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Torngat Mountains contain Canada's ultimate cultural adventure

The scenic Torngat Mountains in Newfoundland and Labrador offer Inuit culture and outdoor activities that are uniquely Canadian experiences.



Camp elder John Jararuse had been forced to leave his home on the island of Hebron as a youngster. (JENN SMITH NELSON)

By **JENN SMITH NELSON** Special to the Star
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TORNGAT MOUNTAINS, N.L.-No images of rolling green hillsides, sheer cliffs, magnificent fjords or massive icebergs were taken on this day. Instead, my ears did all the work. After four days of maritime adventures on Labrador's scenic but stark and rugged coast, alongside ancient rocks more than 3.8 billion years old, it was time to listen.

The Torngats had stories to tell.

The immense tree-barren beauty and remoteness of the Torngat Mountains National Park and its offerings are both an adventurer's dream and pure form of cultural tourism.

Related story: [5 things to do in the Torngat Mountains](#)

Inuit gifted the park to Canada after a successful land claim in 2005. Since becoming [the country's 42nd national park](#), it's become a major draw, where visitors can spend time with elders who call the unspoiled landscape home.

Through song, storytelling and firsthand experience, visitors learn about Inuit culture, history and the environment.

"Spending time with Inuit elders reinforces the connection of people to the land and place," says Martin Lougheed, Parks Canada's visitor experience manager.

Nestled into St. John's Harbour in Saglek Bay is the base camp, gateway to the photogenic Torngats. Hosted by all-Inuit Parks Canada staff, it's also home to a mix of visitors, including elders, youth, researchers, base-camp staff, performers and guests.



Camp elder Sophie Keelan and youth visitor Ruth Kohlmeister fillet fishes on the beach at Silluak.

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Hover for sound



Camp integration and community togetherness happens quickly here, making it feel like an adult version of summer camp.

“Being in a remote location creates a sense of camaraderie among guests, adds Lougheed. “Friendships are forged that continue long after their time together.”

Weather-dependent excursions include hiking and venturing out to sea to take in the panorama, look for wildlife, and explore nearby islands and ancient Inuit villages.

For how incredible and vast the region is, it's equally treacherous. From polar bears to raging seas, moody fog and schizophrenic weather, it's not to be underestimated.

Thanks to today's non-stop rain, it's too risky to leave camp, so the Parks folks gather everyone in the visitors' centre to watch a video presentation on Hebron, a nearby island.

Settled by a protestant sect of German Moravians in 1830, Hebron had once been the northernmost settlement in all of Labrador, and home to a flourishing Inuit community that enjoyed a traditional life in the rich fishing village.

In 1959 however, politicians working in collusion with the Moravians gathered residents in the church and advised them they'd be relocated to southern locations, such as Nain, Hopedale and Makkovik, in order to be closer to services.

Residents had no choice but leave their homes. Families were torn apart and once resettled, left unsupported. Great hardship and tragedy followed, with repercussions still felt today.

Through storytelling and acknowledgement, healing and reconciliation have begun.



Ruth Kohlmeister reels in numerous char at the Saglek Fjord in North Arm.

A man from the video looks familiar. Glancing over my shoulder, John Jararuse, an elder, sits three rows back.

Sophie Keelan is another elder also staying at base camp. After the video, our paths collide and she tells me she'd like to share her story.

Keelan is Jararuse's cousin. At 11 years old, they were separated by leaving Hebron.

At 68 years old, this memory is painfully fresh. "It was a sad departure, the saddest time," Keelan says, recalling as her family left on the boat *Trepassey*.

"They promised us good housing and jobs, but when we got to Makkovik, there was no housing at all. We had to live in a tent."

Tears begin to well in her eyes and then mine. "We lost our identity. We lost our family." Sitting in silence, no words beyond "I'm so sorry this happened to you," can express my empathy.

Still emotional, it's the second last day and a boat ride to Hebron means we will visit Keelan and Jararuse's home.

My place, as it's been all week, is at the top of the boat's bow, eyes ahead watching for wildlife and taking in views. By now it's also become my spot for introspection, perspective and internal reset.

Being here does something to you.

Arriving at Hebron, it's easy to imagine the once-vibrant life that thrived along its scenic shoreline, now littered with abandoned buildings and a giant church in the distance.

We explore the beautiful island and then are summoned to the church. Jararuse is sitting at the front, where he addresses us in a soft-spoken voice. "This used to be our church. Everyone was welcome here."

"When I first heard we were moving to Nain, I was worried. I didn't know anything. I was excited. I thought the curfew might be later. In Hebron, it was 9 o'clock," he chuckles, easing tension in the room.

Not long after, Jararuse is beside me on the boat. Watching him, his eyes are transfixed on the shoreline, as they once likely were 57 years ago.

It's my turn to say goodbye a day later and Parks Canada Supt. Gary Baikie's words repeat in my head, "We hope you go home with a memorable experience."

Beyond an adventurous trip that included amazing excursions, seeing polar bears and aurora borealis, the spiritually charged region and its people encouraged a truly meaningful journey.

This time, in order to soak in every last ounce of the Torngats spirit; the back of the boat beckons me.

Jenn Smith Nelson was a guest of Torngat Base Camp, Destination Labrador and Parks Canada, who neither reviewed nor approved this story.

When you go

Get there/get around: [Torngat Mountains National Park](#) operates over a six-week window from the last week of July to the end of August, and is only accessible by boat or charter plane. Visitors fly into Happy Valley-Goose Bay, N.L., and from there, transportation to and from the Torngats is included. There are several packages and four- or seven-day expeditions are available. Prices start at \$5,200.

National parks admission: To mark the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation in 2017, [Parks Canada](#) will offer free admission to its national parks, national historic sites, and national marine conservation areas plus free lockage fees for its historic canals and waterways.

Sleep: Camping is done in comfortable tent style and/or domed accommodations that come complete with beds, dressers, heaters and electricity.

Eat: Dining takes place in a shared kitchen/dining hall with traditional offerings (such as seal and char) and Westernized food. Visitors make bagged lunches for days that are spent on the boat.

Day trips: While onsite, daytrips and natural excursions with Inuit guides and bear guards are included. Helicopter rides are extra (\$3,200/hour).

Find out more: [Parks Canada](#), [The Torngats](#)

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