



Canada's First Peoples

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The Inuit lived in an area comprising a large part of northern Earth, including Northern Canada. Parts of the Yukon, NWT, Nunavut, Quebec and Labrador were settled by the first peoples of the Canadian Arctic.

The Environment

- The Canadian Arctic was one of the coldest and most unforgiving environments on Earth. Winters were long and cold, often with little light. Therefore, the people of the Arctic were forced to adapt to the harsh surroundings in order to survive.
- They adapted every aspect of their lifestyle, from shelters, to food, to transportation, in order to survive in the cold north.
- They lived in a large geographic area, and were some of the most sparsely distributed people on the planet.
- The environment of the Inuit was diverse, and often varied seasonally. It included:
 - Three Oceans (Pacific, Atlantic, and Arctic)
 - Mountains (Northern Rockies)
 - Arctic plains (tundra)
- Winters were long, so the Inuit had to live with ice and deep snow most of the year.
- In fact, the sub-soil, even close to the surface, stayed frozen year-round. This thick frozen layer was called 'permafrost'.
- In the far north, there were even periods of complete darkness during the winter, sometimes for months at a time, when the sun did not rise.
- Most of the Canadian Arctic was like a 'frozen desert' with deep snow, and harsh weather most of the year.
- There were frequent windstorms, which caused blowing snow and large snowdrifts along the barren landscape.
- The summers were short, only lasting a couple of months every year.
- In the very northern areas (near the north pole), there were periods of continuous sunlight when the sun never fully set.
- During the winter, nothing was able to grow. The only time that plants were able to grow was during the summer, and since summers were so short, only small plants, like mosses, lichens, and scrub bushes were able to survive before winter arrived again.



Inuit Snowhouse



Winter Landscape



Snowdrift



Treeless Arctic Tundra



Summer in the Arctic

Settlements and Housing

- The Inuit were nomadic people, so they rarely stayed in one place for very long. Therefore, their houses had to be quick and easy to build.
- During the summer, the Inuit built tents out of driftwood or poles covered with animal skins, mostly caribou or sealskin. These tents were not unlike the Plains tipis.
- A ring of boulders around the base held down the tent skin covering.
- Since wood was so hard to come by, the wooden poles used to make the tents were jealously guarded.
- People from different areas would form large villages during the summer. In the winter everyone scattered across the land into small bands again.
- During the winter, Inuit families would follow the hunt. They needed a shelter that would keep them warm, and protect them from the harsh winter weather. The most common winter shelter was a snowhouse, more commonly known as an 'igloo'.



Summer Inuit Tent

The Igloo

- An igloo was a temporary, dome-shaped shelter made out of snow blocks.
- The blocks were cut from the snow, and piled in a spiral shape, leaning in slightly. This gave the igloo its dome shape.



Igloo at night

- Soft snow was used to fill any holes, and add extra insulation.
- Depending on the size of the igloo, it usually took the Inuit 20-30 minutes to build.
- Larger, more permanent igloos could reach 4 metres in diameter and 3 metres in height.
- Sleeping platforms were made of ice blocks, covered with fur.



Building an igloo



Putting the finishing touches on an igloo

Inuvialuit House



Remains of an Inuvialuit house

- The Inuit of the western arctic (Inuvialuit) were about half of all Canadian Inuit. They lived in the richest part of the high arctic and had access to trees.
- They used them to build permanent log-and-sod houses in which they lived mostly in the winter.
- They excavated a hole into the ground and set up a ring of vertical poles.
- The poles were tilted inwards at the top so that blocks of sod could be piled up over them and remain in place.
- The result was a partially subterranean log-and-sod hut with the floor below ground to preserve warmth.
- A fireplace provided warmth.
- Sometimes villages of 10 to 20 of these log-and-sod houses were set up.

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