

# OUT ON THE LAND

Story & photography by Margo Pfeiff

Go north,  
and then  
keep going,  
to where  
wind peels  
the paint off  
your cabin  
walls, and  
the wolves  
are on your  
doorstep





# SARAH

Sarah and Eric McNair-Landry rattle in their dogsled along the lumpy shore ice of frozen Frobisher Bay, past beached boats and houses half-buried in snowdrifts. Sarah rides on the Inuit wooden sled, while Eric, her brother, drives the team of eight dogs. At a sloped embankment, Sarah jumps off, with the sled still in full flight, runs up the rise, and stands with arms outstretched, halting the traffic of cars and snowmobiles. The vehicles do stop, remarkably, their drivers clearly accustomed to Nunavut's offbeat traffic conventions. Eric shouts "Hike! Hike!," the dogs surge, and the sled crosses the frozen road. Sarah waves thanks to the drivers, sprints to catch up, and leaps back on as the sled glides down the opposite slope, then alongside Iqaluit Airport's main runway, to the roar of a landing First Air 737.

The low winter sun is the colour of butter, and an icy wind has whipped up over the tundra by the time they turn into Sylvia Grinnell Territorial Park. They ride through swirling ground snow broken by glimpses of snow-covered picnic tables. An hour later, after the sled negotiates the ridges and the blue ice of the Sylvia Grinnell River itself, a cabin comes into view, tucked in front of a rocky outcrop on high ground. "We're home!" Eric says.

His voice echoes to silence. It's -32°C on a clear Saturday morning in January, as clear a day as most Canadians have ever seen. Both siblings are obviously very happy to be out of town—Sarah to give her dogs a run, and Eric to fulfill his recent obsession of building an igloo to sleep in. Like Canadians everywhere, they're looking forward to a much-needed overnight respite from their busy lives. And like Canadians everywhere, they've come for that respite to their cottage.

Out here, snow is friend, not foe. The lumpy Arctic tundra is easier to travel through in winter than in the warmer seasons. Siblings Eric and Sarah McNair-Landry (opposite) get to their "shack" by snowmobile, ski, or dogsled. When the weather is decent, some keen swimmers tackle the Sylvia Grinnell River to get to the cabin, with boats carrying their gear.

The McNair-Landry siblings, Eric, 31, and Sarah, 29, grew up in Iqaluit (pop. 6,700), with the Arctic Ocean in their backyard. As youngsters, they shuffled on skis behind polar explorers training on Frobisher Bay. They raised and ran dog teams, pulled gear-loaded "pulks" on skis, and backpacked and camped year-round with their world-renowned expedition-leader parents, Philadelphia-born Matty McNair and Ontarian Paul Landry. At least they did when their parents weren't taking turns guiding adventurers to far-flung destinations like the North and South Poles.

Passionate about adventure themselves, the siblings joined their mother in 2004 on a 10-week Antarctic ski and kite-ski expedition, during which Sarah, then 18, became the youngest person ever to reach the South Pole. Since then, she and her brother have guided dozens of expeditions on their own to both Poles, Ellesmere Island, and Greenland. In 2007, their exploits earned them a nomination for National Geographic's prestigious Adventurers of the Year award.

That same year, the pair formed Pittarak Expeditions, with the goal of embarking on global trips to inspire youth to become active outdoors. They spread the word via live web postings and through speaking engagements that made full use of Sarah's skills as a photographer and filmmaker. Among their many escapades were a 2009 kite-buggy crossing of Mongolia's massive Gobi Desert and 3,300 km of kite-skiing,





complete with polar bear encounters, through the Northwest Passage in 2011.

The year before they formed Pittarak, Sarah and Eric met Will Hyndman, a young Edmonton-born policy analyst now working out of Iqaluit. The three of them skied, backpacked, dogsledded, and kite-skied together, spending much of their free time on forays into the local wild. One summer afternoon, at a “veggie burger barbecue” they’d convened when their outdoor plans had been rained out yet again, they realized there was something missing from their recreational life in the Arctic—a getaway destination of their own: a cabin, a shack, in the familiar parlance, a cottage.

To a lot of “southerners” (bear in mind that residents of the Northwest Territories consider Edmonton “the South”), the idea of people already living in the wilderness needing a more remote getaway, especially from such a small town, can seem counterintuitive. But, in fact, community life for northerners on the tundra can actually be as stifling as urban life is in the South. It’s not that the communities are so unpalatable as that they are unnatural, especially with the wilderness so nearby. Inuit historically never lived in communities, and the non-native people who have moved to the North and love it are often keen to get “out on the land.” It is as much a great relief for northern dwellers to get to the cottage as it is for someone in Quebec, Ontario, or B.C.

In the Arctic, you need to fuel up. With the cabin as home base, Sarah (opposite) and Eric often head out on one- or two-day adventures. They fortify themselves with steel-cut oats for breakfast and pack bags of snacks: nuts, cheese, sausage, crackers, and every traveller’s go-to, gorp. Little goes to waste here; Eric and Will score sweet finds from the Iqaluit dump, the source for many project building materials (previous pages).

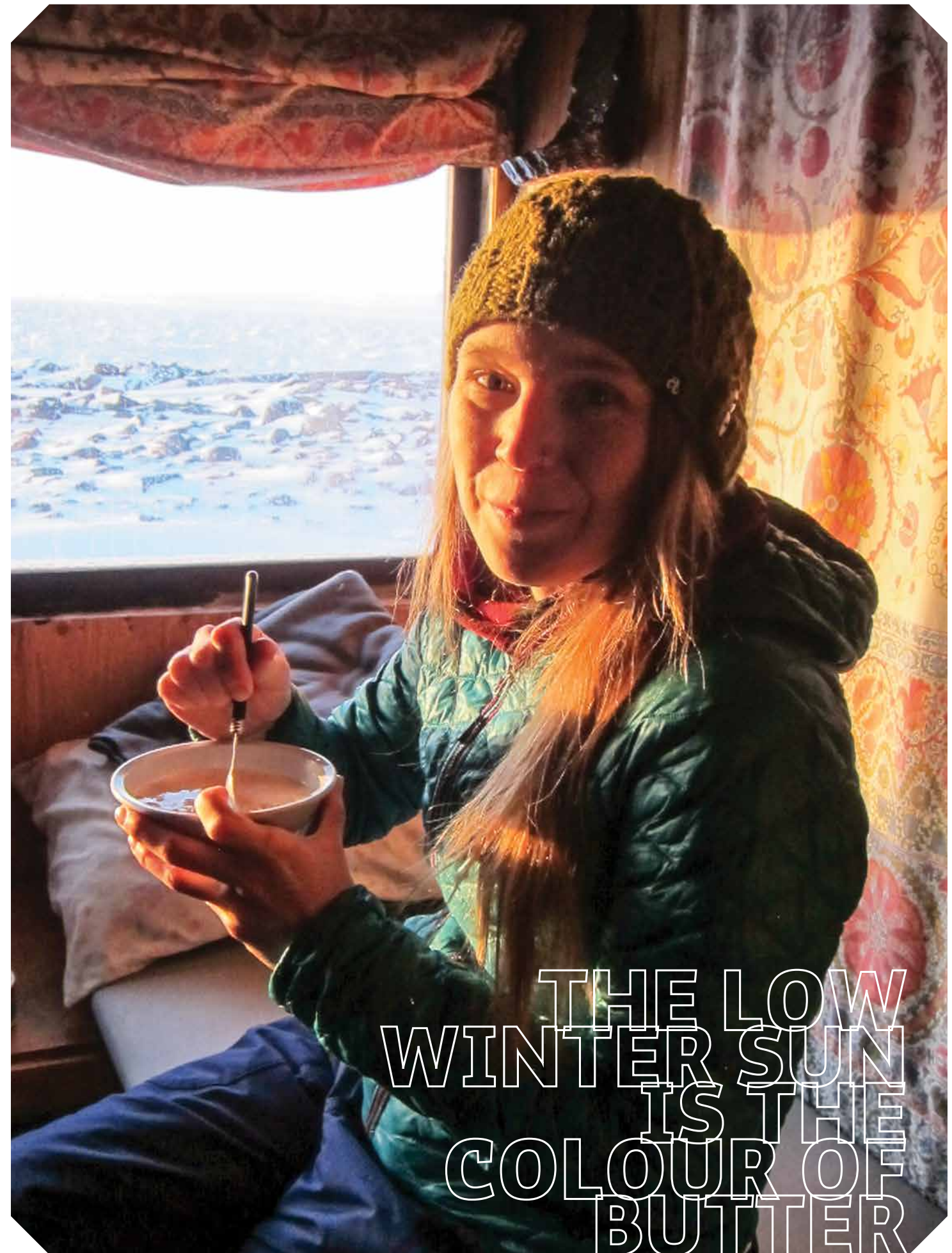
“With wilderness within 30 minutes’ walking distance of town,” says Joshua Armstrong, an intern architect living in Iqaluit who wrote his master’s architectural thesis in part on Iqaluit cabin country, “cabins are burgeoning.” A few, says Armstrong, are deluxe outposts, but most are basic. He calls the cottage country around Arctic communities “shackland.” In these areas it’s not uncommon for friends or families to build multi-cabin compounds. The cottages closer to town are largely for recreational purposes, while Inuit—with a long tradition of spending summers on the land—tend to build farther afield to fish and hunt. Some cottages are even dragged on skids to different locations. In Iqaluit, so strong is the impulse to get out on the land that some Inuit have been known to pitch tents just beyond the town dump, on a peninsula that juts out into Frobisher Bay.

The three young would-be cottagers, mind you, were thinking of something more permanent.

While Eric unhitches the dogs, Sarah carries supplies into what appears at first glance to be a small, no-frills, two-level plywood cottage—the trio’s dream getaway. She feeds the stove with chopped shipping pallet wood—an essential commodity above the treeline—then fills a big kettle with snow to melt for water and starts laying out lunch.

The cottage warms quickly. Its main floor is a single 8- by 16-foot room. The “kitchen” is a propane-fuelled camp stove atop a cupboard that Eric—a skilled handyman with an engineer’s mind—crafted from hardwood scraps. Twin benches containing storage space face four picture windows with spectacular views across Frobisher Bay’s jumble of ice slabs, each heaved by the rise and fall of the world’s second-biggest tides.

A ladder leads to a four-person, sloped-roof sleeping loft. There is no electricity or plumbing. “Our goal was to keep it rustic and uncluttered,” says Sarah. “We just wanted a simple, well-insulated shelter, out of the weather, where we could come to do lots of outdoor activity.” Eric hastens to show off his latest project, a mere 30 metres from the cottage: a compact, partially completed







eight-sided sauna. “It’s loosely based on a yurt’s shape,” he says, sounding momentarily like a 15-year-old working on a treehouse. He designed the sauna on his computer and then brought it to life in miniature with his new 3-D printer, the result a bright orange model complete with a removable roof and little benches inside. “The outward-sloping walls,” he points out, “are perfect to lean back against.” Sarah, who arrives at this point with sheets of Styrofoam insulation brought from town, rolls her eyes. “He just likes to make things complicated,” she says. Three heavy-duty almost-triangular windows, scavenged from the supermarket’s old walk-in freezer displays, will become skylights, so that sauna users can watch the Northern Lights while they steam.

The sauna project was launched in late 2013, just in time for an epic winter storm. “We worried when winds reached 140 kilometres per hour,” says Eric. “It peeled paint off the cottage, but the sauna didn’t budge.” Though he recently moved to Yellowknife, Eric tinkers with the sauna when he returns home. Still quasi-operational, it was functional enough to be fired up during a 2014 New Year’s Eve party.

Just then, the third member of the triumvirate appears, trekking from his parked snowmobile up the rise to the cottage: Will Hyndman himself. It was Will who had become bored enough with town life that he announced he was going to live in the cottage when it was finished, and commute to his government job. Thus, the project was dubbed

What’s cooler than sleeping in an Arctic cabin? Sleeping in an Arctic igloo. Eric (opposite) builds one not far from his newest project, a nearly complete sauna (above, with friend Aidan Stanley). Previous pages: The McNair-Landrys regularly take a team of eight dogs with them to the cabin, but the four-legged friends stay outdoors. “They’re outside dogs,” says Sarah. “They like to pee on everything.”

“Habitat for Hyndman.” The journey from concept to Habitat, as Will recounts it, sounds both weird and hazardous—i.e., normal, in Northern terms.

Their first attempt involved Eric’s old 6- by 10-foot uninsulated plywood greenhouse with two windows. They took it apart, lashed the panels on top of a raft, and paddled it across the Sylvia Grinnell River—the last part of the trip in the darkness of a September night. Since no one had remembered a headlamp, naturally, they had to assemble it with one person holding a candle while the others hammered. Defying the odds, the reconstituted greenhouse was so well used throughout the following winter and summer that they decided to enlarge, winterize, and relocate it. “Taking it back across the river on a raft we briefly lost control,” recalls Eric matter-of-factly. “The cabin nearly ran the rapids.”

For months the trio scrounged for materials. They frequented building sites, collecting contractors’ toss-offs, gathering insulation panels that blow around town during windstorms, combing yard sales, and picking up discarded shipping pallets (many made of Brazilian hardwood) from the airlines’ cargo hangars. But mostly they prowled Iqaluit’s dump.

In Nunavut, everything arrives by plane or on the annual Sealift supply ship. Since hauling trash out is so costly, it piles up at the dump, which is affectionately referred to as the Canadian Tire by locals, who migrate there for supplies and parts that can take weeks to import from the South and can be prohibitively expensive as well. “In a place where a 2’x4’ costs over \$10 and a sheet of plywood \$60,” says Eric, “dump runs are part of everyday life.”

They built the new cabin alongside Eric and Sarah’s mother’s house and then broke it down into 13 panels. A barn-raising group of friends helped move it in February of 2008. The month was intentional. Transportation of any sort in the North is easier in winter than in summer, because the soft tundra can be impassable. But the Arctic is the Arctic, and first they had to chop a route through Frobisher Bay’s gnarly ice, a massive job. Two or three panels at a time were strapped onto a pair of side-by-side sleds {Continued on page 102}



Blipp Eric to watch a short film starring the cabin

## OUT ON THE LAND

{Continued from page 63}

pulled by a duo of snow machines. “Out here everything slows us down,” says Sarah. “But nothing stops us!”

Since the panels were double-walled, complete with insulation and windows, it took six people to carry each one 40 metres up the rocky slope to the building site. “It was a gong show,” Will recalls. “Every now and then someone would simply disappear into a crack in the snow.” The assembly took mere hours, but working in the cold was brutal—screws snapped, nails broke, hands froze.

That first year a tarp reinforced with umbrellas comprised their roof. A proper roof and the loft were added in a single day the following year, built entirely with hand tools and held together with reclaimed nails. The mudroom came last. Will, true to his word, actually did live in the cabin briefly, until the smell of woodsmoke and snowmobile fuel on his office clothing started to attract attention—at which point he became a weekend cottager as well.

In 2009, Sarah, then 22, won a grant through the National Film Board of Canada to make a documentary titled *Never Lose Sight*, an exposé of Iqaluit’s dysfunctional recycling and garbage situation. She used their cabin, constructed almost entirely from waste, as the film’s focus. Even the cloth for the Roman blinds that she made came from the dump. “I reckon with the wood we had to buy, the free stove we shipped up from Quebec, and a can of paint, we built this place for under \$1,000,” says Eric. With six inches of insulation in the floor and four in the walls, he figures it rates R15.

The tradition of thrifty construction isn’t just a moral choice, but a practical one. Like most Arctic cottagers, Eric and Sarah don’t own their land. And while there is a process to acquire building rights on Crown land, sluggish bureaucracy draws the procedure out for years, and few bother to apply. “It’s Wild West cottaging up here,” Eric says. “Everyone respects Inuit territory and simply builds on Crown land. And it’s still too small a community for anyone to demand you take it down.” A friend, Aidan Stanley, drops by to help Eric

saw blocks of snow for the igloo. As they haul and place chunks in a spiral pattern, they reminisce about clam digging on the beach in summer. Between the shoreline of the bay and a small island are phenomenal low-tide clam grounds well known throughout Iqaluit. They can fill a bucket in no time before cooking them on a hot rock outside. And the nearby mouth of the Sylvia Grinnell is a prime Arctic char fishing spot.

The air is pristine and still. Turning 360 degrees, you see only Arctic wilderness, with no sight of another cabin or even a hint of Iqaluit (which actually began life as an American air base in 1942). Now it’s the domain of Arctic foxes, weasels, and the very occasional polar bear. Barking dogs once roused Sarah to peek outside and find herself face to face with a wolf.

But they are anything but isolated here. The cottage is a year-round recreational hub. In summer, adventurous friends arrive by kayaking the bay or hiking and then rafting the frigid river. Then they pitch tents under the midnight sun. “We’ve squeezed 13 people

inside for pancake breakfasts,” Sarah says. Winter transport includes snowmobiling, skiing, kite-skiing, dogsledding, or harnessing themselves to a dog for a ski-joring journey. “If you get a taxi to drop you at the park’s outhouses,” she says, “it cuts travel time in half.”

As if to underline the cabin’s social magnetism, the door opens suddenly, and a cloud of cold steam ushers in the siblings’ mother, Matty McNair, and Will’s girlfriend, Sandy Finn, who skied with headlamps from town after Sandy had finished her shift as a public health nurse. Over dinner—caribou stew and Mad Tom IPA—the conversation ranges from Will’s popular “country foods” outdoor market project, which helps Inuit hunters and anglers share their bounty with the community, to concern over Iqaluit’s aging power grid, the same one that left the capital in the dark for 19 hours in January 2014. As usual, “Dumpcano” comes up. The epic dump fire belched smoke for four months in 2014, with the local government’s lack of response frustrating Sarah and other friends and community members enough to launch

a social media action-and-awareness campaign that quickly went viral.

Midnight comes faster than seems possible. Eric and Sarah slide planks between the two benches to create sleeping space for four. Sandy and Will head upstairs and Eric unrolls his sleeping bag on a sheet of sauna insulation in his igloo beneath a sky speckled with stars.

Dawn arrives to the howling of dogs. At 8:40 a.m. the first rays of sun hit the cabin, igniting as they do the unreal sight of red, billowing fog blanketing Frobisher Bay: “warm” seawater overflowing ice cracked by a 12-metre-high king tide, and steaming into -40°C air. Matty and Sandy snap into skis and head towards town in time for Sandy’s next shift. Meanwhile, before Eric and Sarah reluctantly pack up, they linger over a second cup of coffee.

Their trip back to town will take them an hour, less than the time it would take a cottager in the Laurentians to get home to Montreal. But this is another world. Iqaluit is only seven kilometres away. ➤

*Margo Pfeiff first visited—and became addicted to—the Canadian Arctic in 1992.*

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