

What do you eat by the Mackenzie Delta?

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It's just past 10 p.m. on an early August night and the sky is a flinty blue. The warm weather means just windbreakers, sunglasses and jeans for all, as we motor down the Mackenzie Delta aboard an old runabout, about 150 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle. The sun won't be setting tonight, or any night for the next few weeks for that matter. Still, it's nighttime on the delta, beavers are nocturnal and we're on a hunt.

They say that time slows when you're making memories. Maybe that's why my three-day trip to Okpik Arctic Village felt longer. Located on an island off the East Channel of the Mackenzie Delta, just 16 kilometres north of Inuvik, NWT, it's a rustic spot set amidst the black spruce of the southern portion of the western Arctic, the homeland of the Gwich'in. For many Gwich'in, their lives are intricately linked to this land. But for others, it is not.

Kylik Kisoun Taylor, founder of Tundra North Tours and this microvillage, wants to change that by bringing the next generation out to Okpik to learn about their Gwich'in and Inuvialuit culture. For tourists, the idea is to present a raw, immersive experience to better understand what was almost lost, and what can be gained.

In other words, back to the beaver hunt.

Kisoun Taylor's five two-year-old huskies (like trained toddlers) and their mother Ulu had piled on board the boat, along with seven other passengers, before we all headed into the snaking network of silty rivers and lakes. The light was incredible, reflecting pastel pinks and blues onto the glassy water. We spotted dozens of sandpipers, loons and muskrats – the delta is known as the muskrat capital of the world and back when trapping was king, the muskrat was the local trappers' treasure chest, though these days it's a source of sustainable meat. (Back at Okpik I had spotted some hanging in the smoker tipi.)

"It used to be that real food insecurity meant the weather was crappy so you couldn't hunt," said Kisoun Taylor. "But today's food insecurity means you can't afford avocados in the north."

When I visited the grocery store in Inuvik, a four-litre jug of milk cost \$15.49. And while Kisoun Taylor has planted a small greenhouse, he's not sure that's the way forward, either. "One day of harvesting wipes out a year's worth of work," he had explained as we walked along the boggy trails at Okpik. "Yet here we are foraging for berries that can feed us for months."

The island's mildly forested trails and peat bogs are there for both hiking and berry picking and we did both, selfishly gobbling up the jammy cloudberries while bagging the tiny blueberries for breakfast's pancakes. Kisoun Taylor had said the best way to learn about his culture isn't from a

book but by experiencing it – in nature’s classroom. Part of his vision for Okpik Arctic Village is to teach local Indigenous youth cultural touchstones like fishing and hunting, berry picking and bannock making.

To that end, each morning Pearl Gillis and Adrianna Hendrick, two local high-schoolers who are also on the national curling team, were at Okpik to work (and for school credit), by doing tasks like making bannock, butchering whitefish and plucking geese. They now know the bannock recipe by heart, forming the dough into little patties, lightly frying some in one cast iron pan, while pinching holes into others before deep-frying them in another. “The hard part with the donuts is making sure they cook all the way through. That’s why we do a tester,” says Hendrick while nibbling on the golden-brown tester.

We ate lots of whitefish, mostly caught in the gill net and filleted by Kisoun Taylor’s 13-year-old daughter Indigo. Other meals from the land included moose stew and fish chowder, plus timid nibbles of wild goose, duck, dried beluga, caribou, muskrat and beaver, as a learning nosh. And there was always a big pot of spruce tip and Labrador tea on the fire for sipping.

“You can fit a lot into a day when it’s sunny for 24 hours,” said Kisoun Taylor. “Where else in the world can you sit down at 10 at night and say, man, what do we do now?” We got lucky with the weather and were in and out of the lake all day and into the night, swimming, kayaking, canoeing, paddle boarding and even wakeboarding. It may be the Arctic Circle, but it’s still August in Canada.

About 30 minutes into our beaver hunt, a velvety brown head cuts a swath through the smooth river, leaving a telltale wake. The dogs’ hunting instincts kick in, their ears going from cute and pointy to dead serious and flat. Kisoun Taylor kills the engine. Newbie local guide Fred silently raises his hunting rifle, aims, and fires a single shot. There’s blood in the water. The dogs leap from the boat, dragging the thrashing beaver to shore, where, with another bullet, Kisoun Taylor makes sure it’s dead.

Then he lifts the roughly 30-pound carcass into the boat, where we’re told every part of the animal will be used, for meat and fur, from tip to beavertail. As Kisoun Taylor starts up the outboard motor again, Fred, with his shy smile, starts texting iPhone pics to family and friends. He had just killed his first-ever beaver. And he was justifiably proud.

IF YOU GO: [Okpik Arctic Village](#) is a rustic camping experience in the Arctic Circle where you sleep in sleeping bags on cots in tents. There’s no potable or hot running water and one shared outhouse. The three-day/two-night experience is \$2,800 single (\$2,500 double), not including a necessary night in Inuvik. Tundra North Tours can arrange for that as well as flights with Canadian North or Air Yukon. They also offer a Winter Igloo Experience (\$3,400 single/\$2,900 double) where guests have the option of sleeping in an igloo, tipi or cabin. There are also [summer and winter day experiences](#). For more information, visit tundranorthtours.com.