Nunavut
"If you want to snowmobile to the Arctic Circle, call Mike or Chris in Iqaluit." That was the message waiting when I returned from a Québec tour. Two months later, my Arctic adventure was underway. It started with a Parks Canada meeting in Iqaluit (pronounced “ee-ka-loo-eet”). Formerly known as Frobisher Bay, this town is located at the foot of a like-named estuary that slices into the southern end of Baffin, Canada’s largest island. Iqaluit is the capital of Nunavut (“noon-a-oot”), which was part of the Northwest Territories until 1999, when that region became the first new jurisdiction to join Canada since Newfoundland.

So ten of us met with a Parks Canada rep about snowmobiling to the Arctic Circle. Said circle runs through Auyuittuq (“eye-you-ee-took”) National Park, just north of Pangnirtung (“pan-earntung”). I didn’t like what I was hearing…

Pauline Scott of Parks Canada said that their Arctic Circle sign was located only 12 kilometres inside the park entrance, an easy hike. “Hold on a minute,” I thought. “Did she say hike?” “Yes,” she said, as if reading my mind (or maybe I’d inadvertently exclaimed out loud). “No motorized vehicles are allowed in the park, so you’ll have to walk.” “Not a chance,” I thought. “I came to snowmobile!”

She casually dropped two other bombshells: “No guns are allowed in the park.” and “We recently ascertained that our Arctic Circle sign is misplaced. The Circle is actually a few kilometres further north.” My companions were upset not to have any defense against polar bears. I didn’t care, because I had no intention of walking to the Arctic Circle — especially since it too was a moving target!

Fearing that I had mistakenly joined the Nunavut Hiking Club, I expressed my opposition to pedestrianism immediately after the meeting. I was relieved by my companions’ equally enthusiastic condemnation of hoofing it, which confirmed that I really was among snowmobilers, folks whose idea of out-running a bear involves 800ccs and a spinning track.

Nunavut means “our land”. It has an area one quarter the size of the United States. About 27,000 people reside in this vast expanse, less than normal attendance at an NFL game. Polar Bears probably have a greater population density than humans. Hence the need for guns and fast snowmobiles.

Fortunately, we would have both. My initial call to Mike Erving (Update: sadly, Mike has since passed away) and Chris Lalande of the Nunavut Snowmobile Association was less to express my interest as to reassure myself that these guys knew their stuff. I wasn’t going anywhere with a bunch of amateurs, to disappear like Henry Hudson…

Their plan was to leave Iqaluit on Easter weekend. We would snowmobile a 770-kilometre, 5-day round trip to Pang (local jargon for Pangnirtung), including a day trip for Arctic Circle bragging rights. Unenthused at the prospect of camping for two nights, I was pleased to discover that Mike was a professional outfitter, who used GPS units, satellite phones, current sleds, survival gear, an Inuk guide and guns. I would even ride a familiar Ski-Doo snowmobile!

Contrary to expectation, this part of the Arctic doesn’t get much snow. Under 600 millimetres of precipitation falls annually, less than many parts of the Sahara, so it’s classified as a “polar desert”. Meaning I could freeze my buns while dying of thirst. However, snow accumulates from October through May, with little melting. It also blows around a lot, depositing old
The inland town of Igloolik, a former US military base, now a hub for local travel. The harsh environment makes it challenging to build roads, so snowmobiles are a common mode of transportation.

The Igloolik community relies on snowmobiles for transportation, as the harsh environment makes it difficult to build roads. The community uses snowmobiles to travel to and from the depot, school, and hospital, as well as for recreational activities.

Despite the challenging environment, the Igloolik community has adapted to their surroundings and has managed to thrive in this remote location.
Suddenly, we crested a hill overlooking what resembled a hunt camp. Several small shack-like structures were situated amid a confusion of parked snowmobiles, sheds, fuel containers, stacks of caribou bones, a pack of sled dogs, and what looked like small missiles sticking up in the snow, as if they had been dropped by a bomber. On closer inspection, I discovered them to be frozen seal carcasses, lined up nose down and waiting for the butcher’s knife. I assume they had been hunted, not dropped.

This was the permanent home of an Inuit family who live off the land, about six hours by snowmobile from Pang. Several generations were present, although it was hard to tell who belonged to whom since the husband and wife owners also ran a halfway home and with a degree of familiarity in our commitments. The fair weather continued, and by morning, was to put all my under layers might be warm enough. Also, that the only way to stay warm when I arose in the morning, was to put all my outerwear in the bag too. Crowded, but at least my boots leveled out a few of the dips in my decrepit bed. That night a regrettable urgency sent me shivering out to relieve myself. While an incredible display of Northern Lights danced overhead, I had visions of being found in the morning, fastened to the ground by a frozen stream of urine!

Good Friday morning, we snowmobiled on to the north end of Cumberland Sound, where ice ran all the way to Pang. There are three kinds of ice: pan ice, which comes and goes annually in inlets and channels; pack ice which is the near-shore broken, big, slab of ice, and thick ice which is solid ice! Entering the Sound, this ant was on a white plain as far as my eye could see. The only distinguishing features were hodgepodge of pack ice around numerous islands, and what looked to be mountains far in the distance. Along the way, we stopped at a quarry where soapstone is mined for Inuit art. Great deals can be had from local crafters, and I visited two, with both offering native art restorations to sell their carvings for a fraction of their eventual worth. We also visited a fishing camp. Here, hundreds of feet of shore are either lived in or visited by our many fishers, and I watched them through the large holes to catch turbot for sale.

By mid afternoon, we rounded a headland to a breathtaking view of the fiord where Pang is tucked into the shadow of a small mountain. With more of a shanty-town feel than Iqaluit, Pang had 1,200 hardly souls. It is one of the gateways for Auyuittuq National Park, whence resides the famous Arctic Circle to which one must walk unarmed. So not go at all, which was our final decision, motivated in part by the very uncomfortable Auyuittuq Lodge, and the need to replace a broken clutch before returning. With no repair shops near, word of our need soon spread. Next day, a resident offered a clutch from his own machine for sale. Mike and several others did the repair, even though none of them had tackled clutch replacement before.

Meanwhile, Chris, Dennis, and I crossed the fiord, guided by Mark Housser, the manager of the local Northern Store. We snowmobiled into the mountains for powder playing and hill climbing, then returned by descending a river, where glace ice covered a long stretch of frozen rapids packed with huge boulders.

Only eleven of us headed back that Easter Sunday, since several participants either lived in Pang or had other commitments. The weather continued, and with a degree of familiarity in our retraced route, I felt more comfortable seeing another half-foot of ice. I observed thirty foot ice cliffs along shorelines, where the whole ice plate had frozen into place, then snapped off when the tide went out from underneath. I spotted a massive chaos of broken slabs, tumbling together like smashed white porcelain. We walked a hundred yards to the floe edge, where Cumberland Sound meets the North Atlantic. Huge ice chunks bobbed lazily in waves that rolled to the horizon. I also saw several wide-open cracks across our trail, filled with dark cold water that flooded under my track as we skipped across.

But I never did see any wildlife. Tim asked what I thought of the carbon, fox and seals along the way. He had pointed out wolf tracks, and a little blip on the horizon he claimed was a seal, but his eyesight was better than mine. I probably wouldn’t spot a polar bear until it bit me. We made excellent time, by mid-afternoon passing back through the headland that had been our first camp. We intended to overnight at a small warm up shelter, but when we arrived at 7 PM, wolf hunters had already occupied it. With Iqaluit less than 5 hours away, there was talk about

**“Thirty foot ice cliffs along shorelines, where the whole ice plate had frozen into place.”**
riding straight through on this moon-light night. Until I opened my big mouth…

I reminded Mike and Chris that camping out would make a better story. Besides, I needed more photos and hadn’t yet had the privilege of spending a sub-freezing night in a tent. There I was, Mr. Non-Camper, talking my way out of a warm bed. The Arctic does strange things to a man.

Seven of us stayed; the rest, being smarter than me, headed home. We erected two small, two-man dome tents, while Tim set up a huge canvas palace with standing room, a foam floor, and room for a cooking stove. In my unheated unit, I spent that night breathing frigid air through a small opening at the top of my “Arctic” sleeping bag, trying to decide which foot would freeze first. It was a tie. And I did confirm that laying my carcass on the permafrost, protected by only an extreme sleeping bag, a thin air mattress and a caribou skin, is not high on my do-again list!

We returned to Iqaluit on Easter Monday. At our farewell dinner, two weary looking snowmobilers in full gear trudged in to talk to Mike. They had been out riding, when one of their sleds malfunctioned, so they doubled up for home. When that sled broke down too, they walked for hours, finally making it back to town at dusk. They were lucky; a little farther away and it would have been one very cold and lonely night.

We were fortunate to ride for five days in splendid conditions, without encountering a storm. We avoided problems thanks to the professionalism and experience of my companions, who know that the Arctic is not a place to fool around or take unnecessary risks.

Mike, Dennis and I went for a final ride Tuesday morning. By that afternoon, I was stuck in the Ottawa rush hour, suffering culture shock and thinking that snowmobiling in the Arctic is unlike anything imaginable. I’ll remember this tour because it was so different, so beyond the realm of my normal experience. The Arctic may not be the right choice for casual snowmobilers or those looking for a familiar snowmobiling experience on groomed trails. But for veteran riders with adventure in their blood, it’s an incomparable frontier experience.

Just don’t expect to see the Arctic Circle without walking. But I figure that snowmobiling within 30 klicks is close enough for bragging rights. After all, they haven’t got that illusive Circle nailed down yet!