

Nothing holds a good man down. Intrepid traveller Thomas E. Muller fights his way to Ellesmere Island and a stone's throw from the north geographic pole.

A land *that never thaws*



I desperately wanted to get to Alert. One needs to be supremely geographically alert to know where it is: at the northern end of Canada's Ellesmere Island, just 530 miles from the North Geographic Pole – Sydney to Melbourne, over the permanent sea ice, and you're at the North Pole! Reaching Alert was an adventure travel goal I had set for myself years earlier.

But Alert is a Canadian military base. It was set up during the Cold War to alert the United States that Soviet inter-continental ballistic missiles were on their way to Armageddon. Only air force personnel, ice-hardened meteorologists and the Governor General of Canada are allowed there.

For six months I wrote and telephoned, but it was hopeless; Alert was strictly off limits to me. I contemplated writing to Her Excellency the Governor General of Canada, begging her on my literary knees to allow me to get to Alert: I would entertain the troops with stories of my adventures; I would place minimum demands on their precious resources at the base; I would pay my own way; bring them fresh lettuce and strawberries, and cuddly-warm souvenirs from Australia.

Three years pass; then I find Adventure Canada, based in Toronto and run by Scottish-

born Canadian, Matthew Swan. His company couldn't get me to Alert but it could take me by ice-strengthened ship to the southern shores of Ellesmere Island and the hamlet of Grise Fiord – Canada's northernmost civilian community. The magic of Ellesmere was within my grasp; my geographic fate was sealed!

Eleven months later, in early August, I was flying by charter aircraft from the Canadian capital, Ottawa, to Kangerlussuaq on Greenland's western coast. There, I boarded the 4,000-ton *M/V Clipper Adventurer* for a two-month journey along the Greenland coastline and across Canada's Far North. I had strung together a series of separate Adventure Canada voyages visiting those "blank spaces" on maps of the world's largest island as well as Earth's second biggest country.

Crossing the Arctic Circle, we entered a land of 24-hour daylight

A twelve-hour passage down Kangerlussuaq Fjord – at 168 km, one of Greenland's longest fiords – brought the ship into the open ocean of Davis Strait. An international shipload of eighty adventurers was sailing north along Greenland's coast. Crossing the Arctic Circle, we entered a land of 24-hour

Many iceberg generations ago, a berg like these left its nursery and sank the *Titanic*.

daylight and two days later went ashore at the town of Ilulissat.

This was home to Greenland's favourite son, polar explorer and anthropologist Knud Rasmussen ("Give me Winter, give me dogs and you can keep the rest"). Here, you find one of the world's most fluid and active glaciers, Sermeq Kujalleq. It creeps forward at 19 metres a day and calves roughly 35 cubic kilometres of ice, annually, into Disko Bay. With 18 to 20 million tons of ice breaking off daily and eventually reaching the open sea, Ilulissat Icefjord is a spectacular iceberg nursery that's on UNESCO's World Heritage list. Many iceberg generations ago, a berg like these left its nursery and sank the *Titanic*.

Greenland is a self-governing province of Denmark and on this ice-capped island sensory deprivation is a major factor in

the lives of its Arctic denizens. Ilulissat's 5,000 residents have done something about it, by painting their houses in bright colours and holding onto tradition by keeping 6,000 noisy sled dogs.

Sailing ever northward, we anchored in Karrats Fjord. With icebergs sparkling in the crystal clear, feather-light air and blazing sun, and surrounded by rugged mountains, we had the Greenlandic setting for our open-deck barbecue lunch, complete with wine and a freshly collected iceberg chunk, hauled up on deck by crane and hollowed out by the crew to hold and cool the beer cans. This is as good as it ever gets for hardy adventurers in the High Arctic; not much sensory deprivation here.

Two days later, I am goal-keeping in Upernavik, a very remote village of 1,500 Greenlanders, at 73° North.



Alfresco Barbeque lunch in Karrat Fjord.



Stillness Glacier-eroded mountains in Kangerlussuaq Fjord.



Tradition An Inuit drum chant on Devon Island.



Base Grise Fjord's municipal office.



Local Life Qaanaaq teenagers enjoy the 24-hour sunshine.

Our ship had docked to take on fresh water, so the ship's team of ageing footballers played a soccer match against the local Upernavik team. The boys from Upernavik beat the ship's soccer squad 7-3 and were presented with *The Adventure Canada 2009 Polar Cup*, then invited to lunch on board our ship.

We continued northward, stopping in Qaanaaq (Thule), Greenland's northernmost community with its 600 inhabitants. Lying at 77°30' North, it is the world's northernmost town. But my eyes were set on Grise Fjord, the boundary of Canadian civilisation. We sailed to Cape Alexander, in Smith Sound, and made a landing by Zodiac inflatable dinghy while the ship was anchored at tiny Sutherland Island. After reaching the furthest north on this voyage – 78°12' North – the ship turned south toward Canada's Nunavut Territory and entered Grise Fjord harbour, on the southern shores of Ellesmere Island, for Canadian customs clearance.

Nunavut Territory is eight times the size of the United Kingdom, but its entire population of 27,000 would not even fill the Wembley football stadium. And Canada's most northerly hamlet, at 76°24' North, has a population of 145. But Grise Fjord is surprisingly well connected with the world to the south; it has a co-operative store, a school (kindergarten to Grade 12), a 2-storey hotel, a gymnasium for community events and an air strip for Twin Otter aircraft. School Principal, Lee Wood, let me use one of his office computers to get on the Internet and post a log entry on my website. It was the prearranged way for informing my wife that I was alive.

Leaving Grise Fjord with my fresh supply of ATM-dispensed cash, we crossed Jones Sound and made a Zodiac landing at Cape Hardy, on the north shore of Devon Island, the largest uninhabited island on Earth. And a splendid island this is: 55,247 square kilometres of barren remoteness. In 1997, NASA chose a crater on Devon Island as a simulation site for planned missions to Mars because it mirrors Martian conditions: a cold, dry, rocky desert, virtually unvegetated and drenched in ultraviolet light in summer. It's an ideal place for a Martian picnic.

Rounding the east coast of Devon Island, we landed at Philpot Island, where the first herd of musk ox was sighted. As always, we were on the lookout for polar bears, and they were plentiful in this part of the Planet.

Perfectly preserved for 139 years in the permafrost, their skin, flesh, hair, nails and organs bequeathed a grim message to the forensic archaeologists:

Next day, landings were made on Beechey Island, one of the most important historic sites in the Arctic. There, dotting the island's beach head, are the marked graves of three seamen from Sir John Franklin's ill-fated 1845 expedition to find the Northwest Passage. Franklin had died and his ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, along with all 129 men on his expedition, disappeared without a trace.

We had been primed for this landing by first watching a 27-minute documentary on the 1984 exhumation of the frozen bodies of two of these young crew members, buried in 1845 on Beechey Island, in order to discover what had killed them (and possibly the rest of the crew). Perfectly preserved for 139 years in the permafrost, their skin, flesh, hair, nails and organs bequeathed a grim message to the forensic archaeologists: lead poisoning from badly sealed tin cans that allowed lead metal to come into contact with the canned food eaten by the crew.

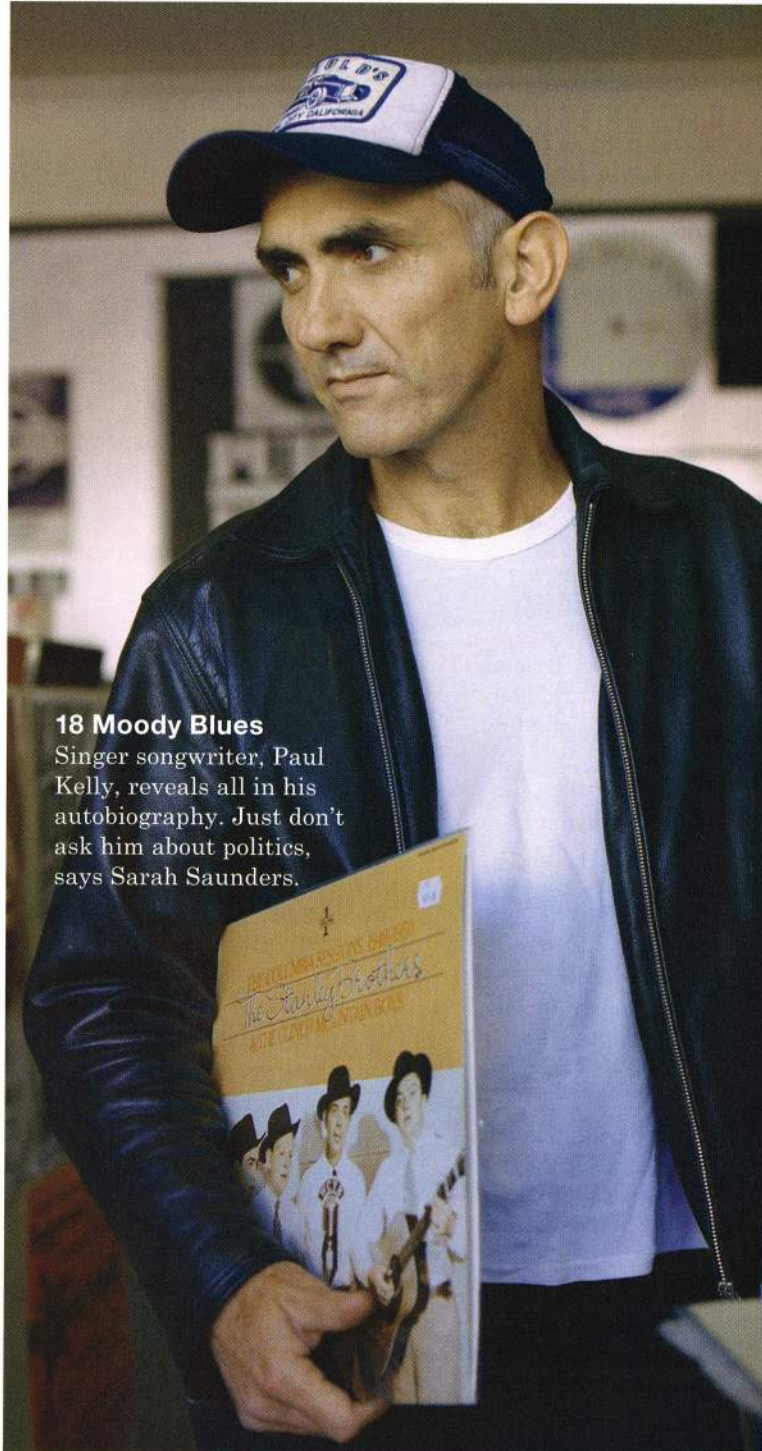
Our food on the *Clipper Adventurer* was far better.

The Hungarian chef and his army of helpers made certain of that. Most of the well-fed adventurers were over 50 and not all of their food intake was burned off with Zodiac exercise and long hikes; the residual calories served to fuel the requirements of on-board entertainment: costumed dances that would make a retired circus clown proud of his imitators, "dancercise" (a colourful sweatshop, animated with loud music in choppy seas), workshops, contests, passenger talent showcase, and navigating the rock-and-roll deck stairways in order to attend informative lectures.

When our ship anchored at the hamlet of Resolute, on Cornwallis Island, all but a handful of expeditioners left the ship to return home by airplane, while a fresh group of travellers boarded the *Clipper Adventurer* to journey into the fabled Northwest Passage. By now, I had not seen a living tree in 14 days. Ahead of me lay another 40 days of voyaging through a land that never thaws. Sensory deprivation was beginning to bite. ■

50something

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At a recent work lunch, a leading political commentator let slip that his favourite author was crime writer James Lee Burke. A hush fell across the table. We had entered new territory. I love James Lee Burke. I knew then that there, opposite, sat a kindred literary spirit.

Oscar Wilde, as always, nailed it when he said: *It is what you read when you don't have to, that determines what you will be when you can't help it.*

Paul Kelly's favourite is Jonathan Franzen's *Corrections*; our reviewer this issue gives Martin Cruz Smith a rare 10 for *Three Stations*; and, vying for a third award, it seems the Booker Prize judges have a soft spot for Peter Carey.

With Wilde's wise words in mind, what better time than this critical juncture in federal politics to dig out a recent *Australian Literary Review* survey on the reading preferences of our key pollies. For the sake of brevity we'll stick with favourite novels.

Julia Gillard's top pick is Tim Winton's *Cloudstreet*, and Tony Abbott's, *Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. For Bob Brown it's Frederick R. Karl's *Short Stories: The Existential Imagination*; and Rob Oakeshott, Kit Denton's *The Breaker*. Unfortunately, it appears Tony Windsor, Bob Katter and Wayne Swan aren't readers.

contributors



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