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An insider's guide to navigating the Northwest Passage

5 January 2022 • Written by Tristan Rutherford

With wild weather and thick ice, navigating the Northwest Passage remains the ultimate maritime challenge. With our insider's guide, discover this cruising route's history and highlights, and find out how to tackle it today...

The icy routes around Cape Horn may have been navigated four centuries ago, but the Northwest Passage remained uncrossed by boat until 1906. It took the skills of Arctic explorer Roald Amundsen, sailing over successive summers, to

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weave from the Atlantic to the Pacific through some 36,000 islands in the Canadian Arctic. Since then, more people have stood on the summit of Everest than have traversed the passage by water.

Although Arctic ice is retreating, transits remain at the whim of capricious weather, legal permits and glaciers that formed millennia ago. In 2021, only five vessels made it through the seven possible routes. But any yacht cruising in the Northwest Passage zone will still view once-in-a-lifetime sights, including beluga whales, polar bear cubs and bobbing bergs, plus Inuit hunters on midnight husky missions. Making time for wildlife and adventure, rather than a headlong sprint from Greenland to Siberia, should be every sailor's aim.



The Northwest Passage remained uncrossed by boat until 1906. All Images courtesy of Jason Van Bruggen.

The history of the Northwest Passage

Then, as now, big business dreamed of opening a trading shortcut from Europe to Asia. In 1845, a magnificently funded expedition led by Captain Sir John Franklin carried British hopes of a trade route that looked simple on a map – and avoided Spanish and French possessions elsewhere. Franklin's two ships, *Erebus* and *Terror*, were stocked like superyachts. Each one carried several years' worth of supplies, including live oxen, Scotch whisky and Fortnum & Mason condiments.

Alas, not a single member of the Franklin expedition could converse with local Inuit, no doubt contributing to the eventual loss of all 120 on board when both

ARCHIMEDES

Feadship
66.75 m · 2008



ROSEHEARTY

Perini Navi
56 m · 2006



HANSE EXPLORER

Fassmer
48.01 m · 2006

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inuit, no doubt contributing to the eventual loss of all 129 on board when both boats sunk after three years of icy navigation. Arguably the greatest search in maritime history, led by polar greats James Clark Ross and John Rae, found hardly a trace of Franklin's ships.

In a story lucidly told by Michael Palin in *Erebus: The Story of a Ship*, both expedition vessels were discovered in 2014 and 2016, near-perfectly preserved on the frigid seabed. Remnants of the Franklin expedition remain the Passage's historical must-see.

On Beechey Island, where the boats wintered through 1845/46, an eerie set of graves was discovered by those searching for the Franklin party in 1850. King William Island hosts a rough airstrip served by First Air and Canadian North, plus 1,300 residents. Nearby, *Erebus* and *Terror* lie in strictly protected waters, while more Franklin memorials, plus herds of caribou, can be found on land.

Traces of the Thule, a proto-Inuit people, can be found near Dundas Harbour on Devon Island. Their forefathers crossed a frozen land bridge from Siberia 12,000 years ago before eventually colonising Greenland and the entire Canadian north. The port also hosts an abandoned Hudson's Bay Company outpost and Royal Canadian Mounted Police station, alongside Arctic hares aplenty. Cambridge Bay on Victoria Island offers the largest port of call for Northwest Passage transits, again with air links in and out. Finally, the lonely hamlet of Resolute on Cornwallis Island ranks as one of the coldest inhabited places on earth.



The Northwest Passage area opens from July to September, when air temperatures hover between 5°C and -5°C

Misconceptions of the Northwest Passage

The biggest fallacy is that because the Northwest Passage lies in Canadian waters, sailors can find stores, fuel stations and other yachts to hail. There's

literally none of that. The passage may look simple on a map but ice alters the route on a weekly basis. Meanwhile, only 10 per cent of the Arctic has been charted to modern marine navigation standards.

Another misconception now is there are “no bears and no ice”, says experienced ice pilot Clive Shute. “While there is no doubt sea ice coverage is diminishing, there is still plenty of ice in the Arctic – in fact, often too much.” A final delusion is that it’s necessary to transit the entire passage to couple wildlife with yachting kudos. Merely entering the passage is a true voyage of exploration.



Merely entering the passage is a true voyage of exploration

Equipment need for the Northwest Passage

The list of necessary kit is as endless as it is essential. Sunscreen, hiking boots, cameras and Merino wool underwear are all musts. Tony Soper, author of *The Northwest Passage*, recommends 10x42 binoculars, as viewers need extra magnification when spotting from a boat. “Watch all beaches for polar bears,” says the guidebook writer, “but don’t go ashore to get closer.” Explorer Ray Mears carries the lightweight Zeiss Victory 8x32 (around £1,700), which has a wider range more suitable for birdwatching while on dry land.

Soper also advises carrying bear deterrents, which can scare animals with a loud bang. “Shore excursions also need to be accompanied by a competent guard,

armed with large-calibre (.308 or greater) hunting rifles or shotguns firing 12-gauge rifled slugs – naturally to be used only as a last resort. The Canadian Firearms Act requires firearms and handlers be certified and registered.”

For yacht communications, the Garmin inReach Explorer+ (£449 plus satellite subscription) is the Shackleton of smartphones. Think two-way SMS messaging, interactive maps, digital compass, an in-built barometric altimeter and an alarm clock. A security service contract with a risk solutions company such as GEOS is also an option in case of a broken leg. Such firms can arrange air ambulance services in inhospitable areas – for a fee. Nevertheless, even in clement weather, a Mayday call would take a day for the Canadian Armed Forces to respond to, so packing the right rafts and medicines, plus spares of pumps, valves and everything else, is a necessity. This absolute rule applies to all motor and sailing yachts: if you think you might need it, bring it.

For larger yachts, a helicopter is not essential, but a wonderful accoutrement. A fixed-wing air tour from an icy regional airport, over shifting glaciers and migrating whales, could be a more cost-effective option. The most essential kit is a simple Zodiac tender. Far from glamorous, they're a compact, trusted and tested tool for exploring extreme environments.

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In 2016, the 56-metre sailing yacht *Rosehearty* explored the passage

The best boats for cruising the Northwest Passage

A custom-built vessel like 48-metre *Hanse Explorer*, which pairs the highest commercial ice class hull with polar expedition kit, is clearly more capable than a commercial yacht. The cost is also much higher, but it's worth it for those

a composite yacht. In fact said, low-draught boats will fare better in tighter passages. Even solo sailors have made the trip: British yachtsman David Scott Cowper undertook several passages in his strengthened 14.6-metre aluminium motorboat, *Polar Bound* - although he carried £20,000 worth of diesel from Greenland to prepare for all eventualities.

Most boats planning a full passage attempt an east-to-west navigation via the "Amundsen route" through the Lancaster Sound, then eventually south of King William Island. This itinerary allows for incredible natural experiences paired with historical sights - with much to see on the way back if ice closes in.

It's always a lonely trip. In 2016, the 56-metre sailing yacht *Rosehearty*, which charters through [Perini Navi USA](#), explored the passage from Greenland through the Bellot Strait then around Somerset Island. "There were many times where we were the only boat in hundreds of miles," says her captain, David Hutchison. "You are very conscious that you are relying on your own resources and any help will be days away at best." Although an ice hull is a distinct bonus rather than a necessity, *Rosehearty* was refitted with upgraded electronics, searchlights, new gyro and a reinforced flybridge hardtop to protect against falling ice.

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Flowers and wildlife are at their most frenzied in July, while belugas and narwhals continue to migrate in August. - Credit: J. Hoffman / EVOX Expeditions

When can you cruise the Northwest Passage?

The Northwest Passage area opens from July to September, when air temperatures hover between 5°C and -5°C. Flowers and wildlife are at their most frenzied in July, while belugas and narwhals continue to migrate in August. Any later in the year and days draw in quickly, although there's the added possibility of seeing the [Northern Lights](#). The full transit is only navigable during a four- to six-week window from around the second week of August – in a good year.

In summer 2021, sea ice in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago area was measured at its lowest in 10 years, with some entry points opening up weeks earlier than usual. But just a few years prior in 2018, the Passage saw extreme conditions which led to the Canadian Coast Guard warning against periodic cruising through Peel Sound, the Franklin Strait and the Prince Regent Inlet. To further the point, even the luxurious exploration vessels operated by Hurtigruten and Compagnie du Ponant were blocked from the James Ross Strait and Cambridge Bay. Their itineraries were swiftly switched to Greenland, leaving each cruise ship hopelessly out of position.

Ben Lyons, CEO of EYOS, which guides luxury yachts and vessels of all types through the passage, tells his clients to take note. “Weather is the most technical aspect of the voyage,” he explains. “While conditions are arguably less prohibitive than in Franklin’s day due to climatic change, ice of all kinds – pack, brash or sea – is still a dynamic, powerful force.” Only an experienced pilot who can sniff out shifting conditions via a mix of radar, coastguard reports and Inuit contacts should be trusted on such a mission.

In Canada the term “Eskimo” is wildly outdated and politically incorrect

Northwest Passage politics

Whatever the weather, advance planning is essential. Yacht owners organising a trip at Christmas for the following summer are probably too late. Some 30 to 40 licences and permissions must be gained for each passenger from communal, regional and federal departments. Most superyacht owners pay an experienced firm to file this paperwork.

Trading carefully is key. Relationships between local Inuit and early explorers were ones of mistrust and miscommunication, which occasionally lapsed into kidnapping and theft. In 1000 Nunavut (which means “Our Land” in local language

kingap and then, in 1999 Nunavut (which means "Our Land" in local language Inuktitut) became the newest, largest and most northern territory in Canada. In this vast land area the size of Western Europe, the wishes of a mere 36,000 residents hold sway.

The Inuit don't expect gifts. Rather, as Robynn Pavia, from the Travel Nunavut Industry Association, explains, "Visitors to Nunavut should research the Inuit culture before they visit." This includes throat-singing, film-making and having a deep respect for wildlife. "Asuujutit" means "hello". (Hopefully sailors won't have to utter "qanimaliqpunga", which translates as "I feel sick"). "Other things that should be researched are the cost of airfares as [Nunavut has] no roads," continues Pavia. In Canada the term "Eskimo" is wildly outdated and politically incorrect.

Modern Inuit remain expert trappers, fishermen and husky drivers. That's why they act as essential guides for yachts sailing the Northwest Passage, be it for advice on ice navigation, wildlife locations or community visits. In March 2019, EYOS Expeditions director Kelvin Murray travelled to Nunavut ahead of his summer groups. "It was -32°C and I had to eat fermented walrus, but face-to-face meetings with locals improved our rapport. Regional communities quite rightly wield a lot of power because it's their backyard we're sailing through. They literally feed and clothe their families from these coastal areas." Murray also sits on the board of the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators, which creates guidelines for passenger safety, environmental protection and interactions with indigenous residents.

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Colonies containing 900 polar bears can be found when exiting the passage around Hudson Bay

Northwest Passage wildlife

The presence of High Arctic megafauna only visible in these climes, including walrus, caribou and bowhead whales, is the most compelling reason to ply these lonely shores. Every experienced hand has a tip, including guidebook author Tony Soper. "On trips ashore, gravitate to any fresh water, as that's where you'll see loons, waterfowl and waders." Muskox – giant hooved bovids that can top 400kg – can be found higher on the tundra. "Most wildlife is best seen from the bridge," continues Soper. "Then at the sharp end for dolphins and whales and as close to the sea as possible for birds."

Colonies containing 900 polar bears can be found when exiting the passage around Hudson Bay, claims travel writer and Canada expert Stuart Forster. "During summertime this region is also known for its proliferation of white beluga whales: so many that they look like grains of rice dumped in a kitchen sink when seen from a light aircraft." Also, on the passage's extreme, Pond Inlet on Baffin Island makes a decent provisioning spot with the chance to see ringed seal, narwhals and polar bears.

For EYOS's Ben Lyons, flexibility is key. "We can't plan an exacting itinerary as some passages or bays might be frozen solid. That said, we can take advantage of spontaneous occurrences, like encountering polar bears or bowhead whales, or the chance to kayak to a lost island in 90 minutes of bright sunshine."

Fuel is key, especially late in a busy season like 2014 and 2015, when supplies reportedly ran low

Provisioning for the Northwest Passage

"You have to have an appreciation of where you are," says Kelvin Murray at EYOS. Quite simply, there's no major port access after refuelling at either St John's in Newfoundland, Nome in Alaska or Greenland. "If you need pak choi and 2,000 Nespresso capsules you'll have to arrange transport. And plan for what happens if fog delays delivery by plane."

During [Roseheart's passage in 2016](#), her spa pool was repurposed as an at-sea fridge for a stock of fruit and vegetables using an insulated hood. Other perishables were stored in the bilges where temperatures hovered around freezing. Fishing is possible in summer (with a licence) but it's not the best season. The catch of choice, Arctic char, is neither as plentiful nor as tasty as Greenland halibut or Norwegian cod.

Fuel is key, especially late in a busy season like 2014 and 2015, when supplies reportedly ran low. As there are no wharves in Nunavut, stories abound of bulldozers constructing rough sand jetties, with hoses laid over the top of yachts to refuel a boat in need. Aviation kerosene (Jet A) has also been snagged from airstrips then used, with lubricating additives, as emergency yacht fuel.

Explorers to this region will find epic scenery that makes the tough cruising well worth it.

A crossing of the Northwest Passage is no small feat, and with so many aspects to consider, hiring a guide with High Arctic knowhow and regional contacts is a must if you plan to discover this incredible destination. Despite the obstacles, cruising in this remote region will reward adventurous owners with an unforgettable experience. As Captain Chris Walsh of 68 metre [Archimedes](#) says: "Being surrounded by ice, animals and an extremely unforgiving, rugged, remote country inspires true awe. And a connectivity with planet Earth that can only be described as magic."

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