

Dispatch from the North

September 6, 2007

On the Way Here



Morning Mist in Yellowknife's Old Town

Welcome to this inaugural travel dispatch from Yellowknife, which will be my main base during the coming year. From here, I'll be visiting further afield: Iqaluit during the winter, and then north and west – to Whitehorse, Dawson, Inuvik, and Alaska – in spring and early summer. With luck, I'll get to a few more remote spots as well.

For the time being, my goal is more modest: to acclimatize myself to the Northwest Territories' capital, and its admittedly urbane form of frontier life, before winter arrives. As I do so, I keep in

mind Samuel Johnson's joke about the performing dog which could walk on its hind legs. As with this famous canine feat, my planned explorations may not end up being done well, but many onlookers will be surprised if they can be done at all.

I arrived just a few days ago, after a summer on the West Coast, shuttling back and forth from my parents' home in Victoria to a Vancouver apartment lent to me by my Massey College buddy Tom Cave. In one way at least, the time was useful preparation for the North. Tom's abode in Vancouver is just off Commercial Drive, which for those unfamiliar with that city's varied urban charms is a rather motley turn-of-the-century strip of new age stores, coffee shops and cheap restaurants frequented by tattooed youngsters, down-at-heel drifters, and hordes of drug addicts. I was most interested in watching the last group, as they took time from their busy schedules of petty larceny to cruise roadside trashcans and alleyway dumpsters in search of deposit-back bottles. (Edgy environmentalism, you might call it). Northern communities (including Yellowknife, as I've since discovered) will offer sights not all that dissimilar, so I did my best to get used to the addicts' constant presence, and at times managed a cheery hello and as well as brief but sociologically enlightening conversations on subjects such as the art of do-it-yourself crack freebasing or the state of the opium supply lines through the Khyber Pass. Not the sort of daily chitchats I was accustomed to in Toronto, but there is something to be said for occasionally breaking out of one's social shell, even if it



Downtown Yellowknife

results in a few jolts to one's equanimity.

The next stop on my travels provided another of these edifying jolts. On my way here from BC, I spent a few days in the small Albertan city of Red Deer, where I'd lived during my teens and had not visited since the 70s. While my old friends there, Mary Gayle Taylor and Michael Dawe, were generosity personified to their long absent comrade, it was sobering to have one's misspent past – exoticized by the passage of 30 years – reappear from the haunting pages of old photo albums and yearbooks. If nothing else, these episodes made me newly grateful that I did not grow up in the Facebook era, when every youthful fashion excess and burst of high spirits of my students is now being captured for posterity. As for Mary Gayle and Michael, they have sworn on their honour that these youthful photo collections will never meet a computer scanner, and I plan to keep them to their word.

Still, it was hard to banish the nightmarish visions of hyper-shag haircuts and tangerine-coloured bellbottoms from my memory as I boarded the Yellowknife-bound plane a day after bidding Mary Gayle and Michael farewell. The flight was longer than anticipated, as our small Bombardier jet, carrying only six paying passengers, circled our destination for an hour due to low lying fog. The periodic announcements from the cockpit warned of a possible return to Edmonton, but the fog finally broke long enough for us to land, and the patchy remnants of mist provided an evocative backdrop during the approach to the runway and then the brief taxi ride into town.

First Impressions

On reaching the spartan apartment hotel that will be my home for the next few weeks, I dropped my cases and immediately went back outside. It was a balmy day, despite the fog, and I was determined to make the best of it. Early fall is perhaps the best time to be introduced to the North, the insect hordes of summer having already departed, while snowstorms and winter darkness are weeks away. So it was easy to enjoy a leisurely stroll through the city's downtown streets and then down the long gentle slope that leads to Old Town – a virtually separate lakeside community that dates from Yellowknife's beginnings as a mining centre in the 30s. Once I'd reached the town's thin peninsula, which juts far out into Yellowknife Bay, each curve of the road revealed another picturesque inlet, rows of wooden houses pitched above the rocky shore, and small flotillas of pleasure boats and float planes at water's edge.



The Wildcat Café

My first meal was at one of this city's few genuine tourist attractions, the Wildcat Café, with a history that goes back to the town's earliest days -- originally as a gathering spot for bibulous local miners, then a more staid family restaurant during the

post-war boom, and now a renovated summertime eatery serving local delicacies such as caribou and lake trout, though the brunch item of Eggs Benedict à la smoked *Arctic Char* failed to tempt this patron. Indoors was as oppressively cozy as would be expected from a one-time miners' hangout, with patrons greeted with the invitation to "adopt northern ways" by sharing empty seats at their table.



Inside the Wildcat

Still, the trapper's mega-breakfast was worth the crowded conditions. Once I'd done, I returned outdoors to find that the mist had lifted, while the sky had turned a crystalline hue to be found only in this smog-free part of the world. I could now gain my bearings at Yellowknife's most famous vantage point. Pilot's Monument

sits atop a high granite ridge in the midst of Old Town. After a short but steep climb from the Wildcat, one pays one's respects at a slightly ludicrous toy-like airplane sculpture dedicated to the North's bush pilots, before giving full attention to the gloriously unobstructed views – southward towards Yellowknife Bay, which leads to the main northern arm of Great Slave Lake, and westward back towards the city. These vistas might not be conventionally beautiful – most of Yellowknife is too slapdash, and its encircling forest too sparsely treed for that – but they have a timeless quality that can't help but impress the newcomer, not only because of the refreshing absence of strip mall sprawl, but thanks to the surrounding sea of wilderness that stretches in every direction.



Yellowknife Bay from Pilot's Monument



City Centre from Pilot's Monument

Indeed, I had not fully anticipated before arriving here just how overpowering this sight of wilderness would be, even in the heart of this small but evidently booming city. It acts as a permanent reminder of the pertinent demographic facts in this part of the world. Forgive me a brief numerical detour, but the details truly are remarkable, even for blasé Canadians who are used to thinking of the lonely North. In the country's three northern territories, the combined population is just under 100,000: about 40,000 here in the Northwest Territories, 30,000 in the Yukon, and a slightly lower number in Nunavut. That's fewer people than the population of Whitby, Ontario, living in an area bigger than all of India. Or, to put things in chronological terms, if we wished to find a similar population density (about one person every 36 square km) for the entire world, we'd have to go all the way back to 3000 BC. Not a date that gets much play in history books, but a few landmarks may help put things in perspective. It was the time when the first pharaohs were ruling Egypt, Stonehenge was still a new piece of English real estate, and the Mesopotamians had just discovered how to work with bronze. So, if one likes to think in such fanciful historical terms – and I, for one, certainly do – then coming here is a bit like going back to the Bronze Age.



A Classic Northern Scene

Back to the Present

It's true that bronze is not the first metal Yellowknifers mention when describing their home. The city once had its own age of copper (the name 'Yellowknife' is said to come from the yellow copper knives once used by the region's eponymous native inhabitants), but for years the main identification was with gold, right up until the closing of Giant Mine in 2004. Of course, it's diamonds that are now the city's economic mainstay, with most of Canada's ever-growing production located some hundreds of miles northwards, but still close enough to make Yellowknife the mines' main entrepôt. Meanwhile, the other major employer here remains the federal government, which has kept on pumping in needed dollars, with even more presently on the way as climate change gives the North a whole new political cachet.

Much to their credit, the feds have established a capital region, set in a protected tract of lakes and forest by the city centre. The area's most recent additions are an historical museum and the new territorial legislature. Both are skilfully designed and attractively situated, but it is the legislature that is the most memorable. Given how easy it is to overdo edifices such as this (Scotland's parliament building, with its much remarked toy-like appearance, comes immediately to mind), it's heartening to see the civilized sense of restraint that infuses this legislative building, its shallow cupola just visible above the surrounding treetops, while inside the light-filled main chamber is covered in gleaming white maple.



The Prince of Wales Museum

More impressive than Old Town's Pilot's



The Territorial Legislature



Monument, its simple concrete pillar is

Between the museum and legislature runs a trail that passes yet another memorial, this one to northern miners.

More impressive than Old Town's Pilot's



Miner's Monument

topped by a miner's lamp. A nearby plaque commemorates the nine replacement workers killed by an explosion during the Giant Mine strike in 1992. When you talk to locals about the city's history, this event always rates a mention. Not only did the strike split the town down the middle at the time, it foreshadowed the end of the gold era, and occurred by coincidence just a few months after the region's initial discovery of diamonds at Point Lake in 1991. This was also when Yellowknife first faced the prospect of a diminished political role, as plans were already underway for the territorial split that accompanied the creation of Inuit-controlled Nunavut in 1999. Whatever doubts about the city's future that existed back then, they now seem far in the past, but there is a realization that such radical shifts in the city's economic prospects could occur again. Mining towns are like that, after all. So far things still look extremely positive. There is talk

about newly found gold deposits, as well as discoveries of tungsten, cobalt and bismuth. And even if the Northwest Territories is less vast than it once was, it is still large enough, and sufficiently well positioned geopolitically, to ensure its capital a prominent future. This is a city bound to keep growing, and turning heads, in years to come.

Still, one can't forget that, for all its patina of prosperity this is still a pretty raw community not too far from the edge of nowhere. For me, this quality was brought home by a sign displayed prominently in one of its restaurants:

Zero Tolerance Policy: *Our staff have the right to work in a safe environment. Any act of abuse or violence directed against our staff will not be tolerated. Abuse is any verbal or physical threat such as swearing, shouting or any other inappropriate contact. Conduct of this nature will be reported to the police.*

There you have it: fashionable political terminology employed to express some age-old frontier verities, and thereby summing up, more eloquently than I ever could, the ambience of this city. As for me, am I glad I came here? Certainly. Will I like it? Probably too soon to tell. In any case, these are still early days. I'm sure there will come a time, not too many weeks from now, when it's dark fourteen hours a day and 40 below outside, when I'll start feeling as though I'm trapped in an endless Ingmar Bergman film. But for the moment I'm enjoying discovering a bit more about my surroundings. If nothing else, it will mean that in future dispatches I'll be able to tackle aspects of northern life I haven't even attempted to broach here. I'll leave off with some answers to basic questions that I know at least a few of you will be impatient to ask.

What's your accommodation like? Not at all the dive I feared. At the moment, I have a pleasantly furnished two bedroom suite, which management is giving me at the price of a one bedroom studio, since none of the latter is currently available. It's

adequately furnished, with a fully equipped kitchen, two spotless bathrooms, and a memorable living room view. I'm paying quite a bit, so this won't last. Once I've got my bearings, the search for longer-term digs will begin.

What about supermarket prices? For nonperishables, surprisingly low. In fact, I can discern no difference at all when compared with Toronto or Vancouver. Only so-called fresh items are more expensive. Liquor, on the other hand, is between two and three times costlier than elsewhere, but that is the result of enlightened government policy in this booze-mad locale, rather than due to transportation costs.

Found any nice coffee places? Only one – a Starbucks knockoff with similar drinks and food, but minus the flair for cappuccino foam. But it's pleasant to get away from the fancy Italianate vocabulary and faux graffiti murals for at least a few months.

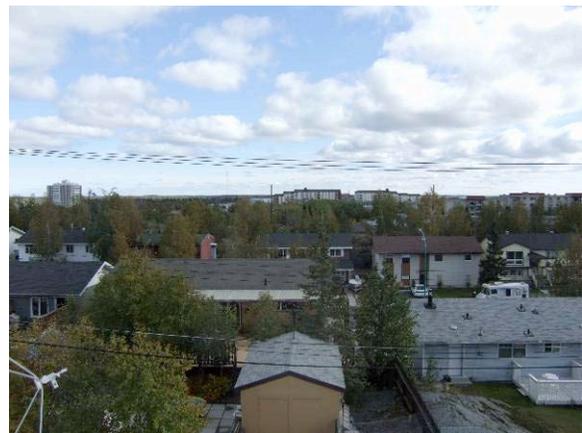
And the restaurants? A disaster. This is a town whose idea of haute cuisine seems to be the Party Pack at KFC. The mom and pop operations are off-puttingly grungy, and the franchise outlets are pretty slipshod. At the local Boston Pizza, for example, the waitress returned to my table soon after I'd placed my order for merlot. "I don't know much about wine," she admitted. "Is that the red one or the white one?" Enough said.

Is there any nightlife worth staying up for? Nothing I know of. But for the time being I'm keeping Methodist missionary hours anyway – doubtless the sensible thing to do for a while.

Is it safe to walk around at night? It's fine until very late hours. There are a few questionable characters, but compared with the crackerjack friends I was making on the corners of Commercial Drive, these ones look positively benign.

Isn't it getting cold already? At times, but I've come well armed with various forms of outerware. On rainy nights, I've been sticking with a black hoody and ski vest. Rather alarmingly, these items make me look like an escapee from the local rehab centre, but they do succeed admirably in keeping me warm.

Made any acquaintances yet? No, but I hope to meet a few locals next week when a magazine colleague of mine – Michael Adams, the author and pollster, and devoted member of the LRC's Advisory Council – comes up here to give the keynoter at a conference sponsored by the chamber of commerce. He has promised to invite me to tag along to the post-speech festivities so I can introduce myself to a few people, while advertising the fact that I'm looking for a temporary housesit. I'll report in future instalments on how this plan turns out.



View from my Apartment Window