



Nunavut Parks & Special Places - Editorial Series

January, 2008

VERA AKUMALIK CENTRE



Located where several major arctic rivers come together to flow down Chesterfield Inlet to Hudson Bay, Baker Lake is not only at the geographical centre of Canada, but also is Canada's only inland Inuit community. Baker Lake has become a well-known Inuit art centre, with artists who work in stone, jewellery makers, printmakers, and fabric artists who create beautiful wall hangings. Many visitors come to Baker Lake to meet these artists and to see the land that inspires their work, or pass through the community on their way to or from other destinations on the rivers or elsewhere on the western coast of Hudson Bay.

Visitors explore the barrenlands surrounding Baker Lake by canoe, kayak or raft along the Kazan Heritage River, or the Thelon Heritage River that passes through the Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary – one of Canada's oldest, largest, and most remote protected areas. The Thelon and Kazan Rivers are recognized as Canadian Heritage Rivers for their rich natural and cultural heritage, and their many outstanding recreational opportunities. Baker Lake is also en route to Ukkusiksalik National Park at Wager Bay – a rich area with polar bears, seals, beluga whales, wolves, caribou and other wildlife.

The Vera Akumalik Centre is located in the historic old Hudson Bay Trading Post building along the shore of the lake, and contains exhibits that interpret the natural and human history of the area. Walking through the door is like entering a small arctic trading post in the 1930s. The inside of the original post has been recreated in one end of the building. The old posts did not have shelves like modern stores, but a counter behind which the factor (trader) stood to receive and grade the furs, and shelves on which the trade goods were displayed.



Trading was an interesting and somewhat formal affair. HBC posts were not heated; the HBC did not want people to linger in the post, and they wanted to reduce any damage to furs. People were "grubstaked" (lent traps and supplies) in the fall and traveled out on the land to their traplines. They camped near the traplines and began trapping in November, after the foxes' fur was "prime" (at its most luxurious). By Christmas, a trapper generally had a load of furs, so returned to the post by dogteam. At the post, the furs would be stacked on the counter, and the post factor would go through them, establishing a "grade" (quality measurement) for each, and tallying the value with HBC tokens or tally sticks, which were laid on the counter as the furs were taken away. When all the furs were gone, the pile of tokens remained, representing a value against which the trade would be totaled.

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The trader would lay a rifle and several boxes of ammunition on the counter, and would remove the tokens to the value of the rifle.

Then the trapper might say, "Oh, a kettle for my wife...." Or, "I'd like a Primus stove." More tokens would be taken away.

Eventually, the counter might be covered with goods purchased in trade for the furs – bright calico cloth, needles, sewing thread, flour, tea, milk powder (Klim), tobacco in a can, the rifle and ammo, the Primus stove, a copper kettle, several blankets, and more, to the exact value of the tokens. At the end of the trading, the trader might say, "Oh, here's some candy for your children," giving a little gift. And the trade would be concluded. Hands encased in fingerless woolen gloves, the trader would then write up the trade on a small pad. He'd later transfer the information to a ledger in the heated comfort of his home.

In the Baker Lake post, the furs were stored upstairs. A post assistant would take the furs, bundle them, and then climb the steep stairs to the loft. Here he could use a pulley system to raise the bundle to the upper level where they could be stored in the dark and cold. In the springtime, they would be taken out and hung on a line outside to air and be fluffed, before being rebundled and readied for the annual ship, which would take them to a central fur warehouse for further processing and sale.

LIFTING THE VEIL OF THE PAST

Today, in the Vera Akumalik Centre, the fur loft remains, with bundles stacked in the dim interior. A figure representing the assistant or trader stands at the top of the stairs, pulling the rope to raise a bundle of furs. On the shelves are many of the trade items stocked in the little trading posts across the North. In the other end of the building, there are displays featuring the wildlife of the area, the Thelon River, and much more.

The centre was named for Vera Akumalik, a highly-respected Baker Lake elder who lived much of her life on the land. When asked whether she thought life in the past was easier or harder than life today, Mrs. Akumalik responded, "Oh, much easier today, we are warm and we don't starve!" She has vivid memories of hard times on the land when each family lost members to starvation or accidents.

VISITING THE CENTRE

The centre leaves the visitor with a much greater understanding of the trading era in the Arctic so long ago and of the land and wildlife of the central barrenlands. It is staffed and open during the summer only, but is a "must see" if you are in Baker Lake.

Visitors should also include a stop at the Inuit Heritage Centre, or *Itsarnittakarvik* (Inuktitut word meaning "place of anything old"), which was established at the request of the elders to preserve and promote the unique inland culture of the inland







Inuit from several groups who have come together to live in Baker Lake. The elders wanted a place where they could share their knowledge with youth and visitors through exhibits, displays and programs. The heritage centre plays a distinct educational role within and outside the community.

Baker Lake is also the artistic centre for the Kivalliq region, and several galleries in the community display and sell carvings, fabric wallhangings, jewellery, and traditional tools.

Camping is available at Inuujaarvik
Territorial Park, located between the
airport and town, on the shore of the lake.
This campground is ideal for canoeists
coming off the Thelon or Kazan Rivers who
want to spend some time in the community.

It offers a beach well-suited for unloading canoes, tent pads to accommodate eight tents, a cookhouse/shelter, picnic tables, a barbeque, and outhouses, and provides a great place to camp while in Baker Lake or a place for families to go for a picnic near town.

For assistance in planning a trip to
Baker Lake or for more information
on the Vera Akumalik Centre,
Inuujaarvik Territorial Park, the
Thelon Wildlife Sanctuary, and the
Thelon and Kazan Canadian Heritage
Rivers, check the Nunavut Parks website
at www.nunavutparks.com, or call Nunavut
Tourism at 1-866-NUNAVUT to request
the Nunavut Travel Planner, which lists all
licensed tourism operators, accommodations
and services.

NUNAVUT PARKS & SPECIAL PLACES

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VERA AKUMALIK CENTRE (open summer only) and INUUJAARVIK TERRITORIAL PARK (campground) \$\mathbb{c}\$ 867.793.2456

NUNAVUT TOURISM

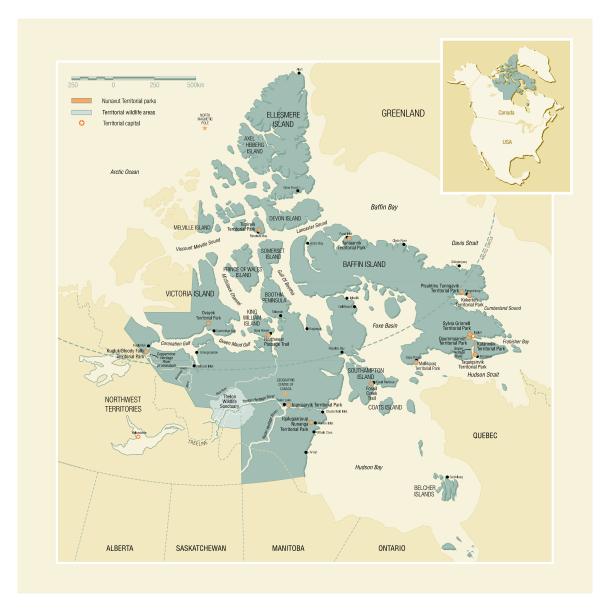
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BAKER LAKE INUIT HERITAGE CENTRE \$ 867.793.2598

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SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL IN NUNAVUT

Nunavut's Territorial Parks offer some of the most breathtaking scenery and magnificent wildlife imaginable, but there are risks when traveling in a remote area. You must be self-reliant and responsible for your own safety. The extreme environment can change quickly, challenge your survival skills and face you with an emergency. Also remember, when you travel in Nunavut you are in polar bear country. Polar bears are strong, fast and agile on ice, land, and in water.

For more information on Safe and Sustainable Travel and Polar Bear Safety in Nunavut please visit our website at www.nunavutparks.com.



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