

The Inuit Thought of It

AMAZING ARCTIC INNOVATIONS



Alootook Ipellie
with David MacDonald

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For my daughter, Taina Lee, with love, and to the Ipellie family.
—A.I.

For my parents, with love and gratitude.
—D.M.

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The Inuit, My People



Imagine living in a land where the temperature stays above freezing for only a couple of months each year, and where winter temperatures sometimes drop below -50°C (-58°F). What would it be like to live in a place where there is 24-hour darkness for weeks on end every winter, and 24-hour daylight for much of the summer? There is such a land, and it is like few places on earth.

Almost no trees grow here, and much of the ground is permanently frozen. Large areas of the landscape are nothing but bare rock. You could travel for days and not see a single sign that humans had ever set foot here. This land is the Arctic, and my people, the Inuit, have lived here for hundreds of years.

History of the Inuit

Many archaeologists believe that the ancient ancestors of today's Inuit may have come to North America about 20,000 years ago, crossing a land bridge that once connected Siberia and Alaska. They settled on the northwestern coast of Alaska. About 1200 years ago, the direct ancestors of the Inuit began to move east and gradually spread through the Canadian Arctic and into Greenland. In some places they would have met hunters from Viking settlements in Greenland. After these Viking settlements disappeared about 600 years ago, Inuit were the only people in the North American Arctic.



Adapting to the Land and the Climate

The first Alaskan Inuit lived on what the land had to offer. They built houses of sod and driftwood, and created a variety of hunting tools from the materials at hand. Seals, walrus, whales, and caribou provided them with food, clothing, and materials to make tools. As Inuit moved east, they brought with them traditional knowledge about making hunting tools and building sod houses. But whenever necessary, they adapted traditions to new living conditions. For example, when driftwood was not available for building a sod house, they used whalebone instead.

About 500 years ago, when the climate began to grow colder, many Inuit who lived in coastal areas of the northern Arctic began to move south. Whales were not as plentiful in the south, so Inuit adapted their lifestyle. They relied more on other sources of food, and began to move their camps more often in search of good hunting grounds. Being on the move meant that Inuit needed temporary shelters to protect them from the winter cold. They relied on the igloo, which was easy to build and could be constructed anywhere.



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A Time of Change

When the first European explorers came to the Arctic in the 1500s, they did not have much effect on traditional Inuit culture. But in the 1800s, European hunters began to arrive. They came because whale products and animal furs were in demand back in Europe. Contact with Europeans, as well as with missionaries and Canadian government officials who came in the 1900s, brought many changes to how Inuit lived. As fewer people lived a traditional lifestyle, the old Inuit ways were forgotten by many. But today, Inuit are working to preserve and maintain the old traditions so that they are not lost forever.



The Inuit Spirit of Innovation

Their ability to adapt and make innovations enabled Inuit to survive in the difficult conditions of the Arctic. Of the innovations presented in this book, which are all from the period before contact with Europeans, many are truly amazing. And some of them—such as the Inuit-style parka, the kayak, and the double-bladed paddle—are now used around the world.



Enjoy your journey through the world of amazing Inuit innovations. I hope this book will make you interested in learning more about my people, our culture, and our heritage.

Timeline

Inuit and Their Ancestors in North America

20,000–30,000 B.C.E.

People from Asia first cross a land bridge to Alaska.

1200 C.E.

Early ancestors of today's Inuit move east across the Arctic from Alaska.

1200–1250

Inuit ancestors reach northern Greenland from Canada. They make contact with the Vikings.

1450

The Vikings disappear from Greenland.

1000–1600

Evidence suggests that Inuit ancestors are using the kayak, dog sled, and ulu during this time period.

1500–1850

The climate grows much colder. Inuit make changes to their lifestyle to adapt to new conditions. Trade with Europeans begins.

1850

European whalers bring more trade goods but also disease.

1900

The climate begins to grow warmer.

1920–1930

The fur trade rapidly expands throughout northern Canada. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police and religious missionaries arrive in the Arctic.

1940–1960

The Canadian government encourages Inuit to live in permanent settlements.

1999

Canada creates a new territory called Nunavut, home to many Inuit.



Inuit in North America around 1600 C.E.



The shaded area on this map shows where Inuit were living in North America about 400 years ago.





This map shows all of North America today.



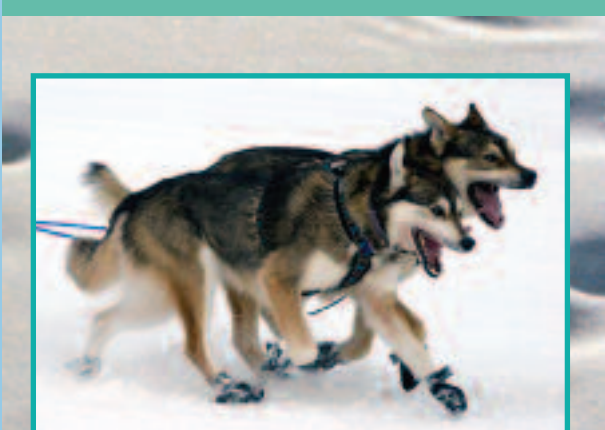
DOG SLEDS

In winter, when the ground was covered with snow and ice, traditional Inuit often traveled by a sled called a *qamutiik* that was pulled by a team of dogs. Sealskin rope was essential to making harnesses for the dogs and a whip to direct the dog team, and for the *qamutiik* itself.

Today, dog sled racing is a popular Arctic sport.



Sometimes Inuit helped dogs pull the sled.



Dog Boots

To pull a sled all day, the dogs' paws needed to be in good condition. Their paws were tough, but they could still get cuts from jagged ice or sharp rocks uncovered by melting snow in springtime. With injured paws, the dog team could not run as quickly. To protect their paws, Inuit often made dog boots out of seal or caribou skin.

Rope

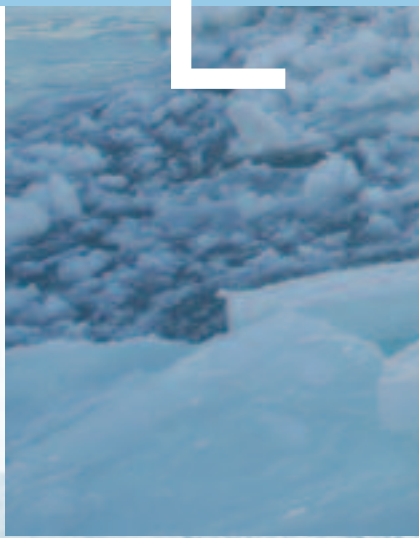
The thick skin of the bearded seal (see photo on page 10) was best for making strong rope. First, the skin was removed by cutting it into sections. Then it was boiled and cut into long strips while still wet. The wet strips were tied between two large stones and left to dry into strong rope.



Sled

The sled runners (the long pieces that touched the ground) and the crosspieces that held the two runners together were most often made of wood. These were tied together with rope in a way that allowed each runner to move slightly up or down when traveling over uneven surfaces. Rough ground, snow, or ice could cause damage to a sled. Rope made the sled more flexible so it would last longer.





Bow-Drill

Traditional Inuit used wood and sometimes walrus tusk ivory to build the *qamutiik*. To drill holes in these materials, they invented a very useful tool called the bow-drill, which had five parts:

1. the **drill stick** (vertical piece) was made of wood or caribou antler
2. the **mouthpiece** at the top of the drill stick was made of ivory or hard wood
3. the metal **drill bit** was at the bottom of the drill stick
4. the **bow** (horizontal piece) was made of wood or antler
5. the **bowstring**, which attached the bow to the drill stick, was made of sealskin

To work the bow-drill, the user moved the bow stick back and forth with one hand.



A dog sled rests on wooden blocks.

Mud Runners

Adding mud to the runners allowed them to slide more easily over snow and ice. With the sled turned upside down, wet mud was spread over the bottom of the runners and carefully smoothed out. Then mouthfuls of water were squirted onto a piece of polar bear skin, and the wet skin was rubbed over the frozen mud. This left a layer of ice on top of the mud, so that the runners were very smooth and slippery. Mud runners made it easier for dogs to pull a heavily loaded sled.

Ivory Runners

In areas of the Arctic where walrus could be hunted, traditional Inuit sometimes made sled runners from walrus tusk ivory. Ivory is very smooth, so ivory runners didn't need the mud-and-ice coating that made wooden runners so much work. And ivory runners had two other advantages over mud runners—they didn't easily break off and they didn't melt if left in direct sunlight, as mud runners sometimes did.



A hunter prepares mud runners for his dog sled.