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EYYOU ISTCHEE

Smokey Hill, on the Rupert River, is a traditional whitefish fishing spot near Waskaganish, Que., in Eeyou Istchee.



The residents of 'the people's land'
are opening their territory — culture,
waters, polar bears and all — to visitors.
The only question is, will they come?

BY JAMES LITTLE

WITH PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROLAND BASTARACHE

IF YOU ASKED most Canadians where you'd find a place called Eeyou Istchee, they'd respond with a blank stare. And I have to admit that I didn't know either until last summer. That's when I learned that *Eeyou Istchee* is the Cree name for the traditional territory on the east side of James Bay. It translates as "the people's land," and it represents a chunk of Quebec about the size of Germany.

Much of Eeyou Istchee is thick bush, but the region also includes nine thriving Cree communities, four of which sit right on James Bay itself. Many of these have airports, and all but one are linked by road to the south, yet very few tourists come to this part of Canada. That's partly because of the region's remoteness, but it's also because the Cree haven't gone out of their way to encourage people to visit.

In recent years, though, that's been changing. For nearly two decades now, the Cree have been slowly but surely developing plans to promote their territory for responsible tourism. They started by building the infrastructure needed to receive visitors — most of the nine communities have new or improved hotels and restaurants. Now the goal is to offer tours that combine cultural experiences with the area's rich history and outstanding natural opportunities.

The tourism program is being spearheaded by an organization called the Cree Outfitting and Tourism Association, or COTA. Robin McGinley, the association's

executive director, hopes tourism will play an important economic role in the future for the Cree. "Right now, many of our people work in mining and forestry, which can be boom or bust," she says. "Tourism could help balance things out." McGinley adds that half of the Cree population is under the age of 25. "We need to create more employment opportunities for our young people."

COTA has identified a number of possible options for tourists, ranging from northern-lights-viewing to mushroom-hunting to caribou-watching. But to get things rolling, the organization wants to offer guided polar bear excursions along the James Bay coast. First, however, COTA needs to find and train some local operators. While the coastal Cree have been venturing out onto the big bay for centuries, they've had little experience with tourists or with the kind of boats that are required to accommodate visitors. So, COTA has called in one of Canada's most respected adventure companies, Arctic Kingdom, to help with the technical aspects of creating a marine tourism program.

Graham Dickson, the founder and president of Arctic Kingdom, says the chance to work with COTA has been an incredible opportunity for his team. "As a commercial operator with experience in remote northern tourism, we knew we could make a difference to help develop meaningful experiences." Dickson believes Eeyou Istchee has tremendous potential as a tourism destination. "There



are many amazing elements that make it a 'must visit' for both Canadians and travellers from around the world with an interest in experiencing Canada's most incredible places, wildlife and culture."

For the past few years, Arctic Kingdom has been assisting COTA in training Cree residents as marine captains and also devising a possible itinerary for a polar bear tour. Now it's time for a dry run.

MY MID-JULY TRIP to the east coast of James Bay begins with a flight from the busy Montréal–Pierre Elliott Trudeau International Airport. As I board the small twin turboprop, I notice there are very few non-Indigenous passengers on board. But that's not too surprising, considering we're flying with Air Creebec, which — as its name indicates — serves the Cree people, primarily in Quebec. We're heading for the southernmost coastal community of Waskaganish, located at the mouth of the Rupert River. Waskaganish was formerly known by Europeans as Rupert House, and was the site of the Hudson Bay Company's first fur-trading post back in 1670. But the Cree have been living in the area for thousands of years.

Shortly after arriving in the late afternoon, we are greeted by COTA's McGinley, who lives in the inland



community of Oujé-Bougoumou but has been in Waskaganish the last few days for an annual tourism meeting. She asks if we're hungry, and explains that we're in for a special treat this evening: a traditional Canada goose dinner. We drive through town, and see the spot where the original English fort was located, though nothing remains there now. We also pass by the impressive new band council building, the pretty Anglican church and a weathered grey structure that is the oldest building in town (though nobody seems to know exactly how old). I notice that many houses have teepees in the backyard. McGinley explains that these *mitchuaps* are the traditional cooking structures in Cree communities.

Clockwise from ABOVE: sunset on the Rupert River; Robin McGinley (second from left), has led development of tourism in Eeyou Istchee; Elder Edna Jonah prepares a goose for her guests; inside a traditional *mitchuap*.

We arrive at the home of Roderick Jonah, a 74-year-old community Elder who escorts us to his backyard *mitchuap*, a square building with a fabric top. Inside, we find Edna, his 72-year-old wife. While Roderick builds a fire using freshly cut poplar kindling, Edna prepares the goose and then hangs it with string so it spins near the small fire. During the hour that it takes the goose to cook, Edna also makes blueberry sauce and bannock. Roderick tells us a bit about himself while we enjoy the feast: he was born in the bush but



moved to Waskaganish when he was a child and has spent his entire life here, apart from a trip to Ontario's Niagara region when he was younger. He still loves to go fishing for whitefish, walleye and sturgeon, and continues to take part in the spring goose hunt, one of the community's most important annual events.

After dinner, McGinley takes us on a tour with Charles Hester, the town's director of culture, sports and leisure. We're heading for a place called Smokey Hill, a traditional fishing spot on the Rupert River about a 30-minute drive from Waskaganish. As we draw near, I can hear the roar of the river, and I soon discover an impressive set of rapids. Hester is not so impressed. "It used to be five times bigger," he says, before Hydro-Québec diverted much of the

river's flow about a decade ago. He says that in the old days, he used to catch 80 whitefish in half an hour at his family's fishing camp just downriver from this spot. But those days are gone.

On the way back to town, Hester tells a story about the late great Cree chief Billy Diamond, who lived in Waskaganish and was married to Hester's aunt. According to Hester, Diamond and other Cree officials were just wrapping up a deal with Hydro-Québec in Quebec City, and were arguing among themselves in Cree about where to go for lunch. The Hydro-Québec representatives — who didn't speak Cree — thought Diamond and his associates were arguing about the deal, so they added another \$100,000.

I hope the story's true.

THE NEXT MORNING, 10 of us are gathered on the bank of the Rupert River, loading an eight-metre rigid-hulled inflatable boat for a day on the water. Before boarding, Jane Whitney, the marine projects manager with Arctic Kingdom, hands out our Mustang flotation suits, which seem like overkill on such a hot day. We motor out into the mouth of the river, and then veer north.

As we speed across the southern tip of James Bay, I think of English explorer Henry Hudson, who was the first European to visit these waters back in 1610 aboard his ship *Discovery*. Sadly, Hudson's career came to a premature end here when his crew mutinied and left him and eight companions stranded



in a small boat. They were never seen again, at least by white men.

Of course, Hudson was looking for the fabled Northwest Passage, so he only ended up here when he made a wrong left turn at the top of the huge bay that

now bears his name. Fortunately, there's no chance of us making a wrong turn today. In addition to the latest GPS technology and several experienced Arctic Kingdom guides, we've also got local wisdom in the form of three Cree marine captains. One of them, 52-year-old Anderson Jolly, has been travelling here since he was young, and he steers us to our first destination, Charlton Island.

Charlton is the second largest island in James Bay, and for many years it served as the location of a major fur-trading depot. (It's also rumoured that Henry Hudson may have spent his final days here.) But now it's home to a number of small buildings used by Jolly and his relatives, primarily during the spring goose hunt. Jolly explains that for generations, Charlton has been the site of his family's trapline.

We pull ashore for lunch, and take a stroll along the wide beach. Jolly points to the remains of an old wooden pier that is partially submerged at the water's edge, a remnant, he thinks, of the Hudson's Bay depot. A minute later he finds a rusty metal relic in the sand. Neither of us can tell what it is.

There's obviously been a lot of history on the island. And for Jolly, much

Homes in Waskaganish, near the mouth of the Rupert River (ABOVE). St. Peter's Anglican Church and cemetery, in Waskaganish (LEFT).

of the history is personal. His grandfather served as a custodian on Charlton, and his father was born here. As we walk inland, some sandhill cranes fly overhead and land not far away. I want to see them, but Jolly doesn't want to approach too closely. One of his relatives is buried nearby.

Around an hour after leaving Charlton and heading farther out into the bay, we see our next objective ahead: Trodely Island. At first glance, it doesn't look like anything special — a sparsely treed, beach-encircled outcrop in the middle of this vast saltwater bay. But still, everyone's excited as we slow down and drive closer toward shore.

Almost immediately, somebody yells out "Beluga!" And sure enough, we see one of the small white whales gliding up ahead, and then another. For half an hour, we track the pair from a discreet distance as they cruise along the shore, their backs gleaming above the water.

It's a wonderful sight, but even while following them, we're still scanning the



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JAMES BAY



island, hoping for something else. That's because Trodely, though officially uninhabited, has been known to host members of the world's most southerly polar bear population. And it's the big white predator, known in Cree as *waapaskw*, that we've really come to see. As we circle the island, I keep thinking I spot one, but every "bear" turns out to be a boulder or a log.

For a while I'm sitting beside McGinley, and I can tell she's anxious. "I really hope we see a bear," she says. McGinley has been with COTA since its creation — "It's my baby," she explains — and she's eager to see some of the tourism projects that she

has been working on for years come into being. "It has been a slow process, but now there's a lot of local interest," she says. "We have momentum."

And then, at last, someone notices something moving along the shore. Something white. We all grab binoculars excitedly and zoom in on the spot. It's a polar bear. A big one.

Though we are a long way off, the bear is obviously aware of our presence. It walks quickly along the shore, and then climbs inland to the top of a bluff. It stops for a moment and looks back at us as though posing for photographs, and then disappears into the trees.

Four Wemindji locals setting out with their fishing gear (ABOVE). On James Bay across from Wemindji, polar bears wander the South Twin Island shores (BELOW).

It's been a short but exhilarating show. Afterward, I look over at McGinley. She has a huge smile on her face.

AS IT TURNS OUT, that bear is only the opening act. In the following days, during a tour to the distant North and South Twin islands — about two hours across James Bay from the community of Wemindji — we encounter six more, including a mother and cub in the middle of what must be a 40-kilometre swim, and another two adults that thrill us by nearly getting into a scuffle.

But we spend our final day in Chisasibi, the northernmost community on James Bay's eastern coast, located on the south bank of the La Grande River. The town's residents originally lived at Fort George, on a nearby island at the mouth of the river, but had to be relocated here 40 years ago thanks to Hydro-Québec. Not surprisingly, the town looks much younger than the other coastal communities, with new buildings still sprouting up throughout.

One of the newest is the handsome Chisasibi Heritage and Cultural Centre,



which houses an extensive collection of artifacts and displays. We spend the morning touring through it — learning not only about Cree culture and traditions but also about the history of residential schools and the effects of flooding from the hydro dams. Just as we are about to leave, a group of 10 tourists — *real* tourists — arrives at the door. We are surprised to discover that most of them have driven their vehicles all the way from Michigan to this community at the end of the road.

McGinley is delighted to see them, and for a few minutes she makes the most of this instant focus group. She asks them a number of questions: Why did they come here? Where are they staying? What adventures would they like to pursue in the area? The tourists are happy to share their experiences and their thoughts, and then it's our turn to

tell them about what we've been doing. They are surprised to learn about the polar bears not far out in the bay. I ask one of them if he would have gone on a bear-viewing trip if it had been available. "Absolutely," he says.

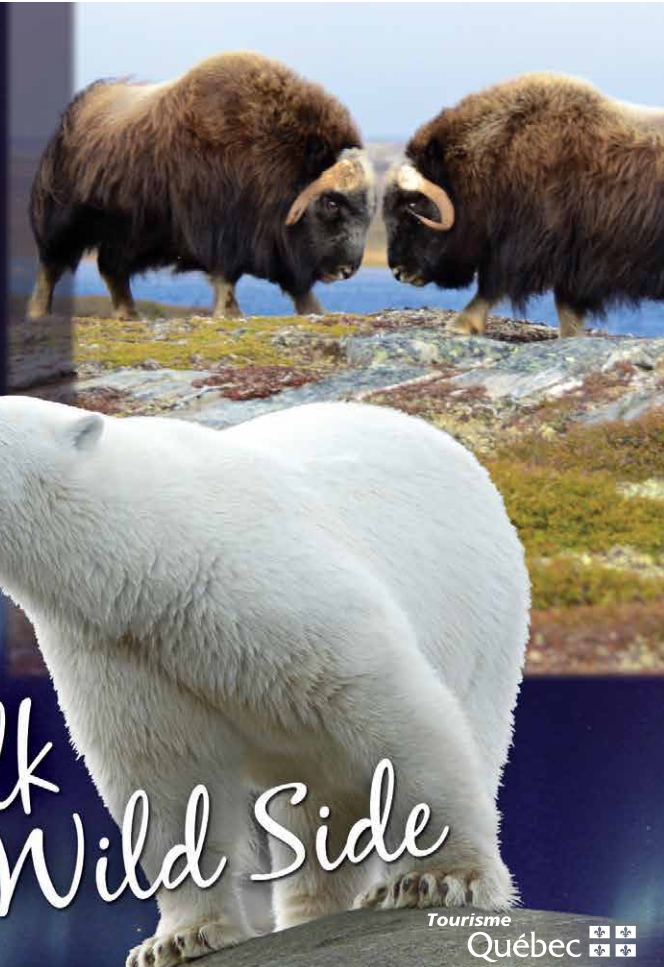
Once again, McGinley has a huge smile on her face. ❄️

A polar bear splashes into James Bay from a rocky islet near North Twin Island — an auspicious sight for the growth of tourism in Eeyou Istchee.



See more photos that showcase the landscape, wildlife and communities of Eeyou Istchee at cangeo.ca/mj18/jamesbay.

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