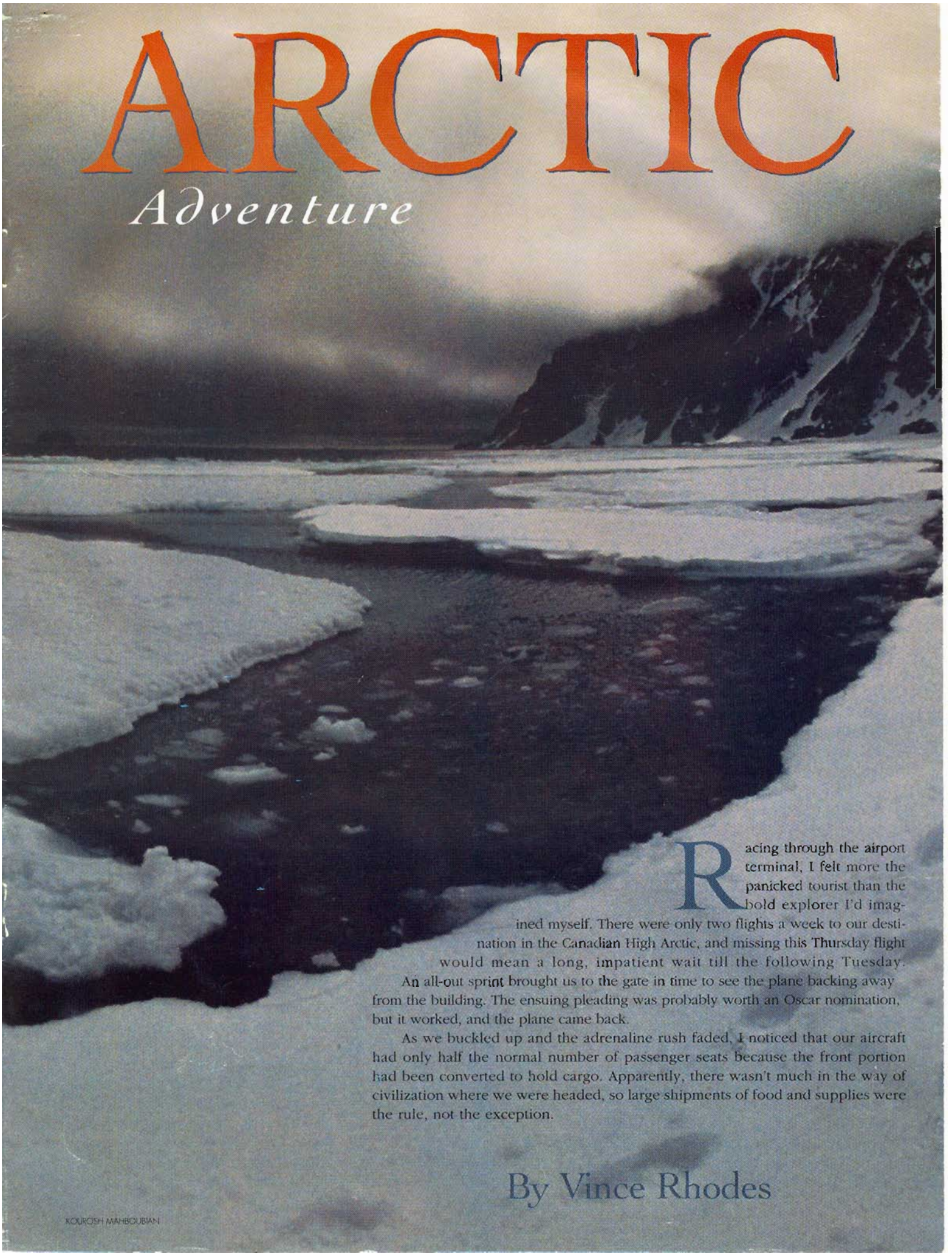


ARCTIC

Adventure



Racing through the airport terminal, I felt more the panicked tourist than the bold explorer I'd imagined myself.

There were only two flights a week to our destination in the Canadian High Arctic, and missing this Thursday flight would mean a long, impatient wait till the following Tuesday.

An all-out sprint brought us to the gate in time to see the plane backing away from the building. The ensuing pleading was probably worth an Oscar nomination, but it worked, and the plane came back.

As we buckled up and the adrenaline rush faded, I noticed that our aircraft had only half the normal number of passenger seats because the front portion had been converted to hold cargo. Apparently, there wasn't much in the way of civilization where we were headed, so large shipments of food and supplies were the rule, not the exception.

By Vince Rhodes



Todd Smith returns from his 29-degree immersion at Cape Martyr. For safety purposes, divers are tethered to the surface with a 130-foot line.

The plane turned to the north, and Montreal's urban landscape was replaced by snow cover and aqua-blue patches of frozen lakes. Trees thinned and then disappeared. Snow, unbroken save by a few large rocks, covered the tundra as far as the eye could follow.

The flight made two stops before our final destination at Resolute Bay, and each landing seemed to document our move into increasingly untamed and isolated country. Iqaluit with its yellow "spaceport" ticked in the midst of rocky, snow-covered slopes was the first hint, but the remoteness really hit home at Nanisivik.

Our commercial airliner touched down on the gravel strip, sending up large clouds of dust. The airport — a shoebox-sized one-room terminal building and a few storage areas — was 11 kilometers from the mining town that's the sole purpose for its existence.

After off-loading cargo and pas-

sengers, we were back in the air and headed for Resolute Bay. Another gravel- and dust-filled landing signaled the end of our travels, and Christine Dennison and Kourosh Mahboubian, owners of Mad Dog Expeditions, and their operations manager, Andy Driver, were there to meet us.

With them were Bezal and Terry Jesudason, operators of High Arctic International, the lodge that would serve as headquarters during our stay. Driving away from the airport toward "town," my attention was not on the conversation, but on the frozen bay visible in the distance. The ice was calling.

DASHING THROUGH THE SNOW

I woke to the gray, pervasive light of the Arctic. Fog obscured much of the horizon, creating a bright glow that turned the barren landscape into a thing of stark beauty.

We'd arrived during the time of 24-hour sunlight. Come September, the light would dim and turn to perpetual darkness through January. But for now, there would be times when the sun was brighter at midnight than noon.

Our dive gear, or "kits," as our English operations manager Andy referred to them, stood ready for our first day of diving. Alternate air sources had been replaced by pony bottles. BCs and regulators would remain attached to the tanks to minimize setup time on the ice. Between the six members of our party, we had enough gear to stock a small dive store.

After bundling up in anticipation of the 32-degree weather, we stepped outside to meet Inuit guides Lucas, Norman, Jamie and Mark. A tent, heater, our dive kits, food and other necessities were loaded onto a trio of open sleds. Snowmobiles were attached to the sleds, and we

began the half-hour ride toward our icy initiation at Cape Martyr.

Bumping along on an open sled on a cool Arctic morning was unlike any ride to a dive site I had ever experienced. We got off the sleds to clear large bumps and on several occasions helped push through patches of soft, deep snow.

Racing across a broken ice field proved more exhilarating than any theme park ride. Occasional glimpses of cracks and holes reminded us that this was no carefully constructed roller coaster, but nature at its wildest.

Fortunately, we were in capable hands. Our guides proved to be not only excellent drivers but also skilled mechanics. It's an amazing sight to see 13- to 17-year-old boys tear apart a Ski-Doo on the ice and rebuild it in a matter of minutes. But they can, and did.

AN ICY INITIATION

It was time to take the plunge. Darius Solomon and Todd Smith, both experienced ice divers, would submerge first as Andy and I tended their lines. To prevent disorientation, each team would be tethered to the surface by 130 feet of line and a harness. One buddy was attached to the "up-line" that stretched back to the hole in the ice while the two divers were connected by the 15-foot "buddy-line." In addition to guiding divers back to the surface, the lines allowed constant communication via tugs on the rope.

Tending is a learned art. It takes a dive or two for the tender to get used to maintaining the correct amount of tension. As Todd and Darius swam below us, I had to feed them just enough line to allow them to move freely but maintain enough tension to feel their signals. Too much slack and I might not know if they were in trouble. There's also the possibility of the line getting caught on an ice ridge.

After a half-hour of tending, I found myself reeling in steadily to maintain tension. Sure enough, the divers were returning to the hole. A froth of bubbles at the opening

calmed suddenly as two heads broke the surface. Smiles so wide they could barely hold regulators told me all I needed to know about their experience.

Preparing for an ice dive is like becoming a 2-year-old again. Dressing yourself completely is nearly impossible. Attaching to the tether, pulling on your BC, fin adjustment, zipping up your drysuit and a hundred other details necessitate assistance.

Finally geared up, I sat at the edge of the hole staring down into the

blue. With a quick "OK" and a grin, I slid into the water and immediately felt as though the wind had been knocked out of me. I was breathing rapidly — on the verge of hyperventilation — and the unprotected areas of my face experienced the slow, cold burn of 29-degree water.

Super-cooling due to the salt content of the bay allows the water temperature to drop below 32 degrees without freezing solid. Yet 6 feet of ice — more than my height — had formed here.

HOW TO BREAK THE ICE

Far from the typical dive vacation, Mad Dog Expeditions offers opportunities of a lifetime. The trip generally takes 10 days and leaves from Montreal. Prices vary due to airfare and the number of team members, but expect a cost of about \$6,500.

Previous ice diving experience or certification is not required but drysuit experience helps. Classes can be arranged with the Mad Dog staff prior to the trip and training dives can be completed in the Arctic.

There are a few things

to keep in mind if you plan to take the trip to Resolute Bay:

Forget previous vacations. The key word here is "expedition." Would-be adventurers shouldn't expect buzzing night life and care-free diving. In the evening if you're not completely exhausted from diving, you can wander around town absorbing Inuit life or take a mountain hike. While Resolute is a dry community with no bars, there is a video store with a surprisingly good selection and a co-op for shopping.

Be prepared to work.

The Mad Dog staff is more than willing to lend a hand with repairs and set-up, but everyone helps everyone. Don't expect pampering. In fact, our joking motto for the week was "Less whining, more coping!"

Be flexible. Weather or unforeseen problems can conspire to change your itinerary. Mad Dog Expeditions has plenty of alternative plans, so be open to change. Whatever you do end up doing, the one thing you are guaranteed are sights that few others will ever experience.

Be patient. Weather is no more controllable here than anywhere else. The main difference is Resolute's remoteness. A weather delay can ground you for days. All you can do is make the best of it.

The Arctic experience is just one of the expeditions offered by Mad Dog. For more information call (800) 4-MAD-DOG or (212) 744-6763, fax (212) 744-6568 or write Mad Dog Expeditions at 132 East 82 Street, New York, New York 10028. — V.R.





Despite their cuddly appearance, polar bears are a real threat in the Arctic wilds. As a result, our guides carried guns for protection.

I quickly realized I had to work on my breathing. Andy had entered the water immediately after me and floated patiently beneath the ice waiting for me to acclimate. After a few minutes, the ice-hot sensation faded and my breathing came back under control.

Suddenly, I was concentrating less on my air consumption and buoyancy adjustments and more on the amphipods that were flitting about the water column. Most of the ice pack is fresh water since the salt resists freezing. The brine becomes concentrated and flows away, leaving channels in

the underside of the ice.

Air bubbles escape from the ice, forming millions of tiny holes and depressions in the pack. This is where the amphipods, or krill, live. Diverting my attention from the ice, I looked down and was amazed.

Comb jellies with ciliary plates shimmering iridescently and orange-tinged jellyfish floated along with the mild current. Krill darted frenetically around the ice. Fronds of kelp and large stalks of soft coral undulated on the rocky substrate. Urchins and sea stars littered the ocean floor, scavenging for meals.

Reaching the bottom, we found a macro photographer's dream. The kelp and coral hosted snails; nudibranchs in varying shades of red, purple and white; and a strange creature known as the skeleton shrimp (*Caprella sp.*). This bizarre little creature looked like a collection of bones, its armored body incredibly lanky. A few tiny fish lethargically watched our approach. I had expected a barren waste beneath the Arctic ice. I was wrong.

Surfacing 25 minutes later, I realized I was wearing the same foolish grin I'd seen on the first divers' faces. We chafed at the delay of the surface interval. But this wasn't the time to push the limits. Extreme temperatures and isolation precluded a "dive till you drop" mentality. The nearest hyperbaric chamber was six hours away by air — plus the six hours required to get the plane to Resolute ... weather permitting. As a result, our conservative schedule called for 12 dives in a week, as opposed to the 20 that are often done in warmer waters, but that's a price we were willing to pay for safety and adventure.

After our second dive, we hiked to the tips of two small icebergs trapped close together, forming a small glacial pond between them. Near the bergs the ice was compressed and rafted forming intricate ridges and corridors.

Darius and I found a scooped-out formation that resembled a shaded couch. Snapping a few icicles from the overhang to suck on, we sat back on the "sofa" and watched a group of seals frolicking in the distance. Pleasantly exhausted, we enjoyed the dazzling-white beauty of the Arctic.

GOING WITH THE FLOE

We took advantage of clear weather to sightsee. Our choices: head for the magnetic North Pole 250 miles away or visit the edge of the ice pack. Beza! advised us there wasn't much to see at the magnetic north other than snow and ice.

In fact, he'd long ago painted a large pole white with red stripes for

expeditioners to carry and pose for photos with. As a result, the local pilots often joked that the North Pole was actually in storage at Bezal's. Opting for the ice edge and wildlife, we reasoned that even if we couldn't have pictures taken AT the North Pole, we could do a little digging in the garage and have our photos taken WITH the North Pole.

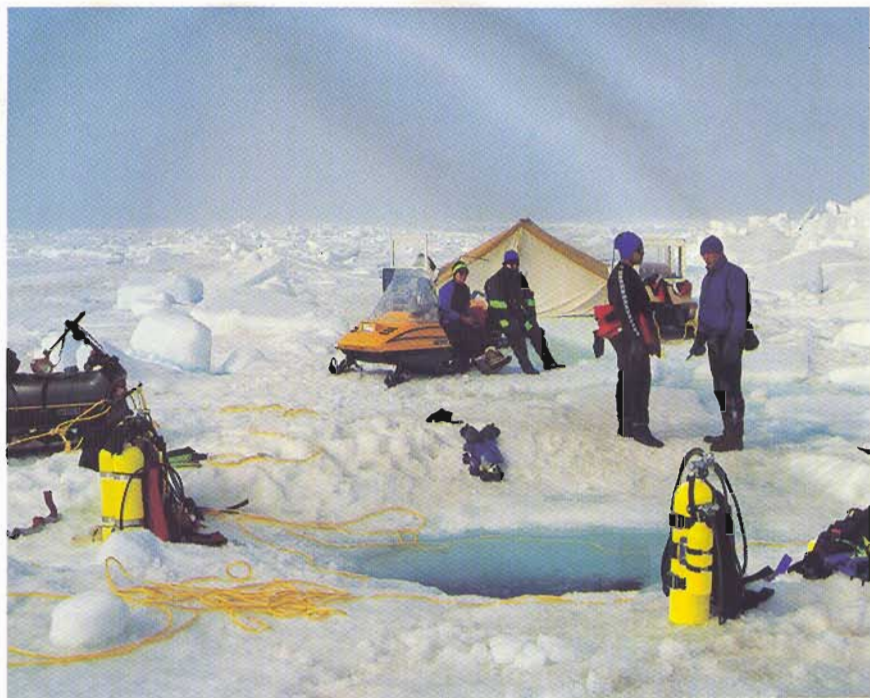
Our chartered Twin Otter climbed into the clear blue sky on a northeast course for Coburg Island. The pilot assured us that while the plane needed only 18 inches of ice for a safe landing, we could expect at least 4 feet to cover Baffin Bay.

After a quick stop in the 120-person town of Grise Fiord to pick up Mayor Abraham Pijamini, we flew out over open water and began scanning the floes for signs of life. Suddenly, someone shouted, "Whales!" Clutching cameras, we glued our faces to the windows. A pod of seven beluga traveled below the plane, their brilliant white bodies alternately breaking the surface and plunging into the emerald water.

Excited chatter filled the cabin as walrus, seal and beluga were spotted, punctuated by muttered curses when an airplane wing cut off a good photo angle. We jumped from side to side of the plane snapping frame after frame of film, bracing against the G forces as the pilot accommodatingly circled for an "instant replay" of the more spectacular sights.

Reaching Coburg Island, we didn't even have a gravel runway, only snow and ice. As we stepped out of the plane, the silence was overwhelming. The only sound was the whistle of the wind.

Again I admired the solitary beauty of the Arctic: the stark shades of white and gray, the crisp, clean air and the remote seclusion. I was



Dive entry points were often seal breathing holes or cracks in the ice that had been widened with a large chain saw.

completely alive. Few people ventured this far north. I wasn't sailing a small wooden ship into the unknown, but I was an explorer nonetheless.

We wandered toward open water and encountered polar bear prints more than twice as wide and half again as long as our own feet. While the bear tracks mostly paralleled the ice edge, occasionally they meandered onto the floes. Icy patches of snow offered testimony that a few swipes had been taken at some swimming animal.

I couldn't help looking over my shoulder occasionally and wondering if the bear would return. That was why Pijamini had his gun.

Hopping onto one of the larger floes, we felt the gentle rolling motion of the bay. The segments of ice were closely congregated, but the current could move them quickly away from the pack. The previous

week's team had planned to do some diving here, but by the time they had geared up the floes had migrated too far away.

We returned to the Twin Otter, and as the plane sped away from Baffin Bay, we finally spotted a polar bear below us. Pijamini and Bezal agreed that it was a small example — only slightly smaller than a Volkswagen. We circled and snapped a few more photos before leaving the bear to its snowy trek and returning to Resolute.

The town of 230 people seemed almost a city after our visit to the snow-filled expanses. Resolute began as an accident. Bezal explained that long ago Cornwallis Island probably supported 40 of the nomadic Thule Indians. At that time, the temperatures were relatively constant and the marine hunting was plentiful. But about 450 years ago, a mini ice age hit and whales quit venturing as far

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TODD SMITH

The thrill of Arctic diving is in the variety of ice formations. Darius Solomon explores an intricate network of crevices running through an iceberg.

into the bay. The Inuit were forced to move away to find food.

After World War II, the U.S. government wanted a weather station at Winter Harbor on Melville Island, roughly 200 miles west of Cornwallis. When the supply ship reached the area, bad weather prevented the cargo and crew from continuing. Resolute Bay became the alternate site.

CAVES AND BUTTERFLIES

Later in the week we ventured across the ice to Griffith Island. While we had GPS coordinates for guidance during the two-hour sled ride, our guides led us directly to the site following nothing more than vague ice formations and a hazy view of the island. A seal breathing hole had been widened by an exceptionally long-bladed chain saw

to give us access to the depths.

We were eager to hit the water and explore an iceberg that housed a large ice cave. While lake ice tends to be smooth, the joy of Arctic diving is the contour.

Segments of pancake ice bang into each other, turning up the edges of the chunks. Eventually the pieces become circular and pile up, creating keels. Some of the trapped bergs are grounded, and when these masses come into contact with the 50-foot bottom, huge furrows of 2 to 5 feet are dredged.

By now, we were adjusting to our frigid immersions. Breathing rates dropped considerably, allowing plenty of time to explore the berg's secrets. As Todd snapped a few photos of interesting ice formations, I scanned the water around

me. Something drifted in front of my face. Kourosh had described the alien creature, but until now none of us had seen it.

The naked sea butterfly (*Chione limacina*) hovering before my mask resembled a tiny, translucent angel. Small colored organs showed through the skin, and the head sported two pair of antennae. Thin wings flapped gracefully, and I was transfixed, as if seeing a real-life fairy.

It took a minute to gain the presence of mind to give the buddy-line a yank. Todd drifted over and immediately the strobe began to flash.

Turning from the delicate creature, we were drawn to the yawning ice cave. Within the crevasse, a small amount of sunlight filtered through from the surface, the colors gradually transforming from white to teal to

The ice broke the light into intense beams of color ranging from aqua to electric blue to a deep indigo. I was swimming down the nave of a vast cathedral, the walls of the channel glowing as though made of stained glass. ❄️

royal blue. Passages branched off in a few directions, but we soon reached the length of our line and turned back toward the surface.

On the return sled ride, I realized the landscape was changing. One-inch cracks we'd crossed earlier in our stay had grown to half a foot or more. Snow cover had become standing water that was almost a foot deep, leaving me to wonder when Ski-Doos would be traded for Sea-Doos. While Resolute Bay had been frozen with a 6-foot layer of ice, it was fast approaching July breakup.

The summer here lasted only six weeks and for a three-week period starting at the end of June, the ice sheet would be too fragmented to use a snowmobile and too packed to use a boat.

WHERE NO ONE HAS GONE BEFORE

It was our last day diving, and we were trying something new. We'd found a hole in the back of a glacial pond. Andy and I were to enter the water first, and the excitement was building. No one had ever dived this spot before.

The halocline was thick. The mixture of salt and half-formed ice crystals obscured visibility. Abruptly, the layer faded, revealing two stunning formations. Shafts of light pierced the glacial pond and the ice below it to illuminate patches of the bay floor. The varied light caused the rafted ice to stand out in sharp detail.

Unlike the mass we had visited earlier, these bergs weren't grounded. They stopped 10 feet from the bottom, allowing us to swim through the dim shadows below. On the far side of the berg we could see another well-lit patch of rocky substrate and knew that our final dive lay in that direction.

In one respect the Arctic is no different from any tropical dive paradise — no one ever wants the last dive to end. Andy and I made our final descent and, as planned, circumnavigated the nearest formation. Rounding the corner, we spied an 8-foot gap between the two bergs. Near the sur-

face the channel had frozen over.

The ice broke the light into intense beams of color ranging from aqua to electric blue to a deep indigo. I was swimming down the nave of a vast cathedral, the walls of the channel glowing as though made of stained glass.

The corridor stretched away from us — too far to explore with our small amount of slack — so we just hovered, drinking in the serenity of this underwater church. I offered a quick prayer for one of the most beautiful and humbling sights I've ever seen.

The calm I experienced as we floated in the gap persisted as we swam away. There are very few ice divers in the world, and of those,

fewer still venture to the Arctic. Between the two expedition teams, we had been the first and last to see these sights.

A reef might last for years, but come break-up, these bergs would drift away. Chunks of ice would splinter, altering formations forever. Next winter, new bergs would enter the bay, digging new furrows in the rocky bottom and uniquely influencing the keels around them. Our ice church would soon be no more, and only two people in the entire world had been fortunate enough to enter the gap.

As I slowly ascended through the dream-like swirl of salt and ice crystals, I knew I had received a rare gift — the memory of a lifetime. ■



Top: Resembling a bag of bones, the skeleton shrimp is just one of the unusual creatures encountered beneath the pack ice. Bottom: Sea stars and urchins litter the bay floor scavenging for their suppers. Far from a barren rocky plain, Arctic waters harbor a variety of plant and animal life.