

**Profound experience** for young scientist in a totally new environment

# Arctic's life-changing



Nature and culture combine to deeply touch the innermost soul, writes Rowan Schindler

I SAT at the table in awe of the story I was listening to. It involved a hammer, wood chisel and a frostbitten toe.

I could barely contain my amazement, and tried to act casually by sipping my hot, black tea.

Stories of pure cold that bites deep into your bones are as alien to me as this landscape. For a boy from the Sunshine Coast, the Canadian Arctic is another world.

The tale of how I found myself at that table listening to that story is complicated. Enough to say, I was offered the opportunity of a lifetime and I would have been crazy to say no.

To experience the end of the Earth, as far away from home as I could go, is an opportunity very few people get.

A week earlier I touched down in Ulukhaktok, Northwest Territories in the Western Canadian Arctic.

I was immediately struck by the warmth and kindness of the locals. Smiling faces and outstretched hands welcomed me with a bombardment of introductions.

I have met the majority of residents in town. I struggle to remember names on the best of days. First lesson – always wave and say hello.

The cold ride into town on a snowmobile reinforced the need for ski goggles and to zip my jacket all the way up – both rookie errors.

What took me by surprise were the hills and cliffs surrounding the town, the ice and the horizon – far reaching and borderless.

The power of the environment grips you. It makes you want to step



NORTHERN LIGHTS: The Aurora Borealis dance above the frozen arctic landscape of Canada's Northwest Territories.

PHOTO: ROWAN SCHINDLER



The midday sun casts a halo above the frozen Northwest Passage, looking south towards mainland Canada.



The near finished traditional igloo, built with the direction of Inuit elder Robert Kuptana.

back and surrender to it. You are dumbfounded by its immensity, endlessness and emptiness.

In contrast are the people, the locals, those who call this place home. They welcomed me, fed me, gave me tea and told me stories of their mothers and fathers and

generations before them.

These are among the warmest, most genuine and generous people I have ever met. There are so many layers here – to the people and their relationship with the environment and the world around them.

The love of the land and their

want, or the need, to be out on it – adventuring, hunting, living – consumes almost every thought here.

"Out on the land, out on the land", they always say.

One night I was asked to go out on the ice with a hunter. He told me

ancestral stories about the stars and constellations. He told me it was his favourite place to be – out on the ice at night in the middle of winter, in the pale moonlight. It's a world without colour or sound. I stood silently, looking around; all I could think of was my camera and trying not to freeze. On reflection, I feel the magic of the moment and the honesty and spirit in the hunter's words.

He and his ancestors are connected by that moment, that activity and memory. He is doing what his forefathers had done, what he was born to do. Since leaving Ulukhaktok, I have begun to question myself – the way I am at home, my relationship with others, the environment and the world around me.

After a few days in the community,

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