

A short time in Northern Canada

Finally, the three years of work, tears and sweat during the medical laboratory technology training were over, following was a frantic search for a full-time job as a medical laboratory technologist. I applied everywhere in Canada, willing to take a job where available. Little did I know the adventures that awaited.

The excitement of being an adult was intoxicating. I was finally applying for jobs, honing my interview skills. Then, before I knew it, I had an offer; a 6-month term in subarctic Canada. I thought "anyone can do 6-months, if I hate it, I will move back home, chalk it up to experience". I accepted the offer and have subsequently never worked in my home province as a medical laboratory technologist. Here I was, early 20-something, relatively civilized individual, embarking on an adventure that would alter the course of my life.

My first flight was from Toronto to Edmonton (the 2nd time I had flown as an adult). A truck had arrived a few days before picked up all my earthly belongings and was travelling to the North where the reunion would occur. This flight was nice, a Boeing 737. When the flight arrived in Edmonton, I quickly made my way to the departing gate. This was where realization hit me. The gate attendant proceeded to ask me who I was, and without asking for supporting evidence, highlighted my name on a sheet of paper, and hand-wrote my boarding pass.

Time to board; for me, first time walking on a tarmac. We walked past a multitude of planes, decreasing in size until we arrived at a 12-seater King-air; the next couple hours were enlightening. Our inflight meal was lunchables and bottled water, which was served by the pilot after he left the cockpit to become the flight attendant. Nevertheless, I survived the flight and arrived at my destination.

My whole environment was new. There was fishing, hiking, friendly people, and, not to forget, 24-hour sun! The team at the health center were wonderful. Working with me were two technologists, a combined lab/x-ray technologist, and no medical laboratory assistants. The health center/hospital had 9 beds and was the only health service available for a radius of 4 hours (in the north, distance is measured as time).

A time that distinctly stands out in my mind, was my first Christmas as a technologist. At this point, I had been a tech about 6 months, and it was my first time on-call longer than a weekend (the lab was closed throughout the holidays, with only on-call service available). The holidays started off uneventful, no calls on the first night. Late Christmas eve it started, a patient with diabetic keto-acidosis (DKA), needing bloodwork every 2 hours-this was the start of a long 3 days. In that time, we had two potential myocardial infarctions, the already known DKA, a ruptured placenta (we only held two units of blood), a snowmobile accident, and one patient death. For the 3 days, I was in the hospital for work on average, every 2-4 hours. Although this was my hardest experience, it was also the experience that began sculpting me into the tech I am today.

After spending the better part of a year working in the health center, I decided to move even further north. The Aurora borealis, canoeing, BBQ's, hiking, camping, fishing, boating and all manner of outside activities is the norm in northern Canada. Many who live there are from other parts of the country and

are there because they are adventurous. This hospital was a little bigger, approximately 30-50 beds, and I got to work in my dream department-Microbiology.

Microbiology was interesting in this hospital, as we had a fully operational Level 3 laboratory for isolation of *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*. The rates of TB were relatively high, so I was able to learn a lot about sample preparation, staining, isolation and identifying TB. In the north, hunters are common, and as such, we isolated infectious agents rarely seen in other parts of the country. Organisms such as brucellosis and anthrax were occasionally isolated, and after a couple incidental exposures, and subsequent prophylaxis regimens, I became quite adept at knowing when to review plates in the BSC (3 weeks of rifampin and doxycycline is not pleasant).

For anyone who may be considering moving north, it is highly recommended. If you are adventurous, don't mind a little cold, and want to visit somewhere few people have been, this is for you.

Some of the best memories I have are from my time up there, and I reminisce on that lifestyle frequently.

A wise man in the north once told me: "Living in the North is like a jail sentence, either you are in for two or in for twenty"

Written by Joel Droogers