

THIS COLD HEAVEN

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We were preparing to head out with the Inuit hunters. I can remember how the still morning air was filled with the eerie sound of 40-odd huskies baying like wolves all around, and the sight of them tugging at their chains excitedly as if to say: "Me first, pick me!", as their mushers unchained them one by one to put on their harnesses and ready them to pull the sleds.

I felt immobile and clumsy, like "Mrs Michelin", suited in six layers, including the outermost survival suit, while the boiled wool mittens made my hands quite useless. Soon we were off – six adventurers, one guide, four hunters and four sleds, each powered by 12 dogs. We packed what we would need to survive in the arctic wilderness for the next five days. I had gone camping before – sort of – but my tent was always pitched for me and there had always been porters to handle my luggage. No such thing this time. Would a city slicker like myself, deathly afraid of the cold and not being able to bathe, survive the next five days?

But my mind soon forgot those fears. I was once told that when we see something we've never seen before in our life and cannot put a name to or explain it, our minds momentarily suspend judgement

or commentary and we are truly in the moment. That was what it was like for me as we traversed old dogsled routes, crossed glaciated islands and travelled down frozen fjords to visit some of the remotest areas on earth. Time slowed down. I had to pinch myself to realise that I was being pulled by 12 dogs across a frozen sea in -15°C weather.

On that sunny day, the cloudless sky was a brilliant blue, and the white of the snow-covered frozen sea and mountain ranges was blinding. Turquoise-blue icebergs, some the size of a car, some the size of a Tyrannosaurus Rex, rose from the ice to meet us. There was only the sound of the sled moving over the frozen ice, the panting of the huskies, the rhythmic patter of their large paws, and the musher/hunter calling out "Yoooot" or "Hreee" to the dogs, which I think meant "right" and "left", respectively. Every now and then, I would detect a sulphur-like smell in the wind, as the huskies were farting and defecating as they ran.

I felt a vague sense of pride when my travel mate and I managed to pitch our two-man tent under the supervision of our guide, who made sure it was sturdy enough to not get blown away by strong winds. That first night camping, I remember groaning when





I had to wake up to answer nature's call, dreading having to leave the warm cocoon of my sleeping bag to trudge out in the -25°C cold to the makeshift toilet (which was essentially just a wall of ice to give privacy). I woke my travel mate to accompany me, as I was afraid of encountering a polar bear. As we left the tent and stepped outside, we again experienced one of those moments where the mind suspends commentary. In the sky all around us was a silent, surreal and ghostly display of lights; the Aurora Borealis – what the Inuits believed were the spirits of the dead playing ball in the sky. Neither of us spoke. We had no words. Finally we broke the silence and said, "It's too cold. Shall we go back in?" We were very lucky indeed. We were treated to the Northern lights three nights in a row, thanks to the calm weather. Once the weather got stormy, there were no more sightings.

Any notions of trying my hand at driving a dog sled were quickly dispelled as I soon realised it was not easy. Unlike Canadian huskies that pull the sleds in pairs, these Inuit huskies are tied to the sled in a fan formation. The mushers have to be skilled enough not only to disentangle the dogs when their traces get entangled or snagged, but also in controlling the huskies, whose

disobedience could lead to life-or-death situations.

The Inuit huskies, though of a medium built, are very hardworking creatures with amazing endurance. The Inuits treat them not as pets but as working animals that spend their entire lives outdoors. I remember our British guide telling me that when the hunters learnt how dogs in other countries are allowed into the house and even onto the sofa, they were incredulous. The dogs aren't fed every day when they aren't working, so that they will still pull when hunting has been poor and food is unavailable. Also, it keeps them from becoming overweight.

I wished I spoke Danish or Greenlandic because there was so much I wanted to ask the hunters. There was a day when we were ice fishing, and the bounty was six halibut and 22 stingrays. The hunters kept the halibut but threw the rays into a pile for the ravens. "Why don't you keep them?" I asked, "Is it because they are ugly? Is it because you don't know how to cook rays? Is it because they don't taste good to you?" The hunters would only reply, "We don't eat it". *Maybe if they had sambal*, I thought to myself.

We returned to the village of Kulusuk two days earlier than planned because weather forecasts predicted a big storm approaching. The village has a

population of about 380 people with 700 huskies – two dogs for every inhabitant.

My Singaporean friend and I had survived the cold and not bathing, and had more than subsisted on boiled fish, polar bear meat and freeze-dried food. I felt grateful towards our guide for taking care of us, and for the expertise of the hunters who led us safely through the demanding terrain. And I would never forget the stoic, uncomplaining dogs that had pulled me across the many, many miles of that cold heaven. ♦

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