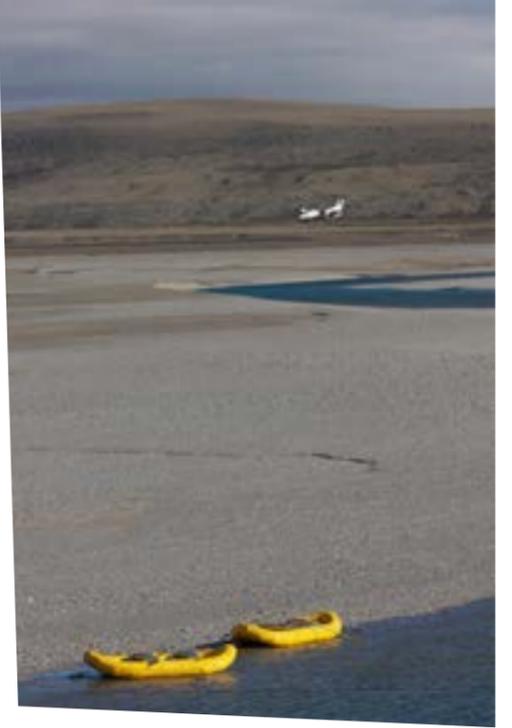


MAGNETIC NORTH

Adventurer Richard Weber and the lure of the High Arctic



BY MARK HACKING • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KENT DOOR AND ARCTIC WATCH

When someone offers you a gun, consider the reasons why before rejecting the idea outright. “Do you know how to fire a rifle?” I was asked. “Do you want to carry a rifle?” By that point, the only experience I had with a rifle, per se, was when I shot pellets harmlessly into a farmer’s field with a cousin’s BB gun; that had been a lifetime ago in a land far, far away.

Richard Weber and guest surfing the ice flows above the Arctic circle.

On the subject of land that is far, far away, there's Somerset Island. Measuring 24,786 square kilometers in size, it's located in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, directly south of Resolute, on the southern shore of the Northwest Passage. It's the 46th-largest island in the world, and, while this ranking may not seem all that impressive, vast does not even begin to describe the place—remote does not even begin to describe it, either.

"...vast does not even begin to describe the place"



Lessi officip sundanimin eium unt. Pit acculpari tem.

From 1937-48, Somerset Island was home to a Hudson's Bay Company trading post, a counter and a cash register based in a no-horse town called Fort Ross. From the moment that outpost closed, the island has remained uninhabited—apart from six weeks each summer, when Richard Weber and his family welcome visitors to Arctic Watch, the world's most northerly adventure lodge.

It was Weber who was grilling me about the rifle, his line of questioning directly influenced by polar bears.

I'd been recruited to be a guide for one of eight people racing in the Northwest Passage Marathon, an annual competition that brought out only the bravest and hardest of long-distance runners. My role was to ride an ATV loaded with spare clothing, food and drink in support of Sabine, a schoolteacher from Berlin, who was determined to complete the full 42-km ultra-marathon distance.

The marathon route would start at Cunningham Inlet, home base for Arctic Watch, and skirt the Northwest Passage before turning sharp left and heading south through the aptly named Red Valley. One of the very first route markers was at Polar Bear Point, a favoured gathering place for the large carnivore. On the day of the race, the carcass of a bowhead whale had washed up on shore at the point and a dozen polar bear were picking it clean, the blood flecking their whitish fur pink.



While it's debatable as to whether the polar bears would turn away from an easy and substantial feast to chase a lean marathoner, the possibility remained very real. This prompted the suggestion that all guides, including yours truly, carry a firearm. I declined. Instead, I opted for a can of pepper spray (to dissuade the bears) and a walkie-talkie (to call for back-up, presumably after the pepper spray failed to make an impression).

In my defense, this decision was made before I had a full understanding of the man offering me the rifle.

Richard Weber knows all about being prepared in the High Arctic. He knows all about what happens there and what could happen there. He knows precisely what skills are needed, when they're needed and when they're not going to be enough to pull you out of the fire—or, the ice, as the case may be.

His very first summer job while in high school was as chief cook and bottle washer at a small geological camp in Richmond Gulf, Que., halfway up the east coast of Hudson's Bay. It's a proper settlement now; at the time, it was little more than a crude lay-by. Weber's father, a research scientist who worked in the Arctic, helped spark his son's interest in the region and, later, introduced him to a colleague who was planning an expedition to the North Pole.

Weber travelled to Alaska in 1985 to prepare with the expedition team under the proviso that he was being evaluated—he needed to make the cut. He called upon his experience as a past member of the Canadian national cross-country ski team and made small work of the test, an 850-km skiing trek across the frozen tundra. A year later, in 1986, he and the expedition team reached the North Pole, triggering a lifelong obsession.

"The first time I went up there, I was amazed that I could function at minus 60 degrees Celsius," he says. "I was functioning better than most people. The High Arctic is always different, you never know what you're going to get, things never work out as planned. So you have to be calm, flexible and perseverant."

Since that first trip, Weber has organized and led more than 50 Arctic expeditions and, in the process, he has spent more than 600 days on the Arctic Ocean.

He's the only person in the world to have completed six full North Pole expeditions, a number of them groundbreaking in nature. But the highlight of his illustrious career as an explorer came in 1995, the year he and Dr. Mikhail (Misha) Malakhov became the first people to reach the North Pole and return to land without outside support.



©Arctic Watch

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The scale of this accomplishment should not and cannot be overestimated; their harrowing adventures included more than one exceedingly close call and fuelled the tell-all book, *Polar Attack*. On his Wikipedia page, there's a quote from noted British explorer Sir Ranulph Fiennes: "To my mind, Richard Weber and Misha Malakhov are the greatest of all Arctic travellers. Their 1995 North Pole return journey was the most difficult polar challenge ever achieved."

More recently, in 2010, Weber and three other brave souls completed a 900-km journey from Canada to the North Pole in a record time of 41 days, 18 hours and 52 minutes—on foot. The record was, of course, a tremendous accomplishment; one of the team members was his eldest son, Tessum, which made it all the more sweet.

UNESCO has officially recognized Weber for his feats in the High Arctic; the governments of Canada, Russia and the former Soviet Union have done so, as well. The most recent accolade for the 56-year old adventurer: a prominent place on the cover of the June 2015 issue of *Canadian Geographic* and equally significant mention in the cover story on the 100 greatest explorers of all time.

"There's something about the vastness of the Arctic and the challenge of the expeditions," he says, in attempting to explain why he has returned so many times, "the challenge of testing yourself physically and mentally."

Compared to all of Weber's adventures, I soon realize, a visit to Arctic Watch is the proverbial walk in the park. For the most part, visitors are a pampered bunch—hot water bottles for the beds in the private yurts, hot showers every morning, hot apple cider by the fireplace in the lounge. The food, served in a large dining room in the main lodge, is gourmet quality from start to finish.

Yet, there's a distinct element of the physical to the surroundings on Somerset Island—and a sense of foreboding about the place. The island is replete with muskox, beluga whales and the aforementioned polar bears, but even they struggle to survive in this inhospitable environment. The near 24 hours of daylight during our weeklong visit in the summer during didn't help much at all; perversely, the cumulative effect of the unrelenting sunshine serves to make things murkier with each new day.

But as the week progressed, one thing did become very clear: Why the most distinguished Arctic explorer of them all was exactly the right person to guide a bunch of tourists through such a harsh environment.

An example: During an inflatable raft ride down the Cunningham River, one of the guests fell in the frigid water. Correction: The guest would've fallen in the water if not for Weber's lightning response to the situation. He was in the stern of the raft, facing the stern, rowing away like an automaton. The rest of us were scattered throughout, paddling ineffectively, attempting to keep pace.

Someone yelled: "She's overboard!" Before anyone had the chance to react—before anyone had the chance to think about reacting—Weber had dispensed with his oars, stood in the raft, spun around and reached out to grab the woman. He lifted her from the edge of the river with one arm. A few droplets spilled from the back of her parka—this was the only part of her that had kissed the water. The entire incident took four, five seconds tops.

The rafting trip took place a few days after the Northwest Passage Marathon. If the race had been scheduled for later in the week, I'm quick to convince myself, I would've listened more closely for the meaning behind Weber's questions. I would've paid closer attention to his implied recommendations on how to survive in the High Arctic. I would've taken him up on the offer. I would've carried the rifle.

I would've done things differently because things in the Arctic never work out as planned. About five km into the marathon, unbeknownst to me, the can of pepper spray fell off the back of the ATV. Some 15 km later, the batteries on the walkie-talkie ran dry. At that point, I was less a guard, more of a guard down.

As it happened, everything worked out fine. The polar bears continued to focus on the fallen whale. Sabine completed the ultra-marathon. We were out there, alone together, the long-distance runner and I, for hours without incident. We saw no other wildlife apart from some whales in the distance. But I chalk all this up to dumb luck. And dumb luck, I now understand, has no place in the planning of a trip to the High Arctic. ✦

"There's something about the vastness of the Arctic and the challenge of the expeditions—the challenge of testing yourself physically and mentally."

Richard Weber



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