



Photo: Quark Expeditions

TIME OFF

## **GREENLAND, THE WORLD'S LARGEST ISLAND, BECKONS**

“If we can't land at a fjord we've planned on, we'll find another just as good.”

**MARGIE GOLDSMITH** | JANUARY 2024

“When greeting someone in Greenland,” explained Lana, the Inuit cultural presenter, “people used to say *inuugujok*. But that does not mean ‘hello.’ It means, ‘happy to see you alive.’” The passengers on the Quark expedition ship, *Ultramarine*, let out a collective gasp.

“Don't worry,” said Lana. “The greeting has nothing to do with death; it means time passing because Greenland has few roads and we don't see each other often.” She looked at the passengers, “Can you say *inuugujok*?” A few tried but were unsuccessful. “That's OK,” she said. “The longest word in my language has about 150 letters, and I won't make you try to pronounce it.”

The 175 passengers on this eight-day summer trip to southwest Greenland had arrived by boat because while there are a few roads within the towns, there are none connecting any two towns on the island, the largest in the world. Everyone had come to hike, kayak, view the glaciers on a Zodiac boat tour, and float by giant icebergs. The expedition included a visit to an Inuit village, as well as helicoptering up to the world's second-largest ice mass and stepping out on the Greenland ice sheet.

The 140-person crew and staff included a historian, a geologist, a glaciologist, a marine biologist, a photography guide, and an Inuit cultural presenter. Ali, the expedition leader, explained that the Zodiacs would be visiting fjords every day, and there would be places where the ship couldn't anchor because of wind and weather. "But don't worry," she said. "If we can't land at a fjord we've planned on, we'll find another just as good." Just then she pointed out a Brunnich's guillemot, a type of auk, flying past the panoramic window.

We'd been issued muck boots for wet landings and a yellow waterproof parka with a zip-out down jacket (ours to keep). I donned the comfy jacket and stood on the balcony of my spacious, light-filled cabin as we made our way down a fjord, created by glaciers during the Earth's last ice age. Everywhere on both sides of the fjord were 3,000-foot-tall jagged snow-covered mountains.



*Margie Goldsmith. (Photo: courtesy of the author)*

## Ice and More Ice

I'd expected verdant hills and valleys, but that's not what I found: Greenland is mainly ice. (Iceland, meanwhile, is mainly green.) The Greenland ice sheet covers 656,000 square miles, roughly 80 percent of the surface. The island was named by Viking explorer Eric the Red, who arrived in A.D. 983 and saw a land blanketed in ice and carved by glaciers. But he also saw a small green valley, and, hoping to attract settlers, named it Greenland.

On our first day onboard, we pulled on our muck boots and motored by Zodiac to shore and divided into three hiking groups: "chargers" who wanted to race up the trail; "medium slows" who preferred a more leisurely pace; and "contemplatives," who meandered along the shoreline or sat staring up at the spellbinding views.

I joined the medium slows and we made our way to a forest, which here meant stubby shrubs because the wind and cold prevent anything from growing taller than three feet. Soon we left the forest and were climbing a dirt path that became steep until we suddenly arrived at a field of boulders. I didn't want to have to fight the rocks, so I moved away from the trail and sat and looked at a huge cascading waterfall. Way below, the *Ultramarine* in the fjord looked like a matchbox toy.

Most days, the weather was warm enough so we could take off our parkas and hike through mossy fields covered in evening primroses and yellow poppies or sink into the soft tundra of hummocky moraine (striking conical hills of glacial rock covered in grass). On one hike, we made our way to a lake where the water was so clear that you could see every rock beneath the surface. Greenland has some of the world's purest air and water. Suddenly, I saw the reflection of a massive white-tailed eagle that flew overhead.

Kayaking here is as spectacular as hiking. You sit in two-person kayaks, a boat originally invented by the Arctic Inuit, and paddle around icebergs of every size and shape; one looked like a capsized sailboat, and another was as big as a tanker. A third rolled in both directions like a rocking horse. When you got closer, you could see they glistened with wetness, sometimes pockmarked, sometimes striated, but always surrounded by turquoise water, meaning there was a lot more iceberg beneath the surface.

To see the icebergs, you don't have to go by Zodiac or kayak. I could sit on my cabin's balcony in the ship at any time of day, listening to the water gently lap against the hull and watching the icebergs that dotted the water. Often, a perfect low-lying cloud of fog, painted in an even streak, would cover part of the mountain.





*Photo: Quark Expeditions*

## **Meeting the Inuit**

There is much more to Greenland than icebergs, including the 50,000 Inuit (out of the country's total population of 57,000). Some of their beliefs echo Icelandic folklore. Icelanders believe in elves who live in nature and can make themselves visible at will. Greenland's Inuit believe in helping spirits who can visit places that ordinary mortals experience only in the afterlife. The Inuit also believe in many legends, including, for instance, that if you whistle under the Northern Lights, your head will be cut off.

One day, we went by Zodiac to Aapilattoq on Prince Christian Sound, an Inuit community with about 100 inhabitants. Brightly colored structures were everywhere: red for churches and supermarkets, yellow for health services, blue for the fish factory, and black for the police. The small community had satellite dishes and the villagers had cell phones. Children came racing out to greet us.

After listening to a church choir sing hymns in Greenlandic, we went to the community center for kaffemik—a Greenlandic tradition where people come together for a social occasion—and ate fish soup with halibut and prawns. We visited a hunter who explained that the community is allowed to catch two whales per year and that the whole southern municipality is allowed to take down four polar bears annually. I couldn't take my eyes off a polar bear skin that was

drying outside the door. The locals and the ship's crew played a rollicking soccer match that the villagers easily won. For the finale, a three-piece rock band sang their hearts out in Greenlandic, though their drummer's boat had broken down and he couldn't arrive in time, so one of the *Ultramarine's* passengers filled in.

While the Aapilattoq fish soup was memorable, equally excellent was the food on our ship. Breakfast and lunch were bounteous buffets. Dinner was five courses with choices ranging from Cajun chicken croquette to Greenland hazelnut-crusted reindeer loin. In addition to sweet desserts, you could opt for fresh fruit, cheeses, and a make-your-own ice cream sundae station.

One of my favorite days was the one when we crossed the Arctic Circle. The captain blasted the ship's horn and we all raced to the aft deck to take turns holding up a sign that read, "Crossing the Arctic Circle, 66° 33' 49.6' N." Though nothing was in the water to mark the spot, I held up the sign, and for a moment felt like an Arctic explorer.

## **An Arctic Plunge**

Every trip to a polar region includes the infamous Arctic plunge. In Antarctica, I swam 20 feet in the frigid waters of Deception Island; but here, participants were attached by harness and jumped into the freezing water to be immediately hoisted back up. I chose the much warmer option the next day at the geothermal hot springs of Uunartoq, where the water was a balmy 100 degrees. As we entered the water, the staff handed us each a paper cup of champagne.

For me, the most memorable experiences were the two helicopter flights, one of the main reasons I'd chosen this outfitter. We boarded the chopper on the top deck and within seconds, were flying above the jagged mountains. The scenery was so extraordinarily unreal that even a wide-angle lens couldn't capture the unending views of jagged granite mountains in every direction, many threaded by glaciers, which swept down the sides. One minute we were flying down a fjord like Luke Skywalker, the next, shooting over mountain ridges and staring down at endless glaciers, sparkling lakes, and mountain peaks. The pilot found a place to land, and we hiked on ice-age-old rock terrain overlooking glittering turquoise glacial lakes below.

Even more extraordinary was the chopper ride to set foot on the two-mile-thick Greenland ice sheet. It contains 2.8 million cubic kilometers of ice—so much of it that, if it melted, oceans worldwide would rise by more than 23 feet. It was staggering in its size, but I was shocked to see that not only was the ice darkened by volcanic soot, but it wasn't completely frozen. Everywhere, rivulets of water streamed from melting ice, and you had to step carefully because any opening in the ice could be a deep crevasse.

That night, I went to the observation deck to watch the most magnificent sunset I've ever seen. It started with a huge halo of pink encircling an apricot-colored globe, then shrunk to a hazy orange orb that hung over the water in slow motion before silently sinking into the sea. As I thought about all the beauty and vastness I had seen, I felt humbled, and a tear rolled down my cheek.

But I'd also seen that the glaciers are retreating and the water temperatures are heating up. In addition to global warming, what will happen when the *Ultramarine* isn't the only ship you see when cruising the fjords? Will Greenland be ruined by tourism? I asked Ali, our expedition leader, who said she thought tourism would explode in around five years. I felt grateful that I was able to get here before the fjords became the site of a nautical traffic jam and the ice sheet melted.

There is currently one million square kilometers less ice cover than in the 1990s, and the ice is 85 percent thinner than in 1991. Greenland is one of the world's most remote places, but it won't always be. To see its pristine beauty, the time to go is now.

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## **TRAVELER FAST FACTS**

**What It Is:** Greenland, the world's largest island, is a *North American autonomous territory of the Kingdom of Denmark*. Eighty percent of its land is covered by the Greenland ice sheet.

**Where It Is:** Greenland lies between the Canadian Arctic and Iceland, with two-thirds of its surface above the Arctic Circle. Its nearest neighbor is Canada's Ellesmere Island, 16 miles to the north.

**Climate:** Greenland has an Arctic tundra climate with average temperatures around 42–50 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer and as low as -4 degrees in the north during winter. Summer is the best time to visit, but you can see the Northern Lights only from fall through spring.

**Getting There:** Private jets can land at Nuuk, Narsarsuaq, and Kangaroo. Quark Expeditions trips to Greenland include round/trip charter flights from Reykjavik in Iceland to Narsarsuaq in Greenland (where the ship docks).

**What to Know Before You Go:** As so few expedition ships go to Greenland, the time to book for summer 2024 is now. You don't have to be adventurous, though most expeditions include opportunities for hiking and kayaking. Many outfitters gift all passengers with waterproof expedition jackets and lend them muck boots. Do not expect to see abundant wildlife (such as polar bears) in southwestern Greenland.

## **GETTING THERE**

**Quark Expeditions.** *Ultramarine* is the only expedition ship to Greenland with two helicopters on board and two rides included per passenger. Cabins with balconies are spacious and light-filled. All meals are gourmet with dinner wine included. Expeditions feature experienced guides, Zodiacs, kayaking, Inuit village visits, hot springs, and polar plunges. Heli-biking, heli-alpine kayaking, and heli-overnight camping are optional.

**Silversea.** *Silver Wind* offers some of the most spacious ocean-view suites on cruises to Greenland as well as butler service, a spa, a gym, Jacuzzis, a pool, and four gourmet restaurants. Guests enjoy Zodiac and kayak excursions (some on a "sign-up" or lottery basis) and visits to Inuit villages.

**Lindblad Expeditions-National Geographic.** Expeditions accommodate just 138 guests and include polar kayaking, paddleboarding, undersea remotely operated vehicles, and the option of a helicopter ride (though not from onboard the ship). Guests can sleep under the stars in two geodesic glass igloos on the top deck.

## **GETAWAYS**