DIGGING IN PERMAFROST

What is archaeology in the Arctic like? **Matilda Siebrecht** shares its challenges and charms.

It was a typical summer day: birds, boats, sea, and ice. The difference was, the birds were Arctic Geese, the boats were converted canoes, the sea was -10°C, and the ice was the size of a large car, rather than bobbing in refreshing drinks. I was standing on the northern coast of the small island of Uglit, where I camped for five weeks last summer while excavating ancient Arctic houses.

Flight to the frost

The journey to reach the island was already an adventure. The planes that travel to the Arctic are small, but often carry important cargo, such as post, for its various communities. As we flew north of the tree line, the tundra stretched out far below, interspersed by large bodies of water peppered with what I originally thought were clouds, but turned out to be huge stretches of floating sea ice. Even in the summer months, icebergs are a common sight.

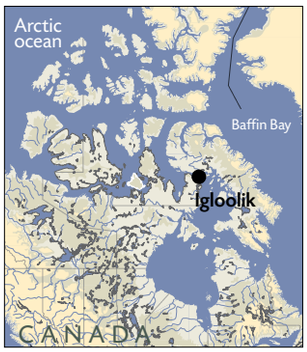
At last, after seven hours split between two flights, I reached Igloolik, the main town where we would be based as we prepared for the excavation. With a population of around 1700, Igloolik is a small but proud settlement, famous throughout the Arctic for its skilled carvers and successful filmmakers. Perhaps its most internationally famous production is Atanarjuat: The Fast Runner, which retells an Inuit legend about a man forced to flee from attackers on foot across the floating ice. We stayed in Igloolik for a week while we gathered supplies – Uglit was too far away to allow regular trips back to town, so we needed to take everything with us – and saw these floating ice sheets for ourselves. While we worried that they might not melt in time for us to leave from the bay, the local kids capered across the slippery, wobbly surfaces, jumping from floe to floe in daring races that left me with my heart in my mouth.

Staying in an Arctic town was a revelation, not least because of the limited access to commodities that I had previously taken for granted. Firstly, the environment means there is no vegetation higher than grass, and definitely no possibility for farming either plants or livestock (to overcome this, there are now a few towns collaborating in a greenhouse project, which aims to provide locally grown vegetables). All building materials and food need to be imported from the south, and these supplies are delivered to the Arctic towns at the end of every summer on a massive container ship, which stocks all the supermarkets before winter sets in. We were lucky enough to see this ship for ourselves at the end of the fieldwork season, and witness the flurry of activity that accompanied its long-anticipated arrival.

Because of this lack of local food production, the only way for the locals to ensure they get enough fresh food is to find it themselves, which means that there is still a very strong hunting culture. Hardly surprising when food in the local supermarkets is so expensive! As a vegetarian, I was a little apprehensive about how I would deal with this particular aspect of Arctic life. However, I need not have worried, as everything is done in a traditional and ethical way. The local Inuit hunt only what they need, and make use of more than just the meat from an animal,

PHOTO: Matilda Siebrecht

PHOTOS: Jelke Take; Matilda Siebrecht



OPPOSITE Icy seas: Inuit legend tells of a man escaping from assailants across the floating ice. Today, it is not uncommon to see people negotiating the ice flows for fun.

LEFT We were ferried out to Uglit in Salomon Mikki's boat (INSET). There, Jelke Take and Sean Desjardins look over the archaeological field camp on the northern shore of the island.

including transforming sealskin into winter clothing that is functional and beautiful in equal measure.

Island interactions

Once we had collected all the supplies that we needed for five weeks of excavation, the next part of our journey began: heading out to sea in our bear-monitor's boat. One of the main perils of digging in the Arctic is the presence of polar bears, and so every team is accompanied by an experienced local hunter who keeps tabs on the activities of these beautiful but dangerous creatures. Salomon Mikki and his family have been working with archaeologists for many years now, and during our excavations he proved how essential bear monitors are. Two polar bears visited the island while we were digging, but thanks to the watchful eyes of Salomon we managed to survive without being eaten. 'You guys are always looking at the ground', he laughed on one patrol when he found us bending over a test pit. 'You wouldn't see a polar bear until it was right on top of you!'

The Mikkis not only provided security during our weeks on the island, but also friendly company and always made sure that we were comfortable. Early on, a crew member found out the hard way that he hadn't brought a thick-enough sleeping bag with him, and so was reduced to sleeping in all of his clothes! Once Salomon discovered this, he immediately produced a huge musk-ox hide, with thick fur that kept our crewmate cosy and warm for the rest of the season. On another day, his daughter Sandra poked her head through our kitchen-tent flap and thrust a beautifully crocheted headband into my lap with a self-conscious 'here you go'. Our endeavours when it came to erecting the big canvas dig tents were also a subject of amusement, and after the first week some of Salomon's sons took matters into their own hands and re-erected our 'lab tent' to a much more professional standard.

Meanwhile, Salomon's wife Rebecca kept up a near constant supply of bannock (fried bread), which she cooked on her

BELOW Sitting on the well-preserved bench in a Historic Inuit meeting house on Igloolik.
RIGHT Fresh pitsik (dried Arctic char) hanging out to dry.

PHOTOS: Jelke Take; Matilda Siebrecht

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ABOVE A family of geese run for cover as we walk towards the site. Uglit is well known for the many birds that nest there in the summer, and is a favourite spot for collecting duck eggs.

qulliq, a traditional soapstone lamp. We were also invited to try all kinds of exotic local meats, including my personal favourite: pitsik (dried Arctic char). (I had already decided before fieldwork that it would be easier to put my vegetarianism on hold for the season). Although one member of our crew had been foresighted enough to dehydrate some delicious meals for us to enjoy in the field, the Mikkis made sure that we were provided with enough fresh food to keep our spirits up. This included leftover stew, pork chops brought from the supermarket by visiting family members, and even on one memorable morning some poutine (a typical Canadian dish) from the Tim Hortons restaurant at Sanirajak (formerly Hall beach)! As the weeks went by, we looked forward to the familiar crunch of boots over the rocky beach and Salomon's cheerful greeting as he pushed aside the flaps of our kitchen tent, accompanied by a steaming pot emitting delicious odours.

Digging for Dorset

Our fieldwork had several aims, one of which was to find evidence of Dorset Culture occupation on Uglit. The Dorset Culture lived throughout the Arctic from approximately 800 BC to AD 1300, and this group are often associated with Inuit legends of the Tuniit people, who were said to have lived on the island. In order to find physical evidence to support this legend, we tested several of the many archaeological features scattered across the surface, which ranged from semi-subterranean houses to cache pits. We also excavated some middens (rubbish pits) associated with turf houses from the Thule Culture (the ancestors of the modern Inuit, who first entered this region around AD 1000). These large dwellings still stand on the central ridge of Uglit, visible from the sea, in an area that we nicknamed 'Thule Town'.

The five weeks passed surprisingly quickly. Our working day would start around mid-morning – because the sun was up for 24 hours every day, there was no need to get up particularly early. After a breakfast of hot oatmeal, we would trudge across the island to whichever feature we were currently digging, carrying with us enough tea and coffee to hydrate an army. The terrain seemed like something from another world, with thick spongey moss and craggy rocks littered with bird nests. The island is known for its birds – people often come in the summer from nearby towns to collect eggs – and every morning and afternoon we would see families of geese and ducks sprinting frantically away from us in

BELOW The view across to the Thule Culture winter sod houses, which sit on the top ridge in the centre of Uglit. Digging test pits to examine the archaeology (LEFT) can be a slow process, though, with permafrost capable of reducing progress to a centimetre or so a day.

PHOTOS: Matilda Siebrecht

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ABOVE These walrus skulls were lined up on the beach at Uglit during an unknown point in the past.

all directions. We were also lucky enough to spot members of the local snowy owl family, who were nesting on the island.

For one week, we ran a field school organised by the Inuit Heritage Trust (IHT), which involved three local Inuit students with an interest in archaeology. They tackled every feature with enthusiasm, showing an incredible understanding of the work they were doing and a knack for spotting tiny fragments in the soil. They not only joined us for the excavations, but were also taught the basics of drone mapping by our drone pilot, and spent a day with me in the lab tent scrutinising microwear traces through my little Dinolite microscope. It was a happy week, with each break filled with games and jokes, while the interest from the students and their supervisor revived our own spirits and enthusiasm.

Of course, it was not all fun and games. One of the main issues of digging in the Arctic is, unsurprisingly, the extreme cold. For the majority of the year, the ground is completely frozen, making excavation impossible. Even in the short summer season, there is still a thick layer of permafrost hidden beneath the surface, which we encountered several times. Once hit, the only thing to do is wait for a day until the top layer has thawed, and then scrape off as much of the melted material as possible before hitting the next layer. This significantly slows down work, which was especially frustrating on the very last feature we were digging, when it took three days to dig a depth of just 5cm.

As an archaeologist who has previously only ever excavated in hot countries, including Portugal, Turkey, and Jordan, I was unsure what to expect from a season in the Arctic. I had been warned of ice-cold winds, lashing rain, and millions of mosquitos. As it was, I was apparently extremely lucky that my first field season included only two days of rain, an average temperature of 12°, and not a single mosquito in sight! It was a truly incredible experience and I enjoyed every moment of it.

It was therefore with mixed emotions that I left the Arctic to return to the heat and bustle of life 'down south'. As I looked out of the plane window and sipped my first glass of wine in six weeks, I took a moment to savour a renewed appreciation for immediate access to running water, electricity, fresh food, and warm showers. But I definitely miss the peace and tranquillity of that summer cut off from the outside world, when the sun was always shining, the only sounds were birds crying overhead, and the view one of icebergs floating past on an endless sea.

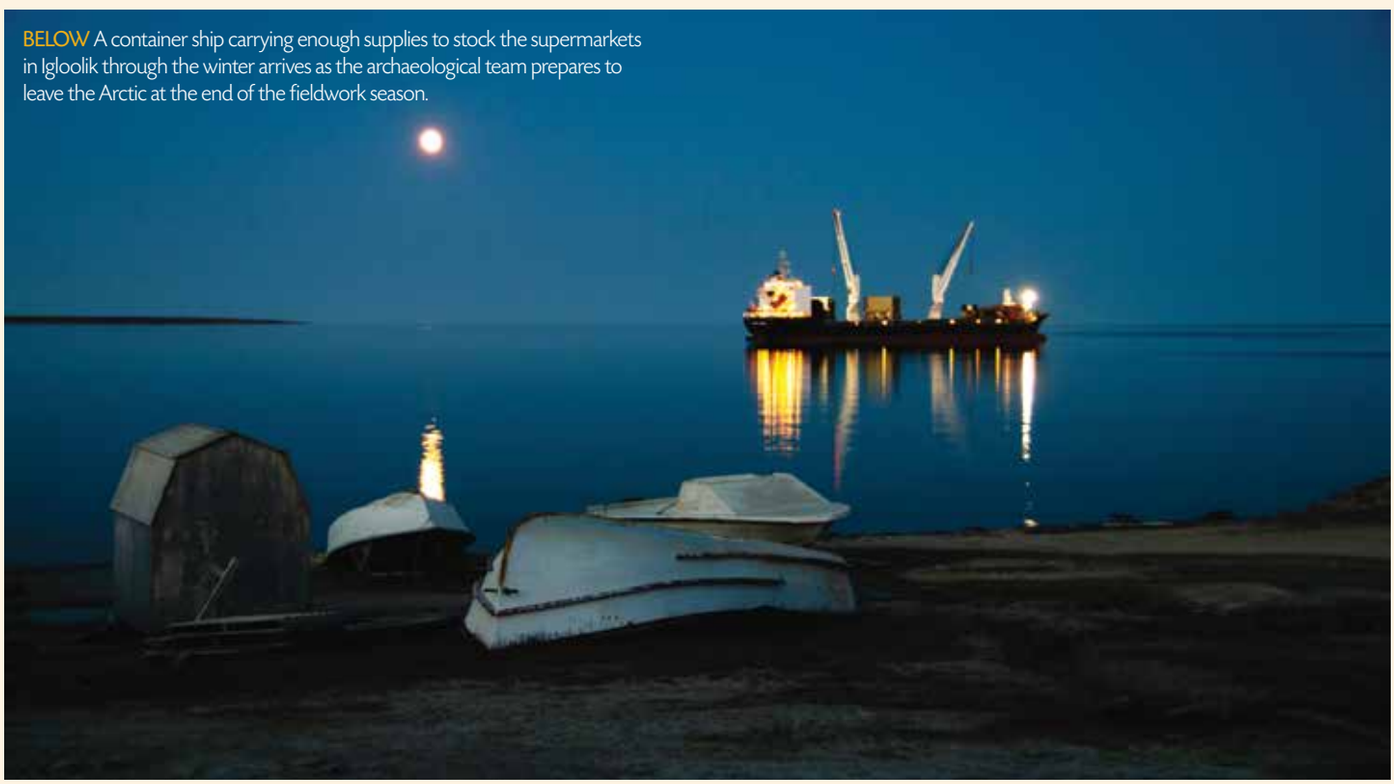

PHOTO: Jelke Take

BELOW A container ship carrying enough supplies to stock the supermarkets in Igloolik through the winter arrives as the archaeological team prepares to leave the Arctic at the end of the fieldwork season.