Joanna Pitman´s article in The Times 3/2005

Come into the cold

PHOTOGRAPHY Chilly scenes of the everyday life of the polar Inuit of northwest Greenland give Joanna Pitman a warm sense of community.

TIINA ITKONEN: INUGHUIT

Michael Hoppen Gallery

IF YOU think that you've been having a rough time with the cold weather, spare a thought for the polar Inuit of northwest Greenland. Their summer ends promptly in early September when the first snow falls on the mountains. The snow keeps falling and by the end of October the sun has disappeared altogether. It doesn't rise again until the middle of February, when all the polar Inuit trudge happily to the top of the nearest icy mountain to greet it.

Spring takes its time too: in June everywhere is still snowbound and the sea is sufficiently frozen to support a full dogsled. Summer finally begins at the end of July and lasts a few weeks. Even then it's not exactly warm. Imagine living there. The place is so cold that even trees cannot survive.

In the 19th century, the polar Inuit thought that they were the only people in the world until the English explorer John Ross arrived in 1818. Today they remain amazingly isolated. Some communities still get their water from hacking at icebergs. In August, when the sea is free from ice, a ship brings merchandise but otherwise they rely on the weekly visit from the postman by helicopter, bringing whatever mail-order goods they require beyond the local staples of whale, arctic fox, fish and polar bear.

When the photographer Tiina Itkonen visited these brave little communities, she had to get there using a relay of oil tankers, hunters' motorboats and helicopters. She is Finnish, so she's used to the snow, but even so it was a bit of a blast.

Yet she was smitten: by the light, by the colours, by the silence and the people. She was intrigued by the massive distances but the lack of markers, by the strange feeling of time stretching like chewing gum, of winter going on forever and of the months of midnight sun when people don't really bother to sleep.

As Itkonen had suspected, she found that the bluish air and deep turquoise icebergs photographed like a dream. Ever since the earliest explorers first made human tracks towards the poles, photographers have hauled their boxes of unwieldy photographic equipment to these icy places.

Nothing reflects the light more beautifully than a vast stretch of snow under a deep blue sky. Companies of dogs and sledges racing across an expanse of ice present an irresistible opportunity for the photographer. And translucent icebergs, their greenish depths seemingly aglow, can be captured on film like huge frozen jewels.

Itkonen didn't just photograph the extraordinary landscapes. She settled down with the polar Inuit themselves. During her months with them she shared such memorable meals as raw whaleskin, polar bear stew, and whole auks (small polar birds), served unplucked. For very special celebrations she ate kiviaq — whole auks buried and matured in the ground for several months, which come out cooked, like hundred-year-old eggs, smelling and tasting of very old cheese.

Her photographs are much more palatable. There is a lovely one of a young man called Tiikala, who posed for her balanced like a furry acrobat on his head. His legs are upholstered in a pair of polar bear trousers (fur out), his feet are

encased with seal skin, and he has a great white gate of teeth through which we can see his ruby red tongue.

Rather than looking depressed by the months of darkness and the perpetual bitter winds, these people seem exhilarated, aroused to a greater awareness of their surroundings, and fed more efficiently perhaps by their sharp, highly oxygenated air.

A young girl sits on a bench in a pink T-shirt and check cotton trousers (perhaps the Boden catalogues arrived by helicopter) playing with a toy bow and arrow, her dark eyebrows curved in elegant swoops, her eye focused on some distant imagined four-legged meal. And Taateraaq poses with a cigarette between his hunter's fingers, his hair combed up into an Elvis quiff, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses.

In the end, in spite of the furry clothes, the strange feathery decorations on their walls, the cold and isolation, you see that these are human communities just like any other. These villages of 70 or 80 people have a school, a church, a shop and each other. They spend their time hunting, gossiping, surfing the internet and playing cards.

In all there are almost 1,000 polar Inuit, and the number is growing. It's a hard life bringing up a family in northwest Greenland, but somebody's got to do it.

• Tiina Itkonen: Inughuit is at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, 3 Jubilee Place, SW3 (020-7352 3649), until March 24.

Joanna Pitman