



LIT BY skylights where the roof has collapsed, an ice tunnel extends a quarter-mile underneath a glacier.



*“When we stop to analyse the expression,
‘a good climate,’ we find that what we really
mean is a good climate for loafing.”*

VILHJALMUR STEFANSSON, *The Northward Course of Empire*

3 | A GOOD CLIMATE FOR LOAFING

BOB COCHRAN had never skied or worn a toque before, which made him a strange candidate for a 250-mile ski expedition near the North Pole. If Bob had ever worn a hat of any kind, it was probably a sombrero during some tequila-fueled weekend in Mexico. Bob lives in Los Angeles, where he works as an assistant principal at an adult school. He is an urban dude who likes to wear a suit to the office, gel his hair, and eat in restaurants a lot. Apart from a stint in the Marines thirty years earlier, he had never traveled much. At fifty-five, he was not exactly the ideal age to begin this hard travel nonsense.

But Bob had other qualities. He had to be one of the only people in L.A. who didn't own a television. In his spare time, when he wasn't chasing younger women, he liked to sit on his veranda and read such authors as Balzac, Ariosto, and Pablo Neruda. Intellectually at least, he had been obsessed with the Arctic since the age of ten, when he read a serialized account of the doomed Greely expedition in a men's magazine.



above Hell Gate, one of half a dozen polynyas in the region, earned its name because of the obstacle it presented to the first explorers.

right The dark ocean reflects on the underside of clouds, creating a “water sky.”

“I saw who survives, who dies, who becomes a criminal, who emerges as a hero,” recalled Bob. “I felt the story showed me everything I needed to know about life, except how to deal with the opposite sex.” He identified, in particular, with Sergeant David Brainard, who joined the army on a whim, after losing his wallet. Brainard distinguished himself at whatever he faced—sledding journeys, the starvation winter on Pim Island, and later, the army bureaucracy, where he rose to the rank of general. He was, as Bob put it, a master of destinies he did not choose himself.

An L.A. guy obsessed with the Greely expedition? And who, even more remarkably, was not writing a screenplay about it?

It was Arctic history that first brought Bob and me together. Two years earlier, on the kayaking tour I led to Alexandra Fiord, Bob had come to see what had obsessed him for so long. That was his first adventure tour, his first time in Canada, and his first vacation in a decade. Among the group, he became known as The Man Who Does Not Sit. He even ate standing, looking around, as if he didn’t want to miss anything. One night, he





above "L.A. Bob" works on his tan while crossing Norwegian Bay.

right A walrus sunbathes beside its *aglu*, or breathing hole, near the Hell Gate polynya.

and I wandered the remains of Greely's Camp Clay for hours, poking around on our knees for bits of sailcloth, rusted cans, and other talismans in which lurked the ghosts of the place.

After the tour, we kept in touch. Bob was keen to see more of the Arctic, maybe even try sledding. Bob kept in shape by running and working out at a club, but such an expedition—in which we would ski and manhaul 140 pounds each in temperatures down to -22°F —was a very different beast from a commercial kayak tour. Years before, I'd had problems with novice companions. But more recently, my wife, Alexandra, had loved her introduction to Arctic travel and now often came north with me, so I felt I was on a roll with partners. Most important, I knew that the Arctic is not

as hostile as its reputation suggests. You don't even have to know how to ski because you are just shuffling on flat terrain. All you really need is a little fitness, an equipment list, and a positive attitude. This last item may sound like motivational shtick, but it's true.

Still, it was a leap of faith for both of us in May 2005, when we stepped down the little ladder of our chartered aircraft onto frozen Walrus Fiord, on Ellesmere Island. Ahead of us lay 250 miles of sea ice and mountain passes en route to our destination—Grise Fiord, Canada's northernmost village.

The currents of the nearby Hell Gate polynya flush nutrients down the channel and nourish rich populations of birds, seals, and walrus. On this sunny spring night, a lone walrus basked on the ice beside its breathing hole, its thick hide scarred from conflicts with rival tusks. Clouds generated by the open water hung low in the distance, reflecting the black sea on their undersides. This water sky was an important visual cue for travelers. If icebound sailors saw this indicator of open water, they tried to maneuver toward it; dogsledders sought to avoid it.



While I got supper ready, Bob stood outside in the -4°F temperature, drinking a cup of hot soup and watching with intense interest as the steam froze on his glove. Later I offered him a thimble of tequila, his favorite drink, but he didn't recognize it. "I've never had it cold."

In the twenty-four-hour sunshine, there is always time, if you have the energy, and after supper we explored the peninsula that separates Walrus Fiord from neighboring Goose Fiord. Explorer Otto Sverdrup spent four years on Ellesmere Island, including two in this area. The middle of this peninsula constricts to a wasp waist that Sverdrup called Outer Isthmus. In September 1901, one of his men, Edvard Bay, camped on this gravel patch for several weeks, guarding a cache of walrus meat until the sea froze and they could dogsled it back to the ship. One night, several polar bears raided the camp and splintered a wooden box of fossils before Bay shot one and scared the others off.



GRISE FIORD

GRISE FIORD, POPULATION 141, unless someone gave birth last week, began like Resolute, with quasi-volunteers from northern Quebec and Baffin Island in the 1950s. Cupped by two-thousand-foot cliffs, the hamlet juxtaposes modern and traditional; residents in sealskin boots surf the Internet over plates of Kraft Dinner and minced caribou. On a sunny May afternoon, the village may be almost deserted, as everyone snowmobiles to nearby Devon Island to fish for char.

The change from dog teams to snowmobiles came in the mid-1960s. Two or three teams remain for white polar-bear hunters, who legally must chase their quarry on this traditional conveyance. *Komatiks*, the wooden sleds attached behind snowmobiles, can only carry about a week's worth of gasoline, so Inuit hunting excursions

last at most a few days. Meanwhile, the Polar Inuit of Northwest Greenland still travel with dogs and can stay out for weeks by hunting to feed themselves and their transportation.

Most people in Grise Fiord work at part-time jobs that keep the hamlet running. One person plows the airstrip. Two drive the water truck. There is a mayor and a wildlife officer. All but about ten residents are Inuit. The non-Inuit serve as police officers, schoolteachers, the nurse, or the store manager. Few stay longer than two years.

In a community where everyone knows everyone, privacy can be hard to find. "Jeanie fell and got thirteen stitches in her knee on Saturday, but look at her go," I heard one resident comment while gazing out her picture window. The analysis continued: "Flo is wearing those

left Nunavut-government workers Seeglook Akeeagok, *left*, and Jeffrey Qaunaq, *right*, have retained many traditional skills, including hunting their own food.

right Mounties have been in the High Arctic since the 1920s, helping to secure the islands for Canada.

tight jeans again—she can barely walk.” Her partner replied: “Joe is at the generator. He’s got a wrench in his hand. I wonder if that means electricity problems.”

A Twin Otter shuttles supplies and people from Resolute Bay twice a week. The two Royal Canadian Mounted Police officers handle mainly domestic disturbances. Once, a tourist reported that his backpack had been stolen. The officer was skeptical. The hamlet’s isolation and the rampant sport of window gazing make theft rare. “I’m telling you, I left it on the hotel veranda, and now it’s gone,” insisted the tourist.

“Have you seen this man’s backpack?” the officer asked a passing boy.

“Yeah,” said the kid. “The wind blew it down to shore. Want me to get it?”





A hundred years later, we could reconstruct Edvard Bay's adventure from start to finish. A slight depression in the windblown gravel marked the outline of his tent; nearby we saw three spent shells and, a little farther, splinters from the box of fossils where the bear had jumped on it. Armed or not, Bay must have found it a daunting experience, since his rifle had needed reloading after every shot. After this encounter, Sverdrup assigned Bay a companion for the remainder of his watch.

OUR FIRST SLEDDING day was challenging: a long climb through narrow, bouldery canyons in which we often had to take off our skis and help each other's heavy sleds over snowdrifts. "My normal day doesn't resemble this at all," said Bob. Although the May sunshine beat down, and I was hot in underwear and Spandex, Bob remained encysted in his balaclava, ski bibs, and fleece jacket. We made six miles—excellent progress for this picky uphill.

The sledding became easier over the following days, when we reached the endless white meadows beyond the height of land, then made our descent to the frozen sea. Sledding, unfortunately, does not promote conversation. The guy in front can hear the guy in back, but not the reverse. So we skied silently for a couple of hours, daydreaming or crafting comments to air during the next rest stop. We traveled about seven hours and averaged ten to twelve miles a day.

Bob's L.A. friends back home didn't know what to make of his new northern passion. An Arctic sled journey was beyond the ken of most Los Angelinos. A few thought it was "trippy" and waxed rhapsodic about campfires and pine trees. Others asked why he wanted to go to Alaska, anyway. The topic of penguins came up more than once.

WHERE I LIVE in the Rockies, cross-country-skiing parents often tow their kids on small fiberglass sleds. But as a form of long-distance travel, sledding (also called sledging or manhauling) is so obscure that only two or three of us in North America do it regularly. Dogsledding is similar but more complicated. For starters, you need your own dogs. The so-called Eskimo dogs for Arctic travel are different from the ones that race the Iditarod.

left Two-thousand-foot cliffs swaddle Grise Fiord on three sides.

right "When I stay in one place, I can hardly think at all," wrote French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. "My body has to be on the move to set my mind going."

Eskimo dogs are a tough and semiwild northern breed. They are not pets. Because they sometimes attack kids and drunks, they are typically chained at the edge of villages. They're big animals with a high metabolism and need as much food as a skier. Sometimes, you have to charter a separate plane just for the dogs. Once you're out there with them, it's great; dogsledding is faster than manhauling and full of social subtext. The dogsicker and maneuver like reality TV characters. But those who travel with them either live in the Arctic or spend their lives raising dogs on backwoods acreages in places like Minnesota.

Besides canoeing and sailing, manhauling is the only form of wilderness travel that allows you to carry six or eight weeks of supplies. But you can't sled just anywhere. The snow is too soft in sheltered woods, and uphill are too hard, except in small doses. Sledging needs flat, open country—Arctic terrain. Here, wind and cold transform powder snow into a hard surface over which a heavy sled glides easily. Ralph Waldo Emerson called this snow the north wind's masonry.

British explorers began the practice of manhauling in the mid-nineteenth century. With the twisted logic for which the British became known in the polar regions, they considered hauling with dogs cruel, so they used men instead. Early manhauling results were encouraging. On John Ross's 1848 expedition, Robert McClure and Francis Leopold McClintock hauled five hundred miles in thirty-nine days. In 1853, George Meham averaged sixteen miles a day for seventy days, with a light sled. (He hunted en route.)

The British made little attempt to minimize loads through efficient design, and later expeditions, in which teams of men attempted to drag fifteen-hundred-pound sleds through soft snow and over rough ice, did not fare so well. Norwegian sleds of that era, in contrast, weighed a fraction of British models. The British also carried far too much; instead of cutting the ends off their toothbrushes, they brought the kitchen sink. I noticed the same style in contemporary British travelers. They have a cultural connection to the Arctic that we North Americans lack, but their travel philosophy remains: why bring a four-inch nail when an eighteen-inch one will do?





THE THIRTY-THREE SNOWS

WHAT A PITY that the old saying about the Inuit having thirty or fifty or a hundred words for snow isn't true. Inuktitut has the same number of words for snow that English does, about a dozen. English terms include sleet and slush, while Inuktitut has snow on the ground, falling snow, and snow on clothing. None of the Inuktitut words illustrates the cultural idea behind the myth—namely, that the world you live in gives you a specialized perception expressed in language.

Yet even someone like me who merely travels the Arctic recognizes many varieties of snow, beyond generic types such as sastrugi, which is hard, wind-sculpted snow resembling frozen whitecaps. Snowmobilers or even

dogsledders might not need so finely parsed a vocabulary, but such nuances are vital to a walker. Here are the thirty-three types of snow that merit their own word.

1. Snow that's windpacked almost as hard as ice. The tip of a ski pole barely makes an impression. It's the best sledding snow—you can easily haul 350 pounds across it—but it's so slippery that falling is common.
2. Hard snow on the upwind side of sastrugi.
3. Slightly softer snow on the downwind side of sastrugi.
4. Breakable crust that's just strong enough to support walking.
5. Breakable crust that requires skis.

6. Snow above 32°F that globs onto the bottom of sled runners and climbing skins.
7. Airy new snow that's easy to pull through, even when deep. Some fresh Arctic snow is 98 percent air and is as light as handfuls of dandelion floss.
8. Two-day-old snow that has settled and, though not as deep, is much harder to pull through.
9. Older snow that has, despite a lack of wind, settled enough that it is no longer an obstacle to travel. Happens after about a week.
10. Soft snow on the sheltered side of blocks of sea ice.
11. Drifted snow that has begun to form sastrugi or windpack but needs more wind to turn fully hard.
12. Snow that conceals cracks in the sea ice, through which your foot plunges unexpectedly.
13. Soft snow that looks hard even to an experienced eye. An irritating variety.
14. The first light snowfall on mountaintops in late August. Some call this termination dust, because it marks the end of summer.

far left Snow 25: The troughs of these wind-sculpted snow waves, or sastrugi, range from a few inches to two feet deep.

left Snow 1: So hard that a ski pole sticks upright and footprints are reduced to faint scuff marks.

below Snow 5: Breakable crust almost supports a walker, but not quite.





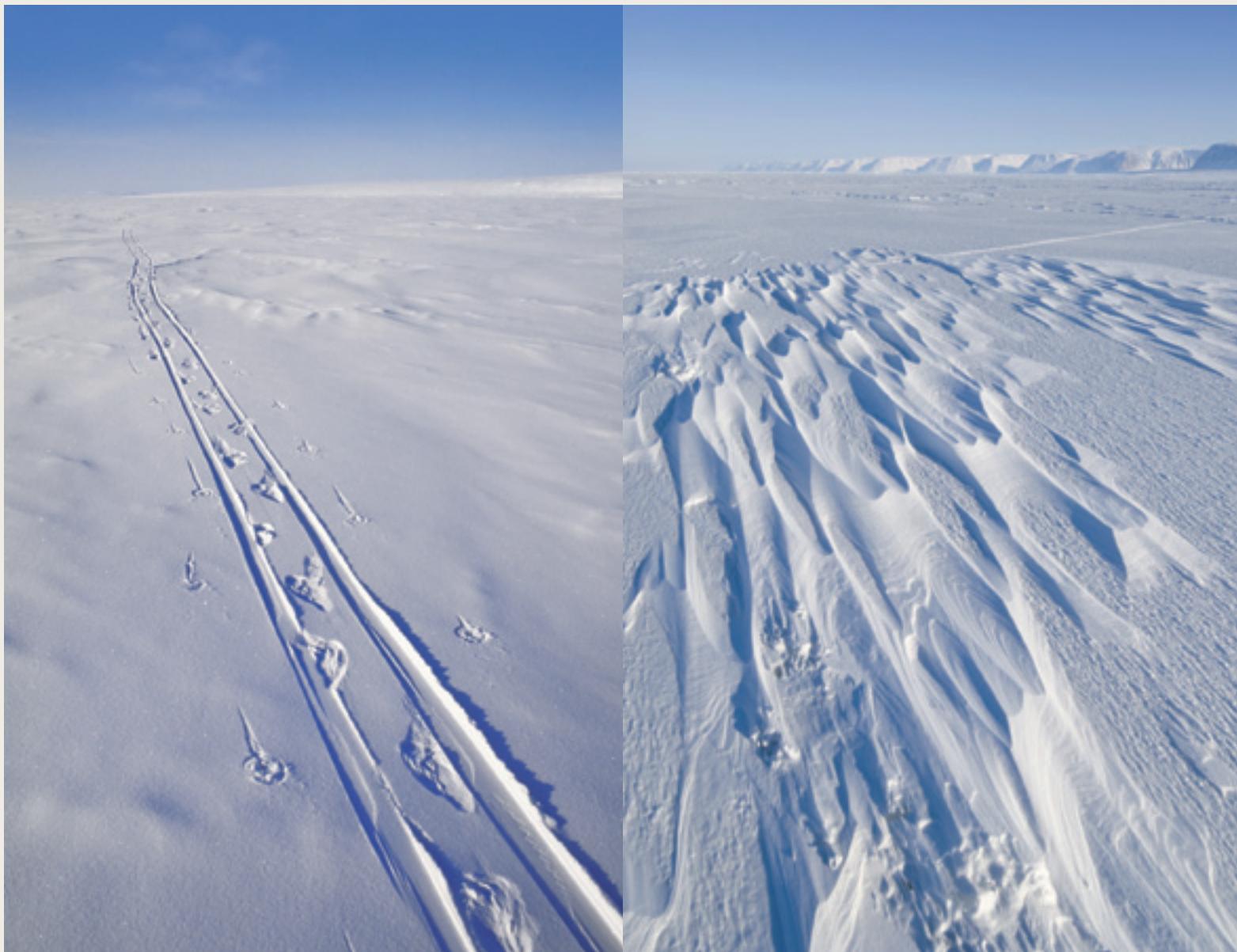
15. A scurf of new snow over hard snow. It doesn't affect sledding except in extreme cold, when the new crystals add serious resistance.
16. The slightly softer snow that a snowmobile's passage creates over hard snow.
17. Snow that disappears from the land prematurely. Common in mountain passes, where dark slopes act as solar reflectors that sublimate the valley snow or where concentrated winds blow it away.
18. Snow that remains most of the summer on north-facing hills. Some explorers mistakenly called these semipermanent snow slopes glaciers.
19. Snow impregnated with windblown sand.
20. Igloo snow: hard, uniform snow that is ideal for staking a tent or block cutting.
21. Saturated snow of a certain density that piles up in front of a sled and is impossible to pull through.
22. Giant low sastrugi, shaped like enormous boomerangs, but without much vertical relief. The angle of the boomerang points downwind.
23. Sharp sastrugi, small and steep-sided.
24. Sastrugi oriented parallel to the direction of travel. Decent sledding by walking along the hard wave crests.
25. Sastrugi oriented perpendicular to the direction of travel. Bumpy going.
26. Granular snow that doesn't hold tent stakes well. Sometimes called sugar snow.

- 27. Snow on the summits of nunataks that has been polished by wind and glazed by sun into pure ice.
- 28. Remnant sastrugi at the end of a warm spring, where thin icy crusts, like eggshells, are all that remain.
- 29. A snowfall that is not followed by a wind when the weather system changes.
- 30. Snow crystals that fall from a clear sky in early spring.
- 31. Flat wind-packed snow, without sastrugi.
- 32. Snow with no shadows to define it. Common on overcast days in the Arctic. The snow appears so featureless that you can't even tell when you're going uphill, except by how hard the pulling becomes.
- 33. Snow on top of open ocean, concealing an unexpected absence of sea ice. Sometimes the snow is hard enough to walk over until you fall through a weaker section into the sea. Fairly rare but scary enough to keep in mind.

left Snow 19: Windblown sand dirties what explorer Otto Sverdrup called Mokka, or Muck, Fiord.

below left Snow 15: In cold weather, even a dusting of new snow creates significant friction for a sled hauler.

below right Snow 24: Sastrugi parallel to the direction of travel allow for less bumpy sledding than if the waves were lying across one's path.





above Bob Cochran unwinds with a cigar at the end of a long sledding day.

right Manhauling is one of the only modes of wilderness travel that allows one to carry two months' worth of supplies.

NEAR THE SEA, Bob and I sledded past a site I'd visited once before. A hundred years ago, Otto Sverdrup dogsledded through an ice cave underneath a glacier. When I first passed this way in 1988, the cave was a third of a mile long and magnificently lit by skylights where the roof had collapsed. Since then, it had changed only slightly, and we spent several hours inside it, lost in wonder. "If I mention Sverdrup's Ice Cave to anyone in L.A.," said Bob, "they'll ask, 'What's that, a nightclub?'"

Early on this trip, I noticed that The Man Who Does Not Sit actually

did sit down at the end of the day. Then he lit a trademark cigar. The twenty-four-hour sun baked the tent as we slept, so despite the outside temperature of -13°F , we hardly needed our superwarm Arctic bags. Our food was basic hard-work fare—lots of fat, lots of sweets. The key is *lots*. Unlike the members of the Greely expedition, no one went hungry. I ate a pound of chocolate a day; Bob, about two feet of dried sausage. A family-sized box of Harvest Crunch granola lasted us a breakfast and a half. Bob found these marathons meals "amiably taxing." To me, his comments sounded positive, although I'd been wrong before.

There was a time when I couldn't conceive of anyone not liking sledding. Thousands of people backpack, and to me pulling a sled was easier. Sure, -40°F might be challenging for some, but -4° or -13°F —typical spring weather—was fine with the right gear. Then one year, my novice partner experienced a kind of mental meltdown after just one day on the trail. He hated everything about sledding: the ox-in-the-yoke feeling, the cold,





left "It was like fairyland, beautiful and fear-inspiring at the same time," wrote Otto Sverdrup upon discovering this ice tunnel in 1900.

below Tons of glacier above his head, Bob Cochran reemerges into the light after exploring the one hundred-year-old ice tunnel.





his sunglasses frosting up from sweat till he could barely see. Another partner new to manhauling was mentally tougher, but we just didn't get along. Finally, I had to admit that sledding was stressful and that finding the right partner was not easy.

During the sledding day, I have to go to a special place in my brain and live there. It is a place where monotony, fatigue, and discomfort don't exist. It always takes me an hour or so every morning to find it again, but at least I know it's there. It's a refuge, but it's also an escape from who I normally am and one of my reasons for doing these treks.

Somehow Bob tapped into it, too. He got the Otherness of it all. "We're using ourselves to carry us somewhere, which is kind of weird," he said one day. I came to believe that it was his past training in the Marines that gave him such ready access to this place.

"How does this compare to jungle warfare training in Panama?" I asked during one break.

He thought a little. "Jungle training felt like play. This is more like war. It's the real thing."

I'D DONE A dozen sled trips longer than this one, so I had some perspective on 250 miles. You just have to retreat to that special place in your brain every day for about three weeks, and you're there. One morning, after studying the map, I mentioned that if we put in a couple of longer marches, we should be able to time our arrival in Grise Fiord to catch the Wednesday flight out, six days from now. Bob didn't say anything but later admitted realizing for the first time, "Oh, I guess we're going to make it, then."

After two weeks, Bob had remained the same polite gentleman he was back home. He still apologized whenever he farted, even if he was twenty yards away. On such a journey, where rich diets turn everyone into backfiring jalopies, that was remarkable.

By day twenty, we both looked pretty ratty. Bob's mane of hair was gelled for the first time with natural grease rather than mousse. But our legs looked like they'd been chiseled by Praxiteles. On a sunny Wednesday morning, Bob skied into Grise Fiord, master of a destiny he did not choose himself.

left The frozen sea, like this inlet near Grise Fiord, has served as the traveler's highway for centuries.