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**Northern Exposure**

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**Nunavut's capital of Iqaluit is in the spotlight this week**

**IQALUIT, NUNAVUT -- There is no going back for Iqaluit, Nunavut.**

Last year, the town of 6,000 people officially became Canada's most northern capital city. This week, it hits the big time - well, at least by northern standards - as co-host of the Arctic Winter Games with Nuuk, the capital of Greenland.

The biannual Games are the circumpolar North's largest event, and Iqaluit is expecting 1,600 athletes and spectators to take part in the competition, which began on Sunday and runs until Saturday. In addition to conventional sports such as cross-country skiing, hockey and wrestling, the Games feature traditional Arctic and Dene events such as the two-foot high kick, where competitors must leap into the air and kick a sealskin ball suspended 1.8 metres off the floor with both feet - and then land with feet planted no more than 10 centimetres apart.

Other events seem more curious than gruelling. There's the finger-pulling, where competitors lock their middle fingers and pull until the loser's finger straightens; and the knuckle hop, where players in a push-up position hop forward on their knuckles and toes in a race to see who can last the longest.

So what's the common element to these games? They all require determination, strength and flexibility - qualities essential to surviving one of the most hostile climates on Earth.

Nunavut, which means "our land" in Inuktitut, the language of the Inuit, is Canada's largest territory, spanning two million square kilometres, or about one-fifth of Canada's landmass. Almost all of it is above the tree line, making its barren landscape the closest simulation of Mars on Earth. Last September, the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration used this eerie polar desert to test a Mars-bound probe.

For much of the year, the territory is covered with ice and snow. The average winter temperature is -30 C (which does not account for the wind chill, which, with 100-kilometre gale-force winds, can send temperatures plunging to around -50). It's the kind of cold that makes taking a deep breath painful. With each inhalation, it feels as though every inch of your lungs is being covered with a thin layer of ice; with each exhalation comes a fit of coughing.

For centuries, the Inuit, the aboriginal people who make up 85 per cent of Nunavut's population, roamed this wasteland - without electricity, modern tools, Gore-Tex or fleece - hunting seal, walrus, narwhal and caribou. In order to build endurance and patience, skills needed when hunched over a hole in the ice for hours waiting for a seal to pop its head up, hunters played games of strength in the cramped confines of their igloos.

Today, the games have moved to a more formal venue. The first Arctic Winter Games were held in Yellowknife in 1970. The brainchild of northerners Cal Miller, from the Yukon, and Stuart Hodgson, from Yellowknife, the Games were born after the two visited the 1967 Canada Winter Games in Quebec City and realized that the North's unique traditions demanded their own type of competition.

The first Games attracted 500 athletes from Alaska, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. Today, Northern Quebec, Nunavut, Russia and Greenland have joined the list of participants, and for the first time this year CBC television is broadcasting the opening and closing ceremonies nationally, giving all Canadians a window into life in Iqaluit.

But if viewers and visitors are expecting igloos and parallel-parked dogsleds, they're in for a disappointment. It's a four-hour plane ride to Iqaluit from either Ottawa or Montreal and for much of the journey all that is visible is an imposing expanse of rock and tundra. The first glimpse of Iqaluit reveals a jumble of houses, buildings, boats and snowmobiles that seem out of place against the backdrop of ice stretching endlessly. The town looks lonely all by itself on the tundra.

That feeling changes after landing amid the chaos of the banana-coloured airport. Iqaluit is the gateway to the 26 other communities in Nunavut, and the airport serves as a meet-and-greet for friends and relatives on their way to all parts of the North.

The airport is also the refuelling point for international flights using a polar route. The din, and the buzz of different languages - English, Inuktitut and French (Iqaluit has 400 French-speaking residents and a French-language radio station) - is disconcerting for anyone expecting a desolate outpost.

There is no concern over being stranded, as a line of cabs from Iqaluit's five taxicab companies waits outside the airport. With no street names and no order to house numbers in Iqaluit, directions go something along the lines of, "Go to house 245 in Happy Valley" or "Take me to the third house in Green Row."

Despite the frontier look of the town and the lack of paved roads or sidewalks, Iqaluit is not a backwater. Ever since it became the capital of Nunavut, Canada's third territory, on April 1, 1999, things have changed for the little town on the mouth of Frobisher Bay. It has hosted heads of state (France's Jacques Chirac), musicians and artists from around the world. This October, the Queen and Prince Philip will visit the town as part of their Golden Jubilee celebrations.

The rugged and unyielding terrain, danger and isolation of Nunavut have also made it a hot spot for adventure travellers craving a pristine setting. Few people know this better than Meeka Mike, who runs Qimuk Adventure Tours. "Anybody who goes out with me gets to see the risks the land poses," she says. "This isn't a place where you get in your car, go out to hunt and then get back in and come home."

Travellers based in Iqaluit can get a taste of the Arctic by camping or hiking in Sylvia Grinnell Territorial Park (about a 30-minute walk from Iqaluit) or taking a dogsledding trip across Frobisher Bay. For more extreme adventure seekers, the action lies elsewhere. Pangnirtung, a community a few hours north of Iqaluit, draws skiers, hikers and climbers from around the world for its proximity to the 19,500-square-kilometre Auyuittuq National Park, whose Inuktitut name means "place that never melts."

The park's most popular trail is the Akshayuk Pass, formerly called the Pangnirtung Pass. With its spectacular fiords, glaciers and towering mountains, it is the perfect place for remote camping, hiking and ski mountaineering. The park's Mount Thor, with its 1,000-metre overhanging west face - one of the world's highest uninterrupted cliff faces - offers a climber's nirvana.

The creation of Nunavut has done more, however, than attract high-powered visitors and adventure seekers. It has changed the flavour of the town. In a desperate attempt to fill hundreds of new jobs, the government hired southerners at an unprecedented rate. In the past five years, Iqaluit's population has surged by almost 20 per cent, mainly with non-Inuit who came north in search of work. Still a community in flux, Iqaluit today is a dichotomy of the modern and the traditional.

At the Fantasy Palace, Iqaluit's sole espresso bar, the young and the hip sample imported chocolates and desserts, sip lattés and cappuccinos, or book a session in the café's tanning bed. Iqaluit's other coffeehouse, the Grind and Brew, is slightly less urbane.

When summer rolls in, the city seems more like Fort Lauderdale during spring break than an isolated northern community at the top of the world. Drawn by large paycheques, excellent benefits, a general willingness to overlook lack of experience and 18 hours a day of blinding sunshine, university students flock to Iqaluit in search of cash and a unique experience.

Nowhere is the melding of old and new more evident than at Iqaluit's hub of social activity, the Royal Canadian Legion. There is one other nightspot in town, the Tulugaq Bar, better known as the Zoo, but its plastic tables and chairs give it a lower-rent look than the Legion, which has a "quiet lounge" (think British pub), a pool room and a dance floor.

On a Friday or Saturday night, everyone in town seems to be at the Legion, and the dance floor is crowded with a mix of different faces. Twenty-year-olds in tube tops dance next to 60-year-old elders in *kamiks* (soft boots made of sealskin or caribou) to the thumping beat of hip-hop.

As Iqaluit grows and changes, it has become a magnet for artists from across the North. Earlier this month, the government-funded Nunavut Arts and Crafts Association set up a weekly Saturday art market to sell handcrafted traditional items such as carvings and prints as well as new media such as fibre arts, ceramics and jewellery.

The hope is that the market will bring artists out from "the underground economy," says Beth Beattie, co-ordinator of the association. "The market gives the public a specific place to go so that there is a better chance of finding an artist or a piece of work that someone might be interested in. Before this, tourists would have to hope they ran into someone selling their work in town. It also gives the artist a place where they can showcase their art."

Iqaluit and all of Nunavut may be growing into a new modernity, but even as the Games bring more attention to the region, they are also a reminder not only of the traditional ways of the Inuit, but of the harsh challenges the land still poses.

Susie Pearce, 22, is competing this year in the eight events that make up the senior women's Arctic sports category in Nuuk, Greenland. "If I go camping on the land and my Ski-Doo breaks down, I need to know how to survive," she says. "This isn't like other places. Even though the town is modern, if you get stranded on the land, you can die. The Games teach you how to be strong, and how to survive."  
**Iqaluit outfitters**

**Qimuk Adventure Tours:** (867) 979-2777, pooka.nunanet.com/~qimuk. Outfitter Meeka Mike specializes in cultural tours. Overnight trips (two days, one night) by the floe's edge - about 128 kilometres from town - cost about $525 a person, which includes traditional clothing and food. Minimum booking of two. The summer day-program "Inuit Now and Then" takes visitors to historic sites where Mike talks about the challenges faced by Inuit both in the past and today.

**Polynya Adventure and Coordination Ltd.:** (867) 979-6260. Operating predominantly in the Baffin, Polynya works with airlines, outfitters and hotels to put together individual tour packages. Airplane trips to the floe's edge cost $400, which can include up to six people.

**NorthWinds Arctic Adventures:** (867) 979-0551, http://www.northwinds-arctic.com. In 1997, operator Maddie McNair led the first women's expedition to the geographic North Pole. Her partner, Paul Landry, is currently on his third North Pole expedition. NorthWinds offers three North Pole expeditions, an expedition to the magnetic North Pole and a traverse of Ellesmere Island. Costs range from $7,000 to $12,000 a person.

**Arctic Games**

**Finger pull:** Two players sit facing each other. Holding their opponents' shoulder for support, they lock middle fingers and pull. The first to straighten his middle finger or have his pulling arm move away from his body loses.

**Two-foot high kick:** A player must strike a sealskin ball suspended 1.8 metres off the floor with both feet together. When landing, both feet must be no more than 10 centimetres apart.

**Kneel jump:** In a kneeling position with the buttocks resting on the heels and toes pointed back, the player moves in a rocking motion to gain momentum, then jumps into a squat by thrusting the body up and arms forward.

**Airplane:** The player lies face down on the floor with legs and feet together and arms extended straight out. The body must be rigid. Three assistants lift the player 60 to 90 centimetres above the floor. One grasps each foot while the other two hold each fist. The player is carried in this position over a preset course.

**Head pull:** Two players lie on their stomachs facing each other. A 90-centimetre looped leather belt is wrapped around both their heads above their ears. Players raise to a push-up position and pull against each other with their heads. The pull must be directly back and parallel to the ground. Whoever is pulled off balance or crosses a line on the floor loses.

**Arm pull:** Players face each other sitting on the floor. The left leg is straight and the right leg is bent over the opponent's straightened leg. Competitors lock right arms at the bent elbow and pull. Whoever straightens his arm first loses.

**Knuckle hop:** A player in a push-up position has to hop forward on his knuckles and toes. The player must land on both knuckles and toes simultaneously. The player who hops the longest distance wins.

**Sledge jump:** A player jumps - with both legs staying together - over a row of 10 sledges. The wooden sledges are 50 centimetres in height and 150 to 200 centimetres long. After completing the row, the player turns around and jumps back. If a player's body touches a sledge, he or she is disqualified. A maximum of five seconds is allowed to turn at the end of the row of 10 sledges. Whoever jumps the longest wins.

**IF YOU GO**

**Getting there:** First Air offers daily direct flights to Iqaluit from Ottawa or Montreal (http://www.firstair.ca, 800-267-1247). Canadian North (http://www.cdn-north.com, 800-661-1505) flies out of Edmonton, Calgary and Ottawa. An average return trip from Ottawa costs around $1,200.

**Getting around:** There's one car-rental outlet in town, (Driving Force, 867-979-2088) but everyone takes taxis and there are five companies to choose from. It's $4.75 a person to go anywhere in town.

**Lodging:** There are a few hotels in Iqaluit including Frobisher Inn (http://www.frobisherinn.com, 877-422-9422) and Discovery Lodge Hotel (867-979-4433). Prices range from $140 for singles to $180 for doubles.Contact Nunavut Tourism (http://www.nunatour.nt.ca) for information about bed and breakfasts or home stays.

**Dining:** Most of Iqaluit's restaurants are in its hotels. Discovery Lodge's Granite Room is one of the more expensive places, offering peppered caribou steak and the only salad bar in town.Frobisher Inn's restaurant's northern offerings include Arctic char, Greenland shrimp and caribou. Navigator Inn offers burgers and fries and hot-and-sour soup. The igloo-shaped Kamotiq Inn has a fireplace to keep you warm. Its specialties include seal, *muktuk* (outer layer of the beluga or narwhal) and caribou.

**Information:** Visit the Arctic Winter Games Web site at http://www.awg.gl; the tourism site athttp://www.iqaluit.worldweb.com or the territorial newspaper at http://www.Nunatsiaq.com.