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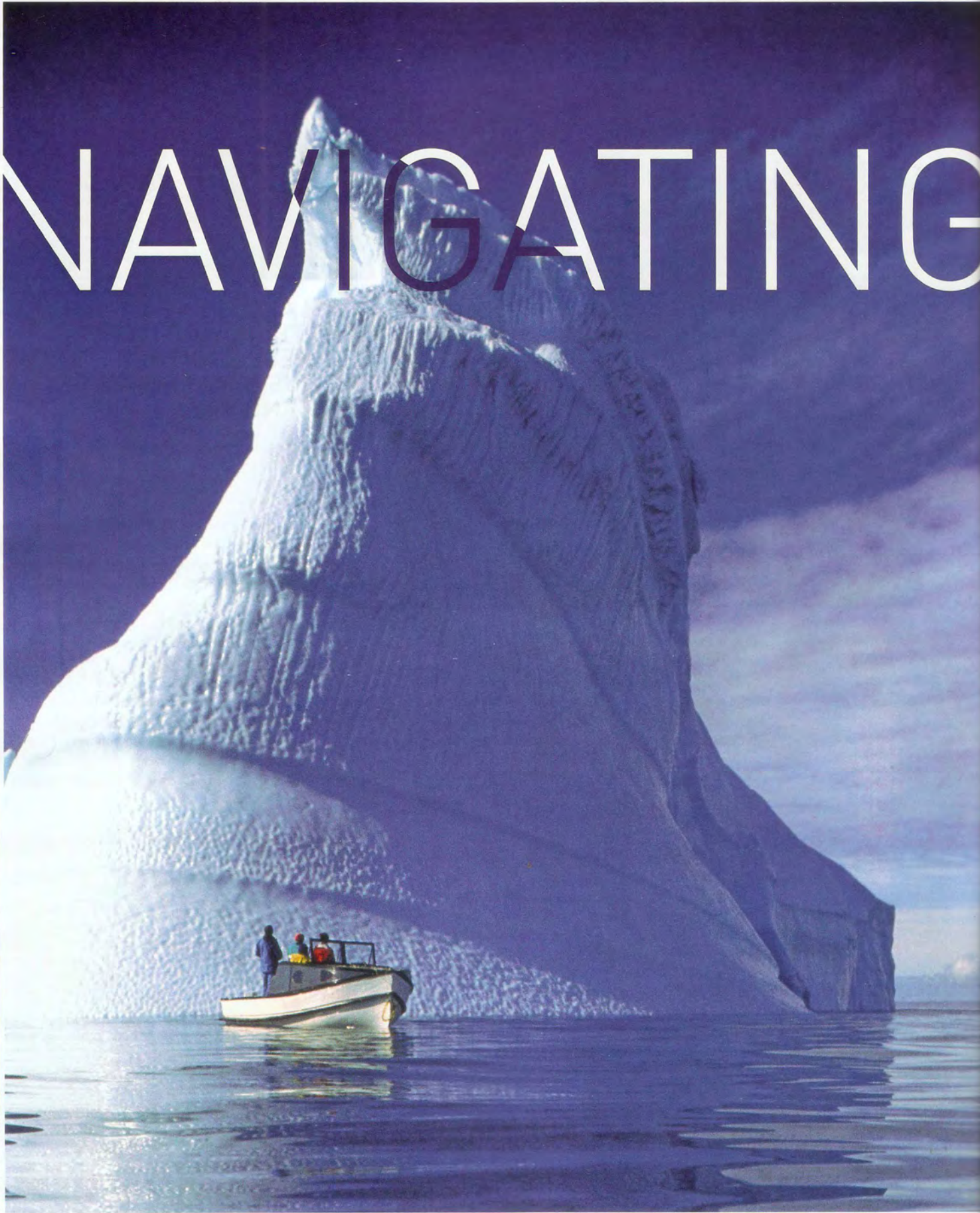
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NAVIGATING



Nunavut Tourism

THE NORTHWEST PASSAGE

THE CHALLENGING, USUALLY-FROZEN WATERWAY THAT CONNECTS THE CANADIAN ARCTIC TO THE BERING SEA AND BEYOND HAS THWARTED MANY A SAILOR. BUT NOW, BECAUSE OF WARMER WEATHER AROUND THE WORLD, YOU TOO CAN EXPERIENCE THIS EXTRAORDINARY REGION. **By Fiona Harper**

Two polar bears lumber down the cliff face, their snow-coloured pelts a stark contrast to the barren basalt slope. As they approach, it becomes evident that the pair is a mother and her cub, the younger one around two years old according to the naturalist in our Zodiac. Mother leads her cub onto the ice floe, where they take up a prone position, neatly camouflaged on the ice but for their black eyes and noses.

We watch them. They watch us. It's hard to tell who is more intrigued. The cub imitates its mother, taking its cue from her each time she alters position. Our outboard purring just above idle, we glide closer, stealth-like, amid the dawn mist rising from the icy sea. We're deep into polar bear country, cruising through the Canadian Arctic Archipelago 73 degrees north of the equator.

Remote Nunavut Territory is a wilderness environment, inhabited mostly by native Inuits, that has long attracted explorers and adventurers by land and sea. Englishman Sir John Franklin's ill-fated 1845 expedition to find the fabled Northwest Passage route was purportedly the best equipped of its time. Tragically, all 128 crew were lost along with Franklin, as well as scores of others in the ensuing search for the missing expedition.

Some 50 years later, Norwegian Roald Amundsen had more success in his steel seal-hunting vessel *Gjøa*. He wintered over twice in the frozen, sheltered harbour at what is now known as the hamlet of Gjøa Haven before triumphantly navigating the passage when the ice cleared long enough for him to escape.

Vessels stuck fast in the ice, their crews trapped on board, are just another fact of life for those who live and voyage in the Arctic – particularly for the latest breed of sailors attempting to traverse the Northwest Passage. Current favourable conditions mean that the passage last summer was mostly navigable where it had been impenetrable just a few seasons ago.

Opinions vary about the reasons for this. Some attribute it to climate change or its elder cousin, global warming. Others cite historical scientific data noting cyclical periods



Canadian Tourism Commission

of heavy and light pack ice through time. It now seems apparent that Ernest Shackleton's doomed attempt was made during a period of heavy ice.

Between Davis Strait and Baffin Bay in the east to Bering Strait in the west, the Canadian Hydrographic Service notes four recognised summer routes. The cruising season is short, with the viable time frame from late July through to mid-September before the ice closes in again. According to the Canadian Coast Guard, current favourable ice conditions are attracting adventurers little prepared for the extreme conditions. The 2010 season saw 50 official visits from registered vessels, which doesn't include private vessels, which are not obliged to register with the Coast Guard, up from 30 vessels the previous year.

During high summer there are 24 hours of daylight every day, but through the rest of the year, the sun skips around the horizon, disappearing altogether between early December and mid-January. It's a strange concept for navigators to grasp. The familiar idea of viewing the sun rising in the east and setting in the west simply doesn't apply at such northerly latitudes.

OPPOSITE: Fishermen are dwarfed by a sculpted iceberg broken free and drifting with wind and tide.
ABOVE: Deceptively cute and cuddly, the largest land carnivore on the planet roam ice floes seeking food.



LEFT: During 2010, the Northwest Passage remained navigable for much of the summer, allowing sailors to transit this far-flung route. **BELOW:** Balmy summer days beyond the Arctic Circle mean 24 hours of daylight. **BOTTOM OF PAGE:** Much of an iceberg's danger to sailors lies unseen beneath the surface.



The sun may sit low on the horizon for the entire day anywhere on the compass, from east through south to west. It's not until the sun disappears into the long, lonely Arctic winter night that its psychological importance to visitors becomes fully evident.

Alvah Simon, sailor, voyager, author and Arctic winter survivor, unexpectedly wintered alone on board his yacht (apart from his kitten Halifax for company), north of Baffin Island. Simon, having weathered a winter frozen in the ice, buried beneath snow, warding off marauding polar bears as well as his own personal demons, puts it thus at the end of a long lonely winter:

"I climbed the ridge and ceremoniously turned towards the south and bathed in the sunlight after 100 days absence."

Cruising sailors, having endured a tough watch on the graveyard shift, will recognise this emotional boost the sun brings. With sunshine, tough times at sea always seem that little bit brighter and easier.

During prolonged summer days, the extra light is a bonus for sailors on night watch keeping a lookout for wayward icebergs and growlers. In these parts, icebergs originate from Greenland glaciers, drifting with wind and currents to create serious navigational hazards above and below the surface.

Willy de Roos set a trend in the late 1970s, when he was the first solo sailor bar the Inuits to navigate the Northwest Passage. New Zealander Graeme Kendall completed his own east-to-west passage in 2010 as part of a world circumnavigation, picking up a world record for the fastest non-stop passage of this waterway, taking just 12 days. He cites satellite technology, which has given sailors the ability to monitor ice flows, and therefore to navigate a safe passage, along with warmer Arctic conditions, as contributing to the success of his voyage.

The tiny hamlet of Cambridge Bay is a vital port for most cruisers. On the south coast of Victoria Island, and separated from mainland

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Canada by Dease Strait, Cambridge Bay is at the southern limit of the passage. It is a major supply hub for polar adventurers, with regular flights connecting the isolated outpost to Canada's major cities. Situated on the shores of a protected harbour, it also offers good shelter during summer as well as a viable over-winter anchorage, despite the fact that the harbour freezes over.

Of course, there is a far easier way to cruise the Arctic. Increasingly popular with adventure travellers who have neither inclination nor desire to subject their own vessels to an Arctic winter, expedition cruises offer a decidedly simpler, safer option. Companies such as Inuit-owned and managed Cruise North Expeditions ensure an authentic, trouble-free experience in one of the world's toughest climates. And, let's face it, the logistics of organising and outfitting one's own vessel for a voyage to the Arctic is beyond the means of many.

Sure, you won't have the flexibility you would if you were the captain. But it's reassuring when you run across wild animals such as the

deceptively warm-and-fuzzy polar bear to know there's an armed sentry nearby, should things get out of hand.

As the mechanical crackle of static over the VHF radio startles the two polar bears we've been edging up to, they rise together on cue. With a casual backward glance, mother bear leads cub off the ice, ascending the cliff from whence they came. Reluctant to drag our eyes away, we watch them until they become mere dots on the landscape, returning to our own vessel elated, yet silenced. Despite the harshness, there is a particular beauty in the far-flung Arctic that's incomparable to most anywhere else on Earth. ❄️

MORE INFORMATION

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