

Once We Had the Arctic

Once
We
Had
the
Arctic

Markku
Heikkilä

Translated by
Mark Waller

into

Journeys and Stories from the North



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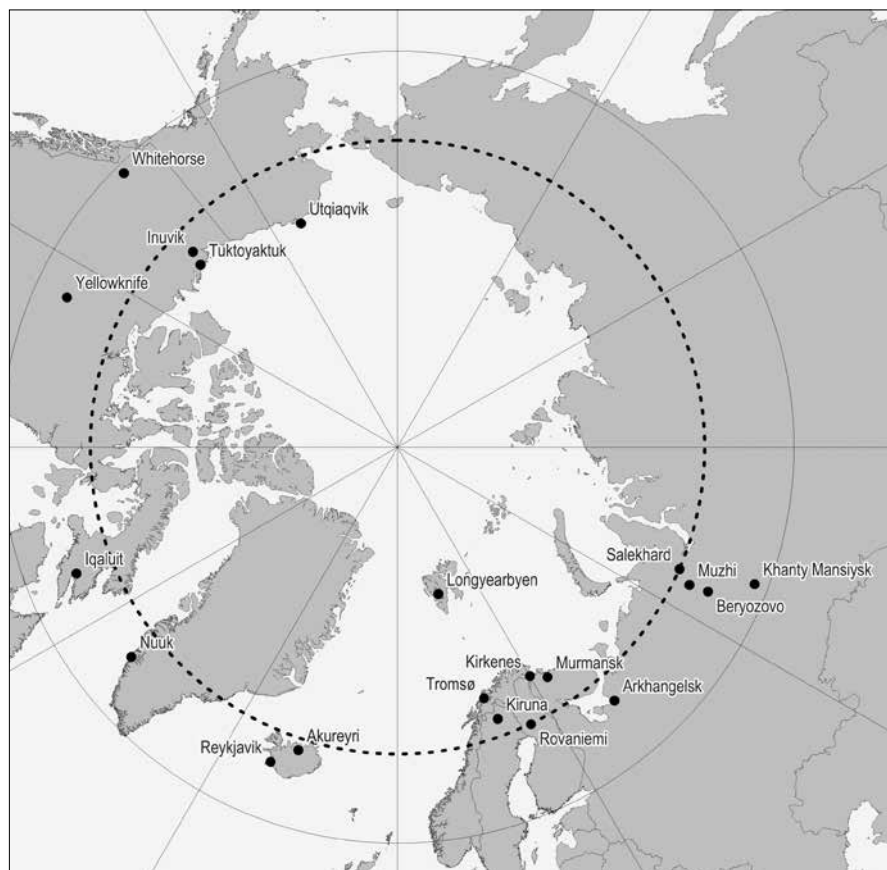
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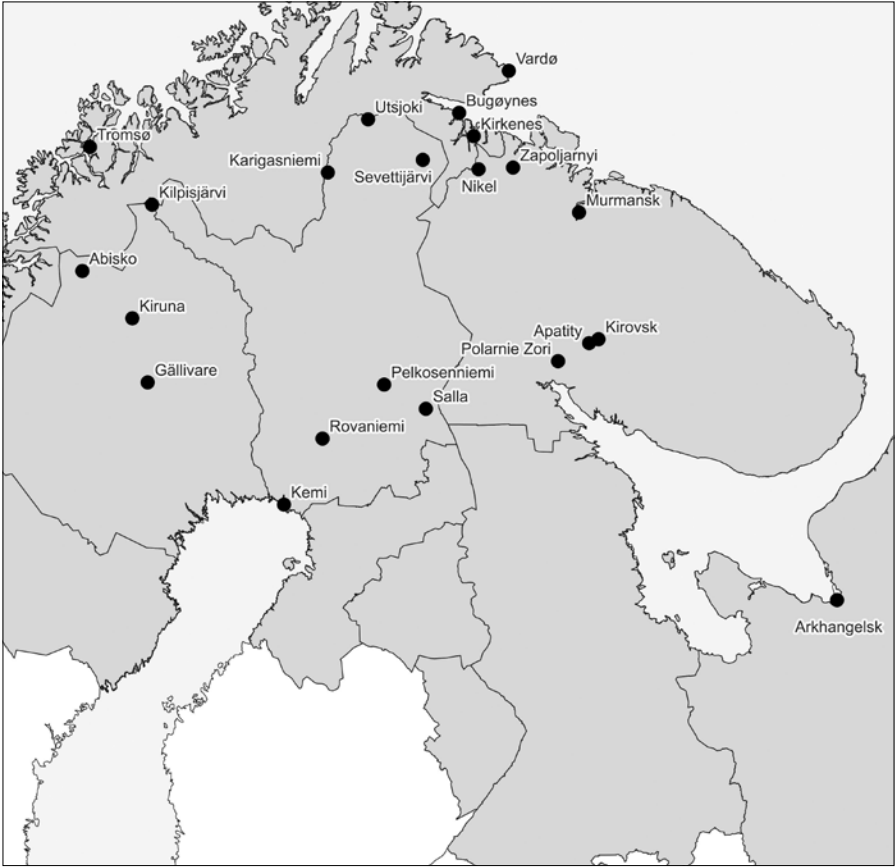
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Dear Reader

This book invites you on a journey through the Arctic, tracing paths both fresh and old. These routes wind through all eight Arctic countries: Finland, Sweden, Norway, Denmark (Greenland), Iceland, Russia, Canada, and the USA. They lead to villages and cities, across Arctic landscapes, and through the region's present and history.

Defining the Arctic's boundaries is a slippery task, that varies depending on the context. Sometimes, all of Finland is considered Arctic, at other times none of it is. For me, the Arctic is primarily a state of mind. I've come to believe that if someone feels they are in the Arctic, then they really are. This feeling is tied more to personal interest and individual experience than to geographical coordinates.

This book encapsulates the Arctic as I have seen and felt it over a quarter of a century, from the early 1990s to the early 2020s. I've followed Arctic affairs first as a journalist at the Oulu newspaper *Kaleva*, then as head of science communication at the Arctic Centre of the University of Lapland in Rovaniemi, and also through personal travels in the European Arctic region. This book's unusual genesis is revealed in its final pages.

Many books about the Arctic focus on glaciers and untamed wilderness, recounting tales of survival, describing the natural world, or warning of environmental threats. This book, however, focuses on where Arctic people actually live—in places that are accessible

without special wilderness skills, often near hotels or holiday cottages for visitors. They live their lives there, and this book tells their stories.

I've witnessed the rise of cooperation between all Arctic nations and its unfortunate decline following Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This book primarily covers the post-Cold War era, a period that was, in many ways, a golden age for the Arctic. This means the book also portrays Russia during a time when travel there was commonplace. The future was unseeable, at least to me. But the past was tangible, and I will share it here, as it helps to understand the present.

Each chapter of the book begins with my firsthand observations, all captured in photographs, some of which are included in the book. I expand on these observations, drawing on my experiences and things I have come to know over time. I hope to lead you, dear reader, along these Arctic trails, to discover something new and fascinating.

So, what are we waiting for? The path beckons, the journey awaits. Let's go!

City Life in the Arctic, with a Russian Twist

East of Raja-Jooseppi Border Station

The 300-kilometre journey from Ivalo in Finnish Lapland to Murmansk via the Raja-Jooseppi border station is a unique experience.

In the waning days of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, the road was more of a rough track. Soft, loose sand and boggy streams and small rivers were crossed by rickety plank bridges. You never knew how long the journey would take, but it always took a considerable amount of time. Progress was agonisingly slow. The constant roadworks seemed to achieve nothing. The landscape, then and now, is pristine wilderness—forest, fells and the deep north. No services or kiosks anywhere between the border and a village about 60 kilometres before Murmansk, and hardly any other traffic.

One time, the bus stopped abruptly. A bear was sitting in the middle of the road. Annoyed by the interruption, it slowly rose and lumbered off into the woods.

On another trip, we were returning to Finland during the final days of the Soviet Union. At that time you were not allowed to take rubles over the border. Everyone's pockets bulged with rubles acquired through clandestine exchanges, useless in Murmansk. I hadn't even been able to spend enough of them on wooden