Dispatch from the North (IV)

November 9, 2007

At Fantasy Palace

Keeping it Unreal

On the road from the airport to Iqaluit is a café unlike any other. Located in an undistinguished industrial building, its cappuccinos are fairly standard, as is the clientele, apart from their enormous parkas and mukluks. But inside the café is a jungle of plastic flowers and vines crowded in such riotous profusion you might believe you're in a Shangri-La grotto. Like many others, I loiter here most mornings before braving the cool breezes outside. In the days to come, I might choose to prolong the delicious sub-tropical mood, as others here do, by heading to the café's single tanning bed.

Fantasy Palace Coffee Bar makes perfect sense in this unusual town. In the two short weeks since arriving in Iqaluit, I've developed considerable respect for the day-to-day hardiness of Iqaluit's 7,000 residents. The shores of Baffin Island's Frobisher Bay are far above the treeline, making the town look more like a lunar colony than an earth-bound community, and the long Arctic nights and frigid temperatures only add to this impression. In a setting so austere, people welcome even the gaudiest flight of imagination, like this little shop of plastic horrors.

In any case, the aspirations here are political rather than aesthetic. Iqaluit's residents are supremely conscious of the town's role as capital of the newly minted Nunavut Territory, and make plain their desire to serve as a model of democratic self-government for Inuit living in the Northwest Territories, northern Quebec and Labrador. Less explicit, but nonetheless palpable, is their wish to become movers and shakers in the wider circumpolar world. Ambitious aims, and fully realistic, for the decisions made here in Iqaluit, especially in the next decade, will determine whether the distinctive Inuit way of life can be strengthened and adapted to survive the onslaught of mainstream North American culture.

And while major Canadian metropolises might be abuzz over predictions that in a decade or two a considerable majority of their populations will be so-called visible minorities, here such scenarios are already hopelessly passé. Nunavut's population is over three quarters Inuit, and even in Iqaluit itself the figure is well over half. That's the main reason this is such an interesting place at the moment. It sure ain't the deftness of this town's planners, or the sheen of its nightlife.

Space Age Prospect

The City Tour

As for striking scenery, what there is here is best viewed by leaving the small central core, with its humdrum stores and office buildings, and strolling to the top of the low outcrop surrounding the town. Here one can make out Frobisher Bay's far shore, where a fold of hills stretches to the eastern horizon. Meta Incognita Peninsula, as it is called, was reputedly christened by Queen Elizabeth I, after hearing the report of one of her privateering explorers. The aptly chosen name was one of the few good things that came of his discoveries.

Meta Incognita

Elizabeth liked her privateers macho, glib and avaricious. On all counts, Martin Frobisher passed full muster. So taken was he with Baffin Island, particularly this bay, that he sailed here three times. Searching at first for the Northwest Passage, he navigated the bay until he came close to Iqaluit's modern-day location, where he allowed some of his men to be taken hostage by the local Inuit. Returning home without the unlucky crew members, he brought with him an odd-looking rock which, when placed in a fire, glinted brightly. He had the rock examined by London assayers, and on the basis of one alchemist's highly questionable assessment that it was gold ore, he started a new career in mining promotion, persuading much of London's high society, the Queen included, to invest in his scheme. (That's where glibness came in handy.)

Martin Frobisher

Not surprisingly his investors' funds did not magically grow as promised. Frobisher quarried a small island near the mouth of the bay, and sailed back to England on his last voyage with what turned out to be a worthless shipload of mica-flecked rubble. Only by foisting the blame for this fiasco onto others was he able to stay out of debtor's prison and keep his reputation barely intact. It could have been worse. Frobisher had intended to leave behind a large party of men to winter over on Baffin Island. These plans had been quashed at the last moment due to a lack of supplies. Had the men stayed, they would have surely died.

Today Frobisher has few fans, especially here in Nunavut. He took back several Inuit hostages with him to London, all of them dying of disease within weeks of their arrival. It's a horrible legacy, yet the whole sordid tale is hard to ignore for one reason: the very first attempt at an English settlement in the New World (beating those uppity Yanks with their talk about Roanoke, North Carolina) happened on these splendidly isolated shores. One day, perhaps, the island, now known as Kodlunarn, still scarred and pockmarked where Frobisher's miners went on their fruitless treasure hunt, will be a major tourist attraction. At present, virtually no one visits it.

The other piece of scenic real estate near town also reeks of history, though from quite a different period. From the outcrop vantage point, one descends through a garish district of slope-hugging townhouses known aptly as Lego Land, before reaching the waterfront. Here, on a lonely rocky beach, is a collection of hunting shacks and boat houses, many dating from the early 1940s, when locals first settled to help build the nearby American airbase. If international renown is anything to go by, these were the town's glory days, back when it served, under its original moniker of Frobisher Bay, as one of the outermost North American links in the chain of refueling stops, which included Thule in Greenland and Keflavik in Iceland, strung along the northern edge of the Atlantic.

The propeller planes still drone over the beach on their descent to the airport. In twilight, when the spot is virtually devoid of colour, it's easy to imagine they are Casablanca-vintage Lockheeds lumbering out of the clouds on transatlantic voyages from Lisbon or other wartime way-stations. I imagine memorable faces pressed against the windows; I can almost see Ingrid Bergman's sylph-like visage, as she peers down at the welcome sight of terra firma below.

The Beach

Palace Conversations

That's the problem with lonely, minimalist vistas: one soon gets lost in such daydreams. Luckily, it's chilly work, so before long I'm back for a late afternoon's hot cocoa in Fantasy Palace, engaged in cross-table chatter and listening in on others' eloquent gripes. The town is composed, I've discovered, of three main self-demarcated groups – Inuit, non-Inuit oldsters, and youthful newcomers. Many of the second group, especially those who have been here for twenty years or more, are not happy campers at the moment. Unconvinced that the current wave of Inuit political activism is for the better, they also dislike what they see as the here-today-gone-tomorrow attitude of the young arrivals.

You meet the newcomers everywhere. Their favourite hangout is Iqaluit's sole gym – a trendy affair with up-to-the-minute fitness equipment and a constant backdrop of pounding technomusic. The newcomers also make up the bulk of the workforce in the town's service sector. For most of them, a few years here offer the chance to salt away a small fortune before heading back south. One young man I spoke to at the hotel, who turned out to be a recent graduate of Ryerson's hospitality program, confided that he and his girlfriend were well on their way to a mortgage downpayment,

despite arriving less than a year ago. “Will you buy in Iqaluit?” I asked with what I immediately realized was jaw-dropping naïveté. “Uh, no,” he replied with a withering look. “Toronto.”

Whatever else can be said about this group, they add some variety to the place. Most notably, they help make Iqaluit a truly trilingual community. Many are anglophones, and the town’s proximity to Quebec means it has long had a strong francophone element as well. You often hear French spoken on the streets, and virtually all the cab drivers are young Québécois. (It makes no sense for Inuit to drive cabs for a living. Any of them with a clean driving record earn much more elsewhere.) Inuktitut is even more ubiquitous, its distinctive syllabic script visible on every street sign and store.

Trilingualism in Action

It’s said to be a hard language for English- or French-speakers to learn, which is why even longtime non-Inuit residents often content themselves with the few fashionable words that have entered government parlance – a patois that might best be termed official Inuktitese. Even non-Inuit refer to Iqaluit inhabitants as Iqalummiut, and all residents of the territory are Nunavummiut. Someone of Inuit heritage is an Inuk (never ‘an Inuit’), while anyone of non-Inuit heritage has to make do with the less euphonious qallunaat. Originally it meant a man with bushy eyebrows – which says a good deal about the Inuit’s first perceptions of those early explorers -- but is now shorn of its derogatory overtones. I’ve included a short glossary at the end of this dispatch for readers who might like to try out some of these *bons mots* at cocktail parties, when talk turns to climate change or Arctic sovereignty.

Booze, Bars and Bootleggers

Speaking of cocktail parties, they’re a rarity here, thanks to Nunavut’s byzantine liquor laws. Concerns over alcohol dependency led to retail sales being outlawed soon after Nunavut’s creation. Territorial residents can legally import intoxicants from outside, but only after receiving a licence. That’s not hard to do, as long as you’ve stayed on the right side of the law, but you must pay a hefty tax. Predictably, there’s a good deal of to-ing and fro-ing of imported booze among friends and acquaintances, but for a tourist without local contacts, matters are pretty grim – rather like being back in the Great Gatsby era, but stuck on the teetotalling side of town. Restaurants offer drink lists, but only to customers ordering the exorbitantly priced food, and the number of bars is strictly limited. Despite this, enthusiasm for liquor-enhanced nights out on the town seems undiminished.

My hotel room is very near one of the few nightspots -- the Royal Canadian Legion. When walking about in the evening, I get a chance to see the crush of revellers, as well as the Manhattan-style queue of cabs outside. That's not a depressing sight, but often you see scenes that are. One common one is young people huddled in doorways and swigging from makeshift plastic containers which could be holding anything – mouthwash or vanilla extract, for instance – obtained despite ludicrous restrictions on their sale.

The Throbbing Heart of Iqaluit

For example, I was flummoxed to discover that supplies of mouthwash in Iqaluit's drugstores are locked behind glass doors. To purchase a bottle, you must convince a wary shop clerk (after you've found one) of your honorable motives. This minor irritant gives a visceral sense of the pervasiveness of the problems this town faces. The sense is only heightened when one hears of the territory's epidemic-level suicide statistics, rivaling those in the most afflicted post-Soviet countries. (Last Monday's murder of a young Mountie on duty in the hamlet of Kimmirut, a hundred kilometers south of here, only adds to the general sense of dismay, in Iqaluit as much as elsewhere.) What does this say about all the hopes currently being placed on Nunavut and its innovative form of self-government? Obviously the answers are far more nuanced than a simple recitation of dire statistics might lead one to believe. I would never claim to possess answers, but in the next dispatch I'll sketch out what people here are saying. I'll end this dispatch, as always, with responses to a few everyday questions.

What's the shopping there like? Besides a few specialty outfits such as florists (yes, fresh flowers are regularly flown in) and art shops, choice is restricted to two stores – Arctic Ventures and North Mart -- both big-box wannabes. There's not much to choose between them, except that the first boasts a fine cache of northern literature, which makes its book department the closest Nunavut gets to a stand-alone bookstore. All prices are, of course, outlandishly high: usually about double what one would expect to pay elsewhere. But that's an inescapable fact of life, given the need to bring in every item either by sea or air, so locals get used to it – just as they get used to the shocked gasps of the occasional visitor tripping through the aisles.

Have you found a decent place to stay? Yes, an apartment-hotel run by the same outfit as the one in Yellowknife, and by local standards a bargain, though outrageously expensive. The view won't win any awards – I look out on a row of stilt-elevated

prefabs – and as for amenities, there's just a tiny fridge and microwave in the room. The local tourist trade needs further refining, as experts will tell you. I've had a good chance to see that here. The mattress on my bed looks as though it has witnessed more than its share of interesting dramas, while the sheets and towels give off a malodorous pong, as if someone forgot to add detergent to the laundry cycle. I've also found myself taking on the occupation of part-time bath-scrubber. As ridiculous as that might sound when staying in a pricey hotel room with daily maid service, it's either that or perpetually hounding the already overstretched cleaning staff – one of the many signs of how difficult it is for businesses here to attract and keep low-wage labour, when so many high-paid jobs go begging.

A Shopping Excursion

What about the restaurants? On the whole, execrable. Most of them make Boston Pizza back in Yellowknife look like Maxim's. At local excuses for upmarket eateries, *plats du jour* can easily set you back $40, a source of deep consternation once you see what arrives on your plate. With one or two notable exceptions, which I will talk about next time, the restaurants in this town quickly result in a pivotal dietary epiphany. When the only options are a cheeseburger platter or a slop-covered hunk of cardboard masquerading as *haute cuisine*, take the junk food every time.

Glossary of Essential Inuktitut (Cocktail Party Version)

Inuk, pl. *Inuit* (ee-noohk'/ee'-noo-eet) – Person.
Iglu, pl. *Iglooit* (ee'-gloo/gloo-eet) – House (not igloo).
Iqaluk, pl. *Iqaluit* (ee'-kha-look/ee-kha'-loo-eet) – Fish.
Iqalummiuq, pl. *Iqalummiut* (ee-ka-loo'-mee-oohk/-oot) – Iqaluit resident.
Nunavummiuq, pl. *Nunavummiut* (noo-na-voo'-mee-oohk/oot) – Nunavut resident.
Qallunaaq, pl. *Qallunaat* (kha'-loo-nahk/naht) – Originally man with bushy eyebrows, i.e. white man. Now anyone not of Inuit heritage.