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Photo by Ryan Creary

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Labrador's Torngat Mountains are as raw and rugged as they were millions of years ago. Walking on lands so ancient and so untouched inspires immense awe and privilege.

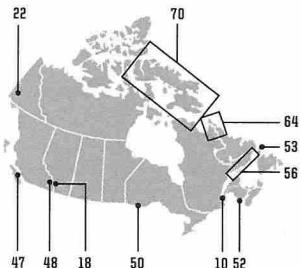
By Liz Fleming

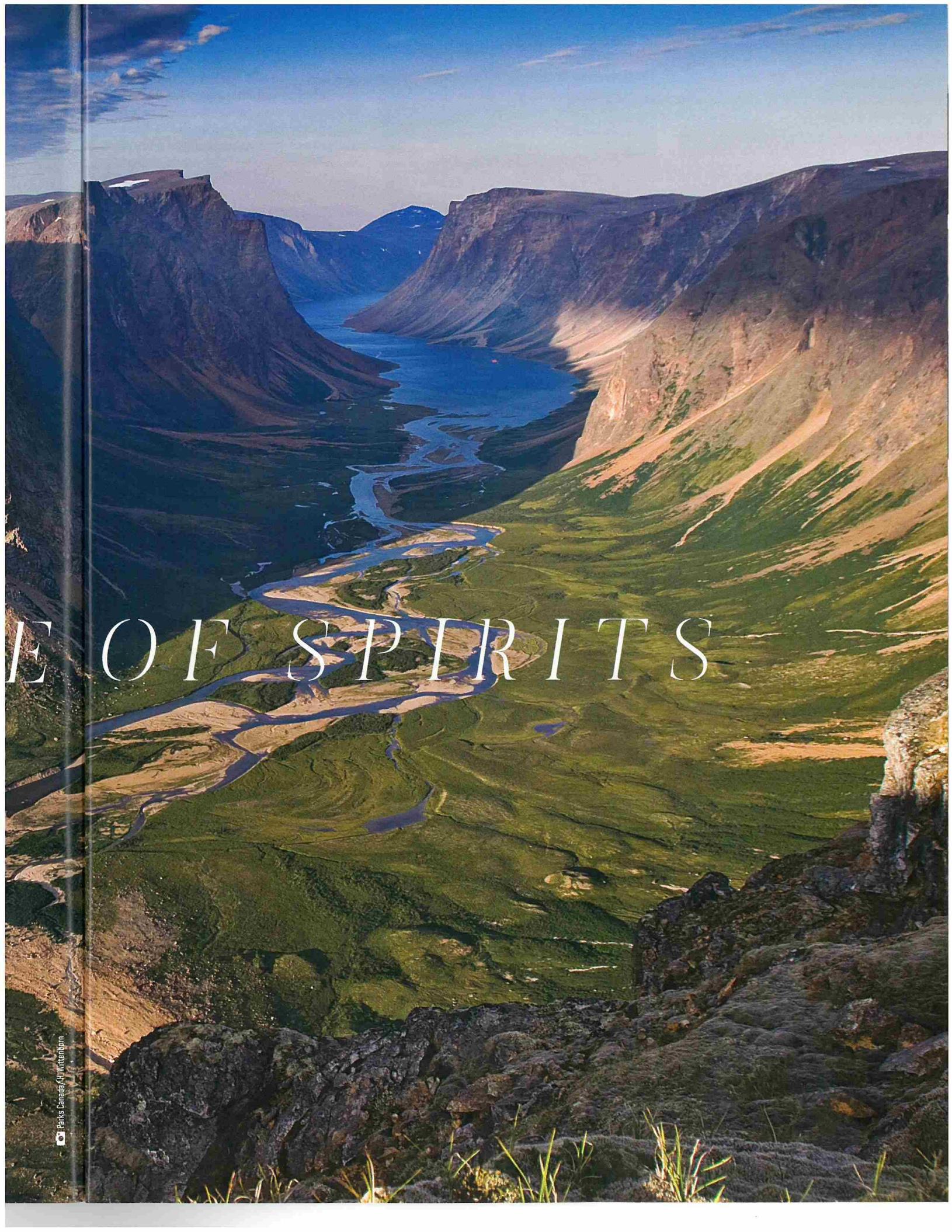
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WAY OF THE NORTH

Journey alongside Sarah McNair-Landry and Erik Boomer on their historic 120-day dogsled journey around Baffin Island.

By Conor Mihell





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IN THE PLACE

Labrador's Torngat Mountains are as raw and rugged as they were millions of years ago, when the last glacier tore through the landscape. Walking on lands so ancient and so untouched inspires immense awe and privilege.

By Liz Fleming

There was no doubt about it. Something was outside my tent—something big. Even though I knew an electrified bear fence surrounded the Torngat Mountains Base Camp & Research Station, nocturnal noises were still something to think about.

to snuffling in the low-growing blueberry patch. We froze, mesmerized by his size, his scent, the sound of his chewing and his mind-blowing proximity.

After a few probably unwise minutes, Mike asked, "Is it smart for us to be so close to a bear? How much would it bother him to come through that electric fence?"

As we were processing that sobering question, two shots exploded into the silence. Our bear friend grunted, then lumbered reluctantly up the rugged slope behind the camp. The Base Camp bear guards had arrived.

Wilderness-wise bear guards patrol the bear fence night and day—just one part of the amazing human machine that makes the Torngat Mountains Base Camp & Research Station a reality.

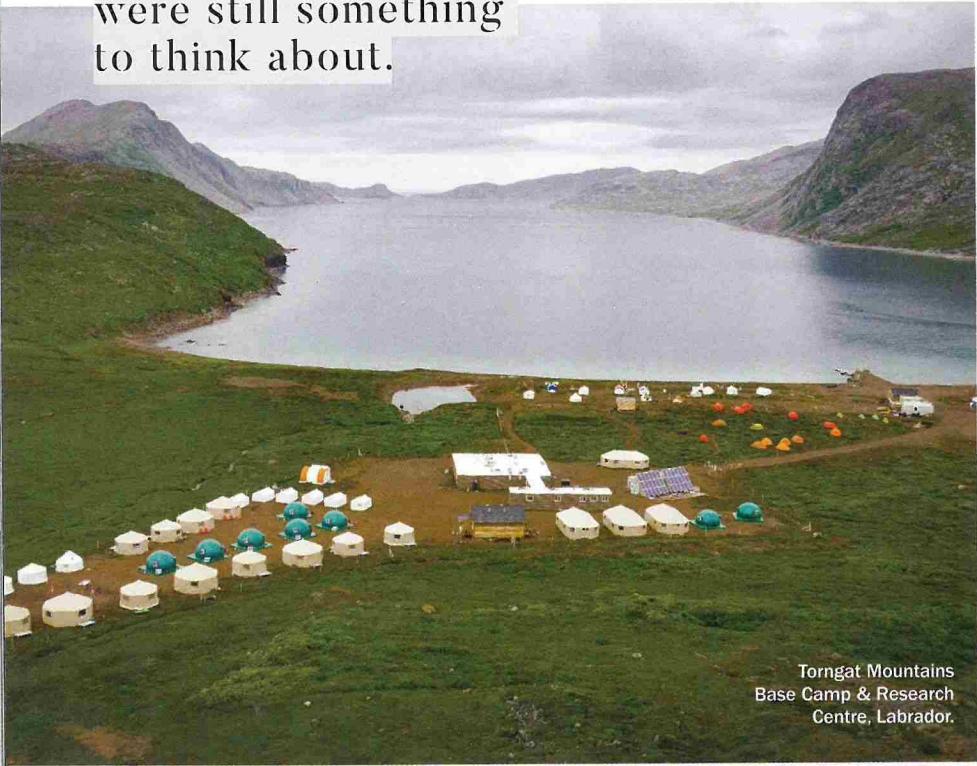
research station and a cafeteria, then a collection of bear-proof Intershelters—which look like green plastic igloos—followed by a series of aluminum-framed yurt-style Design Shelter tents. Most recently came a shiny new shower and bathroom facility with giant propane heaters to keep things cozy from early morning until the last shower of the night. Each Intershelter has a raised wooden floor, two down-comforter-topped single beds and requisite furnishings. It's IKEA-basic, but clean and comfortable. I'd been expecting a pup tent and a sleeping bag so it looked like The Ritz to me. Although the mosquitoes are an ever-present annoyance, the Intershelters and Design Shelters don't have many cracks so the flying pests rarely launch an indoor invasion. I used Watkins Insect Repellent (made in Newfoundland and reputed to be the absolute best by bug-juice connoisseurs), wore a bug jacket and a baseball cap when I hiked and had only one bite over the week.

While the facilities at the base camp are impressive, what really makes the place so fascinating are the people who run it. Having travelled in the north in the past, I'd met Inuit people, viewed demonstrations of traditional sports and games of strength and endurance, heard throat singing and watched drum dancing—all from a tourist's distance. I'd never felt the opening of any serious cultural or emotional doors. My week in the Torngats changed that. Most of the Base Camp staff are Labradarians, and most have Inuit roots, so cultural immersion happens naturally. Dine, hike and laugh with people for more than a week and you're bound to learn something.

Life there is basic: eat, sleep and explore—together. For safety reasons, no one goes beyond the bear fence without an armed bear guard and most trips involve small groups—whether hiking to see ancient tent rings, food caches and burial cairns or motoring through the fiords on a sturdy working boat that can brave nearly any water. Nothing is close to anything else in the vast Torngats, which comprise 9,700 sq-km; every trip requires either a ride on the boat or helicopter flight.

ON OUR FIRST boat cruise to North Arm, a remote fiord flanked by rugged mountainsides, the sky was clear and blue. Wearing three coats, a hat and mitts, I shivered in the sunshine on the top deck, trying to squeeze the beauty and the enormity of the landscape into my camera lens. In the Inuktitut language, Torngats means "Place of Spirits." The long fiords seem to echo with the voices of the ancient hunters of caribou and seal and the shadows on the rock call up the ghosts of an ever-moving nomadic people.

As we navigated rock faces that were billions



Torngat Mountains
Base Camp & Research
Centre, Labrador.

"Liz...get up. You have to see this."

Fellow journalist Mike Carter and I had made a pact. If either of us saw the northern lights, we'd wake the other, no matter what time. It was 3:00 a.m., but I rolled out of bed, shivered into my boots and grabbed my coat. Stepping into the dark night, I stared expectantly upward.

There were no lights—not even a flicker of green in the sky. In fact, the only light was coming from Mike's headlamp.

Not funny.

"Look," Mike said, pointing into the darkness beyond the fence.

There, not more than a metre beyond the electric wires, stood a massive black bear. Our headlamps glinted off his small eyes as he snorted, bent his head and went back

RUNNING THIS UNIQUE combination hotel/camp/research operation is a complex business, made more challenging by its remote location. Situated 200 km north of Nain, the northernmost inhabited community in Labrador, Torngat Mountains Base Camp is a rugged miracle of organization and partnership between Parks Canada and the Inuit people of Labrador and Nunavik. Established on December 1, 2005, after the enactment of the *Labrador Inuit Land Claims Agreement*, the Torngat Mountains National Park Reserve both protects Inuit homeland and showcases its remarkable beauty.

The Nunatsiavut Group of Companies (NGC), comprised of Inuit leaders, works constantly on expansions and improvements. First, they built a permanent building for the

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Parks Canada/Pat Morin

of years old, we learned about staying alive in this starkly beautiful landscape. For the guides and nearly all the Parks Canada staff, hunting seal and caribou was second nature. The sole dog-eared magazine on the boat was an outdoor gear catalogue featuring page after page of rifles. When you hunt not only to feed yourself and your family, but also to ensure your survival against the black bears and polar bears waiting around the next corner, you choose your equipment with care.

I'm not a hunter, but after spending every summer of my childhood in a canoe with my dad on the St. Lawrence River, I thought I knew how to fish.

Apparently not.

Instead of a canoe, we fished from a rocky beach in a quiet cove. The air was cool and the water was mirror-still, broken only by the splashes of our lures. Not used to such shallow-water fishing, I wasn't convinced we'd catch anything bigger than a minnow, but I was wrong. The Arctic char arrived in force.

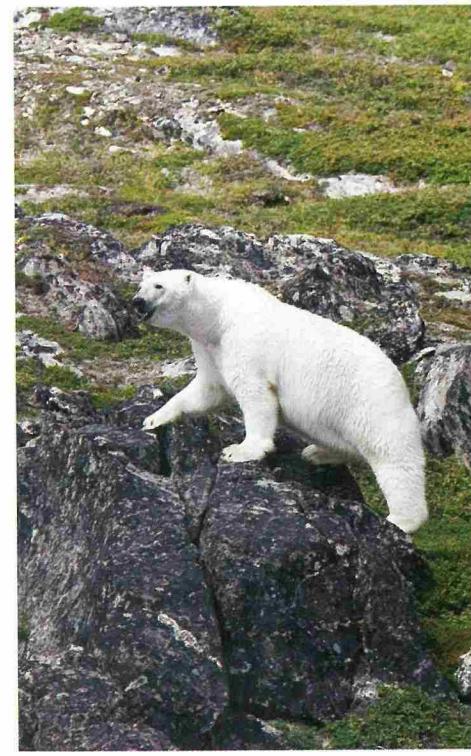
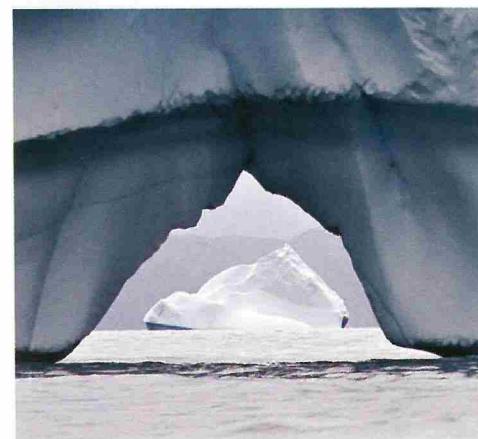
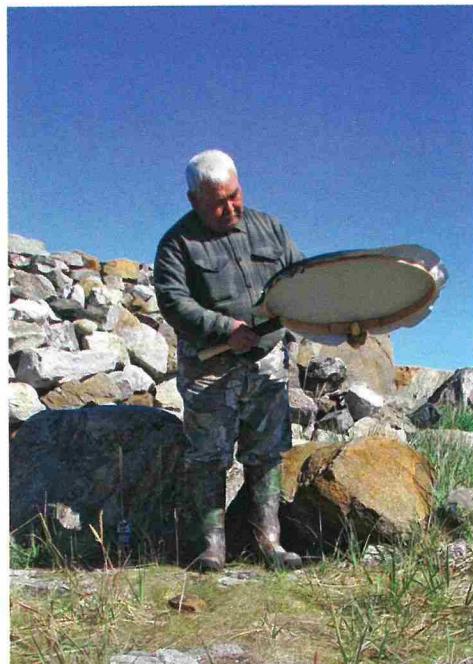
After just two casts, a char hit my lure like a torpedo. I fought to bring it in, my guide friends cheering in the background. In a few minutes, it was on the shore—the biggest of the char caught that morning. Raising my arms in cocky victory, I let my line go slack and made a rookie mistake—not hauling my prize far enough up the rocky beach. The char seized the moment, snapped the line and wriggled back into the water with my lure as its badge of courage.

I had to swallow my pride, but my fishing buddies swallowed their char instead, eating it raw as we crouched on the rocks. A quick whack on the head killed the fish, then sharp knives sliced into the glistening body, carving out small red chunks of raw flesh served up right there on the shore. Despite the fact that I wasn't bringing anything to the party, my friends shared generously.

Generosity is integral to the Inuit spirit; a willingness to share everything from the char on the beach to the most precious elements of their cultural heritage. Such openhearted kindness is humbling.

EVIE MARK AND AKINISIE SIVUARPIK are among the most renowned throat singers in Canada—women who've performed around the world. They spent the week with us at Base Camp—hiking, taking the boat cruises and visiting burial sites where they sang traditional Inuit songs as well as Christian hymns to honour the dead. Bearing witness to that would have been an incredible immersion ▶

Life in Labrador: Millions of years of natural history merges with thousands of years of human habitation and culture in Torngat Mountains National Park.



in modern Inuit culture, but it was just the beginning. Evie and Akinisie wanted us to learn the complex and surprisingly hilarious process of throat singing.

"Throat singing is a game played by two friends—traditionally women—but don't worry," Evie said, winking at the guys, "we'll make an exception in your case."

She explained that we each have an extra set of vocal chords used to make the unearthly, breathy, sometimes guttural sounds of throat singing, inspired by the Torngats themselves.

"Sometimes our songs are the sound of a waterfall, sometimes a caribou, sometimes a bear," she continues.

Whatever the song, the game is the same. Two singers face one another, clasping forearms. One begins a rhythmic chanting from deep within the chest and diaphragm. The other responds with her own chant and the contest begins. Staring into each other's eyes, the singers strive to make their opponent laugh. She who laughs first, loses.

Our group had no trouble with laughing. Perfecting the unearthly huffing, grunting and keening sounds with a set of vocal chords we hadn't known we possessed was more challenging, but Evie and Akinisie were enthusiastic coaches. We practised and laughed, and then laughed some more, as we absorbed a rare taste of Inuit culture. My partner, Guy Theriault, an old friend and one of Parks Canada's best, was a former professional actor, talented singer and big man. Guy had the better pipes for grunting and huffing as well as the self-discipline to control his laughter. No matter how hard I tried, he got me to dissolve into a puddle of huffing giggles every time.

THROAT SINGING ALSO has a deep cultural value. We witnessed the power it had to stir deep feelings in the elders working to restore Hebron, a lonely outpost, abandoned more than 50 years ago. A Moravian mission and Hudson's Bay Trading Post established in 1830, and once home to several hundred people, Hebron's remote location made it difficult to manage, so, in 1959, the Canadian government ordered the resettlement of the Inuit living there. Forced to abandon their homes and way of life, families were separated and sent to random communities, often hundreds of kilometres apart and far further south. Many were unable to reunite for decades. Hebron's school and church slowly decayed, weeds covered the headstones in the graveyard and homes where families had once raised their children sank slowly into the tundra as their wooden walls collapsed.

In the 1970s, Hebron was declared a national historic site and a formal government

apology to the former residents of Hebron was offered, along with a plaque taking responsibility. Another plaque was mounted on the day of the ceremony, in the old community now being resurrected by Inuit elders. Presented by former residents and their descendants, it offered simple forgiveness for the wrongs done to them in yet another example of humbling generosity.

Our Inuit cultural learning process didn't stop with throat singing. David Serkoak, an Inuit elder, was ready to offer his own lessons in drum dancing. A retired school principal, he'd taught his grandchildren and felt ready to take on a bunch of "Southerners."

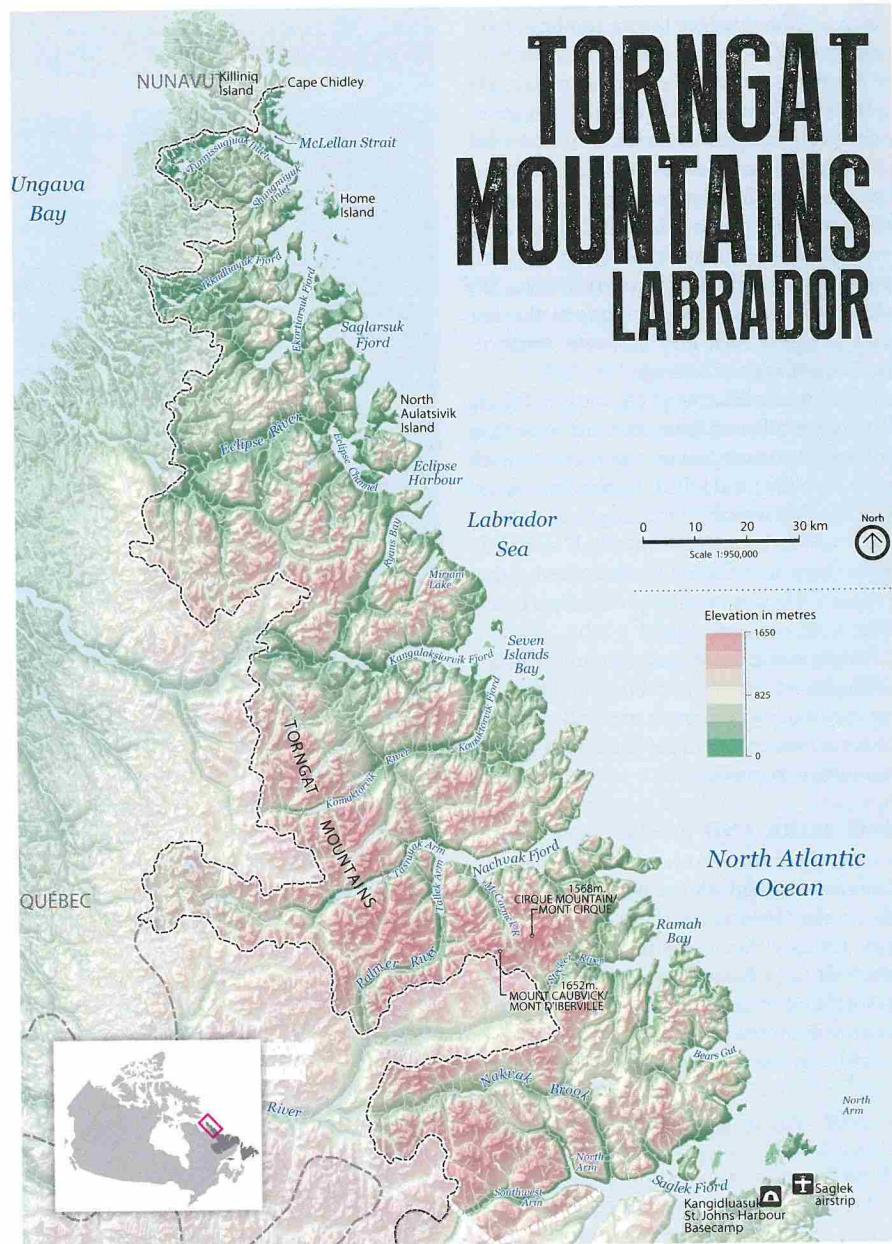
Traditionally, David explained, drum dancing was done for pleasure, to ensure a successful hunting trip, or to honour the dead. Because the Inuit people have never battled

with others, they have no war dances.

David first taught us to stretch the membrane (a synthetic substance commonly used in place of more traditional animal skins) over the drum frames, wrapping them tightly with a strong, thin cord. Our fingers ached as we pulled the membrane taut, but once our creations met David's very high expectations, he taught us to hold the drumstick, and then to move and chant. Drum dancing is slow and deliberate, with the drummer raising first one leg and then the other as the drum is lifted and lowered. That part's easy. The chanting—which sounds more like a wail—is a little tougher.

"Don't force it," said David, grinning at my squeaky first attempts. "It will just come from within."

I'm still waiting.



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Perhaps the most natural example of the Inuit generosity of spirit was the sharing of children. Evie's baby girl was the camp's daughter. Welcome to climb into any lap, she was cuddled and cared for by every adult in sight. It took me a while, in fact, to be sure whose biological baby she actually was because a different set of arms was always opening to her. Gary Baikie and Wayne Broomfield, two senior members of the Parks Canada staff and both Inuit, explained, "In our community, a child is a gift to be cared for and loved by everyone."

At night as I fell asleep in my tent, I could hear Evie's voice from the tent next door, singing her baby to sleep, the Inuktitut lullabies mingling with the wild sounds of the night. I felt safe and warm in the cold night air, as if I were in my own mother's arms.

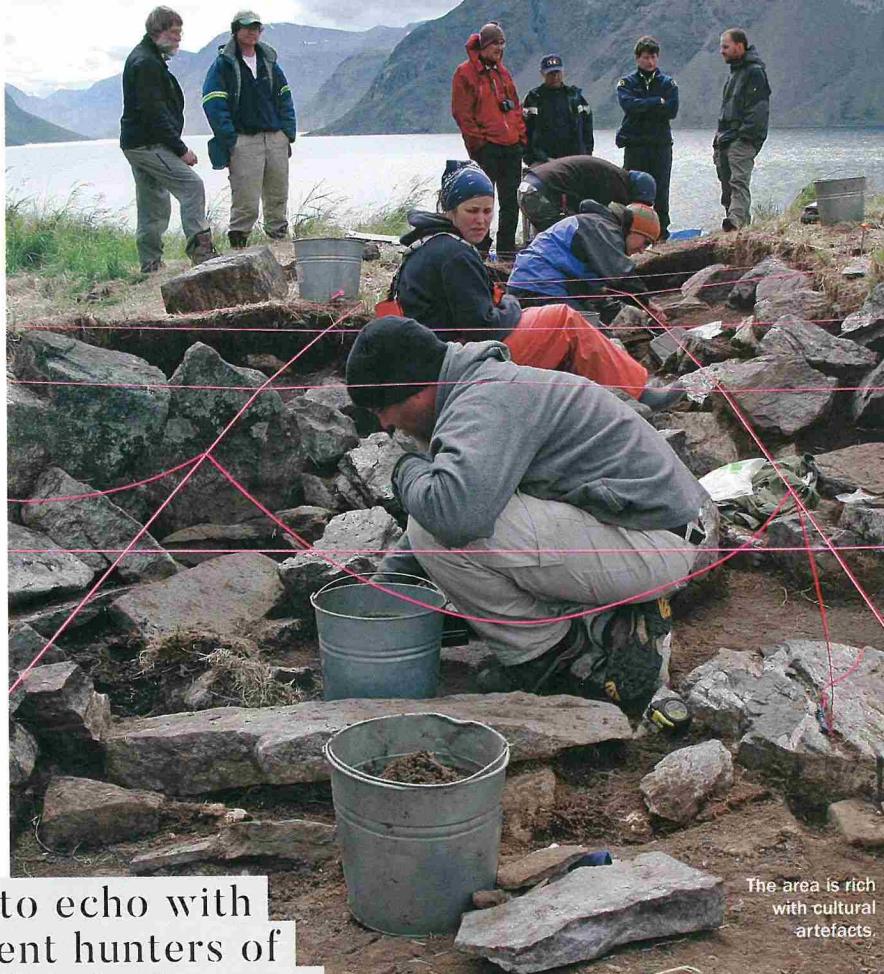
TO DESCRIBE MY Torngat experience, I had to learn a few Inuit words: *Nanuk* is the word for the hungry-eyed polar bear on the shore who watched our boat sail slowly past one afternoon and *Natsiks* were the jar seals playing in the water off the bow, keeping a watchful eye on that *Nanuk*. *Pammiuligaks*

The long fiords seem to echo with the voices of the ancient hunters of caribou and seal and the shadows on the rock call up the ghosts of an ever-moving nomadic people

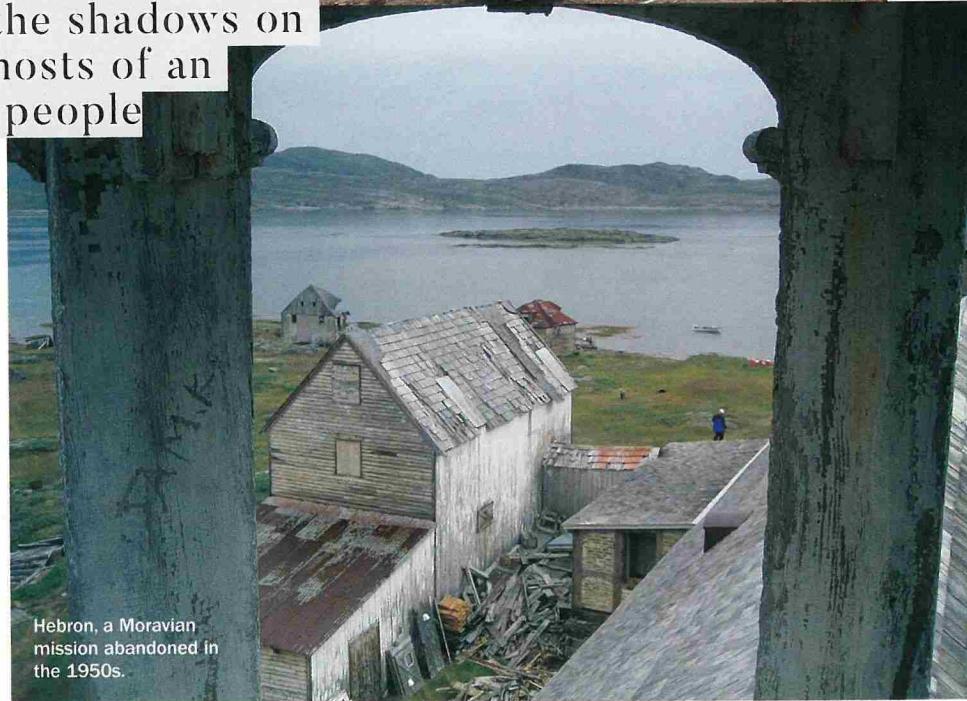
are the minke whales whose mammoth black backs and fins surfaced in the still morning waters in front of the camp and *Atlak* was the black bear who came looking for berries by my tent.

Some words conjure powerful images. The word *Atsanik* is the wildly brilliant iridescence of the northern lights dancing across the black skies, pulling us from our beds night after night, grabbing our hearts and holding us, mouths gaping in the cold night air, unable to go back to bed.

But the most important Inuit word I learned is *Ilannâk*. This is a term that is essential for describing the people who offered their char on that rocky shore, who cooked our meals, shared their knowledge of the wild, flew us to remote plateaus where few humans had ever set foot and kept us safe in a wilderness we couldn't possibly have navigated on our own. It's the word for the people who taught us their songs, their drum dances and the stories of their ancestors—the people who welcomed us into their world. *Ilannâk* means friend. ■



The area is rich with cultural artefacts.



Hebron, a Moravian mission abandoned in the 1950s.

IF YOU GO

Canada's youngest National Park celebrated its 10th anniversary in the summer of 2015, with more visitors than ever coming to experience its uniqueness. The Torngat Mountains Base Camp & Research Station is reached by flying first to Goose Bay, then to Nain and finally to a landing strip where the Base Camp boat meets you to transport you the rest of the way. Package prices start at \$4,000, from Goose Bay.