WaterFlying

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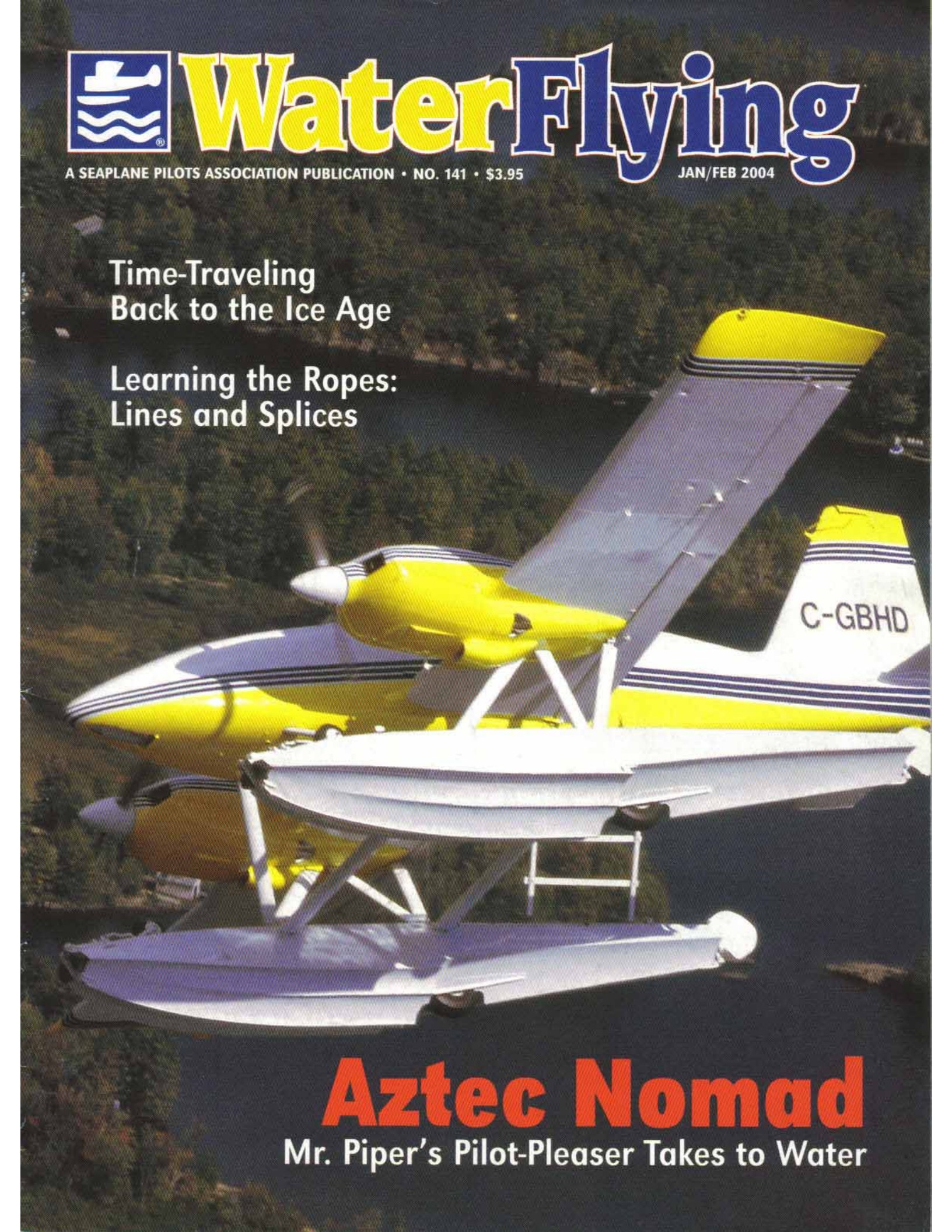
Time-Traveling
Back to the Ice Age

Learning the Ropes:
Lines and Splices



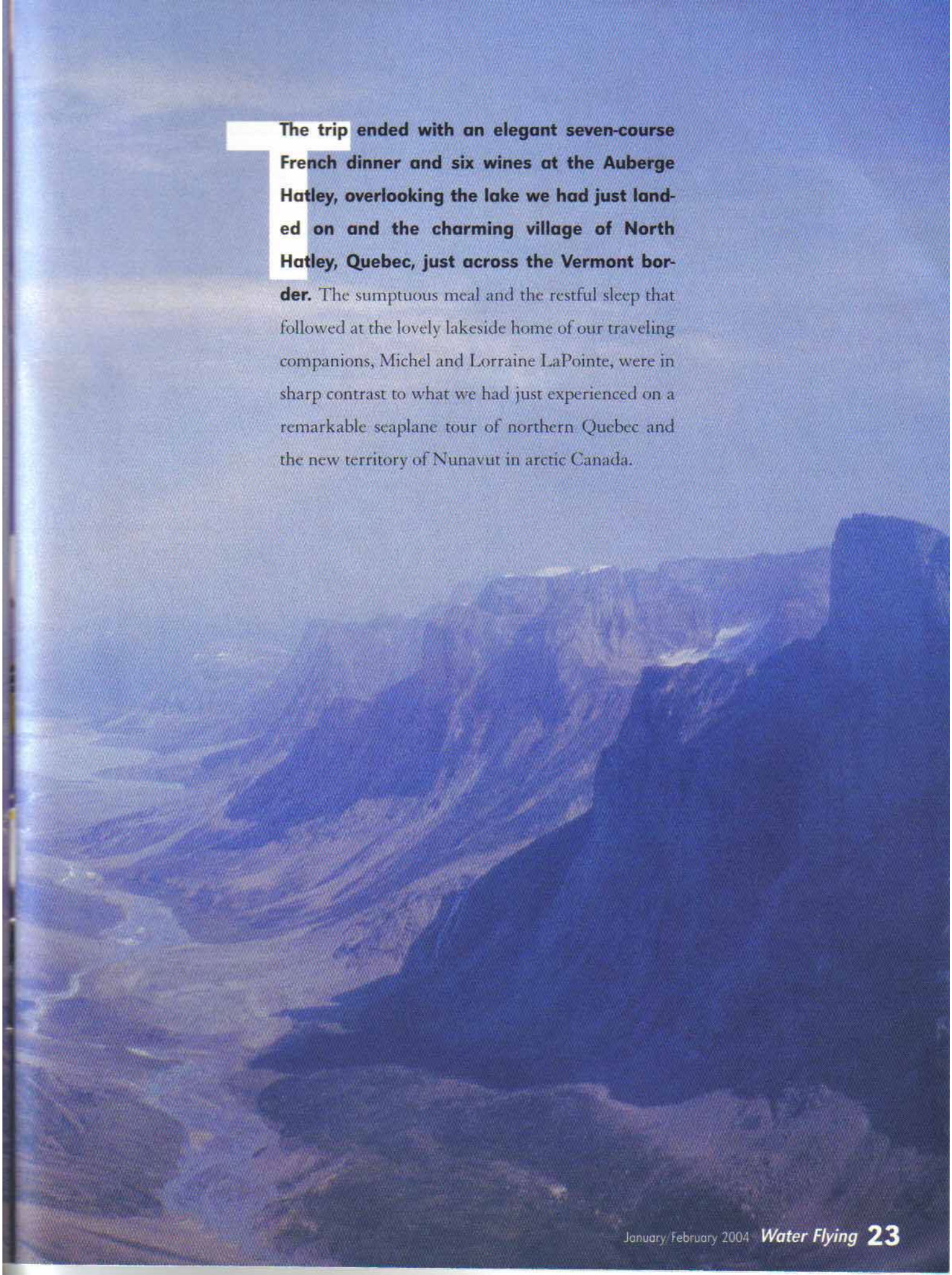
Aztec Nomad

Mr. Piper's Pilot-Pleaser Takes to Water

Three Lakes to the ICE AGE

Baffin Island's Penny Ice Cap and the Labrador Fiords

Story and Photos by Ed McNeil



The trip ended with an elegant seven-course French dinner and six wines at the Auberge Hatley, overlooking the lake we had just landed on and the charming village of North Hatley, Quebec, just across the Vermont border. The sumptuous meal and the restful sleep that followed at the lovely lakeside home of our traveling companions, Michel and Lorraine LaPointe, were in sharp contrast to what we had just experienced on a remarkable seaplane tour of northern Quebec and the new territory of Nunavut in arctic Canada.


PENNY ICE CAP
BAFFIN ISLAND
PANGNIRTUNG
Godthåb
FOXE
Aivilik Bay)
IQALUIT
Kinngait (Cape Dorset)
Salliq (Coral Harbour)
Hudson Strait
LABRADOR SEA
Coats
Mansel
QUAQTAQ
FIORDS
UNGAVA BAY
KANGIRSUK
BARNOIN RIVER CAMP
Nairn
Feuilles
KUUJJUAQ
Smallwood
Goose Bay
NEWFOUNDLAND
Belcher
La Grande Rivière
WABUSH
JAMES' S
Fort George
OTISH MOUNTAINS
Akimiski Island
Péribonca
Ile
Gulf of St.
Fort Albany
QUEBEC
PRINCE EDWARD ISLAND
Charlottetown
NEW BRUNSWICK
NOVA SCOTIA
Quebec
QUEBEC CITY
St John
Fredericton
Halifax
Lake
Thunder Bay
Lake Superior
Montreal
NORTH HATLEY
Ottawa
Georgian Bay
Lake Michigan
Lake Huron
Toronto
Lake
Boston
Buffalo
SYRACUSE
Milwaukee
Detroit
Lake Erie
New York
Cleveland
Chicago
Philadelphia

The glacial valleys on the south and east sides of the Penny Ice Cap on the northeastern coast of Baffin Island in Nunavut had long been on our list of must-see destinations. There one can see the landscape left behind when the glaciers receded some 6,000 years ago. The ice cap had once been three to four kilometers thick.

The valley north of Pangnirtung is especially remarkable because the sides are nearly vertical from the glacial ice that carved them. Six thousand years is relatively new in geologic time, so there hasn't been enough time to erode the rock and round the features of these carved valleys. Extreme climbers trek to Mount Thor in the valley to scale its nearly 4,000-foot vertical face, and many have died in the severe weather encountered there.

The trip began when Tom and Sue Tuxill flew their Lake Renegade up from Florida to Syracuse, New York, meeting me there. The next morning we flew to Quebec City for fuel and to clear Canadian customs. Then it was on to Wabush, just south of Labrador City near the western border of the province, for the night. We logged about six hours that first day.

Michel and Lorraine LaPointe had arrived in Wabush earlier in the day in their Seawolf, and were waiting for us at the Two Season's hotel (we recommend it) for dinner and an overnight. Wabush, at the end of a long gravel road not unlike the Alaska Highway, is as far north as one can drive in eastern Canada.

Wabush exists to support iron ore mining in six open pits located in and around the town. The sounds of mining trucks and trains are heard in town 24 hours a day, year round.

After obtaining a weather briefing from Quebec flight service by phone from the tower cab, we flew off to the north in beautiful morning sunshine and clear skies on a nearly four-hour leg to Kuujjuaq.

It is one of the only places in northern Quebec with 100LL fuel. We paid $1.91 Canadian per litre ($7.96 Canadian per gallon), the most expensive fuel of the trip. Fuel at Wabush cost $1.33 Canadian per litre ($5.05 Canadian per gallon).

BAFFIN ISLAND

We had planned to stay in Kuujjuaq for the night or camp away from town on a lake, but the weather was perfect for a crossing of the Hudson Strait to Baffin Island. So, after a quick fuel stop and weather briefing, we departed gravel Runway 13 for the three-hour flight to Baffin Island, with waypoints at Kangirsuk and Quaqtaq on the northern tip of Quebec on the west side of Ungava Bay.

Leaving Quaqtag and heading out over the frigid waters of the Hudson Strait, we climbed to 7,000 feet to give us more time to react to an in-flight mechanical problem. Hypothermia would have set in within two minutes in the near-freezing water in the Strait, but the surface was calm and any emergency landing should have been survivable.

We arrived in late afternoon at Iqaluit on the northern end of Frosbisher Bay. Iqaluit is the largest village on Baffin Island and the administrative capital of Nunavut. We refueled there with the cheapest fuel of the trip, at $0.98 per litre ($3.72 Canadian per gallon). The Discovery Lodge (also recommended) sent a van, and soon we had checked in to the hotel, which looked like modular construction on pilings.

We learned it was originally built for TWA crews flying the New York-to-London route in the days of propeller aircraft, and that the runway at Iqaluit had been built in WWII as a stop for aircraft being ferried to England. The Lodge had a very acceptable dining room, and was considered by the locals to have the best food in town.

REFRIGERATOR STYLE

The normally very cold weather in Iqaluit is reflected in the architecture, which might be described as modern refrigerator interior. The buildings feature smooth exteriors, rounded corners, and fiberglass panels. Most were constructed on steel posts, and all receive their water and dispose of their sewage by truck. It is tough to construct utilities in solid, sub-zero rock!

On day three we decided to take advantage of the good weather dominating the southern half of Baffin Island and fly to the Penny Ice Cap.

The flight over the ice cap was the primary purpose of our trip, as we wished to see what much of North America must have looked like as the ice cap receded following the Ice Age. We found the glaciers plentiful and the glacially carved valleys spectacular.

Our tour of the Penny Ice Cap started at the far-western end. We overflew the entire southern edge, then turned north to fly up the valley along the ice cap's eastern perimeter, where peaks rose thousands of feet above us. When we reached the vertical face of Mount Thor we did a 180 back to the coast and, hoping for lunch, landed at Pangnirtung.

"Pang," as it is known, is a small Inuit village 150 nm north of Iqaluit. Pang had once been a Hudson's Bay Company outpost for trading in whale oil destined for the lamps of Europe.

After a walk through the village we arrived at a small "hotel" catering to climbers and backpackers, only to discover that there was no food left and the cook had departed. Thanks to quick thinking from Lorraine LaPointe, we had wonderful gorp and apples as our emergency lunch.

Fuel is not available at Pang, and the Canadian Flight Supplement has the following caution: "Only pilots with considerable experience in area should plan on using this airport due to surrounding terrain & variable local conditions. Severe turbulence may be encountered. Surrounding terrain may constitute a hazard to night flying." Pang definitely is not a stop for the unprepared. Fortunately, wind conditions were favorable during our visit. After filing a flight plan back across the ADIZ (we were north of the North American ADIZ), we departed for the return trip south to Iqaluit.

A DAY OFF

Good weather continued, but everyone was exhausted from three days of demanding flying. So, in Iqaluit we took a day off and accompanied Bert Rose, a local teacher, on an excursion to some nearby ruins. While we all sat in a Dorset (later Thule) stone ruin dating from about 500 BC, Rose gave a two-

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hour history lesson on the Inuit people, their ancestry, and migrations from Siberia.

After an overnight frontal passage, we had good weather for the trip south to Kuujjuaq. We refueled there, ate a quick lunch, and watched Sue Tuxill and Lorraine LaPointe do an impromptu ward-off-the-black-flies dance.

Next we headed northeast toward Ungava Bay and a 50-minute flight to the Barnoin River camp of Rapid Lake Lodge, where we beached our aircraft—gear down—45 degrees to the beach (which lifts most of the tail out of the water). To launch, we simply raised the gear handle, lifted the nose to allow the nose gear to come up, lifted one wing to collapse one main, then lifted the other to retract the second main. We used this technique routinely on sand or gravel bottoms, and found it handled 12-inch waves without problem.

After donning head nets (to keep the insects at bay) and unloading some of our gear, we took on fuel so we would have full tanks (88 gallons) for the trip over the Torngat Mountains to the fiords of Labrador. We had made prior arrangements to have a 55-gallon barrel of fuel shipped in to the lodge by Twin Otter, at a cost of $860 Canadian. We transferred the fuel using a barrel pump and jerry cans.

By now we were familiar with the 2.5-billion-year-old rock of the Canadian Shield and the general lack of vegetation, but our tour to the Labrador coast the next morning still held many surprises. We spotted several black bear and caribou; the long-abandoned Moravian settlement at Hebron; the steep-sided fiords similar to those seen on Baffin Island; and beautiful icebergs. We even got in some Arctic char fishing at the outlet of a spectacular lake we landed on for lunch. Michel and Tom had a close encounter with a caribou that walked right behind them while they fished!

BREAKING CAMP

Back over the Torngat Mountains we flew to Barnoin Camp, only to get eaten alive by black flies once more. (Full headgear or bug jackets, plus 100 percent Deet, are must-have items on this trip.) We enjoyed fresh-smoked char for dinner, and then spent our last night in sleeping bags.

In the morning we said goodbye to camp owners Alain and Serge Lagace, and headed southwest to Kuujjuaq one more time for fuel, then on south to Wabush for the night. Along the way we stopped for lunch on one of the thousand lakes and celebrated Tom's birthday.

Weather finally caught up with us in Wabush, where low ceilings and rain shut us down for the day. All the hotels were full, so we ended up staying two nights in a private home that doubled as a B&B, but without the breakfast. We used the layover day to visit an iron mine and watch trucks the size of corporate hangars haul 245 tons of rock with each load.

We made our way south the following day, but had to fly IFR through lots of rain and wet, cotton candy clouds to Quebec City. Then it was on to North Hatley for a wonderful night at the LaPointes, and the exquisite dinner at Auberge Hatley.

Our trip back in time to the Ice Age more than met our expectations. It was spectacular—ancient, glacier-carved valleys and steep-sided fiords were just a few of the many wonders of nature we enjoyed. It was big—we covered 4,100 miles in 37 hours of flying, with 11 landings on wheels and 6 on water. And with so much water in the remote northeastern reaches of Canada and so few runways, especially ones with fuel, we did it the only way that makes sense—in three Lakes.

Ed McNeil has flown his Lake Renegade more than 250,000 miles to destinations throughout North America including Alaska, Mexico, the Caribbean, arctic Canada, and the Hudson Bay. McNeil flies for The Nature Conservancy and other environmental organizations as a volunteer pilot. He is the past Chairman of the Adirondack Nature Conservancy and Adirondack Land Trust, and is active in the Dominican Republic and New York State for The Nature Conservancy. Seasonally a resident of Syracuse, New York, he now lives in Winter Haven, Florida.