

Expedition Story: 80 Degrees North: Kayaking Ellesmere

We had flown in to Alexandra Fjord on a Twin Otter plane from Resolute Bay in Canada's newly created Nunavut Territory. Eleven days later, well into our trip, we paddled on the mirrored waters of Flaggler Bay, applying yet another layer of sunscreen to our weathered faces. The presence of the immense Greenland Ice Cap to the east creates its own high pressure weather system that reaches to the east coast of Ellesmere. This combined with the mountains that run down the spine of Ellesmere, blocks weather systems coming from the west and creates some of the most predictably wonderful weather anywhere.



Human presence in this remote corner of the Earth goes back almost 4000 years. Anywhere you can pull a kayak ashore, you'll find evidence that someone had the same idea long ago. A quick exploration of the shore reveals broken stone tools, old tent rings, empty meat caches, stone fox traps, kayak stands, and any number of ghosts left by cultures that have since moved on. To perch on a lookout is to sit where hundreds, even thousands of years ago, a hunter sat watching the fjords for the whales, walrus, and seals that would provide the meat, blubber, and skin for his family to survive the long, dark Arctic winter. As I soaked up the 24-hour sun at an archaeological site known as Eskimobeyn, I watched ice-rafts of barking walrus float by. The mystery of this timeless place strikes me.



Our group shared the urge that brought the Thule people, the Vikings, and recent explorers to the high Arctic – the urge to explore. We came to discover as much as we could in our short two weeks among the walrus, Eider ducks, and ice flows of the Fjords of Ellesmere. No matter what preconceptions we had, nothing prepared us for the glassy calm water, the eternally-circling sun, the fields of arctic wildflowers, and the abundance of stories the land tells those who listen. Like those who came before us, we left with more questions than answers, and a desire to return to the land of the narwhal, the polar bear, and the midnight sun.



Dave Quinn is a freelance photographer & writer based in Kimberley, BC. He spends his summers as a sea kayak guide in the Canadian Arctic for Whitney & Smith Legendary Expeditions. The rest of the year he can be found working as a wildlife biologist, teaching outdoor environmental education, or skiing.

Whitney & Smith Legendary Expeditions leads expeditions to the Queen Charlottes, Banks Island, Ellesmere Island, Greenland, Great Slave Lake, and Patagonia. To find out more about their trips, log on to www.legendaryex.com.