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STEVE HAGGERTY/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The Mackenzie River empties into the Beaufort Sea, above the Arctic Circle. The Norweta, near Inuvik.

SHIP TO SHORE

Travelers, not tourists, course Canada's dramatic, desolate Northwest

By Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty
GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

YELLOWKNIFE, Northwest Territories — If the crew of the good ship Norweta, sailing south on Canada's Mackenzie River, had known ahead of time, we wouldn't have missed the wedding.

But it was nine o'clock on a July evening when we disembarked at Fort Good Hope, 25 miles south of the Arctic Circle. By that time, the bride and groom and their guests, wearing their best beaded moccasins, had left the church and walked to the park.

In southern climes, the celebration would have been half over. But here in the western Arctic, where the summer sun shines for 22-7, the party was just beginning. The guests, gathered at picnic tables, stared in surprise at the 18 accidental tourists suddenly in their midst. A bonfire crackled and strips of moose meat sizzled on a dozen barbecues. On the dance floor, a low wooden deck, the musicians were about to play.

"C'mon, let's dance," whispered Adele Chilli, 28, the Norweta's cabin stewardess, a member of the Dene (Athabaskan Indian) people. She smiled shyly and tapped her foot as nine wiry men, each with a large, flat hand-held drum, began to pound

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SOURCE: ESRI

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2 oceans, 6 seas, too many suitcases

By Susan Klibanoff
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

With the words "Welcome home," the crew greeted us as we boarded the ms Amsterdam for a 62-day Orient Explorer cruise. A non-flier, I had always wanted to visit the Orient, but it was a pipe dream, until I learned of this cruise to Asia, Australia, and the South Pacific. At last I would get to see the Great Wall of China and meet my Japanese penpal of 50 years.

Extended travel outside the country requires planning, and my husband, Elton, and I had plunged into it with enthusiasm. I attacked the packing with ferocity. Anticipating autumn in Japan, summer in the South Pacific, spring in Australia, and December in Boston, I filled several suitcases. Dress and casual clothes, 10 pairs of shoes, I packed it all. Books, puzzles, binoculars, cameras, Elton's crutches, and a wheelchair.

Other passengers were wiser. New Yorkers Janet and Mike Stoller brought one suitcase apiece. Monte and Kathy Kirsch of Anchorage came with only two backpacks and a garment bag. After all,

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The ms Amsterdam, Holland America's Pacific flagship, is readied for departure from Seattle last August.

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On water route of long-ago trappers

► **CANADA**
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out a rhythm.
 "I have a second cousin here and they've invited us," Clilli said, tugging on my sleeve. In a minute we had met the newlyweds and were circling with two dozen others to the thundering beat of a traditional dance.

A wedding was the last thing we had expected when we booked a cruise on the 103-foot *Norweta*, which sails eight- and 10-day trips on the 1,000-mile-long Mackenzie, or Deh Cho ("Big River"), as the Dene call it. But surprise is part of the charm of a trip to the north.

"These are communities, not tourist destinations," said Margaret Whitlock, 68, the *Norweta's* co-owner, a fourth-generation resident of Hay River and a licensed river boat captain. "We're never sure what we'll find until we get there, but it's always interesting."

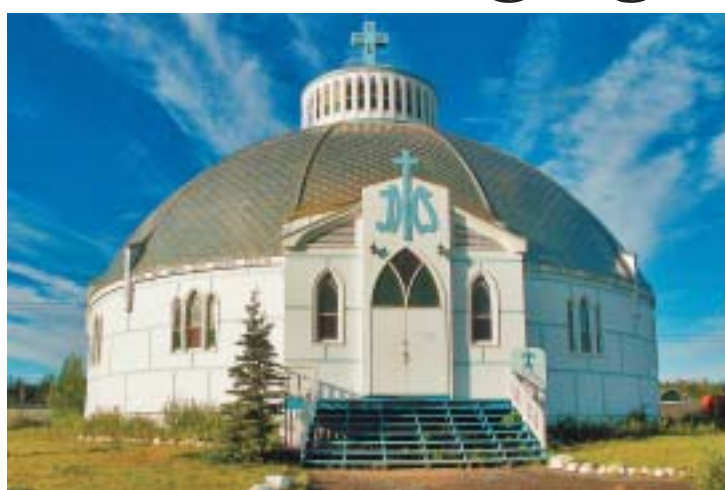
Sailing from mid-June through July, the *Norweta* follows the historic route pioneered in 1789 by Scottish explorer Alexander Mackenzie, between Hay River, on Great Slave Lake, and the town of Inuvik on the Mackenzie River Delta, near the Arctic Ocean.

Along the way, the ship docks at a half-dozen sleepy outposts where passengers can get off to explore, including Dene and Gwich'in villages, historic forts, and towns built around former fur trading posts.

In Norman Wells, we found a small but impressive museum, with history exhibits and a shop selling native crafts. In Fort Good Hope, we visited the beautifully-decorated little church, a bit of classic folk art. In Tsiigehtchic, where the Arctic Red River meets the Mackenzie, the main attraction was the arrival of a hunter in a motorboat — with a freshly killed moose stuffed into the prow.

The Mackenzie, the continent's second-longest river system after the Mississippi, is a mammoth body of water, draining one-fifth of Canada. Flowing from southeast to northwest, it bisects the Northwest Territories, a region twice the size of Texas but home to just 45,000 people.

This river once bustled with activity. In the 19th century, travel-



STEVE HAGGERTY/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The "Igloo Church" is Inuvik's most famous landmark.

ers heading downstream wrote of seeing dozens of Indians fishing from canoes, trappers laden with furs for the trading posts, and riverboats ferrying cargo and passengers. But life on the river changed after the fur trade died and airplanes came to the Arctic. Eventually, most people moved off the land and into towns.

Now what visitors see are trees in the trillions. There are so many trees, in fact, that during the summer, 30 or 40 forest fires, started by lightning, burn at any one time, fated to smolder until winter snows put them out.

"No one pays any attention to them, not unless they're threatening a town," said George Whitlock, 72, as he scanned the horizon. Whitlock is the *Norweta's* co-owner, first mate on our trip, and Margaret's husband. "It's part of the natural cycle. But there isn't much else out there, you know. Just a few hunters."

The *Norweta*, small but functional, is a working ship with four decks. The engines and crew are on Deck 1, below the water line. The cabins, on Deck 2, have large private bathrooms with showers, built-in furniture, large drawers for clothes, and narrow closets. Screens on the portholes keep out mosquitoes. You can close them to block out all light, or leave them open and pull the curtains.

The combination lounge and dining room, and the bar are on Deck 3, with an open deck around the perimeter. The sun deck, behind the bridge on Deck 4, is surfaced with artificial turf and equipped with deck furniture. It's a nice place to get away, but it can

get very noisy here, and in several other places close to the engines. Fortunately, earplugs and noise-canceling earphones are part of our standard travel kit.

The meals, mostly American dishes, are delicious but not fussy, prepared with first-class ingredients and served restaurant style. Late evening snacks of cookies, cake, and fruit are also laid out. You can purchase wine, beer, or mixed drinks.

If you don't get enough exercise on shore, the ship has a treadmill, or you can walk around the outside deck, where 22 laps equal a mile. Owing to space limitations, however, most onboard activities are sedentary: board games, cards, reading, crossword puzzles (bring your own), birding (bring binoculars), and conversation.

We brought a couple of best-sellers and our laptop. Other passengers brought knitting, stationery, and trip diaries. The ship's library has a nice collection of regional histories, Canadian travel, nature references, and a few recently published novels.

As the scenery rolled by, there was always something to grab our attention, from mountains, rock formations, the Ramparts gorge through which the river flows, a passing cargo barge or Canadian Coast Guard vessel, or eagles in the treetops.

Fort Simpson, built at the confluence of the Mackenzie and Liard rivers, is the jumping-off place for airplane sightseeing trips west to Nahanni National Park Reserve, a mecca for kayakers and rafters, and site of the spectacular 300-foot Virginia Falls. If the weather

If you go . . .

For information about the itinerary, the ship, recommended dress, choosing a date, booking a cabin, and making airline reservations, visit the *Norweta* website at www.norweta.com, then call Margaret Whitlock directly at 866-NORWETA (866-667-9382).

Prices per person start at \$4,914 for a cabin with two single beds, and \$5,229 for a cabin with a double or queen bed. All meals are included. Alcoholic beverages and Canadian taxes are extra. Most shore excursions are free; the Tuktoyaktuk and Nahanni National Park flightseeing cost extra.

For maps, pamphlets, and other information about Northwest Territories tourism, call 800-661-0788 or go to www.explorenwt.com. For national parks information, see www.nwtparks.ca.

is clear and the planes have space, this splurge (rates run about \$300 per person) is well worth it.

Another highlight was our day tour to Tuktoyaktuk, on the Arctic Ocean. Here we visited Maureen Pokiak, 51, who served us caribou soup for lunch and introduced us to traditional Inuit culture.

"I came to Tuk to teach school, where I met and married my husband, who's a native Inuit and a hunting guide," Pokiak explained. They raised a family, and Pokiak learned traditional cooking, food preservation, skinning, and sewing, skills she integrated into an otherwise modern lifestyle.

After our day trip to Fort Norman, some of us decided to walk back along the beach, where we met Mandy and Arlene, both 12, and Steve, 9, who had built a driftwood fire and were splashing in the river. As curious about us as we were about them, they asked where we lived and if it snowed there. Enchanted by their friendly questions, we lingered to watch the fire die down.

"Bye," they called, as we headed for the *Norweta*. "Come back again soon."

Contact Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty of Venice, Calif., at Annezcooke@cs.com.



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