

Explore the Beauty of Canada's Northwest Territories With the Indigenous Tour Operators Who Know the Region Best

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PHOTO: FIONA TAPP

Standing on the frozen Arctic Ocean and looking out into the vast expanse of snow and ice makes you feel very small. On the shore of the tiny far northern

town of Tuktoyaktuk, in the Northwest Territories of Canada, it's hard to imagine how people could survive in such a remote, coastal tundra.

The waves have frozen in dips and valleys that will become reanimated once spring releases them from the ice. The indigenous Inuvialuit and First Nations people who have lived here for centuries are survival experts. Their ingenuity, strong communities, and traditional practices have enabled them to carve out a life in harmony with the caribou and beluga who share this stark environment.

As interest in indigenous tourism grows it's imperative that historically disenfranchised populations are not further exploited. The key is in supporting and empowering indigenous people to launch and grow their own tour groups and companies. In this way, visitors are invited into an educational and cultural experience as guests, rather than voyeurs.

With this in mind, I started my trip with an indigenous owned and operated company, Tundra North Tours. Traveling from Inuvik, heading down the ice road 73 miles towards Aklavik. We stopped to take photos of the boats parked in the solid ice at the side of the road like ghost ships. Our Inuvialuit guide, Noel Cockney, pointed out a truck buried up to the windscreens in snow and ice after taking a turn off the road.

Arriving in Aklavik we met elders, Annie and Danny Gordon, who have been married for 63 years. Danny sells his traditional artisan handicrafts like sunglasses made from caribou antlers and handmade tools. While Annie creates beautiful mittens and moccasins from moose and beaver hides, a skill she learned from her mother.

Continuing onto Tuktoyaktuk,(the name means “looks like a caribou”) we wandered around, climbing up a hill to look over the town and observe the nearby pingos. These large formations are soil-covered ice mounds. We spotted satellite dishes that adorn many of the properties angled at an unfamiliar 60 degrees, rather than straight up at the sky; that’s how far north we were. The houses of Tuk (as it’s commonly known) are built on stilts to prevent them from melting the permafrost below. Here, you can walk on the Arctic ocean, as we did, or swim, kayak, or sail it in the warmer months.

Against the white blur of a snowstorm coming in, the black spruce trees that line the road look like magnetized iron filings standing to attention. Heading back to our camp we crawl inside the communal igloo to enjoy a supper of caribou stew while Tundra North Tour’s owner Kylik Kisoun Taylor demonstrates traditional games that people would have played during the long dark days of an arctic winter.

As night falls, we keep a look out for the Northern Lights before getting inside our own private igloos. A heating pad inside the sleeping bag stops it from being too cold but you do need to keep your hat on.

The next day we zipped over frozen lakes on snowmobiles and took a turn at herding a band of reindeer. During the day, Kylik taught me how to make an igloo. I enjoyed using the long-bladed snow knife to cut almost perfectly square bricks of ice, but I found it very difficult to balance the bricks to make the structure — luckily the experts were on hand.

These traditional skills are in decline as indigenous people, who have always been incredibly adaptable, embrace quicker, easier ways of doing things. In fact,

it's often the younger people who are researching their ancestral skills and then encouraging elders to revisit some of these abandoned practices. Community leaders like Kylik, who invited elders Danny and Annie to stay at his igloos this year, are giving the community opportunities to reconnect with their culture.

We traveled on to the comparatively busy streets of Yellowknife, the capital of the NWT, which has a population of 20,000 residents.

Another indigenous owned tour operator, Aurora Village, which has been in operation since 2000, became my playground for the next few days. During the daytime, the village, just 10 miles from the downtown area, offered ice fishing tours, interpretive snowshoeing hikes around the property, a tubing slide, and thrilling dog sledding rides.

Each night we awaited the natural magnificent northern lights show. The first night she was elusive and even though we stayed up until 5 a.m. she didn't make an appearance. The next three nights she wowed us with a dazzling display of green streaks, swirls, wisps, and curtains of color that went on all night long.

Aurora Village provides teepees where guests can warm up and enjoy a hot drink while waiting for the aurora, as well as a bar, restaurant, and gift shop. They also offer unique heated seats which swivel 360 degrees ensuring you never miss a moment of the show. They are the only place in the world to have these seats which were designed in conjunction with indigenous groups to replicate a traditional sleigh. They are so comfy and warm you might just fall asleep – just make sure a friend wakes you up when the lights come out!

From ice roads, igloos and the northern lights, exploring Canada's Arctic region in the Northwest Territories was simply spectacular. Doing it in the footsteps of indigenous leaders elevated the trip to an unforgettable cultural experience.

For more information to plan your own indigenous tourism adventure visit The Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC).