

# Willis's Walkabouts High Arctic Summer

## 5-6 Weeks: July-August 2011

**Once again, Willis's Walkabouts is offering an Arctic summer trip.** These notes were originally written for a trip scheduled for 2008. That trip did not run. If this does, it will be our first arctic summer trip since 1996. (We have, however, run two arctic spring trips since, most recently in 2006.)

### **Option A, Baffin and Ellesmere Islands.**

I've led two trips to Baffin. That's twice more than most Canadians have visited the area. Ellesmere has been a dream of mine for the past 15 years, hiking in the northernmost national park in the world (80°N) in a surprisingly green landscape. It won't be cheap, but it will be a once in a lifetime experience. If I do manage to run it, it will almost certainly be the only time I do so. Anyone who has even the slightest interest in the trip owes it to themselves to read these notes carefully and to check out the web links that give additional information.

### **Where are Baffin and Ellesmere?**

Baffin and Ellesmere are two large Canadian Islands that run parallel to the west coast of Greenland.

### **What's it going to be like?**

Here's a link to the hiking page from Parks Canada.

[http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nu/quttinirpaaq/activ/activ1\\_E.asp](http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nu/quttinirpaaq/activ/activ1_E.asp)

(If any of the links in this document don't work, you can copy and paste them into your browser.)

The Parks Canada page describes what I want to do. "Another option is to hike the route between Lake Hazen and Tanquary Fiord. This route follows a number of mountain valleys and includes numerous mountain stream and glacier crossings. Hikers should allow from 8 –10 days for this trip, and up to 12 days to allow for side trips." Hopefully we'll be able to fly in to one place or the other, drop off some food, do some day trips as we get used to the area, then walk to the other end and catch a plane back.

### **It won't be cheap.**

Airfares alone will almost certainly cost at least \$10 000 for those coming from Australia, not much less for those already in North America. Once in Canada, we need to get to Resolute Bay, population about 200, on the south side of Cornwallis Island. The only air line flying there is First Air. When I looked up the return fare from Ottawa, I got a quote of \$4841. Return from Yellowknife was only \$2430. Combining Baffin Island and Resolute from Yellowknife got me a quote of \$3700. All prices in Canadian dollars. A return fare from Vancouver to Yellowknife can be had for less than \$800, so this looks like a good bet.

The map at left is a blow up of part of the map above it. It shows Baffin, Banks and Cornwallis Islands. Cornwallis is the small island at the left end of the line. Resolute Bay, population about 200, is on the south side of Cornwallis.

Flights between Yellowknife and Resolute Bay stop in Cambridge Bay on Banks Island. Flights between Iqaluit and Resolute Bay stop in Nanisivik on northern Baffin Island. Since we will be spending so much on airfares, we may decide to stop in one or both and do a walk there.

That's the easy part. Here's what the Parks Canada website said about getting to Ellesmere. "From Resolute Bay, you must charter an aircraft to get to the park. It is a four-hour flight by Twin Otter to the park from Resolute Bay. A Twin Otter aircraft charter to Tanquary Fiord or Lake Hazen, is approximately \$15,000 one-way. However, you will need two flights, one to go to the park and another to come out for a total cost of around \$30,000! A Twin Otter is capable of carrying a load of from 1000 - 1200 kg, which is equal to the weight of eight to ten people with gear. You should try to co-ordinate your trip to the park with other travellers, to reduce your charter costs."

If we had 8 people and were able to share the flights in both directions (don't bet on it) it would cost only about \$2000 each. Double that if we can't share. As of 15 July, the Australian dollar was worth about 91 cents Canadian so you can add about 10% to all prices above.

Prices and flight schedules will undoubtedly change but this gives you a good start.

I have been in touch with Ken Borek Air, the company that does the charters from Resolute Bay. I am still waiting on a quote and information about things like carrying fuel. We'll need fuel for cooking but you can't normally carry it on commercial passenger flights. I believe that they can carry it on a charter, but I haven't yet been able to confirm this.

The airfares are the largest expense, but they are not the only thing which is expensive on this trip. The park entry fee for a backpacking trip is about C\$150. If you want a bed in Resolute Bay before or after the walk, it will set you back C\$195 per person, twin share. (Accommodation in all the small towns is similarly priced.)

If this hasn't put you off, you really need to have a detailed look at the Parks Canada website.

[www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nu/quttinirpaaq/index\\_E.asp](http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nu/quttinirpaaq/index_E.asp)

There are many pages. You should read them all.

Someone has put some photos from their 2005 hike onto the web. See

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/neoviking/sets/762512/>

Here's a good basic information sheet.

[http://www2.parksCanada.gc.ca/apprendre-learn/prof/itm2-crp-trc/pdf/fquttinirpaaq\\_e.pdf](http://www2.parksCanada.gc.ca/apprendre-learn/prof/itm2-crp-trc/pdf/fquttinirpaaq_e.pdf)

Here's someone's description of a walk they did there with a commercial operator in 2005. Our trip is likely to be quite similar. <http://www.canadian99s.org/articles/Ellesmere%20Island.htm>

**New in September 2007.** Here's the 21 page Parks Canada Quttinirpaaq information packet.

[http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/pdf/quttinirpaaq\\_info.pdf](http://www.bushwalkingholidays.com.au/pdf/quttinirpaaq_info.pdf). **Don't even think about**

**joining this trip until you have read the whole document.** Two particularly important parts are on pages 4 and 9. The box on page four comments on possible weather delays. No matter how much time we allow, it is always conceivable that the weather can cause a change of plan.

On page 9, it states, "Many *satellite phones* will not work in Quttinirpaaq because their transmissions are limited by northern latitude. If you intend to bring a satellite phone, be sure to check its range and functionality at northern latitudes. *Iridium phones do work at these latitudes*" We will be carrying one of our iridium satellite phones.

At this point, that's enough for Ellesmere.

### **Baffin Island**

Assuming that we do go to Baffin Island we might return to Auyuittuq National Park and do the ten day through walk that we did in 1996. (We also did this by dog sled in March 2000.) See

[www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nu/ayuittuq/activ/activ1\\_E.asp](http://www.pc.gc.ca/pn-np/nu/ayuittuq/activ/activ1_E.asp) for more information.

Or we might do the Itijjagiq Trail in the Katannilik Territorial Park. See

[www.nunavutparks.com/on\\_the\\_land/katannilik\\_park.cfm](http://www.nunavutparks.com/on_the_land/katannilik_park.cfm) for more information.

At this point, the second walk is looking more likely than the first.

### **Yellowknife and more**

If we fly via Yellowknife, it would be a shame to miss out on some of the interesting possibilities in this area. We'll have more when we know how likely it is that the trip will run. The flights to and from Resolute Bay from Iqaluit stop in Nanisivik and those from Yellowknife stop in Cambridge Bay. If it's not too expensive, we might consider a stop in one or both.

**If you find any other websites we should have a look at, please let us know.**

As of 14 July, we had one deposit and four expressions of interest in this option.

## Option B, the Dempster Highway

I've been dreaming about this one since the road first opened back in 1979. It begins near Dawson in the Yukon and goes north to finish at the town of Inuvik in the Northwest Territories. There are lots of relatively easy, one to four day walks that we can do along the way. As with option A, drop me a line or send me an email if you'd like to be kept informed as this develops.

The Yukon Info web site [www.yukoninfo.com/dempster/](http://www.yukoninfo.com/dempster/) has a wealth of information (five pages) about the road.

David Simmons's personal website [www3.sympatico.ca/billh56/](http://www3.sympatico.ca/billh56/) is a great source of info.

There are many possible day and overnight hikes along the road. I've got details in a book, but haven't found much on the web. Your suggestions are welcome.

As of 14 July, the person who put down a deposit on the Ellesmere-Baffin option said he'd do this if that one didn't run. We've had two other expressions of interest in this option. If we don't run it in 2008, we hope to offer it again in a future year.

**Only one can run in 2008** so please contact us as soon as possible if you are interested in either one. But before you do that, please read on and see whether or not this type of tour is for you.

## Why use a Darwin-based firm for an Arctic tour?

Since 1969 I, Russell Willis, have made a number of trips to the far north. I've worked as a deck hand on a river boat on the Mackenzie River (second longest in North America) in Canada's Northwest Territories, remaining until the river had frozen solid in early November. I've paddled over 300 kilometres on a solo canoe trip down the Yukon River. I've met a grizzly bear at close range while walking in Denali National Park in Alaska. I knew what to do and walked away to tell the tale. Would you do the same? I hiked through the snow to Alaskan cabins in March 1994. I led a six week expedition to the Northwest Territories in July & August 1996. I led a spring trip which included snowshoeing outside Yellowknife and 10 days by dogsled across Baffin Island in March 2000. Most recently, I did a western arctic spring trip in March 2006, hiking and dog sledding.

## General Information

We will, whenever possible, stay in reasonably priced accommodation when we are in town. This will be a mix of bed and breakfast, hostels and hotels. In some cases, this should be no more than C\$40-70 per person. In others, the cost maybe close to C\$200 per person per night. The high arctic isn't cheap.

## What does it cost?

My fee is \$1500. This covers only my services as guide, organiser and cook. In addition, you will have to pay your share of all the expenses for food, transport, accommodation, etc.

I will pay the same fees and fares as everyone else and will keep these as low as reasonable comfort and reliability will allow. My current estimate for the total cost, including airfares, is of the order of \$13000-18000 for option A and \$7000-9000 for option B. I will provide a more exact estimate when I have a better idea of which trip is most likely to run.

## What do you get for the fee?

You get expert advice on the things to bring. You get someone who will handle the mundane details of making the travel arrangements, doing the food shopping for the walks, organising accommodation etc. You get someone who will provide all the group equipment (billies, stoves, etc) and who will cook all the evening meals on the walks allowing you to relax and enjoy yourself. If you want to get maximum value for your money, you can go off sightseeing or simply relax while I am doing the food shopping or standing in line for tickets etc. Or, if you wish, you are welcome to join me while I do these things. Finally, you get a small, like-minded group of people with whom you can share your experiences and expenses.

## What don't you get?

You do not get a guide who will hold your hand and make every decision for you. **You** must be prepared to take on a much greater degree of responsibility than on most other tours. All members of the group, including myself, are expected to work together in establishing how the group will function, who will lead on the walks, who will look after the stragglers, etc.

A trip such as this cannot work unless everyone helps out. A simple example may help you understand just how important this is.

Hypothermia is another potential problem. A person who becomes hypothermic is unlikely to realise it. In an extreme case, he or she may have to be physically restrained from doing something which a rational person would describe as insane. There is no way that any one person, no matter how experienced, can look after an entire group 100% of the time. No matter how careful the guide may be, there is always a possibility that he or she will be the one to get injured or otherwise incapacitated.

Accepting the responsibility that goes with a trip like this is part of the experience we offer. It is one of the things that sets our trips apart from the vast majority of "adventure" trips on the market. For those prepared to accept this responsibility, it makes the experience doubly rewarding. Those who are not prepared to accept such responsibility would be better off going on a "normal" tour.

## A Caution

Do not expect everything to run like clockwork. There are too many variables for this to be possible. A single storm could change our pick up or drop off time by a day or more.

Willis's Walkabouts is not covered by public liability insurance in North America. However, the local operators we use there are covered.

## Conditions

1. A deposit of \$200 is payable on booking. Your deposit will be refunded in full if we do not have the bookings to run the trip before the end of 2007.
2. Cancellation fees are \$200 before 1 January 2008. A sliding scale will come into effect after that. Details to be announced closer to the date.
3. All participants are responsible for obtaining the necessary passport and travel documents. **Everyone must have some form of travel insurance.** Illness or injury in North America can be catastrophic without adequate cover.

**Questions?** Please contact me ASAP.

Russell Willis