

My first trip to the Arctic

By CHRIS GERALD WILLIAMS

That steep soaring rock had a special relevance for me—something primal and spiritual about it. The Indians knew about it. Their petroglyphs near the base of the cliff were still prominent, numerous bold strokes of orange, yellow, and terracotta. I read in the Ontario Provincial Park brochures that Bon Echo escarpment, soaring up 110 feet, is Ontario's highest elevation. I had journeyed there numerous times to sketch and paint the granite cliffs, in mist, rain or sun, and they always had a stunning allure.

Then, around the summer of 2003 it crept up on me. Bon Echo Provincial Park was losing its grip. My fascination had waned. All the previous winter I had felt it coming on, but by spring I decided to try again. "Maybe," I reasoned with myself, "if I go up there in June while it's not overcrowded and ply a kayak along the base of the cliff, it will speak the old language to me."

This resulted in a few tasty watercolours [paintings]. But a rebirth of the deep connection never happened. Once I got close, paddling the kayak, the rock face it seemed to shrink, its grandeur becoming petty and familiar. Driving home, I mulled this over. Finally, it struck me what had gone wrong. I needed to go deeper, farther back into time, to a primal place.



PANG GAP: This picture captures that moment when the sun passes over a cloud and the cloud's shadow undulates across the landscape, making it a stage that transforms momentarily. God's stage perhaps. CHRIS GERALD WILLIAMS

A LITTLE HELP FROM FRIENDS

My trip to the Arctic sprang from that notion. I placed a call to an art gallery curator in a small northern town about an exhibition of my paintings of Bon Echo. But I was already obsessed with the idea of visiting the Arctic. I had even coined a title for a future exhibition of paintings that I would call Whale Rocks; after all, most of Canada was once undersea and whales were everywhere.

That gal, the curator said, "Oh, the Arctic, I've lately been making Inukshuks [stone figures in the likeness of people] out of small stones. I get a kick out of it and the tourists love them. You should call up so-and-so, he's a sculptor, he's been there and knows all the good spots."

"Really?"

"Sure, here's his phone number."

When I first told friends about going, I didn't know a soul in the Arctic. But Lilian, who managed an antique shop in the small town where I was just barely existing, told me, "Go down the street to the hairdresser's and ask for Denise."

"Why do that?"

"Well, she has a brother in Iqaluit, and that's where you need to fly in when you visit the Arctic."

"Oh, right."

The Arctic wilderness, untouched by the hand of man, was not only to be a source of inspiration for my art, it would also add a precious, missing ingredient to my life: full-tilt adventure. I had forgotten along the way that deep down I was a solid, through-and-through adventurer. Two weeks later, I took a First Air flight, bound for Iqaluit. I had packed a mini-tent, a thermal sleeping bag, and grub for two weeks. I had the basics for survival, including a compass and a bear-whistle to ward off over-friendly polar bears, in my backpack. Just two weeks after Arctic notions had struck, I was bound

for Nunavut, the ancient name the Inuit people call their land.

It's amazing how two people can utterly change a person's life! Denise's brother, Glenn, met me at Iqaluit Airport and drove me around town in his pickup. Afterward, his son drove me to the "park" where I camped that night. There is nothing more grueling than erecting a new tent while rav-



INUIT CHILDREN: The artist was pleasantly "accosted" by smiling and curious children during his visit to Pangnitung. COURTESY OF NUNAVUTTOURISM.COM/KYLE CALVO

aged by winds and rain. It was a park alright, one vast glacial landscape with not a tree in sight, nor a Homo sapiens! I was mortally gratified to have a sturdy fellow to help me. Day one was a clear strike!

That evening I was invited to dine with Glen and his family on Arctic char. This fish is like nothing you ever tasted. It was the best sockeye salmon, only sweeter and buttery tender. I met Glenn's Inuit

wife, Eelee, introduced me to four of her sisters in attendance, all of whom fired questions at me then giggled endlessly about my plans for the Arctic. Apparently, it was funny to paint; and I had "better watch out for the polar bears!"

THE LURE OF PANGNITUNG

The next morning, Glen drove me from my campsite to Iqaluit Airport. I was waiting with my survival gear on my shoulders, full of everything to camp for the duration, but I was seriously beginning to wonder how much longer I could support the huge load.

Glenn grinned, as he must have understood when he announced, "You're a lucky man. You must have impressed those women."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"One of my wife's sisters lives in Pang where you're going, and she's offered you her house to stay in."

"Really? Wow!"

"Her man's gone off to hunt caribou—they do that in the summer, you see. She doesn't like the loneliness and stays with her sister, so the house is yours. Jennifer will meet you at the airport and drive you to the house."

"Cool!" I was so stunned I didn't know how to thank him.

From Iqaluit, a FirstAir jet flew me about 500 miles north to Pangnitung, a remote village of about 1,200 people accessible by air or water and situated in a fjord under steep mountains. Jennifer met me with a warm Inuit smile and quickly piled my gear on the Honda four-wheeler. That's mostly what they use in Pang.

There was only a gravel track that ran through the village and then ended along the shore near Pang Gap. I recalled in history book photos dauntless explorer teams standing on a glacier 100

feet high in Pang Gap, about to reach the North Pole.

Mountains and high hills line the fjord, narrow and close in, leaving scarcely room enough for a small river to wind up through the canyons. The river crosses the Arctic circle and continues into the majestic mountain corridors of Auyuittuq National Park of Canada, all the way to the Davis Strait. Hardcore backpackers come to Pangnitung just to hike up that trail into a primal, rarely trodden landscape.

Once settled in, I found a marvellous abundance of spectacular

scenery. Yet, the best surprise was what I discovered in the faces of the people... the elders, the women in homespun and beautifully beaded clothing and moccasins, the children that gathered around me in the streets with their fresh smiling faces, asking funny questions like, "Are you a ranger?" I learned quickly that a white man stood out and, if anything, was a curious, comical-looking occurrence.

A DEEPER EXPERIENCE

Scouring the mountainsides, then gradually working my way along

the rock-strewn shores south of the village, I discovered a bounty of land forms and curious shapes and designs in the rock. Clearly, colossal forces had shaped them long ago. Scattered at the waterside, as if sliced by an unearthly knife, great wedges of rock lay with smooth, polished tops. Everywhere, there were signs of a glacier having belled through, sculpting the granite into weird shapes, many odd human-looking forms.

I thought Henry Moore might have dropped in and discovered his oeuvre there; it was so like that. A world where explosive forces wrought wonders and they had lain unmoved for over 10,000 years.

I wandered in the midnight sun with the camera into the late hours, catching the mood of the mountains, while long stark shadows stretched out, one overlapping the next. The waters of the fjord heaved beside my boots, sometimes so calm that you felt nature maybe had become mute and wondered if some immense event were about to shatter the silence. A strange tension grabbed me—the sweep of time in its infinite glory making the here-and-now seem minor and insignificant.

Our Canadian government's strategy to protect sovereignty in the Arctic may bring unsettling changes. What has been 4,000 years of simple village life will experience unprecedented upheaval. Fjords and coastlines will be patrolled by gunboats and the curious invaders will multiply. "Life at the Speed of Light" will collide with the primal and ancient ways of the land and her people. I want to look into Inuit eyes and see what they see, that essence which may soon be lost forever.

Chris Gerald Williams is a Canadian artist who travels to the Arctic to collect research and photographs for his art and to study the Inuit land and its people. He has exhibited paintings in Canada, the United States, and the U.K. and has a novel accepted by a Toronto publisher. His art website is scheduled to be launched by July 1 (ChrisGeraldWilliams.ca).

Sudoku

	1	5				8		
			5	7				
7				1	2			6
9	4				7	5		
	3			5			1	
		7	6				3	4
8			9	6				5
				2	4			
		6				9	4	

Fill in the boxes using numbers between 1 and 9 so that each column, each row, and each 3x3 square contain all nine numbers only once.

Exclusive Epoch Times puzzle by Sudoku Works. Sudoku puzzles and software at: www.SudokuWorks.com.

2	3	7	1	6	8	5	9	4
1	5	6	7	2	4	8	3	9
8	2	4	8	6	3	7	5	1
5	6	7	9	1	2	3	4	8
6	3	3	5	8	8	7	1	6
4	1	2	3	7	7	6	8	5
7	6	1	1	2	2	5	4	9
4	6	8	9	7	7	6	8	9
2	5	3	4	6	8	9	7	1

This week's solution

White Dew Oolong

A 100% natural high mountain spring oolong (que shan chu), from the Bei Shan Mountain in Taiwan. This tea is hand-picked, and hand-crafted. A highly oxidized oolong with a fragrant fresh scent. Produces a clear golden brew with an awakening quality and smooth refreshing taste.

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This award-winning rare aged oolong (lao chu), from Taiwan is carefully aged in bamboo baskets for 8 years. The tea is then re-fired, naturally making it low in caffeine. A traditional tea regarded for medicinal properties for being light on the stomach. Produces a clear amber brew with a crisp clean taste.

To learn more visit: www.fiveelementstea.com

The Epoch Times
Geography Guru™
"Growing your geography knowledge" Quiz #272

SHARE AND SHARE ALIKE: Match each geographic feature on the left with its description on the right.

Gulf of California	Shared between Canada and US
Hudson Bay	Shared between Mexico and US
Mississippi River	Only in Canada
Rio Grande	Only in Mexico
St. Lawrence River	Only in US

Read The Epoch Times next week for the answer!

Answer for Quiz #271

BIG CITY, SMALL NATIONS: Which nations have more than eight million people (the approximate population of New York City), and which fewer?

MORE: Argentina (40.1 million)	LESS: Switzerland (7.8 million)
Australia (22.4 million)	Honduras (7.5 million)
Guatemala (14.0 million)	Paraguay (6.3 million)
Sweden (9.4 million)	Norway (4.9 million)
	New Zealand (4.4 million)