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# Go Greenland!

By Richard J. Litell

*Photographs By Tina Buckman*

*Air Greenland and the island's travel industry are promoting tourism as never before and prospective visitors can be assured that there is far more to the island than its ice cap.*

**It's after midnight in Ilulissat** as a lone fishing vessel puts out to sea.

**T**ELL SOMEONE YOU'RE GOING TO GREENLAND AND—AFTER a moment's hesitation—they will come with one of two basic replies. “Wow! That sounds exciting” or “What in the world do you want to go there for?” The naysayers are those who barely know where Greenland is but are convinced it is cold, remote and insufferable. The enthusiasts, on the other hand, will be the better informed, the curious, the adventuresome—those anxious for a vacation thrill out of the ordinary. For, indeed, Greenland has much to offer the inquisitive tourist, the one anxious to learn more about an island that is more than twice the size of Texas and Alaska combined and 85 percent covered by an ice cap up to two miles thick.

Obviously impressed by the growing destination popularity of its arctic neighbor, Iceland, and taking advantage of its clearly demonstrable effects of global climate change, popularly referred to as global warming, Greenland is poised to capitalize on its newfound tourist appeal. Perhaps no place on earth, outside the far less accessible Antarctic, are the results of a worldwide temperature rise so apparent as in Greenland.

For those with a fresh—or preexisting—interest in environmental concerns, therefore, it was welcome news when Air Greenland last summer inaugurated a new summer route between Baltimore, Maryland, and Kangerlussuaq, the principal international airport, formerly known as Søndre Strømfjord. This direct flight takes less than five hours and, cloud conditions permitting, affords some dramatic aerial views of the island's coast during

the final half hour. This service will be repeated this summer and makes Greenland far more accessible to Americans at least.

Taking advantage of the new route, *experiencegreenland.com* has put together two eight-day package tours either to Kangerlussuaq and Ilulissat (Greenland's third-largest town with less than 5,000 inhabitants) or to Kangerlussuaq and Nuuk, Greenland's capital, humorously known for having the island's only two traffic lights. Both offer opportunities for boat cruising, seal, whale and musk-ox spotting, skiing, hiking and helicopter rides. Hotel accommodations are first-class and meals include native as well as international delicacies.

While the Ilulissat and Nuuk regions on the southwest coast are fascinating in their own right, they represent only a geographic tidbit of Greenland. Consider the enormity of the island—2,175,600 square kilometers. All five



In Nuuk, Greenland's capital, you can mail your letters to Santa in this giant red mailbox bearing the sign: Next emptied at Christmas.



Ilulissat's varied terrain (above) accommodates any size or shape of home provided it is painted in bright, solid colors. The town's tight little harbor (below) contains a neat arrangement of work and pleasure boats.





**The town of Ilulissat**, Greenland's third largest, can be seen almost in its entirety in this helicopter photo. Ilulissat is Greenland's top tourist town—host to about half of all visitors to

the island. Fishing is the main industry and one quarter of the town is employed by the Royal Greenland fish factory. Half of Greenland's fishing is centered here.

Scandinavian countries—Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden—can fit into Greenland, and you can also throw in France, Great Britain and Italy before you could fill it. Greenland's southern tip is about on a level with Helsinki, Oslo and the middle of Hudson Bay. Its northern tip extends farther north than any land in the world, although little specks of land may pop up as the Arctic Ocean gradually melts away.

Naturally, then, there is no end to what you can see and experience on Greenland. But bear in mind, there are no roads outside its scattered towns. Nor has there been any reason to have them. There are only about 57,000 inhabitants (and 30,000 dogs) in all. The only way to get around is by boat, plane or dog sled. It's probably safe to say that the Greenlanders who have traveled to any extent have done it abroad.



**Helicopter tours**, including a scenic stop for quiet contemplation, fly in and out the length of Kangerlussuaq fjord as well as along the ice front at its spectacular base.

All this means that getting to large areas requires a great deal of time—and money, especially in remote East Greenland whose three largest settlements have a combined population of 2,500. Greenland's only national park is the world's largest. At 972,000 square kilometers it occupies the entire northeast quadrant of the country. Activities in the northern half of Greenland are largely confined to the daily life struggle of the native Inuits and to the tasks of the various scientists who have made Greenland their laboratory. Today glaciologists and geologists from all over the world are working atop Greenland's ice cap, drilling and securing ice cores to help us determine the age of the ice as well as the intervals of deposition and chemical contents.

The northern reaches of Greenland were the realm of Denmark's famous polar explorer and anthropologist Knud Rasmussen who made six significant expeditions, of which the fifth, designed to "attack the great primary problem of the origin on the Eskimo race," is considered by many his greatest

achievement. In 1946 he produced a 10-volume account of ethnographic, archaeological and biological data gathered on his journey east to Canada and ultimately to Nome, Alaska, making him the first person to cross the Northwest Passage by dogsled.

**R**ASMUSSEN IS A TRUE SON OF GREENLAND HAVING BEEN BORN in Ilulissat (then called by its Danish name Jakobshavn) of a Danish missionary and an Inuit mother. He learned to speak the Eskimo language at an early age and became proficient at hunting, mushing and mastering harsh conditions. One of his remarks succinctly defines his philosophy: "Give me winter, give me dogs, and you can have the rest."

The house in which Rasmussen was born still stands and serves as the town



**The Kangerlussuaq fjord**, once filled with a rapidly moving glacier, is now a mix of slowly melting ice. Ice pieces vary in size from small chunks to those measuring 1.5 cubic kilometers.

museum. One entire room is devoted his anthropological and linguistic studies.

Besides special package deals there are other other ways to visit Greenland. The easiest, and laziest, is to accompany one of the several cruise ships that ply the island's coast. You can also fly (solo or with a group) to Kangerlussuaq and set off from there to anywhere your time and pocketbook permit. Remember, you won't see a polar bear unless you go pretty far north, Musk oxen, however, can frequently be encountered in the Kangerlussuaq vicinity.

The first time I visited Greenland several decades ago was to spend Easter week joining a group setting out with dog sledges to ski from the town of Sisimiut (then called Holsteinsborg) inland to Kangerlussuaq. We had to reach this second-largest town in Greenland by helicopter. Indeed, at that time, all internal transportation was by chopper. Today, it's quite different. Air Greenland now has 14 airstrips that will take fixed-wing aircraft. Three air-

ports can accommodate jets: Kangarlussuaq, first set up as a U.S. Air Force base in 1941 and vacated in 1992; Narsarsuaq, the farthest south, and the Thule airbase in the north that is still restricted to use by the U.S. Air Force.

At smaller runways, Air Greenland can operate its six deHavilland Dash 7s, two Dash 6s and one Beechcraft King Air B200. Close to 80 towns and settlements have heliports or helipads. The company runs a Sikorsky S-61 helicopter to towns and two Bell helicopters (the 212 and 222) to settlements. Air Greenland's fleet consists of 30-plus aircraft and 20-plus helicopters.



**Greenland's flag,** introduced in 1985. White symbolizes the inland ice and icebergs, while red is the rising and setting sun.

The first signs of human life on Greenland were Inuit who came from Canada's Ellesmere Island around 2400 B.C. But this civilization, as well as many subsequent ones, eventually died out. By the time Inuits in appreciable numbers began heading south along the coast, because of a cooling climate, Europeans had begun appearing in the south. The sagas tell us that the first European to discover Greenland was an Iceland-bound Norwegian who got blown off course in A.D. 930. Norway annexed Greenland in 1261 but by the late 1300s the Viking settlement had disappeared and, while there are many theories about what happened to it, its fate remains a mystery. The first Danes to arrive came in 1721. Since 1979 Greenland has enjoyed

home rule as a self-governing territory of Denmark.

For the past several years, the Disko Bay-Ilulissat area has been the undeniable center of international attention in Greenland. At least 10 percent of the island's ice-calf production from the inland ice via the Sermeq Kujalleq Glacier ice is lost through Kangia, or the Ilulissat ice fjord. The glacier is receding at the alarming rate of 35 meters a day. Scientists and politicians have been streaming to Ilulissat in droves to witness the effects of the earth's rising temperature there. In the summer of 2004 Ilulissat Icefjord was added to UNESCO's World Heritage List, which has brought with it enhanced recognition and status worldwide. Sites on the list, wherever they are located, become not only the responsibility of the host country but share responsibility with the entire world population on whose behalf it is preserved and protected.

The breathtaking beauty of the Ilulissat region is due to the production of icebergs from the glacier and the presence of the threshold across the mouth of the fjord that causes the bergs to run aground. Tours on small guided boats allow visitors to see close up the unending drama of changing forms, colors and sounds created as icebergs melt, collapse and collide with one another. It is an experience of a lifetime.

As is your entire visit to Greenland. It's no ordeal, it's a privilege.

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**Richard J. Litell** is editor of the *Scandinavian Review*.