

Two Villages, One Town

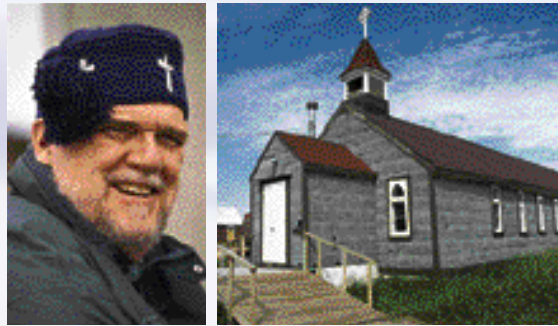
Known as Kuujjuaraapik to the Inuit and Whapmagoostui to the Cree, this town on the shore of Hudson Bay is the only community in Canada where the country's two First Peoples live side by side

BY MARGO PFEIFF

IN THE SMALL WOODEN CHURCH NOT FAR FROM THE SHORE OF HUDSON BAY, AN ENTHUSIASTIC CHOIR AND CONGREGATION BELT OUT THE INUKTITUT LYRICS TO A FAMILIAR-SOUNDING HYMN WHILE TWO SEALSKIN COLLECTION BASKETS ARE PASSED AMONG THE PEWS. AT 6'4" AND CLOAKED IN A LONG WHITE ROBE, THE REVEREND TOM MARTIN CUTS AN IMPOSING FIGURE AS HE STRIDES DOWN THE AISLE AT THE END OF THE SERVICE TO SHAKE HANDS WITH HIS DEPARTING PARISHIONERS.

The church empties, the bell tolls, and Martin returns to the altar, where a new choir is taking up its position at the front of the church. "Crew change," he says cheerfully as the church fills again, this time with Cree worshippers. Moments later, they too are singing the familiar hymn, but this time in Cree.

Every Sunday morning, Martin holds a marathon three services – in Inuktitut, Cree and English – at St. Edmund's Anglican church in



Minister of St. Edmund's Anglican church, Tom Martin holds services in Inuktitut, Cree and English.



MARGO PEHFI; HEIKO WITTENBORN

a northern Quebec community with four names. The minority French and English, each numbering about 150, call their home Poste-de-la-Baleine and Great Whale River respectively. To the 650 Inuit residents, it is Kuujjuaraapik (“Koo-joo-ara-pik” – little great river), while the 700 Cree call this northernmost outpost of the Cree nation Whapmagoostui (“Wop-mug-stoo-ee” – place where the whales are). It is the only settlement in Canada where the two First Peoples live side by side.

I am heading towards the town in a bright yellow Air Inuit Twin Otter, passing over a mosaic of pothole lakes that dimple the gently rolling taiga. It is a wild and majestic landscape of barren granite and scattered forests of spruce, whose height at this fringe of the tree line is rarely more than 1.5 metres. On the point of land where the Great Whale River empties into Hudson Bay, the pilot circles above a cluster of homes and then touches down on a gravel airstrip from which airport workers must sometimes chase herds of caribou before planes can land.

As I set off on foot to tour the town, my private halo of mosquitoes echoes the drone of the all-terrain vehicles – the North’s summer family vehicle – that stir up billows of dust as they drive along the community’s grid of unpaved streets. Beyond this grid, only tracks leading to hunting grounds pierce the wilderness; the nearest road to the South begins 200 kilometres away in Chisasibi, Que. The wind blows almost constantly, a blessing during the bug-filled summer, but wicked during the eight months of hard winter.

Like many northern settlements, the town’s greatest attraction is its natural setting and community spirit; it has few frills. There are two basic hotels, two bars and a diner called Lizzie’s. The hub of the community is the Northern store, which stocks everything from soothers to camping stoves. There is also the Inuit-run Great Whale River Co-op and Sandy’s Corner Store, where kids hang out, shouting “What’s your name?” or “*Bonjour!*” to passers-by. Since it’s expensive to transport goods to the North, prices are double or triple what they are in the South. Two litres of milk, for example, costs about \$5.30, and a 3.6-litre jug of bleach will put you out nearly \$11. Most goods are flown in, but heavy items like pickup trucks and building materials arrive by ship in the summer.

The town has a skating arena, where hockey is played year round (in the summer, the ice is removed and roller hockey played), a gymnasium and a paintball field, which was set up on the outskirts of town by a couple of young police officers

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keen to give teenagers an outlet for their energy in the summer. There’s also a much-loved golf course, a scruffy swath of rolling land parallel to the beach. Locals point out with a chuckle that even the greens are a hazard; the plywood sheets placed beneath the artificial turf to render it flat make the balls bounce away from the holes.

Freighter canoes, which have square sterns so that outboard motors can be mounted on them, are neatly propped in front yards. Since it’s late summer when I visit the town, some of the Cree backyards have sprouted tepees, where both Canada geese and snow geese from the fall hunt will be slow-roasted over fires.

Hunting is such an important part of life here that the school year starts early (in mid-August) to allow students to take time off later to participate in the hunts.

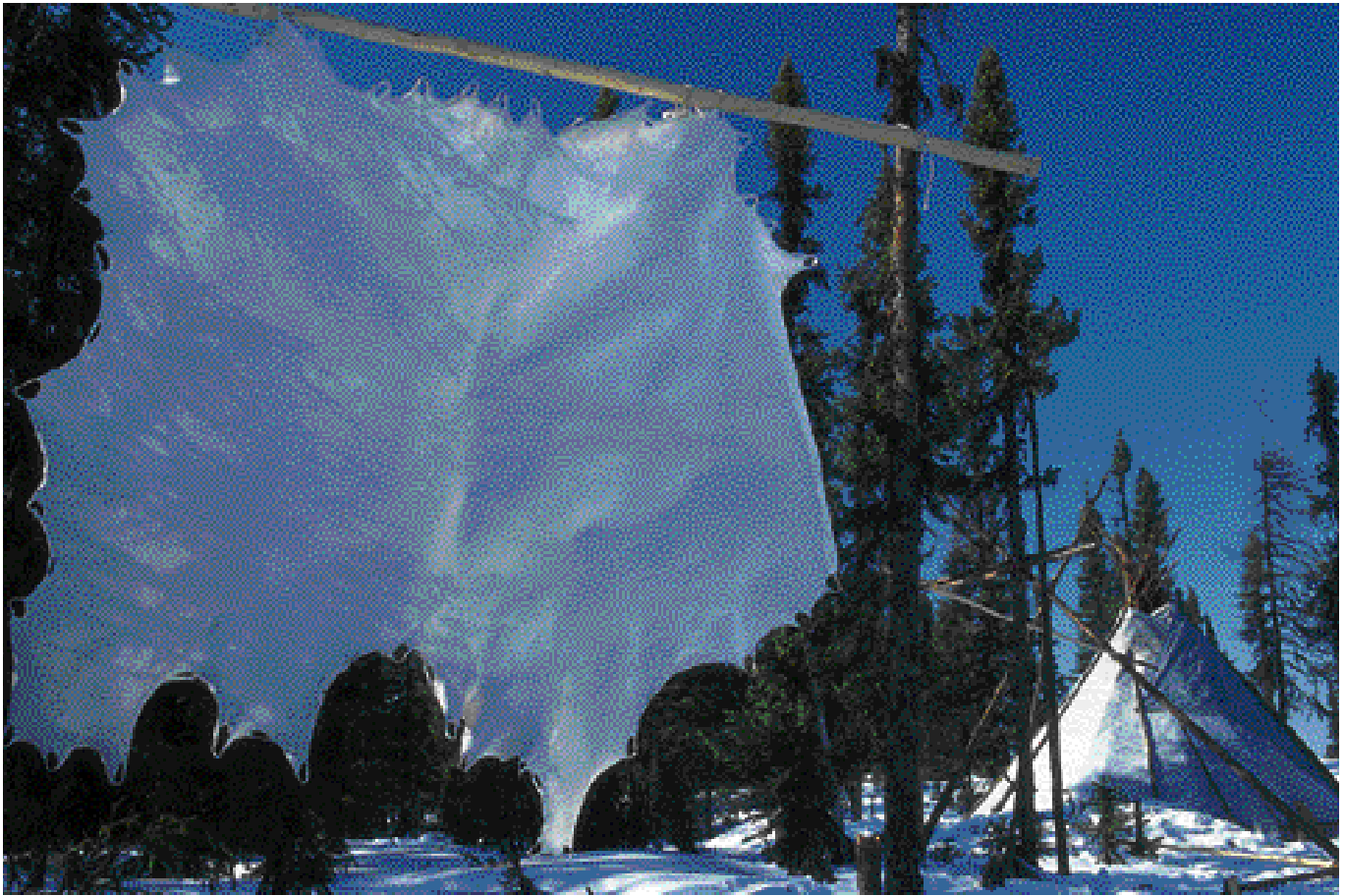
The hunting traditions of the Cree and Inuit take them in opposite directions. The Cree hunt inland, fish in lakes, and regard the sea as merely a highway. The Inuit, though they also hunt caribou, generally see the ocean as their larder and most often head onto Hudson Bay for ocean fish, seal and, occasionally, beluga, which they cut into strips and dry on racks outside their homes.

It was beluga that historically brought the Inuit to this spot every year. For the Cree, it was a summer gathering place. In the early 1800s, the Hudson’s Bay Company set up a trading post here, and for a time, Cree and Inuit hunted beluga together to trade the oil for supplies. When the whales headed upriver to calve, the Cree would be waiting for them, and when the beluga started the return trip downriver, the Cree would light a beacon to signal the Inuit to drop their nets across the river mouth. Thus trapped, the creatures were easily harpooned.



I WALK PAST A CARIBOU HIDE DRYING over a balcony railing and, swallowing my southern “etiquette,” enter the

Natachequan home without knocking. “Up here, if someone knocks, we know it’s a white person,” laughs Elizabeth Natachequan, the daughter of Cree elders Maggie and Andrew Natachequan, who sit at the kitchen table. Their peaceful faces lined by a life spent outdoors, the elders reminisce in Cree about the early 1950s, when the present town site was just a field of tents and tepees, the only permanent buildings being the church, the RCMP office and the Hudson’s Bay store. “Then the Americans came and built a runway,” says 67-year-old Maggie through her daughter, referring to the construction



of the Mid-Canada Line, a Cold War network of military sites designed to detect enemy aircraft. “Our settlement was on one side of the runway, but the school was on the other. A military crossing guard led the children across.”

Maggie and Andrew spend seven months of the year on the land with the encouragement of the Cree Hunters and Trappers Income Security Program, which pays a quarterly stipend to eligible band members (those who practice hunting and trapping as a way of life). Andrew, 76, still makes his own snowshoes, sets trap lines, hunts, and portages his

The Cree head inland to hunt caribou and other wildlife and to fish in lakes and rivers.

five-metre canoe to set fishing nets. His bounty is shared with the community.

The signing, in 1975, of the first modern land claims settlement was to have a major impact on the development of this community. The agreement resulted in the creation of Nunavik, a homeland for the Inuit of northern Quebec that includes 14 coastal communities, of which Kuujuaapik is the southernmost (the boundary actually lies south of the town), and the establishment of rights to substantial land south of Nunavik for the Cree. Despite the fact that the town is in Nunavik, the

Cree control their own section of town. The result of this dual proprietorship is that the Cree and Inuit sections are administered separately, and each group has built its own facilities. Two villages have sprouted in one town.

AS I WALK DOWN THE COMMUNITY'S MAIN STREET, Tom Martin pulls alongside on his all-terrain vehicle, wearing his trademark woollen toque. "Hop on," he says cheerfully. "I'll take you on the official tour." We turn down a residential street. "This part of town is Cree," he says, "and as in the South, houses here have basements, piped-in running water and a sewage system." A little while later, we reach a row of houses with brightly painted siding. "These are Inuit homes," my guide informs me, "and like Inuit houses farther north, where there is permafrost, they have no basements or underground plumbing. Trucks deliver water and cart away sewage." Inuit streets are patrolled by the Inuit Kativik Regional Police, and Cree streets by the Whapmagoostui Band Police. But there's cooperation between the Inuit and Cree, Martin tells me with a smile. "When the Whapmagoostui Band Police have a crackdown on all-terrain vehicles, for example, everyone detours through the Inuit streets."

The community also has two daycare centres, two municipal offices, two community centres and two schools (each running from kindergarten to the end of high school), and is served by two airlines. There is, however, only one minister, 64-year-old Martin, a gentle giant respected by just about everyone, who baptizes babies, marries people, orders coffins, and, as justice of the peace, signs search warrants. When someone dies, it is Martin who travels from home to home to inform relatives of the death before it is announced over the two radio stations. And in the town's original church, a steel structure that was built in England and shipped here in 1882 from its first home in Little Whale River, 100 kilometres to the north, Martin lays out the dead – Inuit, Cree and otherwise.

For the most part, however, the older church serves as a museum. A Cree canoe is propped on wobbly pews, a sealskin kayak hangs on a wall, and various other artefacts that speak of the history of the town and its two aboriginal groups are displayed on benches and shelves.

When Tom and his wife, Marianne, came north to live in 1984, they left a comfortable life in Toronto for a challenging one in the country's biggest Anglican diocese, which encompasses the North-west Territories, Nunavut and northern Quebec.

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They loved the North, and a two-year posting stretched into five. A first child was born and then a second. The five years ended; the family stayed on. The children grew up visiting Cree hunting camps and fishing with Inuit friends. Martin has been charged by caribou; he has administered the Eucharist in tepees along trap lines and has been in a float plane that nearly crashed en route to a remote community. Although life may not always be "comfortable," it is, he says, endlessly interesting and satisfying. "I do so much more here than I could in the South," explains the minister, who can't see himself ever leaving the region. "I think we'd have problems adjusting to the more structured southern life style."

Dr. Tinh Duong feels the same way. "I love the cultural diversity, friendliness and challenge here," says the town's only doctor. Although a single medical building serves both Cree and Inuit patients, there are separate clinics and nurses for each group (those who are neither Cree nor Inuit take their pick). "Turn right if you're Cree, left if you're Inuit," explains Tinh, who arrived in Montreal from his native Vietnam in 1975 and, in the spirit of adventure and professional interest, made his way to

the North in 1978. He has treated everything from gunshot wounds to harpoon injuries, but rarely sees frostbite. "People here know how to live with the cold," he tells me. Though the clinic is as modern as any in the South, Tinh must send the more difficult cases to Val-d'Or, Que., or Montreal. "We don't have the facilities or the staff to deal with complicated cases," he says. As well, every pregnant woman must leave to give birth. "Cree women go to a hospital in Val-d'Or or Chisasibi – their choice," he explains. "Inuit women go to a midwifery clinic in Povungnituk [Que.], more than 500 kilometres north of town." This is one of the hard realities of the North. "It's often very traumatic for the women to give birth so far from their families," says Tinh. Leaving the close-knit community is also hard on young people, who must head south for postsecondary education.



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IT'S LATE AFTERNOON AT THE BAR IN THE QILALUGAQ Hotel. Apart from the wolf pelt, Inuit sealskin kamik boots and traditional Cree costume that decorate the pine-panelled walls, it could be any sports bar in Montreal. Here, the various groups come together. Here, four languages can often be heard at once. A couple of teachers chat in English as they work on a laptop computer in one corner, while a group of men chat in Cree in another corner. Inuktitut can be



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heard at a table by the window, where six Inuit are playing gin rummy, while two middle-aged men talk in French with Michel Duguay, who runs the hotel.

In the late 1990s, Duguay worked at Nunami, an Inuit-run hunting lodge 200 kilometres east of here, during the hunting seasons, returning to his home in Hull, Que., in between. But he missed the north when he was back home. And when the opportunity to manage the hotel and bar in Kuujjuaraapik (which is owned by the same group that owns Nunami Lodge) presented itself, Duguay took it, moving north permanently. “Northern communities are so

The Inuit of Kuujjuaraapik value the traditions of their culture and generally see the ocean as their larder.

close-knit,” he comments, “and with two flights a day to Montreal, I can get bagels nearly as fresh here as in almost any place in the South.”

Larry Hubert, one of two captains of the Kativik Regional Police Force, is off duty. After plunking himself on a bar stool, Hubert, who was born in Newfoundland and raised in Ontario, talks about how he came to live in the town. In 1986, after graduating in marketing from Mohawk College in Hamilton, Ont., he joined the Hudson’s Bay Company’s management training program and travelled the North buying furs. In 1991, he became a district manager for the Inuit-

owned Fédération des co-operatives du Nouveau-Québec. Based in Montreal, he spent three weeks of every month in the North, visiting the organization's co-ops in 14 Nunavik communities. It was during this period that he met Elisapi Aliqu, an Inuit woman who worked at the co-op in Akulivik, Que., about 700 kilometres north of Kuujuaapik. Hubert decided he wanted to settle permanently in the North and, in 1995, switched careers, joining the Kativik Regional Police Force. He and Aliqu now have three children and, as Hubert points out, a great life. "We go camping and barbecue on the beach in summer, and I play hockey and golf," he says. "Why would I live in the South?" Down there, it's just go, go, go. The stress of daily life here is much less."

The town, however, is not immune to the problems that beset many northern communities. The 10,000 Inuit who now populate Nunavik have one of the highest annual suicide rates in the world. And high unemployment, which so often leads to a sense of hopelessness, is endemic. Seeking solutions, Cree and Inuit have been returning to traditional values, creating native justice committees to help troubled youths by pairing them with elders in bush camps. Native languages are also being revived. Students in the town are now taught exclusively in either Cree or Inuktitut until grade 3. "I see much more Cree written today than even a decade ago," says Losty Mamianskum, a communications officer with the Whapmagoostui Band Office. "Our language and culture are stronger than ever, which is building pride in the community."

Mamianskum is hoping that an agreement reached in February between the Quebec government and the province's Cree will have a positive effect on the community. The agreement, which allows Hydro-Quebec to go ahead with a 1,200-megawatt hydroelectric project on the Rupert and Eastmain Rivers, will give Cree living in nine northern Quebec communities, including Whapmagoostui, about \$3.4 billion over the next 50 years, as well as a greater share of jobs with Hydro-Quebec. The money that will come to the community certainly has the potential to do a great deal of good. "We're short of housing here," explains Mamianskum. "The cost of living is high. We are the only Cree community without road access. And there are no Cree regional offices or administrative organizations such as Cree school and health boards to provide jobs."

I WONDERED IF HAVING TWO VILLAGES IN ONE TOWN resulted in any tension. As in any community, Tom Martin explains, people don't always agree with one another. The Cree, for example, became upset when

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the Inuit killed caribou for export to the South, and the Inuit were annoyed that boat traffic back and forth across the river to a Cree camp was frightening off beluga. But Martin shrugs off the occasional problem. "All towns have their issues, and the ones that arise here are minor compared with those many towns face," he says. "In fact, this community could teach many a lesson in the area of peaceful coexistence."

Deputy Grand Chief Matthew Mukash agrees. "Socially, we get along very well." Tensions tend to stem from bureaucratic conflicts. Cree and Inuit attend one another's funerals, feasts and sporting events. The bigger gap, he points out, is between the southerners who come here to work and the northerners. Even so, that gap is minor, says Martin. "We all have friends in other groups," he says, "and a good number of southerners are married to aboriginal partners."

I BORROW AN ALL-TERRAIN VEHICLE AND HEAD towards the giant *inukshuk* that welcomes all with its outstretched stone arms at the point where the river meets Hudson Bay. Then I make my way up into the low hills just behind town, where tepees and tents are pitched, reminiscent of scenes from centuries past. The wilderness is so close here. Passing massive sand dunes, I reach a long, deserted beach, where I have a barbecue rendezvous with Marianne Martin, her two teenagers and an Inuit friend of the family, Caroline Weetaltuk, who is clearly in charge of the proceedings. "Wind or bugs?" she asks, and receives a chorus of "Wind!" Up here, you contend with either a stiff breeze or a cloud of insects. Weetaltuk chooses a breezy site while the rest of us collect firewood. She swiftly stokes the flames of a cooking fire and then tosses an Arctic char onto the grill.

It's 11 p.m. by the time the sun sets, and we are roasting marshmallows over coals while Weetaltuk talks about fishing and summers at bush camp. The swoosh of water lapping the shore and the soothing breath of the wind can be heard when she pauses, and it's easy to see that the town – whatever its name – is merely an island, a toehold of civilization in a vast sea of calm, rejuvenating wilderness. The bush may not be the answer to all the problems that face northern communities, but it is certainly part of the solution. "I would like to see more people going back on the land," Deputy Grand Chief Mukash had told me, "returning to that way of life while maintaining a life in the community part time. Living on the land is a hard life but a good one, and the values that come with it help you respect yourself." □