



The "Igloo Church" in Inuvik is 2 degrees north of the Arctic Circle.

Tasting the big Mac

Mammoth Canadian river a gateway to native cultures

By ANNE Z. COOKE and STEVE HAGGERTY
Special Contributors

GREAT SLAVE LAKE, Canada — If the good ship *Norweta*, cruising on the Mackenzie River in Canada's Northwest Territories, had arrived earlier, we wouldn't have missed the wedding.

But it was 9 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, dressed in their best beaded moccasins, had already 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 22-7, the party was just beginning. A bonfire crackled, and strips of moose sizzled on a dozen barbecues. On the dance floor, a low wooden deck, the musicians had started to play.

"C'mon, let's dance," whispered Adele Clilli, the *Norweta's* cabin steward, a member of the Dene (Athabaskan Indian) people. She tapped her foot as nine wiry men, each holding a large, flat drum, began to pound an insistent rhythm.

"I have a second cousin here, and they've invited us," she said, tugging on my sleeve. In a minute we were circling with two dozen other dancers to the thundering

beat of a traditional dance.

A wedding was the last thing we'd expected when we booked a cruise on the 103-foot *Norweta*, sailing from mid-June through July on the Mackenzie River, or Deh Cho, "Big River," as the Dene call it. But surprise is what makes this cruise so unusual.

"These are communities, not tourist destinations," said Margaret Whitlock, 68, the *Norweta's* co-owner and a fourth-generation resident of Hay River, on the south shore of Great Slave Lake. The ship's eight- and 10-day cruises between Great Slave Lake and Inuvik (in-NOO-vik), an Inuit town on the Mackenzie River delta, follow the historic route pioneered in the late 1700s by explorer Alexander Mackenzie.



The *Norweta* cruises on the Mackenzie River near Inuvik, Canada.

Photos by STEVE HAGGERTY/ColorWorld

Along the 1,000-mile journey, the ship docks at a half-dozen sleepy outposts — Dene and Gwich'in villages, historic forts and towns built around former fur-trading posts — where we and the other 18 passengers disembarked to explore.

In Norman Wells, we found a small but attractive museum with detailed exhibits and a shop selling beaded moosehide moccasins, hand-knitted hats, jewelry and baskets. In Fort Good Hope, we visited the church, decorated with classic folk art. In Tsiigehtchic (TZIG-eh-chik), where the Arctic Red River flows into the Mackenzie, we arrived just in time to watch a local hunter pull up to shore with a freshly killed moose in his motorboat.

The Mackenzie River, North America'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 with a population of just 45,000.

The river was busier in the 19th century than it is now. Travelers heading downstream wrote of seeing Indians fishing from their canoes, trappers laden with furs for the trading posts and riverboats ferrying cargo and passengers. But as the fur trade vanished, so did the traffic. The airplane put the riverboats out of business.

Today, the trip is a wilderness adventure, past mountains, cliffs, islands and forests where trees grow in the trillions. There are so many trees that each summer, 30 or 40 lightning-started forest fires burn at any one time.

"No one pays any attention to them, not unless they're threatening a town," said George Whitlock, 73, the *Norweta's* co-owner and Margaret's husband, as he scanned the smoke on the horizon. "It's part of the natural cycle."

The *Norweta*, with four decks, is a small but functional ship, built

for deep water but maneuverable on the river. The engines and crew cabins are on Deck 1, below the water line. The 10 guest cabins, on Deck 2, have large private bathrooms with showers, built-in furniture and drawers for clothes. Screens on the portholes keep out mosquitoes. You can close the inside hatch to block the midnight sun or pull the curtains.

The combination lounge and dining room are on Deck 3, with a narrow promenade deck. The Sun Deck, behind the bridge on Deck 4, is surfaced with artificial turf and equipped with deck furniture. Because the ship is small, cabins near the engines can be noisy. We were prepared, however. Earplugs and noise-canceling earphones are part of our standard travel kit.

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

If you don't get enough exercise on shore, the ship has a treadmill or you can walk on the promenade deck (22 circuits equal a mile). Because of limited space, most on-board activities are sedentary: board games, cards, reading, crossword puzzles (bring your own), birding (bring binoculars) and conversation.

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

There was always something to see, from mountains, rock formations and the Ramparts river gorge to the occasional cargo barge, Coast Guard vessels and eagles in the treetops.

The most interesting stop was Fort Simpson, a former trading post at the confluence of the Mackenzie and Liard rivers that offered a choice of activities.

"We're a real town," said guide Steve Rowan, 82, whose dry wit enlivens his historical walking tours. "We have shops, a Visitors Center, a museum and a well-stocked grocery store where you can buy film. We even have a historical society with two members, including yours truly."

Fort Simpson is also the jumping-off place for flight-seeing trips west to the 300-foot-long Virginia Falls in Nahanni National Park Reserve, a mecca for kayakers and rafters. If the weather is clear and the planes have space, splurge on this one (about \$300 per person).

My favorite shore tour was to Tuktoyaktuk, an Inuit village on the Arctic Ocean. Here we visited Maureen Pokiak, 51, who served us caribou soup and introduced us to the Inuit (Eskimo) culture.

"I came to Tuk to teach school, where I met and married my husband. He is a native Inuit, who grew up here, and a hunting guide," she explained. Together they raised a family, and Maureen learned to prepare muktuk (whale blubber), dry fish, skin muskrats



DEAN HOLLINGSWORTH/Staff Artist

WHEN YOU GO

THE CRUISE

Prices start at \$4,914 for a cabin with two single beds; \$5,229, 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 flight-seeing cost extra. Contact: 1-866-667-9382; www.norweta.com.

ARCTIC TRAVEL

■ Northwest Territories information: 1-800-661-0788; www.explorenwt.com.
■ Parks: www.nwtparks.ca.
■ Inuvik or visit Maureen Pokiak: www.arcticnaturetours.com.

GUIDEBOOKS

■ *Canada* (Lonely Planet, \$26.99)
■ *The Journals of Alexander Mackenzie* (Stackpole, \$17.95), a diary of the explorer's 1790 and 1793 river trips



At 11 p.m., kids in Fort Norman are still swimming in Canada's Mackenzie River.

and sew fur parkas, traditional skills she integrated into her family's otherwise modern lifestyle.

"I'm living in two cultures," she said in her modern kitchen.

In Fort Norman, tour guide Jim LaFleur showed us the town's half-dozen streets, the 1880s log cabin that served as an Anglican church, the cement-block community center and his house, a pre-fab cottage perched on a bluff overlooking the Mackenzie.

"I came out here a long time ago," he said. "Here, I was the janitor at the school, but I'm retired now. I never get tired of looking at

this river."

Afterward, walking back along the beach, we met some town kids. Mandy and Arlene, both 12, and Steve, 9, had built a campfire and were swimming and splashing in the river. Curious about us, they asked where we lived and if it snowed there. Enchanted by their smiles and courtesy, we lingered.

"Bye," they called, when we finally left for the *Norweta*. "Come back soon."

Anne Z. Cooke and Steve Haggerty are California freelance writers.



An air tour gives a bird's-eye view of the Inuit village of Tuktoyaktuk on the Beaufort Sea.



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