

THE MAGIC OF winter

BRAVE THE MINUS TEMPERATURES IN THE NORTHWEST TERRITORIES FOR OUTDOOR ADVENTURE, INCLUDING SNOWSHOEING, SNOWMOBILING, ICE FISHING AND SLEEPING IN AN IGLOO, ALL GUIDED BY INDIGENOUS EXPERTS WHO KNOW HOW TO LIVE IN HARMONY WITH THE ARCTIC LANDSCAPE.

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PREVIOUS SPREAD:
Hiking through the snowy winter wilderness.

THIS SPREAD:
Great Slave Lake, where the Snowking Winter Festival is held each year. Ice is carved into many different sculptures, including a snow castle.

A

t's underfoot as you stand on the frozen Great Slave Lake, it's carved into decorative sculptures, and it's used to build a glittering snow castle. The effect is quite magical, as the sun sets and the blinding white snow shifts into shades of moody blue. For a month at the end of every winter, entertainers including actors, musicians and comedians

at the Snowking Winter Festival held annually in Yellowknife, in the Northwest Territories, ice is everywhere.

transform Yellowknife Bay into an outdoor stage. However, Mother Nature won't be upstaged and gives almost guaranteed aurora shows each night.

The festival, now in its 30th year, celebrates northern living by encouraging everyone to get outside to enjoy the season. I headed north not just for the festival but also for some winter adventure. I started in Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories (NWT), in search of the northern lights, which have proved elusive to me on visits elsewhere across Canada and even in Iceland. The guides at Aurora Village, a lakeside wilderness and northern lights resort, assured me





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that I'd see them on this visit as a four-night stay in the area promises a 98% chance of viewing the phenomena.

Visiting the village gave me plenty of time to try out the other winter activities on offer, including riding down a huge snow slide on an inner tube, dog sledding and ice fishing for my lunch. The northern pike and trout we caught were wrapped and roasted over an open fire and served with traditional bannock, a fried 'survival bread'.



OPPOSITE PAGE:
A husky preparing for a sledding race.

THIS PAGE:
Aurora Village is one of the best places to see the aurora borealis.



did keep me warm but once I learned how to properly wear a parka, I switched to the more traditional clothing option for my journey further north to Inuvik and the shores of the Arctic Ocean. My fur-lined parka and beaver pelt mittens were loaned to me by the owner of Tundra North Tours, Kylik Kisoun Taylor, as we made our way down the Mackenzie Valley highway from Inuvik to Tuktoyaktuk. Lodgings for the night were an igloo that Kylik built by meticulously carving ice bricks and layering them into the traditional shape, which I was able to have a go at sculpting myself.

OPPOSITE PAGE:
Ice fishing on a frozen lake.

THIS PAGE FROM THE TOP:
Entrance sign for Inuvik, the only town in the Inuvik Region, and the third largest community in Canada's Northwest Territories; Huskies racing on the lake.

Strapping on some traditional wooden snowshoes gave me a chance to explore the back trails with an Indigenous guide and learn more about what makes this area so special. I was led through the woods and shown which trees are used to make shelter, how to build a fire and melt snow to make tea, and how some plants were used to make traditional medicines.

Don Morin, from the Dene and Métis community of Fort Resolution, is the founder and CEO of the Indigenous-owned Aurora Village and one of three generations to work here. He told me that although there are other destinations you can visit for winter adventure, in the north you have the opportunity to also understand the culture and traditions of people who have carved out lives in some of the harshest conditions on the planet.

Don is proud to teach visitors about traditional practices and ways of knowing

that have endured for thousands of years, and wants visitors to know that the Indigenous people here continue to adapt while preserving their heritage. "We use [the land] differently than our fathers and mothers, or grandfathers and grandmothers did, but we still survive, and we make a living off the land. It's important for people from around the world to understand that the Dene and the Métis of the Northwest Territories are still alive in a very rich culture and are thriving."

Cold-weather education is an important part of welcoming outsiders to the north. Don told me that drying your boots properly is an especially important northern skill. "Every night, take the insoles out of your boots and make sure they're dry for the next day because if your feet are damp, you're too cold. Don't overexert in the cold, because then you'll sweat. Do everything slowly."

Don, now aged 70, learned these essential winter survival tips as a child, when it was usual to be expected to stay outside all day, no matter the weather. "I'm born and raised in this country, in the north, and we played outside. Didn't matter whether it was 50 or 60 below [freezing], we still played outside."

A classic way to stay warm is to wear a traditional parka, but Don told me that there's also a technique to that. "We teach guests how to use a parka. Because a lot of people don't even know they can adjust the hood so that you can put it on one side – it breaks the wind and leaves the other side open so that it's easier to breathe and see."

Aurora Village provides clothing for guests to rent as they may not appreciate just how cold it gets here. My fancy winter jacket, which cost £400 and was apparently crafted with NASA-level tech,



"THE NORTH IS ABOUT ACCEPTING YOUR VULNERABILITY, LOOKING AROUND, AND REALISING IF YOUR EQUIPMENT FAILS, YOU'RE DEAD"



We had private igloos to sleep in that were very toasty and accessed by crawling on your belly through a narrow tunnel. He also made a larger igloo for the group where we could eat our supper and listen to tales of the Inuvialuit people as well as watch a demonstration of some games they played during the long dark days of winter.

Caribou has been hunted here, providing food for local communities, for generations – although on snowmobiles these days. I joined the hunt, my eyelashes frozen together in clumps, my breath fogging up the visor of my helmet and my facemask wet through. A gunshot caught my attention. Blood on the snow and the scraping sound of caribou hooves and

heavy hides being heaved onto the sleigh followed. During the hunt, one of the snowmobiles tipped over and had to be rescued from a snowbank, underlying the importance of travelling together in such remote regions. As Kylik remarked, "The north is about accepting your vulnerability, looking around, and realising if your equipment fails, you're dead."

After my days of winter adventures in the north, whether I was gazing out from an igloo or standing on a frozen lake in Yellowknife, come dark those beautiful streaks of milky colours painted the sky. Looking up at the aurora borealis, I saw what Don says are his ancestors – "the spirits dancing in the sky" – and felt the magic of winter in this land.

THIS SPREAD:
A caribou herd in the tundra.

NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

Flights to Yellowknife Airport from the UK usually involve a connection in Calgary or Vancouver. The city centre is just a ten-minute drive via taxi, shuttle or rental car. Inuvik is served by Inuvik (Mike Zubko) Airport, with flights connecting through Yellowknife. The town centre is a 15-minute taxi or rental car ride.

GETTING AROUND

Downtown Yellowknife is easily walkable. Guided tours are available for activities like aurora viewing and visiting Great Slave Lake. In Inuvik, a car is essential for exploring local sights such as the Dempster Highway or taking a tour to the Arctic Ocean.

BEST TIME TO GO

December to March is ideal for winter activities in the NWT such as dog sledding, ice fishing and northern lights viewing. In Inuvik, June to August brings the Midnight Sun and cultural festivals.

WHERE TO EAT

In Yellowknife, don't miss Bullock's Bistro (bullocksbistro.ca) for fresh fish caught from Great Slave Lake. In Inuvik, Alestines (facebook.com/alestines), located in an old school bus, offers local Arctic char and reindeer dishes.

WHERE TO STAY

In Yellowknife, The Explorer Hotel (explorerhotel.ca) is a popular choice, offering modern amenities and stunning views. In Inuvik, consider staying at the Mackenzie Hotel (mackenziehotel.com) for a comfortable and central location.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more details about Yellowknife, visit the Yellowknife Tourism website (extraordinaryyk.com). For Inuvik, check out Inuvik Tourism (inuvik.ca). Information on tours in the region can be found through Aurora Village (auroravillage.com), Tundra North Tours (tundranorthtours.com) and B. Dene Adventures (bdene.com).

Photos: Pierre Emmanuel Chailion, Riley Veldhuisen, Sarah Pruyss, Pat Karne, Jason van Bruggen, Adam Pison, Northwest Territories Tourism, Destination Canada, Dreamstime