

TORNGAT SAFARI

Exploring Northern Labrador's Torngat Mountains, a mysteriously different land of age-old rocks, magical fjords and remarkable wildlife



Photography and text by John Sylvester

AT the northeastern edge of North America, a mountainous triangle of Canadian Shield juts into the Labrador Sea. Two years ago, the eastern portion of this rugged, remote peninsula, encompassing all of Labrador's northern extremity, was designated Torngat Mountains National Park—Canada's 42nd and newest national park.

The Inuit regard the Torngat Mountains with reverence. They and their forebears have called this territory home for thousands of years. The English name, Torngat, is derived from "Torngarsoak," the powerful spirit that dwells there, according to Inuit mythology.

It's easy to understand the Inuit regard for the Torngats. The place is best described by superlatives. From Saglek Bay in the south,

A tour boat is dwarfed by the soaring cliffs of South West Arm on Saglek Fjord.



WHERE THE ROCKS REVEL...
IN THEIR FREEDOM



to Cape Chidley near the northern tip of Labrador, the park's 9,700 square kilometre area includes the highest peaks east of the Rockies. Fjords cut deep into the interior, framed by soaring cliffs that rise 900 metres above the shoreline. Icebergs, drifting south on the Labrador Current, dot the coast.

The earth lays itself bare here, with ancient rocks dating back 3.9 billion years, among the planet's oldest. Evidence of the glaciers' effects—eskers, moraines, erratics—is everywhere in the barren, boulder-strewn landscape; they are remnants of the last ice age.

More than 40 small glaciers, nestled in high mountain basins called cirques, cling to their existence in the face of a warming climate.

With rugged mountains, rocky valleys, deep, cold fjords and stormy maritime climate, the region accommodates a surprising variety of boreal and Arctic wildlife species. Polar bears, black bears, wolves, caribou, Arctic hare, Arctic fox, seals and whales not only survive in its environment, they actually thrive—in fact the black bears in the Torngat Mountains are the only black bears known to live above the tree line.

Spawning schools of Arctic char clog the rivers in late summer, providing a feast for bears, seals and humans.

The Inuit have long understood the changing nature of the Torngat Mountains, and built a semi-nomadic lifestyle based on the seasonal migration of the animals.



Joseph (Buddy) and Jenny Merkuratsuk, of Nain, greet visitors to Hebron. The couple, along with their two sons, spend summers at their camp in the abandoned community, which was established by Moravian missionaries as early as 1830; in 1959 residents were relocated to more southerly communities such as Hopedale and Nain. Below: A full moon rises above the tents of Kangidluasuk, base camp for Torngat Mountains National Park. Opposite page, top: Abandoned buildings in Hebron were once part of a busy Hudson's Bay Company post. Bottom: A hiker takes in the view.





Polar bears are a common sight along the coast of Torngat Mountains National Park, where their population has steadily increased in recent years. Below: The calm waters of North Arm on Saglek Fjord reflect the rugged beauty—and in this case painterly quality—of surrounding mountains. Opposite page, top: River Beauty, a northern relative of fireweed, blooms profusely along the rivers of Northern Labrador. Bottom: Mary Annanack, a Parks Canada seasonal employee from Kangiqsualujjuaq, Que, prepares a meal of caribou meat during an overnight camping trip in Saglek Fjord.



BEHIND THE LENS



Based in PEI, John Sylvester is an award-winning photographer with a passion for Canada's landscapes and people. "You could say I've had a 28-year love affair with Newfoundland & Labrador," he says, "because I've been going there for that long to photograph. One of my first jobs as a photographer's assistant was working for a British photojournalist on assignment in Newfoundland for *International Wildlife* magazine. We spent most of the summer photographing Jon Lien of Memorial University's Whale Research Group while he rushed around the province rescuing whales from fishermen's nets."

This past August I was fortunate to join Cruise North's Torngat Safari, one of an Inuit-owned tour company's inaugural trips to the park, in partnership with Parks Canada and the Labrador Inuit Association.

Our small group of seven spent a memorable week hiking along spectacular coastal cliffs, casting our lines for Arctic char in pristine rivers, swimming at the foot of cascading waterfalls and watching the full moon rise from our wilderness campsite on a remote arm of Saglek Fjord. We saw polar bears and black bears, whales and seals.

The wilderness experience was unsurpassed, but it was the cultural experience that made this trip unforgettable.

Inuit guides accompanied us at all times, sharing their intimate knowledge of the land and their customs. We ate seal, caribou, Arctic char (raw char roe was a special treat) and panitsiaks or bannock, a tasty fried bread. We visited the sacred island of Sallikuluk—or Rose Island—and saw the remnants of ancient burial mounds, sod houses and tool caches.

Just south of the park, we also visited the abandoned community of Hebron, established by Moravian missionaries as early as 1830, to attend a ceremony marking the controversial 1959 relocation of Inuit families.

The week ended all too quickly, but the people and the landscape left a lasting impression. The spirit of the Torngats will be with me for a long time to come.

