

Nunavut youth go on wilderness trips across Canada this summer

Sailing, seeing trees, going swimming among the highlights for teens

William Koblensky Varela, Local Journalism Initiative

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This summer, 59 teenagers from across Nunavut will go on wilderness trips they otherwise wouldn't have been able to afford, thanks to financial support from the Ayalik Expeditions Fund.

Five different canoeing, camping and tall ship trips are all paid for by the fund throughout this summer.

The charitable program, launched by Laurie and David Pelly, started offering support in 2015.

One recent participant in the expeditions is Reuben Qaunaq, who was 17-years-old when he left his home of Arctic Bay and stepped on a sailboat for the first time.

The six-day voyage through Quebec and the Great Lakes in Ontario would give him experience abroad and employment opportunities near home.

“Before that, I had zero experience in sailing, I didn’t even know what it was,” Qaunaq said.

For three consecutive summers, Qaunaq sailed with Tall Ships Expeditions Canada’s youth camp.

He excelled at the teambuilding and personal development camp and was brought on as a petty officer, or a team lead, in charge of a group of five youths.

“It was an honour because I was given an opportunity to travel to places I’ve never been to, and places most people have never been to,” Qaunaq said.



He is now working on cruise ships as an intercultural educator and trip team lead between Greenland, the Canadian Arctic and Alaska.

He's still thankful to Ayalik Expeditions and wants Nunavummiut to know how much of an impact it made in his life.

"These opportunities will open so many doors for young people, even a career," Qaunaq said.

Those opportunities are continuing this summer, and one of the Ayalik Expeditions' trips includes eight 14- and 15-year-old girls from Nunavut who are canoeing across Great Slave Lake in the Northwest Territories.

The group was in Yellowknife for 12 days starting June 23, including a nine-day journey across the lake, guided by Jackpine Paddle's Kyra Hermann.

Hermann is trained as more than just a paddle instructor — she's also a mental health support worker at a wilderness-based rehabilitation program and works as a high school teacher during the winter.

Taking Inuit youth into new environments with different food and sleeping schedules can be a challenge, Hermann admitted.

"This year I have two girls who have never in their lives seen trees," she said about the contingent.

Many Inuit youth who go on Ayalik trips have never gone swimming before, but it's also usually the favourite activity among the teens, Hermann said.

The girls are planning to embark on a 60-kilometre canoe trip around Great Slave Lake, with one portage.

While the trek is long, Hermann said the girls often become very close over the course of the journey.

"They're usually pretty shy at first, and then by the end they're best friends," she said.

Another Ayalik Expeditions' returnee this summer is 15-year-old Matthew Ayaruak from Pond Inlet, who is attending the leadership program at the YMCA Camp Wanakita in Haliburton, Ont.

Ayaruak impressed last year at Camp Wanakita, in part by learning how to canoe in just 20 minutes, he said.

He was scheduled to depart for Ontario on June 27.