



No Roads Lead to Canada's Northernmost Brewery

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I stamp the snow from my boots and peel off the three jackets, two hats, and insulated pants I'm wearing to protect me from the Iqaluit wind. While it's early April—nominally the start of spring on Canada's Baffin Island—the late afternoon temperature is hovering around 5° fahrenheit.

Inside the warehouse that houses [Nunavut Brewing Company](#), though, general manager Katie Barbour is swirling around like a summer storm. She's greeting customers, checking with her staff, and talking with visitors about the challenges of making beer at Canada's northernmost craft brewery.

NuBrew opened its doors in 2018, although its story started years earlier and its future may be linked to the complex liquor laws and attitudes about alcohol in Nunavut. Canada's newest territory is home to fewer than 40,000 people—more than 80 percent of whom are Inuit—who live in a vast region that stretches 800,000 square miles between the North Atlantic and Arctic Oceans.

Find Land, Start a Brewery

Iqaluit is three hours by plane and a world apart from the nearest major city, Ottawa, Canada's national capital. Many of the brightly painted, low-rise buildings in this community of 8,000 perch on stilts, and the roof of the town's Anglican church curves like an igloo. The rocky landscape has little vegetation; a tour guide at the Nunavut Legislative Assembly quips that a leafy glass-and-metal sculpture in the building's lobby is the territory's only tree.

"We realized that we were the only region of Canada without a craft brewery," Iqaluit architect Ambrose Livingstone, one of NuBrew's owners, tells me.

The brewery incorporated in 2014, after five Iqaluit business people—with backgrounds in construction, development, and engineering—partnered to lease a piece of property from the local airport. Although none of the partners—two of whom have Inuit heritage—had any experience in the beverage industry, they saw the rare availability of this parcel of land as the chance to launch a new business.



Evolving Alcohol Laws

Livingstone recounts that the brewery's first obstacle was a legal one. "Nunavut had no zoning for breweries, because who ever thought anyone would open a brewery here?"

In fact, purchasing alcohol locally had been illegal in Iqaluit for decades and several Nunavut communities still ban liquor sales. Many regions across Canada's far north

implemented alcohol prohibitions in an attempt to reduce levels of suicide, domestic violence, and other social issues that have been linked to alcohol abuse. Canadian government policies in effect from the late 1800s through the late 1900s, particularly the residential school laws that required indigenous children to be separated from their families and sent to church-run boarding schools, left a legacy of trauma that Inuit communities are still dealing with today, resulting in high incidences of substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other mental health challenges.

Addressing these issues through outright alcohol prohibitions have met with mixed results, however, and some northern communities are now opting for a “harm reduction” strategy, rather than a total alcohol ban. In 2017, territorial authorities voted to open Iqaluit’s Beer and Wine Store as a three-year government-operated pilot. According to NuBrew’s Barbour, the government’s objectives in selling less potent alcohol were to deter illegal liquor smuggling and moonshine production and to curb the alcohol abuses that have long plagued the territory.

In this evolving regulatory climate, it took until 2018 for Nunuvut Brewing to receive its operating permit, although Barbour notes that the brewery faced little resistance from local residents. “Most people thought that beer would be less evil than vodka,” she says.

The permit enabled the company to make beer and sell its products at the government store and at the town’s few licensed pubs and restaurants. However, they can’t sell cans, growlers, or any closed containers directly to the public. “You can come into the brewery for a pint or a tasting flight,” Barbour explains, but you can’t purchase anything to take home. “That’s one of the biggest issues NuBrew is facing right now.”



More Northern Challenges

The other issue plaguing the brewery is its remote location. “Shipping logistics are so complicated—and kind of scary,” says Barbour, who worked for more than ten years in the wine and cider industries, primarily in her home province of Nova Scotia, before relocating to Iqaluit to join the fledgling brewery in 2017. Since no roads connect Iqaluit to any of Nunavut’s 25 communities or to towns further south, all goods must be transported by air or sea.

Barbour notes that she has to forecast and order all the ingredients the brewery will need for the coming year for delivery on the Sealift, the cargo boat that travels north only when Iqaluit’s harbor thaws, typically between July and October.

Livingstone adds, “The territory’s liquor law was developed before the internet. The liquor board has to approve anything that we put online.” Local regulations currently prohibit the brewery from advertising or even showing its products on social media. “One thing you discover quickly up north is that it’s not all about you,” Barbour continues. “You need to fit into this intricate society. I’ve learned more in the last two years than in my whole career.”

What’s on Tap?

When NuBrew was finally able to start making beer, Barbour’s small team thought hard about what would appeal to the local market. “Iqaluit drinks Budweiser, so we wanted to come up with beer that was similar, but in a craft style,” she says.

The brewery’s Floe Edge Lager, which Barbour calls “a solid, approachable beer,” is now its most popular, named for the area where land-based ice meets the open ocean. NuBrew ferments its Floe Edge for five to six weeks at a lower-than-average temperature. “Lagers aren’t typically super easy to knock out. They’re more costly to produce and take longer than other styles,” Barbour says. “But don’t you want to have a cool-fermented beer in the Arctic?”

The other beers in the regular line-up at NuBrew’s tasting room—where a curved wood bar faces its production space—are Aupaqtuq Red Ale (aupaqtuq is the Inuktitut word for “red”), a lighter pale ale, and Frob Gold, a strong English-style ale, which takes its name from Frobisher Bay which surrounds the city.

Today, NuBrew is struggling to increase its capacity. Barbour recently purchased a new 12,000-liter tank, which she expects will enable the brewery to double its production. “I had to measure the ceiling. It just fit into the building!”

“We’re running dry. We can’t make enough beer to satisfy Iqaluit.”