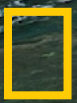


FIRTH RIVER

ANCIENT MOUNTAINS, TUNDRA BEAUTY, WILDLIFE,
HIKING & ARCTIC OCEAN



National Geographic Adventure
2009 Best Adventure Travel
Companies On Earth

DESCENDING THE FIRTH RIVER THROUGH A CANYON.
ISSUING FROM THE BRITISH MOUNTAINS ON THE
BORDER OF ALASKA AND THE YUKON, THE FIRTH
IS ONE OF THE OLDEST RIVERS ON THE CONTINENT.
TYLER GARNHAM PHOTO

TRIP DETAILS

Margaret Lake to Herschel Island in the traditional lands of the Inuvialuit First Nation: Approximately 130 kilometres (80 miles) with an elevation drop of 410 metre (1345 feet)

SKILL LEVEL

Beginner. The guides navigate with oars & paddling by participants is optional for those who want more activity.

RENDEZVOUS POINT

Parks Canada Office: 81 Kingmingya Rd, Inuvik

DURATION

12 River Days

TRIP TYPE

Raft

YOUR TRIP

The most hiking on any guided river trip north of 60!

A rafting journey down the Firth River in Ivvavik National Park is an enchanting, scenic passage from the British Mountains to the coastal tundra plains and the Arctic Ocean. Rafting over 11 river days, we journey 150 kilometres (94 miles) with an approximate elevation drop of 460 metres (1,500 feet).

This is a land of contrasts: forest and tundra, craggy peaks and flowery alpine meadows, wild coastline and ice-filled seas.

The Porcupine Caribou Herd, grizzly bears, mountain sheep, muskox and wolves thrive in this arctic Eden, along with millions of migratory

birds. The Firth features a long canyon stretch, Class III rapids and Inuvialuit cultural sites. It's a fly-in and fly-out rafting journey that finishes at the Arctic Ocean.

In his report Justice Thomas Berger wrote: "The Northern Yukon is an arctic and sub-arctic wilderness of incredible beauty, a rich and varied ecosystem: nine million acres of land and animals... a place of contrasts, of an explosively productive but brief summer and of a long hard winter, of rugged mountains and stark plains. Its teeming marshes and shore lands give it a beauty equalled by few other places on Earth."

Ivvavik National Park is the first national park in Canada created as the result of a First Nation land claim agreement. Its designation in 1984 was timely as a number of industrial

developments were being proposed for the area. The last one – the Arctic Gas Pipeline – was rejected by the Government of Canada following the Berger Inquiry of 1977. Justice Thomas Berger wrote: “The Northern Yukon is an arctic and sub-arctic wilderness of incredible beauty, a rich and varied ecosystem: nine million acres of land and animals... a place of contrasts, of an explosively productive but brief summer and of a long hard winter, of rugged mountains and stark plains. Its teeming marshes and shore lands give it a beauty equaled by few other places on Earth.”

We fly west from Inuvik, NWT on a Twin Otter for about an hour into the mountainous upper Firth, near the border between Alaska and the Yukon. In summer much of the vegetation is in bloom and wildflowers carpet the tundra.

Floating north, we move into open park-like terrain composed of rolling dry tundra and small spruce groves in valley bottoms. This area provides excellent walking and good opportunities to see not only caribou but also wolf, moose and grizzlies. Along with Vuntut National Park to the south and Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to the west in Alaska, Ivvavik National Park forms a core part of the range of the Porcupine Caribou Herd. This herd of over 200,000 barren-ground caribou migrates through this

area to and from calving grounds on the coastal plains of Alaska and Yukon.

After calving in early June, they congregate in dense herds and begin to migrate south again. The herd’s crossing of the Firth River is a spectacle that is unsurpassed in North America.

Occasionally our passage down the river coincides with this migration and we stop to watch this amazing sight. The river flows in a broad gravel bed before entering an exciting 40-kilometre long (25 mile) canyon, its walls dotted with nesting birds of prey.

The Firth braids again when it reaches the coastal plain and then enters a lagoon fronted by a long shingle spit that offers protection from the Arctic Ocean. The Arctic coastline is rich with birdlife and marine mammals such as bearded and ringed seals, and beluga and bowhead whales.

The plane lands on Nunaluk Spit and flies us along the Beaufort Coast, over the Mackenzie Delta, and back to Inuvik.

What About the Weather?

Typically we enjoy good weather on the Firth, with clear skies and temperatures ranging from 10 to 30 °C (50 to 86°F). But this is the

Arctic, and weather changes can see temperatures plunge to near freezing. Rainfall and snow may occur. Pack ice on the Beaufort Sea can create ice fog that can affect flying conditions. Come prepared to be flexible and to encounter all kinds of weather.

What About The Bugs?

Days are often breezy on the Firth, which keeps the mosquitoes at bay. In the Arctic a bug jacket is mandatory in the event of calm days. We bring a screened dining tent and toilet tent.

Fishing

Dolly Varden, Char and Arctic Grayling are both abundant on the Firth. If you plan to fish, you need to purchase a National Parks fishing licence in advance from the Parks Canada office in Inuvik.

Hiking

The 24-hour daylight allows for lots of hiking on most days. The trip generally includes two layover days for full days of hiking for those who wish.

Parks Canada Science Trip

Ask for details for this partnership with Parks Canada with accompanying scientists and opportunities to join in with the research from July 14–28.



TYLER GARNHAM PHOTO

FINDING MAMMOTHS

ON NUNALUK SPIT

DISCOVERIES ON NUNALUK SPIT.
TYLER GARNHAM PHOTO



NUNALUK SPIT IS A PLACE UNLIKE ANY OTHER.

Here, the Firth River meets the least-explored ocean on our planet: the Arctic Ocean, a place where the intensity and vibrancy of the North is always present.

Made of sediment and stone pulled from the mountains, shaped by water and continuously combed by ocean currents, this landmass bridges the terrestrial and the marine.

This is a place where muskox walk the shores of the Beaufort Sea while beluga feed on Arctic char; where terns, snow buntings, gulls and plover circle overhead; where tracks of wolf, muskox, caribou and grizzly give testament of an active wildlife corridor. When we visit, seals, beluga

and bowhead swim past, and we often find bones of their ancestors amongst the driftwood—some storm-tossed, some recently thawed from the permafrost in a melting Arctic.

The east end of Nunaluk Spit, is rapidly eroding. At its centre lies a permafrost core that disintegrates further with each storm.

This past summer, a trapper's cabin that was a well-preserved landmark for the last century gave in to the sea; now only a few logs, washed above the tideline, remain to tell of the region's recent occupants. But as the ice melts and some history is lost, another much-older connection to the past is revealed.

Over the years our guests have found tools such as snow knives, dog-sled runners and a myriad of ancient bones.



BERINGIA WAS THE ICE AGE LANDMASS THAT INCLUDED A LAND BRIDGE ACROSS THE BERING STRAIT THAT CONNECTED ASIA AND NORTH AMERICA. SEA LEVELS DECREASED AND THE LAND BRIDGE FORMED WHEN MUCH OF THE WORLD'S WATER BECAME LOCKED IN GLACIER ICE. MANY PLANTS AND ANIMALS - INCLUDING HUMANS - MADE THEIR WAY TO THE YUKON ACROSS THE LAND BRIDGE.

TYLER GARNHAM PHOTO

ITINERARY

DAY 0 – MACKENZIE DELTA RENDEZVOUS

This is the first date listed for your trip.

The trip starts and ends in Inuvik, Northwest Territories. To get there, you fly to Whitehorse, Yukon or Yellowknife, NWT and connect with a flight to Inuvik, NWT in the Mackenzie Delta where this giant river flows into the Beaufort Sea.

Trip participants meet the trip leader at the Parks Canada Inuvik Office at 7 pm, the night before the start of our journey. The Firth is in the Yukon, but Inuvik – in the northwest corner of the Northwest Territories – is the closest town with a jet-serviced airport.

DAY 1 – MARGARET LAKE

We'll have some time for last-minute errands in Inuvik in case you need to pick up something at the Northern Store or get a National Parks fishing license from Parks Canada.

The flight into Ivvavik National Park will leave Inuvik Airport around 10am.

We fly in a deHavilland Twin Otter aircraft, the workhorse aircraft of the North. The route takes us over the vast maze of the Mackenzie River Delta; one of the largest in the world, home to nesting swans, ducks and geese. As we reach the mountains we keep our eyes peeled for large mammals – caribou, muskox, moose, bears.

The hour-long flight to the river put-in takes us across north Yukon close to the border with Alaska and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR). Ivvavik was Canada's first national park created by a land claim. We land near Margaret Lake on "tundra tires." Guides go over the campsite routine with guests and then they get the opportunity to explore while guides prepare dinner.

DAY 2 – BRITISH MOUNTAINS

At first, the winding river has a quiet nature. Low banks reveal unobstructed views up the valley and limestone crags rise from the river. Our rafts glide across deep clear pools full of grayling and char.

The area is summer habitat for many migrating birds: phalaropes, sandpipers, plovers, jaegers, terns, buntings, longspurs and even robins. Caribou migration trails line the hillsides. Red fox and ptarmigan are common. The open tundra was made for wildlife watching and hiking – we carry a spotting scope to take advantage of viewing opportunities.

DAY 3 – RAPIDS & RIDGE HIKES

The culinary delights for which we are famous are once again whipped up by our talented guides. A few days into the journey, you begin to realize how this land has been used by indigenous cultures for thousands of years. Along much of the route, there are ancient signs of human use.

The Inuit would leave the coast to travel inland and hunt caribou and moose and fish for char. When we pick a nice campsite – one with good wildlife viewing opportunities or perhaps a great fishing hole (maybe we will add some freshly caught fish for dinner!) – we may find remains of old meat caches and stone rings.



MUSKOX HERD, FIRTH RIVER, IVVAVIK NATIONAL PARK, YUKON TERRITORY. TERRY PARKER PHOTO

DAY 4 & 5 – ANCIENT MOUNTAINS

Downstream of Joe Creek the river enters a spectacular canyon that continues for 40km. The landscape transforms as the limestone rock gives way to volcanics, mountains rise and vegetation changes.

The middle part of our adventure takes us through the ancient, unglaciated and jagged British Mountains. The Firth winds among these stained, eroding peaks, alternating between quiet pools and exhilarating rapids. In some places, remnants remain of stone fences built by Inuit hunters to funnel caribou into enclosures.

DAY 6 & 7 – SHEEP CREEK

Just above the confluence of Sheep Creek we run some of the expedition's bigger rapids. Partway through the canyon, we stop to camp.

Ridges to the west beckon for hiking, and we take some time to catch up on journaling, photography, and discovering the area's cultural and natural history.

DAY 8 – CARIBOU & FIRTH CANYON

Wildlife spotting is a non-stop activity as we watch for ten species of raptor, Dall sheep, wolves, bears and caribou. Sometimes we're fortunate to witness thousands of caribou from the 200,000-strong Porcupine Caribou Herd crossing the river and surrounding our camp.

Soon the British Mountains merge into the Buckland Hills. The canyon walls are left behind and the Firth emerges onto the coastal plain. At the end of the day, you will cozy up in your tent in the comforts that are the hallmark of our journeys.

DAY 9 – ENGIGSTIACK; ANCIENT ANTHROPOLOGY

As the plains spill before us, a rocky knoll known as Engigstiack rises a few hundred yards from the river. Though just one hundred feet high, Engigstiack provides great views over the plain.

We climb this timeless hill, an important archaeological site where hunters have stood for 8,000 years gazing across the tundra.

DAY 10 – MUSKOX HABITAT

We float across the plain to reach a campsite at the head of the Firth delta. Here vegetation is often draped in qiviut, the downy underhair of muskox which is one of the most valuable wools in the world. Here, we may have a good chance of seeing some of these hairy beasts.

DAY 11 – ARCTIC OCEAN & BEAUFORT SEA

River channels get smaller as we approach the ocean, so we may walk along the flowering tundra in order to lighten the rafts through the shallows.

On our last night we camp on the beach of Nunaluk Spit, at the mouth of the Firth River delta. Here we'll enjoy the first campfire of the trip, thanks to plentiful driftwood. Ocean currents carry nutrient-rich waters along this coast, attracting birds, mammals, whales and other sea life.

The water won't be the only nutrient-rich item to be had! You will enjoy yet another fantastic meal filled with fresh produce that the guides continually provide throughout the trip.



JOE CREEK CAMP ON THE FIRTH RIVER.
TYLER GARNHAM PHOTO

DAY 12 – ARCTIC OCEAN FLIGHT

The Twin Otter will pick us up for a flight along the Arctic Ocean and coastal plains, back to Inuvik, where we will gather for a final dinner. Remember to book a hotel room for this night, and plan your flight no earlier than the next morning. (Accommodation and meal not included)

DAY 13 – HOMEWARD BOUND

This is the last date listed for your trip.

After goodbyes and a last look around Inuvik, we will head for home with a cargo of fond and spectacular memories.

Please note: The above is a tentative itinerary and has been designed with much thought to capitalize on the most scenic and exciting parts of the river, while making time on other sections. Your guides will adjust the schedule to make the best use of river and weather conditions.

Please ensure you have a warm winter jacket, i.e. down coat or other “puffy” jacket. Robust rain gear (top and bottom) are provided as are lifejackets. Rain boots are recommended, we can rent these if you prefer not to travel with them. Rubberized rain gear is provided on all raft based expeditions.

Meals and pre- and post-trip accommodation in Inuvik are your responsibility – the cost is not included in the expedition fee.

We have attached a list of Inuvik hotels. Breakfast, lunch, dinner and snacks are included from the Day 1 lunch until the final river meal. Any other meals off the river are your responsibility.

SUGGESTED READING

Your guides will carry a small reference library which include field reference books. Following are some books for winter reading:

A Naturalist’s Guide to the Tatshenshini–Alsek by Heather Hamilton

After the Ice Age – The Return of Life to Glaciated North America by E.C. Pielou

Herschel Island Qikiqtaruk: A Cultural and Natural History edited by Chris Burn

Canada’s Western Arctic – Including the Dempster Highway by Western Arctic Handbook Committee

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JOE CREEK HIKE ON THE FIRTH RIVER. TYLER GARNHAM PHOTO

