

Ancient land, modern life

Freelance adventurer Stephanie Porter shares the story of her week at Torngat Base Camp, where Inuit entrepreneurs are working to transform their traditional culture into twenty-first-century currency

Torngat Base Camp, photo by Geoff Goodyear

Stuffing the helicopter in Nain for the journey to Saglek airport, Stephanie Porter photo



At the gravel airstrip in Nain, Labrador's northernmost community, pilot Rich Martin is expertly packing the helicopter. He's obviously well practiced in filling all the nooks and crannies with a pickup load of boxes and bags, leaving just enough room for three passengers. The weather hasn't been good for flying the past few days—and fog is threatening to descend again—so the helicopter bound for Torngat Mountain Base Camp and Research Station has been charged with bringing a few overdue supplies, taking advantage of the short window of clear air.

I climb in, next to the new heaters, slabs of Carnation milk tins, coffee canisters, and other odds and ends. There's not a lot of room, but I strap in, don the headset, and get ready for my first helicopter ride.

We lift off from Nain for the 200-km flight north. The 48 hours I'd spent there (longer than planned, thanks to that fog) was my first experience in a northern Labrador Inuit community, and it was eye-opening: Nain is beautiful, active, bustling with new subdivisions and growing. The population is currently about 1,200, but that swells in the summer months with an influx of workers in the construction business.

Most visitors travel to Base Camp from Goose Bay on a Twin Otter or other small airplane, land at Saglek airstrip, then take a short Zodiac ride to Base Camp, located just outside the southern boundary of Torngat Mountains National Park. Helicopters land directly at the camp.

Our 50-minute flight takes us over shockingly beautiful scenery. Each peak or ridge we crest reveals another, taller, more dramatic. Trees diminish in size and dwindle in numbers as we approach, and then cross, the treeline. Icebergs dot the sea. Sharp mountaintops cut into the sky as far as the eye can see. Martin spots a black bear and takes us in low for a close look. A few minutes later, we make another sightseeing circle over Hebron, an Inuit community founded by Moravian missionaries in 1830 and forcibly resettled in 1959. A handful of Inuit, with roots in the old community,

Saglek airport transfer, Stephanie Porter photo



live there in the summer, offering tours, sharing Hebron's tragic story, and working to restore some of the buildings.

We swoop over a final ridge and Base Camp appears at the edge of a beach, surrounded by rocky cliffs. A triangle of white canvas tents, green domes, yellow and red nylon tents, and a few containers and out buildings are spread around a central building, all encircled by a 650-metre electrified bear fence.

There is no cell phone service or Internet availability here; solar power is backed up by diesel generators. This will be my home for the next week, and the people here, my community. I haven't even set foot to ground and I'm overwhelmed by the scale, drama, and expanse of the land—and the remoteness of camp.

The helicopter lands at 8:30 p.m., but the day's agenda isn't done yet. We're greeted by several Parks Canada and Base Camp representatives, friendly faces that would become familiar over the next week. I'm ushered into the cafeteria for a quick cup of tea and fresh banana bread, shown to my tent, then urged into the AV tent for a welcome presentation and the mandatory viewing of a 30-minute video on polar bear safety.

Finally, at 11:30 p.m., the formalities are done, and I eagerly return to my tent—though *tent* doesn't seem the right word. I have been assigned a "Design Shelter," a high-end canvas tent on a wooden platform. It's big enough to stand up and walk around in, and welcoming enough that I immediately want to unpack—which I can do, because there's a chest of drawers. And two single beds with fluffy duvets (crucial, given the night temperatures can dip near freezing), a small table and two chairs, a night table with reading light, and electricity. The best part? Someone has already lit the propane heater and the tent is cozy. It takes me a few minutes to decide if I *really* need to leave again to visit the common washrooms and showers, just a 30-second walk away (I do).



Stephanie Porter, Torngat Mountains

It goes without saying that running a tourism operation in the north is a challenge: the season is short (for Base Camp, about seven weeks), weather is unpredictable, locations are isolated, travel is tricky, and costs are high, for both operators and visitors.

It also goes without saying that Canada's north holds some of the country's most awe-inspiring landscapes, beloved animals, and pristine waters, land, and air. The most northern lands are also among the most culturally fascinating and environmentally important and sensitive. It would be tough to understand Canada without seeing

and experiencing the rhythm of the north; a trip to these vast open spaces, to see polar bears, black bears, wolves, whales, caribou, eagles—and mountains, fjords, icebergs, and glaciers—and to be introduced to Inuit culture and traditions, is rightfully on many a bucket list.

For these reasons, Parks Canada has established a number of northern national parks, and is working to make them more accessible and understood. Torngat Mountains National Park Reserve was established on December 1, 2005, after the enactment of the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement. From



Stephanie's accommodations at Torngat Base Camp



Before you go...

The key to a happy and profound Base Camp experience is to go with open eyes, an open mind, and an open heart—and be prepared. A few things that should be on your packing list:

- Clothes for all weather (think wet, cold, hot, and everything in between). This includes: rain gear (jacket and pants), warm sweaters/fleece, long underwear, cozy socks, warm hat and gloves (more than one pair—they get wet), hiking clothes, shorts, sun hat, bathing suit (seriously).
- Footwear for all activities: rubber boots, hiking boots, sneakers, and light shoes or slippers for Base Camp.
- Warm and respectable pyjamas (remember, you may have to make a late-night bathroom run).
- Headlamp/flashlight (see above).
- Insect repellent, bug jacket, sunscreen, sunglasses.
- Camera, binoculars.
- Lighter/matches (to light your heater).
- Pen knife (to clean your fish).
- Alarm clock (so you don't miss mealtimes or excursions).
- Travel insurance (just in case weather gets in the way).

Getting to Base Camp ...

Most flights to Base Camp travel from Happy Valley-Goose Bay to Saglek airstrip, with a refuelling stop at Nain or Makkovik (the weather has to be satisfactory at all locations in order to fly). Flights to Happy Valley-Goose Bay usually route through St. John's, Deer Lake, or Halifax; it is also possible to drive, following the Trans-Labrador Highway route 510 from Newfoundland (via ferry across the Strait of Belle Isle) or Route 500 from Quebec.

Make sure your rain gear and boots are easily accessible for your arrival at Saglek airstrip. From there, it's a 20-minute Zodiac ride (or 40-minute trip by passenger boat) to Base Camp.

the beginning, the park has been co-managed by Parks Canada and Inuit from Labrador and Nunavik. The prospect of a park encompassing and protecting this Inuit homeland was exciting, but the hurdles huge.

"We had to figure out how we were going to manage a remote park 200-odd kilometres north of our headquarters [in Nain]," says Gary Baikie, Parks Canada visitor experience and product development manager. "To have visitors visit in a very safe way, to share the stories of the Inuit on their homeland in a safe way ... how was that going to be done?"

The idea of a base camp, offering a single point of entry, or gateway, for researchers, adventurers, and tourists, was piloted by Parks Canada in 2006.



Hiking to Navak Brook, John Higdon photo. Inset: Gorge hike, Stephanie Porter photo

A temporary camp was set up on Shuldham Island, within the park boundaries. All was well, Baikie recounts, until three days of rain caused major flooding (ironically, another drawback to the location was the lack of a direct fresh water supply). At the suggestion of Inuit elders, base camp relocated to St. John's Harbour.

In 2009, the Nunatsiavut Government's Labrador Inuit Development Corporation (which evolved into Nunatsiavut Group of Companies [NGC] in 2011) took over the management of Torngat Mountains National Park Base Camp and Research Station, as it was branded. Every year, investments are made in Base Camp infrastructure: a permanent building for the research station and cafeteria was built, Intershelters (the green domes, which are bear-proof and insulated) were added to the accommodation options, and, in 2015, a new permanent building with shower and bathroom facilities was constructed.

Parks Canada, with half a dozen or more employees and contractors, is the major tenant at Base Camp, providing up to 20 per cent of annual revenue—but the relationship is

more than that. "We work very closely with NGC before the season in planning, and at the end of the season in debriefing, discussing how things could be improved," says Baikie. During the season, Parks staff and Base Camp staff meet daily to plan activities, taking into account weather, guest requirements, the needs of researchers, and available resources.

"We've had various Parks Canada officials visit us and various northern groups come to look at the base camp model," says Baikie. "This concept is how other northern camps would like to work ... and we're really pleased with the arrangement. We're committed to working with NGC and coming up with solutions to make this a sustainable business."

NGC CEO James Thorbourne says he can see the day when Base Camp will be a consistent money-making venture, but it is "still in the developmental stages." It costs approximately \$750,000 to operate for its seven-week season—though unexpected weather delays or other events can cause that to fluctuate considerably.

"From a straight business perspective, you can think of it as a

hotel with 80 beds and it has to be 70 per cent occupied for the entire time it's open to break even," says Thorbourne. "The set-up and fixed costs are pretty high so you need to make those back. And if you have a slow week at the beginning, a slow week in the end, and/or you miss a week in the middle, that's not very good. It's a short window that you need to be open and make your money and be really efficient at doing it."

Packages to stay at Base Camp start at about \$4,000 for three days of nylon tent accommodation for the self-reliant backpacker, and range up to about \$10,000 for seven days in a green, domed Intershelter or white canvas Design Shelter, excursions, and a one-hour helicopter tour. Package prices include all meals and the cost of charter transportation from Goose Bay to Base Camp.

Marketing efforts for Base Camp focus on specific niches, including outdoor and eco-tourism shows, universities and researchers, and other groups—it's more cost-effective to manage a group of 10, after all, than 10 individuals. Summer 2015 brought student programs, researchers, and a Japanese film crew working on a documentary about glaciers, among others. The mixed background of visitors adds to the Base Camp experience, and word of mouth is their most powerful advertising tool.



Creating wealth in trust

A for-profit entity with a strong social mandate, the Nunatsiavut Group of Companies is changing the way business is done in the north

The Nunatsiavut Group of Companies has a clear strategy: to be the go-to organization for the crucial businesses (transportation, construction, and logistics) in the north. And to do it while being culturally respectful, socially and environmentally responsible, and profitable.

"I would say we're at a sustainable business level now," says Nunatsiavut Group of Companies (NGC) president and CEO James Thorbourne, "and it will only improve as activity increases in Labrador, and as we get the businesses to work better together and to share services."

NGC has grown substantially since its creation four years ago, from \$6 million in annual revenue to over \$30 million in 2014; the total annual budget is in excess of \$30 million.

NGC grew out of the Labrador Inuit Development Corporation, which for 30 years operated a number of ventures in northern Labrador, including a sawmill and a quarry and finishing plant for Blue Eyes granite. Those businesses were not-for-profit, designed to build capacity by training and employing Inuit.

In 2005, the Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement was signed and Nunatsiavut self-governance established. The new government, realizing the development corporation was not sustainable, moved to separate politics from business. The arm's length Labrador Inuit Capital Strategy Trust was created in 2006 and its board of trustees was given the task of fixing the business operations.

"There were some fits and starts, but in 2011, a plan was conceived: we were going to put the old businesses aside and start new for-profit entities," says Thorbourne. "The usable assets would be transferred and then we would acquire other companies that fit the strategy for Labrador."

All shares of NGC are owned by the Labrador Inuit Capital Strategy Trust, to which all profits are returned. Consolidated financial performance is reported to the Nunatsiavut Legislative Assembly annually.

The NGC umbrella covers a number of companies, all of which work together to help NGC meet its mission of being an Inuit-led business leader, and a crucial part of the supply chain in the north. Included are wholly-owned subsidiaries Nunatsiavut Construction, Nunatsiavut Marine, Nunak Land Corporation, and NGC Solutions (operators of Torngat Mountains Base Camp and Research Station). NGC is also a majority owner of Air Labrador.

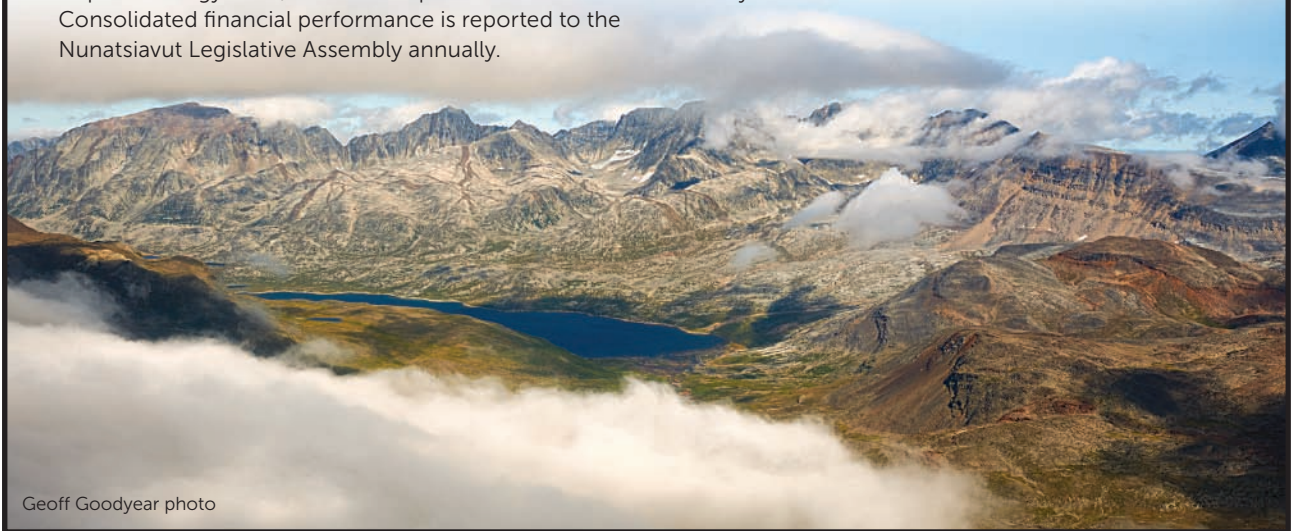
Universal Helicopters is the most recent addition; in 2013 the 50-year-old company switched ownership and is now 80 per cent Inuit-owned.

"Transforming into an Aboriginal company was a perfect next step," Universal president and COO Geoff Goodyear reflects. "A lot of contractors and organizations are subject to agreements with adjacent Aboriginal communities. Being an Aboriginal company, with quality service, helps us in the marketplace."

Capt. Peter Adams, president and CEO of Nunatsiavut Marine, says NGC has positioned itself for long-term success: "Boom or bust, you need to have our services in Labrador. We've tried to position ourselves strategically so we're here for the long haul."

The past couple of years, at least, have been at the "bust" side of the cycle, thanks to the dip in mineral prices and mining activity. "There's enough work for us to service the baseline of activity in the communities, but the gravy is with exploration, when people are doing big projects in Labrador," admits Thorbourne, adding NGC is "always looking" to grow and add to its existing businesses.

"We're doing fine, but we will do better. ... We've put together a formidable group of businesses in Labrador that no one else has. We're using this time when the economy is not particularly good to hone our business skills and make ourselves more efficient in the years to come."



Geoff Goodyear photo



Polar bear sighting in Torngat, Geoff Goodyear photo

This year, for the first time, Base Camp sold out for the season—there should have been 255 guests, about 100 more than any previous year. Unfortunately, 2015 also brought one of the longest stretches of poor weather to date, grounding flights for a full week, and a number of guests rescheduled or cancelled—while others stayed on longer than planned, for free. Most seasons only lose a few days, total, to inclement weather, and those are often spread out, with minimal effect on travellers.

That said, “Base Camp is one of the most complex businesses that we run due to all of the uncontrollable variables,” Thorbourne admits.

“Weather—when can we get guests in during the summer? And when does the ice leave in the spring so you can get in to do work? Plus all of the types of transportation you need to get people, food, and supplies in.

“Little things will always go wrong or go differently ... you can put all the planning into it you can but it inevitably changes on a daily basis. It’s a very complex operation.”

And it uses just about every arm of the NGC, as Base Camp manager Scott MacKenzie points out. “[NGC] have their fingers in just about everything that’s involved in the north and ... if you’re going to succeed up here, that’s what you’ve got to do.”

Each spring, as the sea ice starts to break up, a planning session gets underway in Goose Bay and a lengthy shopping list is drawn up: fuel, groceries, hardware, lumber, and other supplies for renovations. The supplies, as well as any heavy machinery required, are all loaded on a barge, operated by Nunatsiavut Marine, Inc., which, when conditions permit, makes the long journey north along the Labrador coast. In early July, set-up (all the tents need to be erected each year) and renovations are done by Nunatsiavut Construction, Inc.

During the operating season, weekly flights, usually chartered from Air Labrador, bring in people and produce, though a second or third flight is often put on. A Universal Helicopter pilot and helicopter are generally stationed at Base Camp to ferry researchers, staff, and visitors around; also in case of emergency.

MacKenzie oversees the Base Camp staff of about 20, including 10 bear monitors, cleaners, kitchen staff, a paramedic, and others. “In an outfit like this you have to stay on top of things,” he says, pointing out that the boats all need to be regularly serviced and generators, solar power, and water systems all need to be maintained, on top of the daily cleaning, food preparation, and guest services. “We have very

talented people here ... they can do everything and are more than willing to pitch in.” Maintenance and upkeep is, officially or unofficially, part of everyone’s job description.

“We’re still working out a few bugs,” he continues. “You are camping in the wilderness and you don’t have everything at your disposal ... you can’t just go to Home Hardware or Canadian Tire and get supplies. You have to order it, and then you have to wait, and if the planes get backlogged, we have to pick and choose what goes on board. It’s a constant battle to manage and organize and keep things flowing as best we can.”

Keeping the kitchen running is “a daunting job”: the chef and her two assistants are up at 4 a.m. and may not get to bed until 10 p.m. Within those hours, they are constantly planning and baking. Meals are served cafeteria-style, and they are delicious and substantial—beef and vegetable stir-fries, fish, pastas, roasts, and a full Jiggs dinner, complete with roast turkey, on Sunday night. Homemade soups, pizza, and desserts. Fresh baked goods come out of the oven every afternoon. No one at Base Camp goes hungry, even if several days of deep fog means the kitchen is running out of some staples, including white flour, potatoes, and tinned milk.

As it turns out, the first week of August is the only weather-bound week of the 2015 season—and that's the week I'm in Base Camp.

As I quickly find out, days begin early at camp. Although the cafeteria is open 24 hours a day for hot and cold beverages and snacks, breakfast is served between 7 a.m. and 8 a.m. Most excursions leave by 8 a.m. and require a packed lunch; sandwich fixings and snacks are spread out in the morning so visitors can make their own.

My first full day in camp brings a day trip to North Arm which, photos prove, is a stunning fjord, with 3,000-foot vertical red cliffs on either side cutting into deep blue waters. We land at the beach (the group includes the other guests at camp—a tourist from Colorado and a 10-person group from 5-Wing Goose Bay—as well as a Parks Canada guide, an archaeologist, and two bear monitors) and hike to a waterfall and a calm, clear lake with, on a good day, brilliant and welcoming indigo water. Unfortunately, the low clouds and

drizzle hide much of the landscape and mute the colours. Fortunately, the weather does not hide the archaeological features on site or stop the fish—beautiful, plentiful Arctic char—from biting.

Fishing, done from the beach by rod and lure, is the main attraction of the day for the 5-Wing visitors. A few brought their own gear, and several sturdy Arctic char are reeled in. For those new to the sport, rods, reels, and lures are available at Base Camp to borrow; bear guards and other staff are more than willing to offer pointers on both catching and cleaning fish. Tourists are permitted to bring up to two Arctic char home, and everyone on the beach vows to do exactly that.

The three-hour boat trip to and from North Arm is also eventful: the way out brought polar bear, seal, and minke whale sightings; the way back, fresh fish cooked in the captain's cabin. Even under cloud cover, the scenery is breathtaking, and the boat is a bustle of lively conversation.

The next few days are no better for visibility, and worse for wind

and high seas, making a planned excursion to Hebron impossible. Trips to Rose Island (a deeply significant Inuit cultural island with traces of two sod house villages, as well as a mass reburial site), Nachvak Brook (known for great fishing, wildlife viewing, and hiking), and Ramah (another key archaeological site and home of the distinctive Ramah chert used to make traditional stone tools)—the experiences I had read about with such interest—never make it on the agenda.

"This place is absolutely incredible ... It's a new park, and people need to get in here and see it," MacKenzie says. "It's so peaceful, so untouched. It's an expensive venture to come in here, and you see the weather—," he looks out to the bank of fog and drizzle clinging to the mountainside, "—that's the chance you take. You can still get out and do things, hiking and fishing, though you may not see the peaks of the mountains."

It's true: no matter the weather, no one is left at loose ends, and I don't miss an opportunity to see or



Fishing for Arctic char at North Arm. Photo by John Higdon.
Inset: Stephanie Porter with her catch of the day: "I ate a raw fish heart after being offered it by my Inuit guide. We shared it actually (and it was the heart of the first Arctic char I'd caught)."

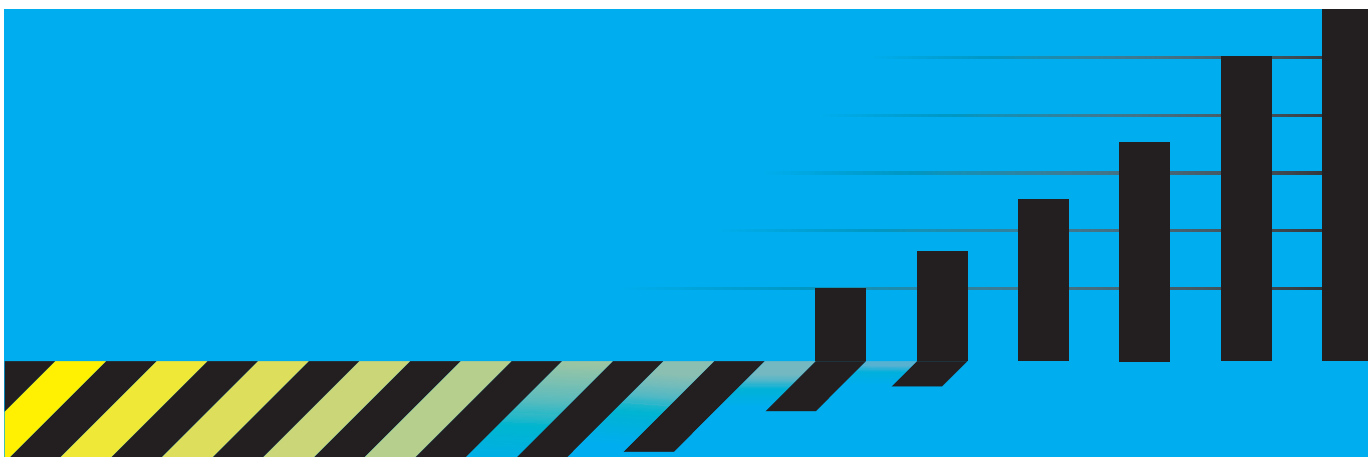


do something new. Several two- to three-hour guided hikes are scheduled, bringing us to a nearby waterfall, along the ridge overlooking Base Camp, and to a beautiful river gorge. Every hike has something more to remember it by: bear sightings, introductions to native flowers, mushrooms, and edible plants, or insight into local history. Indoor cultural activities are also offered, including Inuktitut language lessons, Inuit games, and an evening of drum dancing and throat singing.

The other thing that happens when the weather closes in: people talk. The cafeteria, which in fair weather would be primarily a flurry of eating, packing lunches, and excitement for the day's excursions, becomes a true gathering place, where hikers come to warm up, activities are held, and stories are told over cups of tea and card games. Without the distractions of cell phones or Internet, conversation and personal connections take their place. If one of the goals of Base Camp and Parks Canada's Torn gat operations is to



Maria Merkuratsuk demonstrating how to remove the fat from a seal skin using an ulu (an all-purpose knife with a curved blade, traditionally used by Inuit women). Inset: the finished product. John Higdon photos



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Inuit fun and games. Far left: Andrew Anderson demonstrating the one-foot high kick. The target is approximately two metres off the ground. Geoff Goodyear photo. Left: Stephanie Porter takes on Jolene Jenkins in the "back push" competition. John Higdon photo. Below left: Simeonie Merkuratsuk being taught to drum by David Serkoak. John Higdon photo. Below right: Traditional drum dance performed by Nancy Kooktook. Stephanie Porter photo.

show the land through the eyes of the Inuit, to facilitate meaningful interactions between visitors and those who call the area home, that mission can be achieved, no matter the weather.

"It means more when you're hearing the stories from people who have a true connection," says Jolene Jenkins, Base Camp's hospitality coordinator. "Ninety-nine per cent of our staff are from the area and you have to have that in order to make the experiences genuine."

Most staff come to Base Camp to help set-up in mid-July, and don't leave until the last guest does, in September. It can be a struggle for some—especially those with small children—with long days, and only one shared satellite phone for periodic communication. Despite this, anyone I ask about their work at Base Camp, including Jenkins, proclaims it the best job they've ever had. The big reason is the opportunity to spend time on the land that feels most like home, and to introduce it to newcomers.

Jenkins says her own pride grows with each visitor, as she watches the awe on their faces. "We all really care about your experience, and if you're getting out to see enough of what we

have ... we all realize it's so beautiful here, and it means so much to us. We share in the excitement of our guests, as if it's our own first time seeing it."

She smiles as she says that every week brings a new adventure, no matter what the elements throw out. "We always have so much fun here; we become a family for a week. You do make friendships that are real."

On the fifth day of fog, the *Inuttatik*—the passenger boat we had taken to North Arm—is dispatched to make the 18-hour trip to Nain for supplies. This is the day I was scheduled to leave, but instead, we are offered the chance to head out on a seal-hunting expedition (not to do the actual hunting, of course—only Inuit are permitted to bear firearms in the Park, among other reasons—but to observe). It's not that the kitchen is quite running out of meat, but extra would not go astray. While no seals were spotted during the five-hour excursion aboard the longliner *Robert Bradford*, it was an opportunity to see more of the coast.

Back at Base Camp, Geoff Goodyear, president of Universal Helicopters,

radios for the forecast. He was scheduled to pick up two researchers deep in the park a few days ago. It looks like it will be another day before he can reach them. They, like Goodyear and everyone at camp, are prepared for these eventualities.

"One of the greater privileges of my career is that I've been able to fly up here every year since the park started," Goodyear says. "It's incredible—not only the challenge of flying in the mountains and over some of the most incredible real estate in the country ... but to work with researchers, guests from all over the world, and friends within the Inuit communities."

In spite of the challenges of climate, topography, and logistics, Goodyear believes Base Camp will thrive.

"This all started out on Shuldham Island in a little tent village, and now you've got this state-of-the-art facility that's on the cusp of turning itself into a world-class tourist destination," he says.

"This is a very vast area and they're taking a non-consumptive approach to having a look around. When we leave here in the fall nothing is changed on the land. As long as they can maintain that model, the potential benefits are endless ... They're doing it right."

On day six, the clouds start to break up; there's a bit of blue in the sky. My first reaction is dread: I do not want to leave this magical place. When word comes in that the Saglek airstrip is too foggy for planes to leave, a last hike—up the mountainside behind Base Camp—is hastily organized.

After almost an hour of solid uphill trekking, we reach our destination elevation (about 300 metres above camp) where there's an Inukshuk and, finally, the view I'd been craving all week: the mountains, the sea, distant glimpses of ice, a sense of place.

That night, clear skies bring another treat: the Northern Lights. By midnight, the sky is bright with steaks of dancing green, mesmerizing and peaceful. It is the perfect time and place to contemplate the week, and get ready to leave.

"We do have moments of 'my God, why do we do this?' but those are fleeting," says Thorbourne. "We're very proud to operate [Base Camp]. When people come out, inevitably they have a glow. They're just overwhelmed with the place, and the culture, and you say wow, you put a smile on people's faces—and you do it with a reasonable hope to make some money, then that's ideal."

Of course, Base Camp will never be only about making money. It's giving locals the most meaningful employment possible—showing guests around their homeland, sharing their history. It's about the \$250,000 in salaries that go back to the Inuit communities on the Labrador coast, protecting the land, helping those who wish to learn more about it. And about the success of NGC.

"It is a poster child for what we can offer," says Thorbourne, "the stunning landscape, the Inuit culture you get to experience ... It is a showcase for Labrador Inuit culture and there's a value to that." •

Editor's note: although Stephanie Porter's trip to Base Camp was subsidized by the Nunatsiavut Group of Companies, NGC did not review or approve the content of this story.

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