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Journey to the 'end of the world': Aboard a Russian icebreaker, Calgary author goes where few have gone before

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Hard to believe that throughout history fewer than 12,500 people have been to the North Pole. My bid to join their number began in Helsinki where 87 like-minded travellers were assembled. A Finnair charter took us to the "Russian-dreary" port of Murmansk with its row upon row of rundown concrete apartment blocks, their walls stained and pitted.

With a population of 320,000, Murmansk is by far the largest city north of the Arctic Circle. We embarked on the nuclear icebreaker I/B Yamal, resplendent in a fresh coat of paint, the gaping jaws of a shark adorning its formidable bow. "Yamal" in the language of the Nenets people of Siberia means "end of the world" and perfectly suits this powerful vessel. Yamal is a working icebreaker whose "real job" is to keep the shipping lanes open during the winter months. In the summer, it and its crew can be leased for adventure cruises such as this. When the incoming tide was high enough, two tugs manoeuvred her out into the main channel and we slipped out through the Kola Peninsula into the Barents Sea, named, like so many other places in the Arctic, after one of the early polar explorers.

The chances of reaching the pole are good, but ice and wind are powerful and unpredictable forces.

The days were occupied with on-board activities, mainly lectures by experienced and highly qualified experts. The audience was invited to join in with questions and information. My humble contributions were that the Inuit description of the ring formed by muskox to protect their young from predators was, "Big hairy ones worry" and that it was no less than Charles Dickens, the celebrated Victorian novelist, who had given the polar bear its name. Before that it was known simply as the "white bear." The Russians still call it the "ice bear."

I have been privileged to spend considerable time in the Canadian Arctic, but the photo slides and videos that accompanied the talks in that lower-deck lecture room brought home to me, as never before, how large and important a part of Canada the Arctic is.

The bright red denoting Canadian territory sweeps across the map. Pride is mixed with concern that we may not be doing enough to maintain our sovereignty over this vast area. As global warming, from whatever cause, continues to increase, the famed Northwest Passage is destined to become an important waterway for international trade.

The days of non-stop steaming ahead afforded an opportunity to get to know one's fellow voyagers -- predominantly American, with a large contingent of Europeans, and the inevitable Japanese tour group.

I was one of three Canadian passengers. The tour leader and two of the lecturers were also from Canada. Not surprisingly, the passengers were seasoned and experienced travellers who had "been there, done that." References to The Galapagos, Machu Picchu, Easter Island, Antarctica and other remote destinations sprinkled the conversations.

Seasoned travellers they might be, but jaded they were not.

We encountered pack ice on the third day, and from then on the hull echoed with the crash and boom of breaking ice.

The bridge, to which we had unlimited access (provided we stayed on the starboard side and didn't bother the Russian crew working on the port side) commanded a sweeping view of the ice stretching from horizon to horizon. Ice, in its many varieties, was the subject of a talk by a former captain of a Canadian Coast Guard icebreaker, when there was an announcement that a female polar bear and her cub had been sighted.

This began what I shall always think of as a "Polar Bear Afternoon." The polar bear, the undisputed king of the ice, is a solitary animal, living what may be the loneliest life on the planet. Normally, the only time they meet their own kind is to breed in the spring. After this, they separate and resume their solitary existence. Fertilization is delayed for several months and the female takes to a den excavated in the snow in late October where she gives birth in December to one, occasionally two, tiny cubs weighing only about 680

grams. Nourished by her rich milk, they weigh a healthy 11 kilograms when they emerge from the den in April.

Unlike Antarctica, a continent surrounded by water which teems with life, there is very little in the way of animal life to be seen in the High Arctic, an ocean bordered by land. It is a rare treat to spot even one bear, let alone witness social interaction among them. But here, spread out on the ice around us were no less than 13 bears.

Yamal ceased its relentless attack on the ice and came to a full stop so we could enjoy the show. It was the presence of two kills -- ringed seals -- that attracted the bears. A sub-adult male stood over one of the kills, until a female with a cub approached. So intent on the prize, she momentarily forgot her cub trailing behind. Realizing this, she turned and went back to collect it, like a harassed mother in a superstore. The young male took advantage of her distraction to drag the carcass away, leaving a trail of blood across the ice. But he was outranked by the female, and soon sulked off, leaving her to enjoy the feast.

Nine gulls patiently waited their turn. There would be lots left for them, as the bears, desperately accumulating fat to see them through the long winter months, would eat only the blubber.

Each day begins at 7:30 a.m. with a cheery wake-up call from the expedition leader who briefs us on our latitude (for example, 86 degrees 29 minutes on the fourth morning), the temperature (always one or two degrees above or below freezing) and our current distance from the Pole (210 nautical miles on that particular morning).

Slowed by heavy ice ridges, our speed is reduced to three knots, with Yamal frequently having to stop and take another run at the ice, driving its bow up over the floe, then crashing down to break it apart.

In between lectures we are taken in small groups on a tour of the engine room, peering through thick glass at the two nuclear reactors that generate steam to power the turbines. The turbines develop 75,000 horsepower to drive the ship with its double hull, 147 metres long, sheathed in five-centimetre-thick armoured steel, at its open water speed of 20 knots.

The enriched uranium fuel rods need to be replaced only once every four years, and water to make steam is sea water purified on board by a process of reverse osmosis.

Another day bulling our way through the pack ice; then on the sixth, the excitement begins to build as there is a possibility we might reach the Pole late that night. "Night" is a bit of a misnomer since the sun shines 24 hours a day. The hours creep by, progress slows to a crunching crawl and dense fog envelops the ship. At 10 p.m., we are seven nautical miles from the Pole. Suddenly the fog lifts, the ice loosens its grip and we surge forward. Less than two hours later, a triumphant blast from the ship's whistle announces we have arrived. The midnight sun beams down from a blue sky as, out on the bow, champagne toasts are raised to salute the feat.

The North Pole is the northern end of the earth's axis, and is located by celestial or satellite navigation. When the GPS screen shows latitude 90 degrees N, longitude 0 -- 360 degrees, you're there!

The return leg is more leisurely and relaxed. There was time for a celebratory lunch on the ice, and, when the fog allowed, sightseeing flights on the helicopter. Some 800 bone-jarring kilometres later, we broke free of the pack ice and sailed into open water. Skuas and kittiwakes once more flew around the ship. Soon we were threading our way into Franz Josef Land, an uninhabited archipelago of 191 tiny islands, many little more than large rocks. The larger ones resemble a series of truncated hills, volcanic cones with their tops sheared off.

The ship's helicopter shuttled us, 20 at a time, to Champa, one of the most northerly of the islands. Armed guards were posted to protect against polar bear attacks and we were warned not to venture beyond the area they patrolled. The ground was muddy and mossy with small alpine flowers bravely blooming above its surface. That afternoon we made another landing -- this time on Alger Island, where we visited the remains of camps established in the 1930s to serve as bases for several unsuccessful attempts by American expeditions to reach the Pole. They were financed by a New Yorker who never visited the Arctic, but nonetheless has an island named after him.

The capricious fog moved in to threaten our anticipated landing at Cape Flora. After a few hours, the fog lifted, clearing the way for us to go ashore. Remarkably, it continued to lie, wreath-like, around the base of the other islands. The sun continued to shine, leaving us free to admire the 27 species of wildflowers blooming there, and to inspect the weathered remains of long-abandoned camps of early polar explorers.

For all that night and the next two days we steamed south across the choppy waters of the Barents Sea. After 2,744 nautical miles, we were once more in the shelter of the Kola Peninsula, where we took on board a pilot to guide Yamal into her home port. As we made our way through the channel, the harsh outlines of the dockside cranes and other port facilities were bathed in the soft mellow light of a summer evening.

John **Ballem**, Q.C., is a Calgary lawyer and author who travels widely. The Oilpatch Quartet, with four of his previously published novels, will be released by Cormorant Books later this month.

Illustration:
• Graphic: The I/B Yamal forges through pack ice on its way to the North Pole.
• Map: The I/B Yamal forges through pack ice on its way to the North Pole.
• Photo: Courtesy John Ballem / A sub-adult male sulks away from a seal kill after a mother bear pulls rank.
• Photo: John Ballem, For The Calgary Herald / Yamal at the North Pole. A new paint job doesn't last long in the ice.

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