

The deep bite of the arctic

By Rowan Schindler

I sat at the table in awe of the story I was listening to - it involved a hammer, wood chisel and a frost bitten toe. I could barely contain my amazement at the story 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 sub-tropical Australia, 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 found myself 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. Situated on Victoria Island in the Western Canadian Arctic. Straight away I was greeted by the warmth and kindness of the locals. Smiling faces and outstretched hands welcomed me and thus began the bombardment of introductions. I suppose 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 the back of a snowmobile introduced me to further lessons - the need for ski goggles and to zip my jacket all the way up - both rookie errors. What immediately 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 seemingly grips ahold of you, it makes you want to step back and allow yourself to surrender to it, you are dumbfounded by it. It is purely magical in its immensity, its endlessness and its emptiness.

In contrast to the environment are the people, the locals, those who call this place home. These people welcomed me in, fed me, gave me tea and told me stories of their mothers and fathers and their mothers and fathers before them. These are among the warmest, most genuine and generous people I have ever met in my life. There are so many layers here - to the people and their relationship with the environment and to the world around them. The love of the land and their want, or the need, to be out on it, adventuring, hunting, living - it 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. While out on the ice he told me stories about the stars and the ancestral stories of the constellations. He told me it is his favourite place to be - out on the ice at night in the middle of winter. No wind and no noise whatsoever, just the pale moonlight - a world without colour or sound. At that moment I stood in silence and looked around, all I could think about was my stupid camera and trying not to freeze. Reflecting back now I can feel the magic of the moment and the honesty and spirit in the hunter's spoken words. He and his ancestors are connected by that moment, by that activity and by that memory. He is doing what his forefathers had done, what he was born to do. Out there on the ice, there was no advertising, no cars, no strangers, no rules, no laws.

Since leaving Ulukhaktok, I have begun to question myself - the way I am at home, my relationship with others, with the environment and with the world around me. After a few days in the community I began to feel myself changing, somewhere inside of my mind something was happening, I was being bitten. I began to question myself and it continues. It is like a challenge is being mounted somewhere inside of me - against myself. Challenging all my prior thoughts, opinions and biases.

I realised I needed to get over myself - this is the major lesson I have learnt during my stay. All my prior knowledge and experience is useless. It makes up who I am, sure, but it is only a very slim piece of me, completely built from western bias and all the junk which comes with it. I realised the Inuit relationship to the land is spiritual to the core. We cannot fully understand it from the outside. Nobody can teach them anything, I, for one, can only learn from them.

The wonderful knowledge and rich life experiences I have learnt while being in Ulukhaktok will stay with me forever. Everyone has an amazing story to tell and each person I spoke to surprised me with something new, without ever trying to and without even realising it.

I sat at that table and made a friend for life. While I may never get an opportunity to journey back there - which saddens me deeply - those that taught me have a huge place in my heart and will never know how much they have affected me.

I sat at that table and tried to absorb everything I could but realised I had nothing to give in return but my friendship, respect and something which bit much deeper. An emotion, a cross between sadness and happiness. A happiness for friends who live their lives day-by-day, and a sadness for a waning way of living. A culture and traditions disappearing and that which I can't help but feel guilty for.