



Jason Cressey spends three months with the Inuit in Arctic Canada, where the summer sun still shines at midnight.

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Those first steps off the plane into the tiny airport of Igloolik, at the northern end of Baffin Island in Canada's Northwest Territories, were perhaps the most memorable. The air was dry, the wind roaring a gale, and the temperature too cold to bother consulting a thermometer. Walking the few metres between the sturdy propeller plane and the ramshackle hut that served as an airport terminal, the hairs inside

my nose began to freeze. The glare from the dazzling sun reflecting on this landscape of pure, brilliant white made my eyes water (the tears froze, of course). The absence of trees allowed an uninterrupted view of the Arctic horizon - the largest expanse of desert on the planet, and home to Canada's twenty-five thousand Inuit people. I soon learned that this culture, present in Canada (as well as Alaska, Siberia

and Greenland) since the last Ice Age, prefer the name 'Inuit' from their own Inuktitut language, meaning 'the people', rather than the slightly offensive term from the Algonquin Indian language, 'Eskimo' which means 'he eats it raw'.

Half expecting to be whisked by dog-sleigh from the tiny airport to the pre-fabricated houses that made up this settlement of five

thousand people, I was surprised to find a small collection of 4-wheel drive vehicles (all Government owned) waiting, with each arriving passenger and their baggage somehow being squeezed into the small flotilla. None of the luggage was crammed full of duty free wine and spirits, however, as Igloolik - in common with many other Arctic settlements - is a 'dry' community, and the buying, selling or possession of alcohol is strictly against the rules



Photography: Getty Images

laid down by the Hamlet Council. Alcoholism has had a devastating impact on the social and cultural life of the Inuit people and great efforts are being made to reduce the crime and violence that drinking has caused over the last century. It was clear I wouldn't be up partying all night during my first week or two in the Arctic, but staying awake until 2 or 3 in the morning was something I had to contend with as the sun shone 24 hours a day in those spring and summer months (as opposed to winter, when the sun never even rises, and perpetual twilight ensues). It took a little time to adjust to seeing children play ice-hockey on the frozen bay of the Arctic Ocean (which would thaw for a brief few weeks in July and August), bathed in the soft, golden glow of the midnight sun.

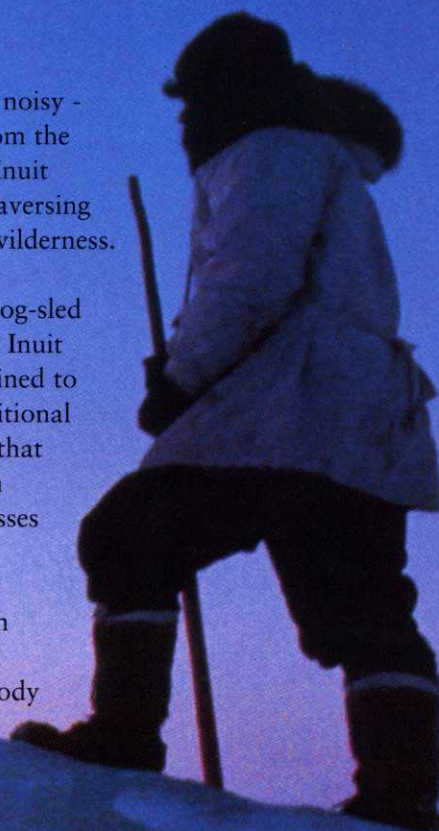
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MAY

I got my dog-sled ride at last. Forget the romance - it was cold and unbelievably windy. The faithful endurance of these amazing huskies, the expanse of tundra over which we travelled, and the sheer silence which engulfed us, save for the hypnotic 'whoosh' of the sled over the ice, made this a much more serene experience than the white-knuckle ordeal of driving a skidoo (basically a motorbike on skis), which is a standard means of transportation for any northern resident. Although fast and hardy,

skidoos are noisy - a far cry from the traditional Inuit means of traversing the frozen wilderness.

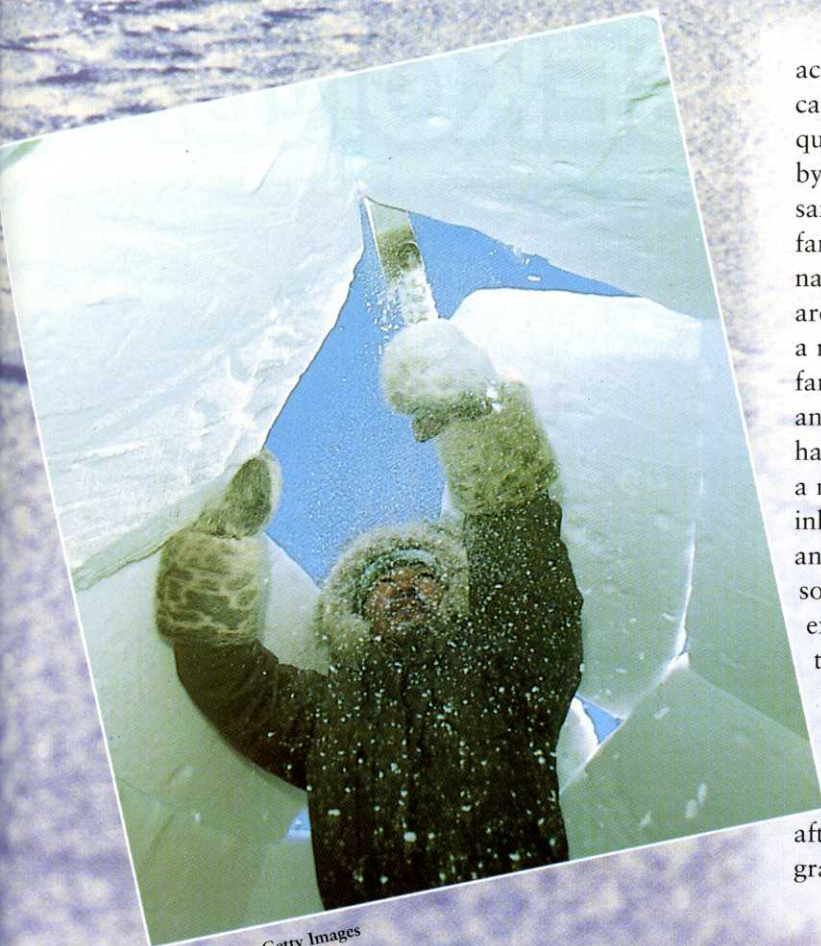
Along the dog-sled journey, my Inuit guide explained to me the traditional Inuit belief that each human being possesses two souls. There is the basic human soul, locked inside the body



Names can be passed on regardless of gender, so a young boy could be named after his recently deceased grandmother.

of each person which gives one the energy, endurance, skills and knowledge essential for physical survival. For the Inuit, there is also a 'name soul' - whereby the

be looked upon as a 'reincarnation' of at least some of her qualities and traits. Some of the names I encountered were 'Kappiasuksuitok - brave one', 'Nuki - strength', 'Arluk - killer whale' and 'Nanuk - polar bear.'



Photography: Getty Images

actual name of a person carries with it special qualities which are shared by everyone with that same name. When a family member dies, the name soul wanders around the cosmos until a new-born child in the family is given that name and the 'name soul' again has a 'host'. What's more, a new-born child who inherits a particular name and therefore the 'name soul' that goes with it, is expected to demonstrate the qualities of that name soul. Names can be passed on regardless of gender, so a young boy could be named after his recently deceased grandmother and would

JUNE

By the end of my third month in the Arctic, I had seen quite clearly that, contrary to popular belief, the Inuit do not rub noses at every opportunity. Indeed, they do not rub noses at all, but instead sniff each other's cheeks as a sign of respectful greeting and intimacy. Although this traditional gesture is seen less frequently today, the early European sailors and explorers mistakenly assumed that the locals were rubbing noses to keep warm, when in fact the only known culture that actually does engage in nose-rubbing is the



Maori people, thousands of kilometres away in New Zealand! The image of Inuit people fishing through holes in the ice, however, is based on fact. Indeed, the people are expert fishers and hunters - they have to be, as food is anything but abundant in this frozen wasteland.

Although the Inuit do not live in igloos, they still

know how to build them in a remarkably short time, often less than half an hour, and use them instead of tents when going out hunting or travelling on the land. The most memorable experience of my time in the frozen north came at the end of my stay, when I got the chance to spend the night in an igloo, safe and protected from

the whistling, persistent wind outside.

After a restful night, I woke up in the igloo, warm in my sleeping bag with a 'mattress' of Caribou skins beneath me (Caribou are much like reindeer, and are widely hunted by the Inuit for both their skins and meat). As I opened my eyes, I was aware of

formed the doorway to this ice-dome that had been home for the night. My hosts were already up and about, fishing somewhere off in the distance. As I focussed on them, just tiny dots on the horizon, I was overwhelmed by a sense of feeling so small, so insignificant in this vast, white, starkly beautiful world.

'We do not believe, we fear.'

being bathed in a gentle, soothing glow of deep blue as the sun's rays refracted through the ice-crystals of the igloo walls, filtering out all but the blue light. As I sipped my hot tea, listening to the huskies howl with anticipation to be on the move again, I glanced out of the small hole that

Surveying this alien landscape, I was able to fully understand and respect the words of the Igloodik Shaman (or medicine man) Aua, who when asked about the spiritual beliefs of the Inuit, had simply answered: 'We do not believe, we fear'.

