

Amériques : du nord au sud

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« Why? ». The question keeps coming back. According to the locals it would seem the Arctic is not the perfect place for a holiday. But as things stand we are not exactly in Kotzebue, above the Arctic Circle, as simple tourists. Here it is cold and inhospitable to those who do not know it well. One does not just visit the Arctic. One has to experience it.

It is here we start our trip is our answer. A voyage where we will "walk the path" the people who first inhabited America took many thousands of years ago. The exact dates rest unknown and the theories questionable, but for us white Europeans and Citizens of the World, this "route" is symbolic. The small town of Kotzebue named such by Russian traders, is built on the side of the bay of the same name, and was a stop on the route taken by those first settlers on their long migration from Asia to America. Certain of them continued southwards until they reached the other end of the world. After the first wave, others stayed here in the Arctic establishing settlements along the coasts of Alaska, Canada and Greenland, and later inland to form the culture known today as the Inuit. For those of us from

warmer climates, the first few days are little difficult to get used to. Covered from head to foot with several layers of clothing we confront the daily minus 25 degrees temperatures outside. Our friends Billy

their guns and set out to find reindeer and caribou returning from winter migration. For new arrivals like us the enthusiasm is much less, as it feels like we are going into a second winter. Ice forms on our



Great French Hunter.

and Maureen, to make our sorties less painful, found for each of us a cap of wolf fur, good gloves and army boots which are more redoubtable against the cold than the usual "Sorel". In early April the town is still completely encircled by ice. It is already spring and there is an air of re found liberty after the long months locked inside. Now is time for racing skidoos across the frozen bay. The roads start to be noisy and smell of fuel. The warmer weather allows fishing through holes in the ice. The hunters clean

scarves just in one breath. The cold, sneaky and invisible, bites into us whenever we mount a Skidoo. It is sufficient to have just one spot of exposed skin to get a burn mark. I had a red one under my eye that finally turned towards brown, before white as it peels away.

Concerned and a little disorientated, we observe the disorder in this lonesome town of 4000 people, where no road lead. Still in its isolation it is not as different as one might expect, at

least on the surface. Everyone lives in houses with the usual running water, electricity, internet and telephone. Not an igloo in sight. Anyway it was never that, in this part of the Arctic, as the locals always built in earth or wood. The people here are 90% Eskimo, more precisely Inupiat, that is to say "real men". Although quite used to modern times, a lot of them have decided to safeguard their old cultural ways. Anyway since the beginning they have had to adapt to a life that is extremely difficult. This capacity of adaptation makes for them being clearly American, but Eskimo first of all.

For sure, as in any town, there are people who have lost their spirit. Certain haven't the strength to resist their desires of a "better life". It is difficult to struggle constantly against the long winters and lack of work. The Arctic can be severe with its people. Christianity has come to save them and brought food, encouragement and peace. Also the church has taken in the drunkards caught in the downward spiral of alcoholism. Like most other towns in the Arctic, Kotzebue is faithful to its Christianity. The sale of alcohol is banned by wish of the habitants themselves. There are few jobs in these isolated small towns which hence a lot of unemployment. Certain though, make a choice and find in nature all their needs. Why should this stop! The sea is full of fish. Also there are always migrating caribous about. In summer, the Tundra is full of berries; in the fall, the woods full of moose. Christine and Gene live here since a good 30 years in a small cabin they built

themselves, without running water or electricity, some 13 miles from town. It is in this small home of 60 m² they raised their two children on just the fish and game they caught. Even today their life is much the same, close to nature with a bit of government aid and money from the extraction of oil and zinc,

Koonuk and his wife Tamara take us out hunting caribous but without luck, until we stumble upon a group of reindeers. They have better meat than caribous. Once spotted Koonuk's Skidoo goes straight on the pack. The downed animal is immediately gutted. It seems like its heart was still beating wildly. Tamara then slips her hands between the



Julie sleg.

De tout temps, les Inuit ont su s'adapter à des conditions de vie exceptionnelles difficiles. C'est cette capacité d'adaptation qui a fait d'eux ce qu'ils sont aujourd'hui: des américains, « Eskimos » avant tout.

and they are happy. We discover their simple world with joy. In the morning we go out to pull the nets placed under the ice at the beginning of winter. Sometimes there are as many as twenty fish. Back home, Christine chooses the nicest one for dinner. While she is cooking we go off with Gene hunting ptarmigan. Bad luck the gun didn't function just at the right moment to descend one of these elegant birds, the symbol of Alaska that they are. The cold is not so bad now as we have had to accept it and get on with life. At Gene and Christine's, each day is a question of survival. I have even put aside my vegetarian ideals to sample the fruits of their labor. On another day their son

skin and body of the deer to warm them up. Apparently this is as successful a method as heating them by the fireside. I forget again my wish for fresh vegetables, and accept to taste the tender meat. Back home, Gene and Christine had a yarn to tell as usual. The warmth of their cozy home soon relaxes us. We feel just like at home. Back in town, the action and noise bring down our spirits. We were already nostalgic for the simple cabin life. The closeness to the real Arctic was also missing. After a hesitant few days we decided to move on. Where to, still not sure. Then a sudden idea, so we buy plane tickets to Point Hope, a small town some 160 miles from Kotzebue. We know no one there.

This is the season when polar bears come and visit the place. It seems there is hope yet in Point Hope. We are still skeptical, more so when the first question on arriving is, "who are you?". This kind of welcome puts us immediately on guard. After a few hours wandering the streets in search of a bed we get a little used to it. It's just that the locals are not used to visitors neither in summer, let alone winter. The mistrust of certain puts us ill at ease, more so as others come up without hesitation with many questions. Our back pack intrigue them, so do our smiles.

Refusal upon refusal, we continue our search in the incredibly warmish air of early afternoon.

Finally we end up at Andrew and Pinkie's place. He is Inupiat, born and raised here and she is a filippina. Both are passionate for the culture of their small town. Point Hope, or Tigara in Inupiaq, is the most ancient settlement in the Americas, habited continually for more than 2000 years, constructed on the crossroads of the migration routes of the caribous, bearded seal and whales. The people here have never had to go far in search of food. Settled since almost posterity, their life revolves around whale hunting. Without whales, Tigara is not. The meat makes for a good part of the local diet and even the bones and the baleen are used to create tools and objects of art. Every part of the animal is used. Only the skull is left and thrown back to the seas with the order to come back the next year fully shod again.

Thanks to the explanations of Andrew we understand the goings in the town at this moment. It is the be-

ginning of spring and the time for large tracts of ice to start to melt, leaving large bands of clear water along the coast. The whales, during their migration, follow the coast. It's the

sion. Nostalgic of his traditional life he has rebuilt that house and hopes to live in it soon. From his stories we share the secrets of the Arctic, a strange land of ilikralik (places where no



Mont Top.

start of the hunt. During the last few days the wind hasn't been good, but finally these marine mammals showed themselves in the blue patches of sea. The seal skin boats wait in their sled, ready to go. Here in Tigara most of the men chase whales. When a whale is caught the whole town stops what they are doing and comes to help in exchange for their share of the meat. Everyone has this right without exception, whether an official, retiree or just a student. Until June there will be no let up and meat for everyone. Hunting takes over. The streets smell whale and the people of Point Hope have joy in their hearts. While waiting for the ice to open more we listen to the tales of Koonuknowruk, or Peter from is English name. He was born in a sod house in the old town 3 miles away, which had to be moved to New Point Hope in 1975 because of the dangers of shore ero-

one will camp), spirits, and small discrete people called "Inukun". A shamanic land overgrown by Christianity, but not yet totally dead in its original beliefs.

In Tigara, the Inupiaq identity is strong. There is resistance to all that could change the substance of the town and a constant battle against anything that would damage the wild life and nature. The mind full of stories, we decide to stay a little longer. In front of Pete, Andrew, Steve, Earl and Rex, we try to understand a small segment of the immense local knowledge. They have learnt this from their forefathers and nature itself. They have lived and will live the Arctic. Hours pass but it doesn't seem the sun wants to set. "Live on Eskimo time!" they tell us, and it is already midnight. Before leaving we must try some whale meat, which is unfortunately not yet of

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this season. Armed with her ulu or Eskimo knife, Rex's wife cuts some slices of the frozen and raw meat. To swallow the skin with its thick blubber, I admit takes me some effort. In the end I am happy just the same to have managed to get it down.

The hunt has not yet begun. We would like to stay but the whole village is getting busy. "You have to come back!" insist Pete and Andrew. And go with them in the search of wild duck eggs in summer, run on the beaches splattered with the ivory tusks of walrus and mammoth, breath the mild Tundra air. Listening to the Arctic that way!

Back in Anchorage, we want to thank all the people who helped us: Billy and Maureen Reich who welcomed us in Kotzebue, Brandon and Jaime Locke who welcomed us in Anchorage, Christine and Gene Barger, Koonuk and Tamara, Andrew and Pinkie Tooyak from Point Hope, Pete Lisbourne for all his stories, Carl Henry Jr for his gift, Sylvan for his translation, and all the others...

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