

An artistic watercolor illustration of a small boat named 'VAGABOND' navigating through a field of white sea ice. The boat is dark brown with a white cabin and a tall mast. A polar bear is depicted on the ice to the right of the boat. The background is a soft, hazy blue and white, suggesting a cold, open environment.

LAVIE

SCENES FROM A REAL ADVENTURE:
The Brossiers spent years on a boat amid the
Arctic sea ice, exploring, raising toddlers,
hunting seal—and learning that survival on
earth's coldest inhabited place takes a hamlet.

STORY ASHLEIGH GAUL • ILLUSTRATIONS JONATHAN WRIGHT

EN GLACE

Like many things in Grise Fiord, hauling a 30-tonne polar yacht up the beach to the edge of the main drag is an unceremonious affair. “I wasn’t really paying attention,” says Larry Audlaluk of the afternoon in September 2012 when a family of French explorers floated into town. (If Grise Fiord had a man about town, it would be Larry.)

Mayor Liza Ningiuk, who’d first invited the Brossiers to winter in the hamlet, is on the beach—not to offer an official welcome

but because, well, someone’s got to watch the kids, Léonie, six, and Aurore, three, while their dad Eric swims around the hull in a wet-suit, preparing for drydock.

The yacht—named the *Vagabond*, and immediately the tallest structure in town—is up in under an hour, balanced in the bed of a seasonal stream and almost level. >>



Over the next few days, the girls disappear with the local kids while Eric and wife France Pinczon du Sel prep the *Vagabond* for winter: stocks of non-perishables—onions, apples, potatoes, coffee, dry ham, biscuits and chocolate—go into the galley. A makeshift outhouse is set up with extra sawdust donated from the company constructing a new hamlet office. Visitors offering help drift by as casually as the local hares, polar bears and muskox. A local man piles a berm of rocks and gravel up against the hull for insulation. The neighbours offer to share their wifi. The next family over donates electricity for the Brossiers' oven via extension cord.

That month, they write in their ship's blog:

À terre. September 17. Gathered to haul *Vagabond* out of the sea: a high equinoctial tide, a calm sea and an available loader. At 4 p.m., the boat is on land, for ten months! Thus, invited by our friends, we will spend the winter in the middle of the village, close to them, to the dogs, to the school ... A new life is starting.

BOTH IN THEIR EARLY 40s, bright-eyed and permanently ruddy-cheeked, the Brossiers have the résumés of typical polar explorers. In their hometown of Brest, France, they grew up on a steady diet of New World captain's logs and accounts of the first inhabitants—strong, curious, resourceful, traditional. They support their travels by writing books, making films, selling memberships to their Arctic adventure club and providing data about circumpolar air, sea and ice to southern scientists. They've sailed through the Northwest Passage from the east and west. France once fended off an aggressive polar bear while locked out of the *Vagabond's* cabin. By her first birthday, Léonie had already been rescued by helicopter from a drifting ice floe.

In the boat, there's a library of adventure books and films with titles like *Horizontal Everest*. The Brossiers keep a running tally of fellow North Pole/Northwest Passage conquerors—they counted 17 in 2013, by sailboat, rowboat, speedboat, dog team, light aircraft, mini-catamaran and amphibious truck.

The Brossiers' M.O. is to find a sheltered bay with a high animal count, preferably on a migration route or two, drop anchor and wait for the water to freeze around them. Overwintering, a technique developed by Norse explorer Fridtjof Nansen in 1892, requires a shallow-drafted hull that can withstand the pressure of shifting sea ice.

From 2004 to 2011, the Brossiers overwintered in Svalbard; when the ice froze up, they were completely alone. They once went three weeks without encountering a single living being. Their only link to the outside world was via supply helicopter.

Our yacht, now hut, seems to be very still, frozen in ice for eight months. But she is coming up and down with tides. Cracks along the shore are opening and closing with creakings that are sometimes making the dogs mad. These movements are quite strong at spring tides, and as the boat is very close to shore, she is tilting one side, then the other ... So we have to hold our cups like when at sea! Somehow, we are sailing at the speed of one wave every 12 hours...

But in 2011, they came to the Canadian North to get to know one of the communities that polar conquerors often pass through on their way through the Arctic: Grise Fiord, population 150. They spent the first year in the sea ice far outside of town. The second year, they moved in. They had learned that no one can survive in the Arctic alone.



IT'S WEDNESDAY, Christmas 2011. The party's gone on for three days already—it's supposed to last until New Year's—and France and Eric haven't fed their dogs since they left the boat on Sunday. Still, as the Brossiers slip out of the festivities to escape back home for a few days, Grise Fiordmiut keep stopping them in the street to ask, "Are you going back already?"

Eric and France had planned to spend Christmas on the *Vagabond*, but while they and the girls were hanging the first tinsel from the boat's portholes, Liza Ningiuk and her husband Aksakjuk arrived at the boat on Ski-Doos. They brought mail, fresh food and fruit juices and homemade anoraks for Léonie and Aurore. Then they left a *qamutiq* in the ice, and said—no discussion—they'd be back to pick them up on Christmas Eve.

Eric and France hardly knew the Ningiuks. They'd spent a few weeks in the bay in front of Grise Fiord when they first got to Canada in August, 2011. But the bay, and much of the coast of Ellesmere Island, is rough on ships. It was impossible to stay longer.

In those first few weeks, the Brossiers explored the hamlet—France, an artist, attended classes on sewing pelts and preparing muskox hides; Léonie had her first Inuktitut lesson; Eric procured some extra huskies from the Ningiuks' son, as well as a seal net and a few lessons on how to catch and prepare seal meat for the dogs. Liza first suggested the Brossiers park their boat on the beach in town to protect it from the winter storms, but the family declined.

Outside Grise Fiord, the nearby fiords offered a familiar solitude, independence and history. France and Eric quickly found the spot where Otto Sverdrup, Nansen's student, inheritor of the *Fram* and Grise Fiord's original overwinterer, erected a cross in 1900. They settled on South Cape Fiord, a narrow inlet about 30 kilometres from town. It's packed with narwhals, Greenland seals, hares, wolves, foxes, muskoxen and polar bears.

Even so, no one within a day's Ski-Doo ride from Grise Fiord spends the holidays alone. At 9 a.m. on Christmas eve, and -39 degrees, France and Eric transferred the girls from their beds to a hunter's frozen *qamutiq*. They arrived to a 110-person feast in the community gym, followed by a week of music, gifts and games.

Breathing on the pack ice. Alone in the middle of the fiord, on 30 centimetres thick pack ice, while I'm pulling [an instrument] to the surface, I suddenly hear a breath, powerful, very close. I look around in vain, ice is very smooth all over many square kilometres, not a bump to hide an animal. Then I see a little dome: a seal came to catch his breath...

"Nights start around 7 p.m. and can last until dawn," wrote Eric. "The town is sleeping in the morning."

On Wednesday, the Brossiers return alone to the *Vagabond* to feed the dogs and drop off a *qamutiq* full of presents, but they're back in town by New Year's.

SOMETIMES, DRIVING HIS SNOWMOBILE alone across the ice, Eric feels a presence and turns to find hunters, tens of kilometres from town, riding alongside. Once, they give Léonie a live baby seal to play with. They followed its tracks, leading miles from its hole; the only options were to kill it or leave it for the polar bears. The girls take turns squeezing it like a teddy bear, then the hunters take it home and eat it.

Eventually Eric starts asking the hunters if he can tag along with them on their trips to find muskox, caribou and polar bears. He never does any hunting himself, but he notices he feels safer and goes farther with them than when he's alone.

Many hunters are out hunting during the week-end, and I often stop to have a chat with those I meet along the way. [One hunter] tells me how, a few days ago, when approaching a female polar bear, they scared her two cubs. So he took them both on his knees, on his snowmobile, and brought them back to their mother!

For her birthday, Eric and Liza arrange for France to shadow Liza on a seal hunt. From the *Vagabond*, they travel by Ski-Doo, stopping along the way to shoot at seals from up to 300 metres away. Liza, a Canadian Ranger who's been hunting since she was five, spots animals farther out on the ice than France can. >>



France, until now, has mostly been teaching herself. She practised cleaning skins on the seals hunters brought for the dogs. She's already spent hours tiptoeing up to seal holes near the boat behind a white cloth screen she made with the fabric from an old tent, a rifle at her right side, Aurore at her left.

Liza hits, but her target slides back down into its hole. They race to it. Liza points her gun straight down and instructs France to hook the wounded seal with the harpoon if it appears. Five minutes they wait. Then faintly, blowing and breathing through the bloody slush, it gets louder and louder. The seal's nose appears. Liza fires; it sinks a bit but France hooks it. Liza reaches for a larger hook. France tries to hoist it out of the water, but the skin rips and this time, the seal sinks for good. They return home empty-handed. "I'm learning by making mistakes," writes France, "Soon, I hope, I will use what I learned with her this day."

whole other local history that left him and his relatives eating from that dump in the late-1950s—the High Arctic Relocation. Larry and his sister are some of the only surviving exiles, out of the 19 families transferred to Grise Fiord and Resolute from Inukjuak, Quebec, and Pond Inlet in 1953 and 1955.

France caught a seal.

IT'S MESSY. Coming back from a picnic on the ice, France drives the Ski-Doo, the girls ride in the qamutiq and Eric is on skis in the back, filming. A seal appears on the ice about 100 metres ahead, so France drives for it. "The foolhardy seal," writes Eric, "not like the others, didn't dive when we came to his hole." Before France can veer off, their huskies attack its back flippers, drawing blood.

France jumps from the Ski-Doo, slings her rifle over her shoulder, cocks, and shoots at point blank range.

When Eric's footage screens in France as part of a documentary, *Sur le grand océan blanc*, director Hugues de Rosière says some audiences had trouble watching it. "I was a little hesitant to put that scene in," he explains. "I thought it was a little violent ...

But in the end, I thought it would be hypocritical not to show it because that hunt is vital to the nourishment of the dogs."

In Grise Fiord, the reaction is predictably different. "They thought it was hilarious," says Eric. "They were laughing so much." Asked what he thought about the French reaction, Larry scoffs. "I think Hollywood has invented that question," he says. "I taught my daughter to understand that real animals are not the animals that Walt Disney has created ... And I think [Léonie and Aurore] are pretty much in the same situation ... I think it's going to be a bit difficult for those girls to go back to France and live in the city."

Bay of Woe. Cardigan Strait. Walrus Fiord has the right name. In Hourglass Bay we visited the hut set up by the crew of the yacht Northanger in 1999. Seven people spent the winter here in 1999-2000, a century after Otto Sverdrup's expedition (four winters onboard the Fram). We are in touch with our predecessors.

THE BROSSIERS' INITIAL reluctance to set up in the middle of town and throw themselves into community life might have come across as aloof, but for Larry Audlaluk, it was a gesture of respect. "They were never demanding," he says, "And for that reason, I guess, we felt we could trust them."

One day, the Brossiers accompany Larry on a trip to the dump to pick up a few things for the boat—wood, a propane regulator, a bike frame. Larry shares the Brossiers' interest in early exploration and even lends them a copy of Sverdrup's *New Land, Four Years in the Arctic*. But he's shocked to learn how little they know about a

*Whatever your adventure,
Let Calm Air take you there.*

PASSENGER Frequent Daily Flights, Convenient Connections, Low One-Way Fares
CARGO General & Priority, Bulk Fuel, 'Big Door'
CHARTER ATR42, ATR72, Dornier Jet328

Calm Air

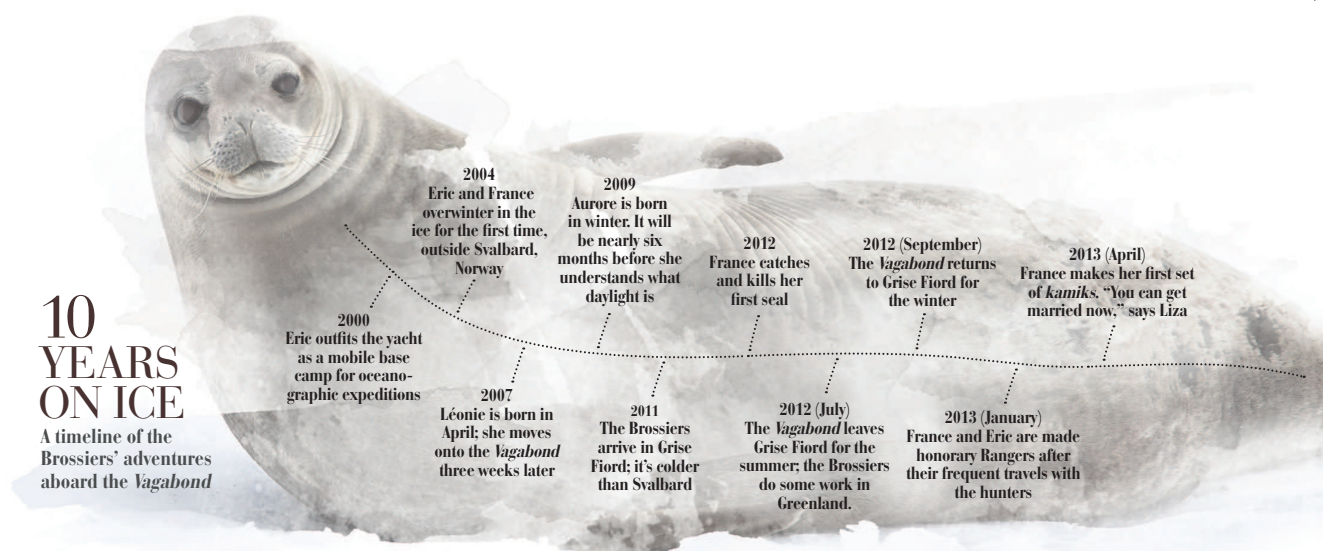
CalmAir.com

Passenger **1.800.839.2256**

Charter & Cargo **1.888.225.6247**

10 YEARS ON ICE

A timeline of the Brossiers' adventures aboard the *Vagabond*



AT SOME POINT BETWEEN June and July 2012, Eric and France decide to return after the summer to drydock in the community. They head east to Greenland when the ice melts, but Liza and her family track the boat's progress all summer, and when they return in September, much of the town is there on shore to greet them. Liza's son Jeffrey contacts them on the VHF radio: "Welcome home," he says, and they prepare the boat.

In that second year in the community Eric travelled farther and mapped more area than ever before—enough for a comprehensive profile of the ice on the east coast of Ellesmere Island. Knowing the hunters were near, he sometimes left the boat for days on end. In May, he waited out a blizzard for four days in a local hunter's cabin. They spent another Christmas in town. Léonie, who arrived in Grise Fiord speaking only French, finished her first year of school fluent in English and Inuktitut.

Liza says the beach looks empty now that the *Vagabond's* gone and the stream is back. Larry says the community was glad to have the Brossiers—but he also says they didn't really have much of an effect on Grise Fiord. "They were only here two years," he says, "and we did not really have regular contact with them until the second year."

Still, the winter ice road that Grise Fiord maintains got rerouted last year based on the ice thickness measurements that Eric took with the hunters (apparently it was going over a section of very thin ice). "Nah," says Larry. "We already knew that. They just corroborated what we already knew ... But they were here 24/7, almost 12 months of the year, and that's what made them stand out."

This September, they moved south, to Qikiqtarjuaq. The bay has better shelter, so they can stay close to the community without becoming the skyline. They left town in the evening, weighed down with packages to deliver from friends in Grise Fiord to their relatives in Qikiqtarjuaq: "When it was getting dark," wrote Eric, "it was time to set sails. Again, many friends came to say goodbye. A lump in our throats. Two years of sharing, hard to turn over a new leaf.

"Yesterday morning, our little family crew woke up at anchor, rested. A polar bear walked on the beach, peacefully. Not long after, *Vagabond* met her own track from ten years ago, while sailing around the Arctic." [UP](#)

VIEW: Sur le grand océan blanc at [Nemesis.tv](#)

Waste Knot Want Not

Untangling northern finances since 1969.

www.averycooper.com



Avery, Cooper & Co.

CERTIFIED GENERAL ACCOUNTANTS FINANCIAL CONSULTANTS

4918-50th St. Laurentian Bldg.,
Box 1620, Yellowknife, NT X1A 2P2
T: 867.873.3441 F: 867.873.2353
TF: 1.800.661.0787

