

MAKING PROGRESS

*NUNAVUT'S LONESOME RIVERS DISH OUT LESSONS ONE WAY—
WHEN THEY'RE READY TO*

No roads lead to Iqaluit. Planes bring people here. Planes are the reason Iqaluit is here at all. They're what led the U.S. Army Air Corps to develop a strategic World War II refueling station near an Inuit summer fishing camp on the southeast shore of Baffin Island

The Cold War brought more American planes, and more soldiers to build and man a long-range radar station. Now this self-proclaimed “New York City of the North” is capital of Nunavut, Canada's newest, biggest, and northernmost territory.

WE'RE ON STANDBY UNTIL 9. NINE BECOMES NOON. NOON BECOMES 2. TWO BECOMES 4, AND LIKE THAT, SUNDAY BECOMES TUESDAY

The airport runway is nearly as long as the town, and it serves as the gateway for any travel deeper into Nunavut, a vast, nearly uninhabited territory almost three times the size of Texas. Photographer Rob Zaleski and I arrive from Ottawa on a rainy early August morning. We'll be staying overnight, flying out the next morning

to paddle the Soper River south to the shores of the Hudson Strait.

Our hotel is jammed with construction workers and miners in transit. This "city" feels more like a frontier town in full boom than anything resembling New York—it's not just the population of 7,000 or polar bear-shaped license plates. As we take one of the few paved roads two miles to the outlying village of Apex, we pass the community cemetery. The whitewashed wooden crosses reinforce every Wild West parallel.

In Apex we meet 29-year-old Louis-Philip Pothier, a transplanted Quebecois who guides sled dog tours in the winter and hiking and canoe trips in summer. He's a hulking, gentle giant of a man who tells us of the Soper's pristine waterfalls, dwarf-willow forests, and blue gemstone deposits. We help him pack for the bush flight, rolling 16-foot inflatable canoes into tight bundles and loading five days' food into bear-proof barrels.

Then nothing happens.

We're up at 5 a.m. for the flight, but we're socked in. The clouds are too thick to risk the flight over the ridge of the Meta Incognita Peninsula, let alone sight-land on a tundra strip. We're on standby until 9. Nine becomes noon. Noon becomes 2. Two becomes 4 p.m. decision for the day, and like that, Sunday becomes Tuesday. The days blur in two-hour increments of waking, waiting and watching for a weather window that never opens.

We wander through the city. It has seven schools, three municipal law enforcers, two public bars, one dump truck, no stoplights. A jetliner flies high above a pair of shoes strung on the power line. An ATV tears across the open row of government-built condos, heading for the Tim Hortons. Kids in T-shirts wheelie around on bikes. A lady walks by in a dress. We are bundled in Gore-Tex and gloves, our hoods drawn tight.

"It's like we're in a moon colony," Rob says, looking at the submarine-like, metal-sided high school. We see the reason behind the \$16 omelet and \$400,000 cottages built on stilts above the permafrost: Every board and nail, every vegetable and piece of fruit, must be shipped from the south. Every kilowatt of energy is generated from a massive store of diesel fuel, delivered before Frobisher Bay freezes, that must last through the winter.

The fact that summers are getting longer is not reassuring.

"Climate change is magnified here—last year people were still seal hunting from their boats at Christmas," says Colleen Dupuis, who like many non-Inuit here, works on a government contract. In the 17 years she's been working with the Nunavut tourism agency, "the thaw," which used to last from mid-July to mid-October, has lengthened by about a month on either end, throwing off trip planning and beluga migrations alike.



Luck of the Inukshuk: The far north's emblematic human-shaped cairns offer a little reminder that you are never alone on the land.



Baffled on Baffin: The author paddles the Sylvia Grinnell through the territorial park's rocky, purple saxifrage-pocked hillsides out to the Labrador Sea.

"It is what it is," she says, echoing the conclusion offered by everyone who's heard our tale of standby woe.

Then the clouds clear, and Louis pulls up in his minivan to tell us that the trip is canceled. Not enough time to make the miles, he says. My mind unravels.

We run through every possible contingency plan: There's potential for a multi-day first descent of the Sylvia Grinnell River that drains into the bay just a few miles from the capital city. Louis makes a call, and reports that a helicopter chartered to a mining company can drop us upriver. We are back on standby, waiting for the helicopter to get a few minutes of free time. Finally the chopper's schedule opens, but the mining company's manpower-moving needs, and dollars, bump us right back to our pile of bear-proof barrels.

So air travel be damned, we load the canoes on Louis' Grand Caravan and rally as far upriver as it will carry us on the sporadically maintained road north.

I gear up head-to-toe. Louis is wearing shorts, with some neoprene underneath and size 14 Chacos. He bends to fill his water bottle directly from the river. I follow suit. I also follow his lines down two broad Class II rapids. We round a bend to the sloping falls that mark the transition from fresh- to saltwater, where a handful of Inuit are snag-fishing. I think nothing of the drastic tide change until we're on the wrong

end of it.

The arctic waters of the Labrador Sea are visible in the southern distance, but frustration mounts as a crisp headwind builds and the tide flood negates the current's force. Between Louis' inherent Viking strength and size that has his canoe riding lower, he pulls ahead out of earshot. I stop paddling, I stop moving.

I start cursing. I am utterly alone, still miles from the sea.

An hour passes and the bay is no closer. Constant paddling—short cadence, long cadence, switching grips, mixing everything up to avoid wearing myself down—only keeps me from drifting backward. I can't just stop out here. There's nowhere to go but out. So I stop looking at the horizon and even at the shore. I watch the rocky riverbed through a few feet of clear water, and think back to a conversation with Cameron DeLong, who manages 13 territorial parks and four national parks from a little office in town. The job may seem insurmountable, he said, but you just have to take the very smallest of accomplishments and build on them. "All progress is relative," he said.

So an inch, and a foot, and a couple rocks at a time I work my way out. As the max tide flood turns the flow backward, I get to shore and Louis and I, together, line our boats to a protected beach takeout. We unload, split the gear and start the hike out, the beach quickly covered in the risen tide.

