

Day 5 - ATVing in Cambridge Bay

- Posted by [Kristy](#) on August 16, 2008 at 9:30pm

I spent most of the day in Cambridge Bay, on the south coast of Victoria Island, the first opportunity I've had to really explore an Arctic town. It's an eye opener. On the Laurier, there is such comfort....my cabin is warm, the food is delicious, varied, and very available, I can have a hot shower. I've been enthralled with the scenery, and fascinated by the talented and giving crew, and the other passengers who are all passionate about their work and involved in unique and interesting projects. But today I got more of a sense of what it would be like to live in the Arctic, year round. It was a reality check.

The morning was sunny and cold, and Cambridge Bay was inviting...it's clearly a town built for practicality...tractors, snowmobiles, ATV's and wooden sledges were everywhere. Massive oil tanks are at the entrance to town. The houses are small and simple, close together and built to withstand harsh winter conditions rather than for aesthetics. But I and the rest of the shore party were struck by how quiet it was. No one seemed to be around. Knowing that school is back in session, we theorized that due to the long hours of light, perhaps people went to bed very late and slept in - after all, it's a Saturday. But the captain later told us that many families are still out on the land. Cambridge Bay felt a bit like a ghost town.

We explored thoroughly. I found the schools, so I know where to go on the 25th when I come back and meet with two classes. We explored the Co-op, and the Northern Store. We walked along many of the dusty roads that led to the edge of town, and then circled the outskirts. We stopped on the beach and talked with some local people who were preparing to go out on the land...James, an Inuit, was turning a large fur. We asked him about it - the claws were on the fur, and they were massive. It was a grizzly bear pelt that James' father recently killed. Ordinarily this would sadden me greatly, and although I never am happy when an animal loses its life, I was actually okay with this. The grizzly meat is used to feed the dogs, as the meat doesn't taste good to humans, but the fur is essential, especially out on the land. James explained that the fur would be used for bedding...the Captain expanded and told me that not only would the fur make a good blanket, but it would also be invaluable when out on the land, most likely to put on the ground. The bear fur would prevent the bitter cold of the perma frost seeping through into the sleepers' bones. Killing the grizzly bear has nothing to do with sport hunting for a trophy - it's completely about survival. And, as the captain pointed out, since there are stores in these small communities, even if it's not about survival in the truest sense of the word, it's about survival of a culture and a way of life.

I was very troubled by the dogs though. Those of you who know Linda's experience in the Arctic will know that many of the dogs in the Arctic are not considered pets, but a necessity, primarily to warn of the approach of bears or wolves. As a consequence, they are chained up on quite short leads beside a small doghouse. They don't get much attention. We did manage to play with a puppy, and "the ice-man" and I even found an Arctic cat! Burt, the ships cook extraordinaire who feeds over 30 people 3 times a day, seven days a week on this journey, and has been doing so for over 15 years, says he has never seen an Arctic cat in all his time up here. (I've heard that Burt is also an accomplished photographer, and he's promised to show me his pictures that reflect several years of travel in the Arctic.)

Cambridge Bay has a number of interesting features. The one that particularly intrigued me was the wreck of the "Maud"...this was a ship built in 1816 for Amundsen...he was the one who actually christened the ship with its name. He used it on two expeditions searching for the Northwest Passage, starting in 1818. In 1825, the Maud was sold to the Hudson's Bay Company who used it (and renamed it the Baymaud) as a supply ship until it sank in the Cambridge Bay inlet in 1830, after being frozen in ice. I was also curious about a little stone church I could see from the Laurier as well as from the edge of town - I discovered it had been built in 1954, using only materials that were available from the land - shale rock, held together by "mortar", made out of

seal oil and sand. From the ship, I thought I would be able to walk to these ruins, but distance is deceiving in the Arctic – it was too far away. The first shore group went back and a new one came...I wasn't finished exploring and so I stayed behind. Officer Roger arrived looking very cool – and very bright! – in his...you guessed it...bright orange, survival suit. I mentioned the ship and church to Roger and he was keen to see them as well. So, another new adventure for me! Roger (who clearly enjoys spontaneous adventure!!) and I rented an ATV from a local named Cory, and drove the pot-holed road, over two bridges, around a point, and saw what I was looking for. There's not much left of the ship...but enough to let your imagination do the rest...this ship carried Amundsen and his crew, searching for the Northwest Passage!! The church is also in ruins, but I could see the shale and how well the improvised mortar had worked, despite some recent repairs in concrete.

By this time clouds had moved in, the wind was up and it was seriously cold – I had put on my toque and gloves. Jean-Christophe, the ice expert, tells me it's expected to go down to 0 degrees in the next day or so, (and I might...just might! see a skim of ice). I remember that this is summer though. The captain tells me that even though I was cold, most of the local people would consider today a warm day. This past winter it went down at times to –65 degrees, and again, I try to understand what that kind of bitter cold would feel like, especially when it's dark for 24 hours, and the wind is screaming...for almost 6 months. I think you have to be very brave, and very self sufficient to live in the Arctic.

We pulled anchor just before dinner, and are pushing through wind towards Jenny Lind Island, where the crew will do some more reconnaissance of navigation aids tomorrow morning.

[Share](#)