Dennis McCarthy: Curiosity trumps age on this trek

Sometimes you get lucky and meet the most fascinating people in the most unlikely places.

I’m sitting on the pontoon of a Zodiac off Greenland in the Arctic last week, freezing my butt off and hanging on for dear life, when this sweet, little lady across from me offers a comforting smile.

“Another day, another adventure,” says Sarah Wheeler, an 80-year-old retired school teacher coming down the homestretch of back-to-back-to-back Arctic expedition cruises with Adventure Canada.

Throw in a row. She’ll go for a fourth if she didn’t have to get home to Vتب, her dog.

I don’t know if you’ve ever been on one of these expedition cruises, but they can be pretty physically challenging, if you want. You’re up early every day donning a life jacket and rubber boots after breakfast, and jumping into a Zodiac, a big rubber boat, in 40-degree weather to head off for a wet landing on another island for another adventure.

Visiting small Inuit communities and historical sites, hiking across mushy tundra and over rocky hills in remote areas, hoping to spot a polar bear, but not too close.

Sarah left her home outside Port Angeles, Washington on June 9 and won’t return until Aug. 2. She’ll do a little gardening for a few weeks then pull her small RV out of the garage to take a road trip camping along the coast with Vتب.

“I just can’t sit still,” she says.
Next to her in the Zodiac are Elizabeth Rienia, 80, and Mickey Thomas, 87. They can't sit still either.

I'm looking at 257 years of adventurous life waking up the gangway to get back on the ship-owen Endeavor, and wondering what makes these people tick?

Whatever it is, I want some.

"I don't have all the answers, but I think it's a matter of attitude and curiosity, as well as being fortunate enough to have the financial resources," Elizabeth says, over a glass of white wine in the lounge later.

She spent a career as an executive secretary in and out of government, and lives in Washington D.C. when she's not traveling the north looking for more Eskimo art to add to her collection.

"I had a hip replacement a few months ago, and when I told my doctor I was going on another adventure, all he said was bring your canes.'

Attitude and curiosity

She's traveling with the group Road Scholars, formerly known as Elder Hostel until too many customers said they didn't necessarily like the elder part. So they became Road Scholars, and now the problem is too many older passengers on board are snubbing them.

"They think we're Rhododendrons and snooty," says Evan Price, who leads the group. "We have to tell them it's just a play on words.

"About half the 14 people in our group are retired school teachers. They've been promoting lifelong learning in their classrooms for decades, and now they're able to live it themselves.

"These Adventure Travel Canada expedition cruises are great for the single traveler, who wants to be with like-minded people."

Waiting in the lounge by the window for the Zodiac to return from another morning trip, Joyce McKeuck, 88, talks about her boyfriend Mickey Thomas, 87.

He owns a department store -- an old five & dime -- in Oraea, Iowa, a few towns over from where Joyce, a retired physical education teacher, lives. They're high school friends who kept in touch over the years and finally hooked up at a small class reunion a few years ago after both their spouses died.

She gets around with the help of a walker, and hasn't been physically able to ride into shore on the Zodiac, but Mickey gives her a first-hand account over dinner every night of what she missed.

"You're only as old as you feel, and Mickey and I don't feel our age," Joyce says, waving to her boyfriend as he disembarks the Zodiac after another day, another adventure.

"When we see something we like, like this trip, we just run for it."

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Dennis McCarthy's column runs on Friday. He can be reached at dmccarthynews@gmail.com.