

Inuit

Overview

- Inuit are one of Canada's Aboriginal Peoples, and inhabit the country's Arctic region.
- The word "Inuit" means "people" in their language, which includes Inuktitut, Inuinnaqtun and Inuvialuktun.
- 50,485 people, or roughly 4% of Canada's Aboriginal population, identified themselves as Inuit, according to Statistics Canada in 2006.
- The Canadian Arctic has been home to the Inuit for over 4,000 years.
- There's a strong oral tradition in Inuit culture, in which stories explain the creation of their people and offer explanations for environmental events. These stories emphasize that everything in the world is alive. Drum dancing, performed at gatherings and celebrations, is a popular form of Inuit music. The singers are usually women, who form a circle, while the men dance in the middle.
- Throat singing also plays an important part of Inuit culture, and is typically performed by two women facing one another. More and more, young Inuit (including men) are combining other musical styles with throat singing.
- Soapstone, wood, ivory, baleen, pelts and hides, bone and antlers—materials typically available in the north—are used by the Inuit to create art.
- The Inuksuit (singular is Inukshuk), markers placed along caribou trails during hunting to help hunters avoid getting lost, were created by the Inuit.
- Inuit seemed to have reached the Atlantic coast around 1400 AD, staying almost exclusively north of the Arctic tree-line.
- As hunters and gatherers, Inuit learned how to subsist on the land in extreme climates. Their clothing, hunting techniques, shelters and modes of transportation are a reflection of their adaptability.
- Inuit first had contact with outsiders in 1576 when they encountered Martin Frobisher's expedition, which landed on Baffin Island. It wouldn't be until the mid 18th century that proper trade relations would begin between Inuit and Europeans. Relations wouldn't truly take-off until the 19th century.
- With the arrival of explorers, traders, missionaries, whalers, scientists and others came significant changes to life as the Inuit knew it.

History: The Beginning

Inuit, descended from the Thule culture, arrived in northern Canada in roughly 1000 AD from Alaska.

- Inuit were nomadic, often living in small camps during one season, and joining with others as the seasons change.
- Working dogs and tools readily enabled the Inuit to settle into their new land and expand their society in the cold climate.

Geography

- Inuit live in an area called Inuit Nunangat, which includes: the territory of Nunavut, the northern third of Quebec called Nunavik, the region of Nunatsiavut in Labrador and in the northern part of the Northwest Territories called the Inuvialuit Settlement Region. Combined, these regions make up a third of Canada's total land mass.
- The climate in the Arctic features long daylight hours in the summer with moderate temperatures and long and cold winters with little to no sunlight.

Food

With sophisticated hunting expertise, honed over the course of 4,000 years of living in the Arctic, the Inuit became skilled hunters and gatherers.

- Many Inuit groups focused their hunt on coastal animals such as birds, beluga, seal, walrus, fish and narwhale during the summer months, when a variety of vegetation was also gathered for food.

- In the long winter months many Inuit groups then lived on supplies preserved from the summer as well as seals, walrus, caribou and bears that were hunted on sea ice, and fish like arctic char, salmon and whitefish.
- Food preparation and food storage was aided by whale and seal oil, which also served as fuel for soapstone lamps and cooking, which were of vital importance during the eight months of little or no sunlight.

Shelter

- The typical Inuit household consisted of a married couple, their children, elderly and unmarried relatives. Most families who chose to live together were closely related, with leadership of the group generally assumed by the oldest member or an Angakkuq, meaning shaman.
- It was not uncommon for Inuit groups to have both a summer home and a winter home.
- Tents made of caribou hides with wooden frames were the standard summer home.
- In winter, families typically resided in sod homes or snow houses called igloos. Sod homes were made from digging out a hole in the ground and a building a pile of rocks and sod all around the outside to make walls. The frame for the roof was made of pieces of wood or whalebone, which was then covered with sod. Blocks of snow shaped into a dome became igloo, which were mostly used as temporary shelter during winter hunting trips. The igloo is an ingenious invention, as it's both warm and easy to build.
- Today, most Inuit settle in villages and live in houses.

Transportation

- Many Inuit used sleds made of animal bones and skins to travel from one place to another. These sleds, which could glide over snow and ice, were pulled by dogs with thick fur called huskies.
- Inuit invented the kayak, a one-person boat propelled by a double-bladed paddle, to hunt and travel by water. Kayaks were made from whalebone to make a light framework, and were covered with stretched seal skins, while whale fat made them watertight.

- Larger boats called "umiak" (not unlike a large rowboat) were also used to transport people, huskies and supplies and to hunt whales and walrus.

Clothing

- With animal hides, fur, quills, feathers and trees, Inuit created beautiful clothing.
- The clothing designs of Inuit differed from region to region.
- Due to the extreme cold temperatures of the Arctic, Inuit had to ensure their clothes were warm. Caribou fur was considered the warmest so it was used to make layered parkas for the winter.
- Seal and walrus skin and intestine were waterproof, and could be cleaned, soaked and dried to make waterproof clothing.

Language

- Inuvialuktun, Inuinnaqtun and Inuktitut are the three main Inuit language dialects in Canada, each of which contain a series of sub-dialects.
- Inuit can determine the community of origin of an Inuktitut speaking person based on their dialect and tone.

Groups

- 1) **Labrador:** Most of the Atlantic coast of Labrador has been occupied by the Labrador Inuit (or Nunatsiavummiut) since the historic period and they were even known to cross to northern Newfoundland and as far south as the Gulf of St Lawrence.
- 2) **Nunavik:** The shores of Ungava Bay, on the south shore of Hudson Strait and on the eastern coast of Hudson Bay, are home to the Northern Québec Inuit (or Nunavimmiut).
- 3) **Baffin Island:** Baffin Island in the new territory of Nunavut is home to Baffin Island Inuit, a group that has considerable regional dialectic and cultural diversity.
- 4) **Iglulik:** Iglulik country extends from Igluligaarjuk (formerly Chesterfield Inlet) on northwestern Hudson

Bay northward along Melville Peninsula and across the northern third of Baffin Island. Iglulik Inuit (or Iglulingmiut), translates to “it has houses,” the name of an important settlement site.

- 5) **Caribou:** Caribou Inuit, who got their name due to their near total reliance on caribou for food, shelter and clothing, occupied the Barren Grounds region to the west of Hudson Bay during the 19th and early 20th centuries.
- 6) **Netsilik:** One of several groups of Inuit who live on the Arctic coast of Canada west of Hudson Bay are Netsilik Inuit (or Natsilingmiut).
- 7) **Copper:** Copper Inuit, who originally occupied Banks and Victoria Islands and the adjacent mainland region of the central Canadian Arctic, were given their name due to their extensive use of artifacts made with the copper deposits in the region.
- 8) **Western Arctic Inuit:** Relatively recent immigrants, the Western Arctic Inuit (or Inuvialuit) from Alaska, took the place of the Mackenzie Inuit, who were essentially wiped out by several smallpox and influenza epidemics early in the 20th century.

Contact with Europeans

- Inuit had very little contact with the European settlers prior to the 1900s. Very few settlers came to these regions, typically only for whale hunting or fur trading. At this time, the Inuit were primarily guides, traders and models of survival.
- Southern Canadians and other outsiders began settling in the Far North throughout the first half of the 20th century, bringing their law, technology, religion and disease, and causing great change to the Inuit way of life. To ensure the North belonged to Canada the Canadian government moved Inuit from their traditional hunting camps into modern houses.
- Children learned non-native traditions in modern schools, which separated children from their families. These schools featured strict discipline and discouraged students from speaking their own language and practicing their culture.
- Many Inuit had a tough time adapting to the changes at first.

Inuit Today

- Today, Inuit cultural identity is preserved through language, family and cultural laws, and through their acclaimed Inuit art. As a result, Inuit culture is thriving.
- Inuit live in modern villages, in houses built with modern materials. Their children attend schools within their own communities, learning and studying in their own language, in addition to English or French.
- Seal-skin kayaks have made way for modern kayaks, and snowmobiles have now replaced dog sleds. But hunting practices still continue to a certain extent.
- The creation of a new territory in Canada, Nunavut (which translates to “our land” in Inuktitut, the language of Inuit), is one of the greatest Inuit achievements in recent years. Inuit in Nunavut have special rights to the natural resources in the region, including hunting and fishing rights. Most importantly, Inuit govern themselves in Nunavut, which has renewed their sense of collective pride.
- That said, many Inuit communities in Canada continue to endure hardships such as high unemployment, substance abuse, crime, violence and suicide.
- Inuit culture is a thriving export, as carvings, print making, textiles, and throat singing are very popular in Canada and beyond.
- The Inukshuk is now an iconic national symbol in Canada.
- Inuit’s strong cultural traditions continue through storytelling, mythology, music and dance.