

Baffin Island Ski Tour– April 27 – May 10, 2002

After several consecutive years of late spring icefield traverses in B.C., I'm heading way up north for a two-week ski tour at the north of Baffin Island. The reasons? A chance to ski among lovely, isolated glaciated mountains at 73 degrees latitude and to sample the Inuit culture of Pond Inlet at both ends of the trip. Better yet, we're traveling on 25,000 Aeroplan points (the same as, say, Calgary to Toronto) and are thus getting \$4,000 in flights for essentially nothing. The only drawback is that because the last leg of our journey only allows two reward seats per flight, we're spread out over several days arriving and departing.



Eclipse Sound at 10:45 p.m. from Pond Inlet (iceberg in upper left)

For insomniacs, here is the story of the expedition, undertaken by four doctors – Gabrielle and Dave from Calgary, Madeleine, working in Iqaluit, and Heather, between locums in B.C. – and one writer; I christened the group MediHack.

April 23-24 – I set out first, leaving Calgary with one big duffel bag and my father's ancient double-barrel shotgun and "double ought" B.B. shot, to ward off potential polar bears at both ends of the trip, when we're near the sea ice. (The gun, always strapped, unloaded to the top of my sled, survives some wrenching downhill runs on the trip, but it doesn't survive the return flight on Air Canada; the wooden stock is cracked nearly in two upon the Calgary arrival.)

After staying overnight with friends in Ottawa, I fly north with First Air through Quebec and across Hudson Strait to Iqaluit, where I spend two days with Madeleine (the flights from Ottawa to Pond Inlet are almost as far as from Calgary to Ottawa). Iqaluit (formerly Frobisher Bay), is the fast-growing capital (pop. 5,000) of the new territory of Nunavut (pop. less than 30,000). Only about a dozen kilometres of roads in town but they're busy with pedestrians, cars, heavy equipment and the occasional skidoo on the melting pavement and gravel.

I walk around town, looking at buildings on pads and stilts, reading signs in English and Inuktitut and buying a few groceries (prices nearly double those of Calgary's). Madeleine and I go to an igloo-shaped restaurant reeking of smoke that was closed a week earlier for health code violations. About every 15 minutes, an Inuk (singular, plural is Inuit) guy stops at our table to show soapstone carvings; Madeleine buys a nice hunter-in-kayak piece for a bartered \$80. Dinner is less of a bargain: \$60 for a hamburger, chicken wings, large Caesar salad and four bottles of beer (hey, we're on holidays).

April 25-26 – Dave arrives in Iqaluit on the 25th, bearing a rich chocolate cake for Madeleine's birthday party, attended by many of the town's ex-pats from the south. On the 26th, the rest of the group arrives and we board the Pond Inlet flight on a 20-seat jet; the front half of the plane is reserved for cargo). The jet flies fairly low towards a stopover at Clyde River, on the east coast of Baffin Island. Near Clyde, we get our first look at the island's northern mountains – an impressive

sea of peaks and glaciers and, along some fjords, granite walls of up to 4,000 feet that attract top climbers during the brief summer.

After passing over hundreds of kilometres of more glaciated peaks, our flight lands in Pond Inlet around 6 p.m, greeted by people pressed against a frost fence and crowded into the one-room airport. Once the flight is unloaded, everyone quickly disperses on skidoos along frozen streets to their small houses. Located on low hills at the north end of Baffin Island, Pond Inlet (pop. 1,200) has spectacular views north across Eclipse Sound to the mountains and down-to-the-sea glaciers (24 kilometres away) of Bylot Island, much of which is in the new Sermilik National Park.

Despite the grandeur, a nippy evening wind is blowing and we have no place to stay, since our intended overnight host has 18 visitors from the end of a Clyde-to-Pond dog sled race. But the enterprising Madeleine recognizes the Australian voice of a nurse, Di, working in Pond and minutes later, three of us are unloading gear on her apartment floor, while the other two are doing the same in another nurse's apartment. After downing some of Di's tea and leftover cake, we're off to the school auditorium to watch the awards presentation for the dog sled race. Skidoos, with two or three aboard and often including a toddler on the driver's lap, steadily zoom past and congregate en masse outside the school. Inside, there are many teenage mothers with babies in the hoods of their parkas (amauties), men with faces blackened by the weather and kids wandering everywhere. We duck out early to finish packing and get some sleep. The skidoos keep roaring up and down the streets till 3 or 4 in the morning, though with the around-the-clock light, it's hard to know when it's nighttime.

April 27-29 – Our Inuk outfitter, Sheattie, picks us up in an old pickup truck and, in light snowfall along the sea ice in front of his house, loads all our gear onto one sled (kamotiq) and us into a covered hutch on another sled. At 9:30, Sheattie and his son Stephen mount their skiddos and begin pulling the two sleds east along the coastline of the frozen sound to the start of our ski trip. The hutch is padded inside, but it's insufficient to soften the bone-jarring thuds each time the sled crests a small ice ridge, and those at the front soon scurry to the calmer back. The smell of skidoo gasoline wafting in the little window causes all the doctors to pop a Gravol, and they're a bit groggy as we progress along the seashore. We do, however, manage to choke down the leftover chocolate birthday cake, a premonition of much gorging to come.



Inuk outfitter Sheattie hauled us by skidoo to the start of our ski traverse.

About every hour, the skidoos stop to refuel and give us some fresh air. We scurry out into the chilly breeze for a quick pee and to snap a few shots of the rock walls along the way. Our last stop is beside a pale blue iceberg, frozen in the sea ice.

After four hours of progressively smoother sailing, we pull into Erik Harbour, named for a ship that sank nearby. Sheattie and Stephen unload their cargo and roar off, leaving behind five chilled adventurers, connected to a very distant civilization only by an emergency satellite phone. After squeezing all our gear into duffel bags and onto our plastic sleds, we embark in mid-afternoon on our journey, glancing over our shoulders occasionally for stalking polar bears.

The sleds, by guess, weigh between 75 and 100 pounds. Some people have brought lots of warm gear – big down jackets, pile or down pants, neoprene face masks, hefty overbags, extra-thick sleeping pads and one-litre steel thermoses. Several have packed a ton of food – big bags of mixed nuts, corn nuts, barbecue peanuts, a couple of pounds of cheese, a pan of homemade sesame apricot bars – and this is just the lunch stuff (I learn to put my hand out at every rest stop). Dave is the champion gourmand. For one huge dinner of Chinese chicken and mushrooms, he pulls out the following condiments – small plastic bottles of olive oil, sesame oil, soy sauce, hot sauce and oyster sauce, plus a little pepper mill and a container of kosher salt. He apologizes for forgetting the cheese grater but does have maple syrup to sweeten the breakfast fruit compote. And Madeleine throws a quarter-pound stick of butter into all her suppers for the calories needed to provide energy and ward off the cold.

Accustomed to carrying everything on my back and doing spring traverses in the warmer B.C. interior and coast, I've packed fairly light. Indeed, I've weighed my clothing and every scrap of food on my electronic food scale, wrestling mightily over whether to carry an extra Clif bar and only throwing in my down jacket at the last minute, mostly for the skidoo ride. Dave, on the other hand, discovers mid-way through the trip he is carrying five pairs of scissors (three in his first-aid kit, one in his Swiss Army knife and even a pair for trimming his moustache) along with a five-inch pair of nail clippers.

Though it's not terribly cold by Arctic standards (our coldest night is -25 C. and we often take the overbags off our sleeping bags), the snow never melts even under bright mid-day sun, and the slightest breeze has us throwing down jackets on at every break. During breaks from sled pulling, I just sip at the cold water from my plastic bottle until someone offers me a hot drink from their big thermoses.

It's not hard pulling the heavily-laden sleds because other than the first couple of days, the trail breaking is non-existent on the hard glacier surface (snow pack is only a couple of feet above the ice), and the grades are gentle. Over two weeks, we only carry the sleds once, across 50 metres of rocky moraine. Half the group has plastic piping connecting sleds to hip belts, while Gabrielle and I have nifty harnesses (made by Joanne Winfield), with ensolite padding across the hips and suspender-like webbing for straps. It really comes into its own on steeper grades, when the pulling is distributed over hips and across the back. It's the only long trip where I've had no sore muscles.

While the sledding is easy across two lakes and then south up a long glacier, the distances are very deceptive. Landmarks that look maybe three kilometres away are in reality about 10 kilometres distant. After a while, we settle into a slow, steady rhythm (averaging 2 km/hr), lost in our own worlds and looking up occasionally to savour the superb views – side glaciers rising to rounded summits and some 1,500-foot granite walls flanking the main glacier.



Madeleine traversing across glacier above Camp 3

April 30 – After three mostly sunny days of plodding up the glacier with heavy sleds, we set off at 6:30 with light packs for a 35-kilometre round trip ski up Mount Qijavik, at 6,000 feet the highest peak on this part of Baffin Island. The rope goes on briefly after we ski across two narrow cracks, but after that it's a lot of low-angle plodding to a high col, where we finally see our peak. We drop onto another glacier and begin the final ascent across hard pack to the summit, reached in 8.5 hours. Great views across rounded peaks that look like sand dunes. In the northeast distance is the dark stain of the floe edge, a gash of open water in the sea ice, where seals, migrating birds and polar bears congregate in the spring (once the sea ice breaks up, narwhales migrate through the sound).

The descent on the hardpack is easy, low-angle cruising – mostly parallel turns on telemark gear; no need to pack the fat boards for this low-snow terrain. The last 10 kilometres is continuous downhill, and we soar down to camp in 45 minutes.

May 1 – We sleep in till about 9:30 and get going around noon. With endless daylight (didn't need to bring the headlamp), it doesn't really matter when you ski, and we soon get into the habit of staying up to around 11 p.m., getting up around 8:30 and departing 11:30ish. This day, we finally reach the top of the long, main glacier and set up camp around 7 p.m. beside a big granite boulder in a marvelous amphitheatre of high walls topped by glacial ice.

May 2 – Still mainly sunny. We make a day trip south onto the edge of the large Oliver Glacier. The wind has picked up, blowing snow and obscuring visibility for the first time (until then, two-day-old tracks looked like they were an hour old). It's bitterly cold on the hands and other exposed bits of flesh, and wearing neoprene face masks we beat a hasty retreat to our camp.



Big rock Camp 4

May 3 – We leave Camp 4 and climb steadily up a new glacier to the west. The last hill up to a 5,000-foot col is the only steep sledding of the trip. Those with hip belts and skinnier skins fight hard not to be pulled backwards as they drag their sleds over little snow ridges. The wind is too chilly to savour the new vistas at the col, and we quickly embark on our first downhill run with sleds – easy going until a sidehill traverse causes them to flip over a few times. We set up an early evening camp and enjoy the late sun on peaks and glaciers to the east that we skied by a few days earlier (we're now heading mostly north and paralleling our inward leg).

May 4 – A long slog up a broad glacier. The peak bagger in me looks wistfully at several likely unclimbed peaks that we pass close by, though given the deceptive distances, their summits are probably four kilometres and a couple of hours away. As we near a 4,600-foot col, I convince Gabrielle to go up a 5,000-foot bump (with an impressive cliff on the other side) while the others go a bit further to set up camp. Without sleds, we cover the two kilometres in 45 minutes and, in a chilly cloud that freezes Gabrielle's exposed hair white, reach the summit at 6:15 p.m. We name our probable first ascent Oonakoot (Inuktitut for "good evening"). Spend the night at our highest camp (4,600 feet) and play Scrabble past midnight.

May 5-6 – First poor visibility day, with some drifting snow on the sleds. By early afternoon, it's cleared sufficiently to set out and we cruise down a long, narrow glacier flanked by granite walls. The downhill, of course, are relatively short lived, and then it's a couple more hours of plodding up the next glacier to the next camp. We take a rest day from traveling and – after watching Dave run naked, save red booties, to the bathroom like in the Inuit movie *Atanarjuat* – and ski up two peaks near the camp and make a couple of lovely runs down in the two inches of glistening fresh powder.



Atanarjuat Dave runs to the biffy

May 7-8 – Zip down seven kilometres of glacier, then plod up three on our last climb. Reach a col with fresh vistas north and then a long run down to a frozen lake harbouring a few small icebergs calved off a nearby glacier toe. Cook dinner on a small gravel bar. After a very leisurely morning, we go back up yesterday afternoon's hill, sans sleds, and make a fabulous run under thin clouds all the way down to the lake for a tour around the mini iceberg (even make a telemark turn off its snowy backside). Pack up camp and leave at 5:30 p.m. to ski down our last glacier, skittering across mostly ice at the bottom. We camp on the ice at the far end of a small lake.

May 9-10 – Snowing and blowing, the worst weather of the trip but still decent visibility and not too cold as we ski along stream channels for less than three hours till we reach Guy's Bight, the end of our ski trip. We reach a couple of traveling hunters' cabins, where an Inuk (singular form of Inuit) hunter named Jake is hanging out after an unsuccessful seal hunt. He departs by dog team for Pond Inlet that evening, disappearing around a corner, a long whip flicking above the dog's heads just like in *Atanarjuat*.

We clean up our dingy but comfortable little cabin, hang up wet gear to dry, cook a last feast with our combined leftovers and play Scrabble. Still snowing in the morning and, after a fine breakfast of fruit compote, pass the time by having everyone fire the shotgun once at a Ritz cracker box (any charging polar bear would have been unscathed). Sheatie and son arrive in late afternoon and, with a tailwind, it's less than three hours back to Pond.

May 11 – After a hasty soapstone shopping spree, the women all catch the plane to Iqaluit at noon, leaving Dave and I to tour the town, shop for groceries and, by doing several loads of laundry in our apartment, running the water tank dry (the city boys don't realize there's no

underground pipes in the permafrost and that a truck has to come to replenish the tank for \$50, a cheap price for three nights of free accommodation). After a lemon pasta dinner with fresh asparagus and roasted red pepper (you can get anything in Pond, for a price), we're washing dishes at 10:30 when the sun breaks through the clouds over the sound. We dash out onto the ice, past teams of chained sled dogs, and walk for half an hour to a seven-storey iceberg, arriving just in time for the nearly midnight sun to light up its blue ice.

May 13 – After making a pancake brunch and chicken dinner for neighbouring nurses and a local white outfitter, Dave and I track down an Inuk woman who makes sealskin mitts for us, delivering them at the airport just before we board our plane. As we fly south, we pass over hundreds of unnamed peaks and glaciers and a lifetime of exploring.