skin tents, anchoring them with rings of stone that are still visible today. Around 1200 years ago, the Thule culture moved into the high Arctic from the West, bringing kayaks and dogs with them. These people hunted the mighty Bowhead whale—fifty tonnes of meat, blubber and bone that spelled survival through the long, sunless winters. These intrepid people chased down, harpooned, and killed the world's second largest mammal from boats that were very similar in design to the ones we were travelling in.

We dangled underwater beepers to prevent encounters with one tonne walrus. The idea is that the normally shy walrus hear us and can avoid us, instead of us scaring them into doing something likely only we would regret!

Walrus are one thing to avoid, but the thought of hunting whales from a kayak is a seemingly suicidal prospect. I can't even imagine paddling up to fifty tonnes of whale and poking it with a bit of bone tied to a stick! Kayaks are sturdy and stable, but you've got to be kidding! However, motivation was intense to capture these leviathans—one whale spelled survival through the winter for a group of Thule. Meat was piled under stones to protect it from bear and fox, blubber was rendered for light and heating oil, and the bones used to frame in a dwelling for the winter!

Eskimobeyn was rediscovered by a Norwegian Explorer named Otto Sverdrup over 100 years ago. Sverdrup is credited with the discovery and mapping of over a third of what is now Nunavut's high Arctic Islands. Sverdrup and a fellow Norwegian named Fridtjof Nansen were the first successful Arctic explorers. 'Success' in the Arctic exploration arena in the latter part of the 19th century simply meant that one's crew didn't die of scurvy, starvation, or freeze to death! Sverdrup and Nansen accomplished this by using traditional methods to travel and hunt. They also broke out of the traditional "Conquer the North" attitude that many European explorers held, and worked with the elements, instead of against them. This part of Canada's newest territory was



At low tide, everything goes aground

bought from Norway for the cost of Sverdrup's expeditions. What a steal! This bargain may partly make up for Canada's Alaska Panhandle fiasco.

Sometime later that morning, after the pod of narwhal puffed their way by our camp, after a huge berg of ice had drifted up the fjord out of sight, and after dozens of walrus had either drifted or swam past, sleep finally found me.

While my hometown of Kimberley was fast asleep under a darkened southern sky, I was dreaming Arctic dreams under the midnight sun. □



Thule people's housepit with Bowhead whale skull



Dave Quinn guides with Whitney and Smith Legendary Expeditions at 403-678-3052 or [www.legendaryex.com](http://www.legendaryex.com). They specialize in trips to areas of remote wilderness. ©

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