

Community Profile: Arviat, Nunavut

Where Inuit Art comes alive

Arviat, the southernmost mainland community of Nunavut, is a traditional Inuit hamlet located on the western coast of Hudson Bay. Arviat's name comes from the Inuktitut word 'arviq' meaning 'bowhead whale' because of the whale-like shape of the landscape. Over time, it has also been called 'Tikirajualaaq' ('a little long point') and 'Ittaliurvik' ('a place where the people make tents.') When the Hudson Bay Company (HBC) set up a trading post in Arviat in 1921 they called it Eskimo Point.

The Paallirmiut Inuit ('people of the willow') have lived in the Arviat region for over 900 years. Two national historic sites are now dedicated to preserving the traditional camping grounds of the Paallirmiut—the island of Arvia'juaq (12 km northeast of Arviat on the western shore of Hudson Bay) and Qikiqtaarjuk, the mainland point immediately opposite Arvia'juaq.

Today, Arviat is growing. According to the 2011 Census the population was 2,318, an increase of 12.5% from 2006. The people are 92% Inuit and speak Inuktitut and English. The plentiful wildlife, including bears, beluga whales, and of course, caribou, mean hunting and harvesting is more than a hobby for people in Arviat—it is a way of life.

Arviat is located on what is known as 'polar bear alley.' Hundreds of polar bears make the trek north along the coast in late fall each year, searching for sea ice so they can resume their seal hunting. In the summer,

Did you Know?

Nunavut has more artists, per capita, than any other place in the world!

Source: Nunavut Tourism

once the Bay melts fully, polar bears can often be found along the coast, swimming in the sea or on the many islands offshore.

The caribou make an annual trek here, too. In early May, just west of Arviat thousands of cows and calves move steadily towards their summer calving ground. In September these caribou begin heading back south through the tundra, toward the treeline where they spend the winter.

The Arviat area is also home to many birds—over 250,000 of them migrate here each year! They include sandpipers, arctic terns, jaegers, plovers, ducks, swans, cranes, loons, ptarmigans, gyrfalcons, peregrine falcons, snowy owls and snow geese.

Many of Arviat's supplies come from Churchill, Manitoba, 200 kilometres south by boat, snowmobile or plane. A winter road has been talked about for many years, and recently, the governments of Nunavut and Manitoba agreed to explore the possibility of a winter road extending from northern Manitoba along Nunavut's Hudson Bay coast. (Naturally, while a road would help many people and the economy, there is



Photo courtesy of the Museum of Inuit Art

much debate about a winter vs. all-weather road, along with potential effects a road might have on Qamanirjuaq caribou.)

Arviat is known for more than its abundant wildlife—it is renowned for its arts, crafts, and music, too. Many talented musicians hail from Arviat, including Susan Aglukark, Simon "Johnny Cash of the North" Sigyariaq; and the band Uniaqtuq, to name just a few. The prized sculptures and carvings made by Arviat artists are unique because they are created from an extremely tough local stone called steatite that said to be harder than steel! Highly skilled seamstresses produce sealskin clothing popular in all of Nunavut, and beyond.

Much of Nunavut's amazing art is being held in storage as there is no place to display it, but that will soon change. An agreement between the governments of Nunavut and Manitoba will see Nunavut loan 8,000 pieces of Inuit art to the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG). The WAG is in the process of creating an "Inuit Art Centre" to display this collection (along with the thousands of pieces it already has), but in the meantime will tour the art to other locations far and wide. The first stop? The region of Normandy, France in November 2016.

If you are interested in learning more about Arviat and its people missionaries Donald and Winifred Marsh wrote a number of books about the hamlet. The websites www.visitarviat.ca, www.nunavuttourism.com, and www.arviat.ca are a wealth of information, too. •



Photo of Arviat by Timothy K for Panoramio