

# CANADIAN ARCTIC

## Four months with the Inuit

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Nobody knows with any certainty where the Inuit come from. It is thought they are descended from a group of hunters and fishermen who arrived in northern America from the Asiatic regions around 10,000 years ago. The Inuit (their present name, meaning "the men"), known to us as Eskimos (ancient derisive name given to them by the Indians which in the local tongue means "eaters of raw meat"), live in the extreme north of the earth, in the Arctic regions; this immense, hostile territory has a very harsh climate. They were once completely nomadic and had no contact with the western world. They living off hunting and fishing and their only goal was survival. When the white men arrived there and discovered they could become rich by extracting the minerals and exploiting the animals of these zones, the Inuit started to change. In what way? The first and most important change was that their active life was replaced by a sedentary existence. It will seem strange to you, but because of this simple detail the Inuit are no longer Inuit. What does this mean?

....That morning I was reading "The Mysterious People of the Ice", a book by the famous Italian explorer Silvio Zavatti. A black and white photograph attracted my attention: a child aged about four dressed in clothes made of reindeer leather and seal skin. I examined it for over a quarter of an hour. The next day I decided to leave for the Arctic. I wanted to live with the Inuit for a certain period, I wanted to immerse myself in their lifestyle and leave mine for a while. That wise and ancient people would certainly be able to teach me something. The horizons of my little world would have become limitless and I would have been able to roam in my new freedom.... But Ivujivik was so different from what I expected. When I arrived, the village consisted of prefabricated wooden houses provided with every kind of comfort" .... [Geos - April 1994]

I lived with the Inuit of Quebec, the northernmost region of Canada for four months. I slept in their homes and shared the monotonous and restricted life of the villages, no longer made up of igloos, but of prefabricated, centrally-heated wooden houses. But I also went hunting with them, encountering polar bears, seals, walruses, white whales and caribou, moving from the tundra in summer to the boundless expanses of ice in the winter. I listened to what they told me as I joined in their activities and I puzzled over the reasons for their sadness. In despair, they continued to ask me "Am I an Inuit or am I a white man?" And you could see an inner turmoil in their eyes, as you can well understand from



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the story of Peter Iyaituk, one of my Inuit friends in the village of Ivujivik. "I was sure that the life I lived was right for me, I was sure that everything which my father had taught me for years was true, was absolute: group solidarity, fidelity of man and wife, the sense of commitment in everyday life. I never set myself the problem of the existence of other values, of another truth. I had always been happy with my family. I have never needed money, my grandfather never worked to earn, he hunted for us because we needed to eat and protect ourselves from the cold. We didn't have to pay anyone. Today, for example, we can hunt more rapidly with motor-sleds, but to buy one you have to work and, moreover, if it breaks down in the middle of a snowstorm, it's certain death. Our dogs instead always brought us back home, we never had problems and they didn't cost anything. Time was not so important for us, we didn't have clocks, we followed the seasons. Now, thanks to technology, we have discovered that everything can be done much faster: at the time I enjoy the speed, but then when I return to the village with my catch and enter my house I feel sad and unsatisfied. I feel that everything I do is no longer indispensable. I have an infinity of time, but I don't understand the sense of my life. My son doesn't like whale meat, he prefers biscuits and chocolate. So who do I go hunting for? We have super-markets now. When I do happen to go out for a turn with my dogs, I get immense pleasure from the silence and I feel good in challenging nature, but if I use them to go hunting I feel stupid because I know that the motor-sled exists. What voice should I follow? There are many situations in which I feel torn between two opposite alternatives. I feel half a man."

## DEBATE

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Look at it carefully! A geographical map always has many colours indicating mountains and plains, seas and rivers, volcanoes and islands, glaciers, deserts and all the rest... This was how the Earth was and is.

To survive, the first living creatures learnt to adapt to these different features of the land. This is how variety was created, spontaneously. In every form of life.

I want to imagine a moment, in the history of the world, in which different creatures could live peacefully together.

Perhaps the deterioration of this garden of harmony began as people evolved and no longer had only to worry about surviving. They found they had the time to consider their differences as something to vaunt and use as a form of power...

Dear children,

Do you like the fact that there are many populations different from yours in the world?

Why do you like it or not like it?

How do you think these populations are "different"?

Do these differences make you afraid or do they make you curious?

Is a "different" person less important than you and your usual friends?

How would you react if an Inuit child were to enter your class now? What would you tell him or her? What would you ask him or her about?