

TIP OF THE ICEBERG

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A cruise up the crinkly west coast of Greenland is a glimpse into the vast frozen world of Polar Bears and Musk Oxen, snowy white Ivory Gulls and curious Narwhals

*Atlantic Walrus
adults with pup rest
on a small slab of ice
in the North Atlantic*



IT'S

NO EXAGGERATION TO SAY THAT GREENLAND WILL ASSAULT YOUR SENSES, AND EVEN TAKE YOU FROM DEEP JOY AT THE SIGHT OF ITS IMMENSE SCENERY TO DESPAIR AT HOW THE COUNTRY, ITS WILDLIFE AND WAY OF LIFE ARE EVER SO SLOWLY **DISAPPEARING...**

It may be the world's largest island with a length similar to that of Australia, but its entire population of just under 60,000 could be put inside London's Wembley Stadium and there would still be 20,000 empty seats.

Over 80 per cent of the country is still covered by a huge ice sheet, although climate change is taking its toll. If you're wise you'll book a window seat on the plane as you spend nearly an hour flying over it as you come in to the airport, and it's a sight that you'll remember forever. Here, mountain peaks rise from the snow like pyramids from the sand, and huge glaciers snake their way across a barren white wilderness. It is like Antarctica, but without the penguins!

Our trip started with a four-hour flight from Copenhagen in Denmark to Kangerlussuaq in western Greenland. We were welcomed at the airport... by mosquitoes! Not what you'd expect and certainly you do need to think about insect repellent or a face net for certain parts of the island.

Our first day was spent soaking up the stunning scenery, travelling in bouncy 4x4 coaches and crossing unexpected sand deserts high in the hills. We walked up to roaring waterfalls and ice-covered lakes in front of our first huge glacier, all under a stunning clear blue sky.

Among the first animals we spotted were Musk Oxen - more than 10,000 animals grazing in the green mountain landscape bounded by the ice. Reindeer, too, were casually going about their business. They can be found along the west coast and in small herds on the east. Each year they migrate long distances between the interior and coastal areas in search of food and to reach their summer calving grounds.

The birders on the trip kept a sharp look out for White- ➤



Clockwise from top: Musk Oxen are now common in Greenland; Mountain Hare inhabit Greenland's rocky mountain ranges; Arctic Foxes with their darker summer coats; the town of Ilulissat overlooks dramatic icebergs

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Above: cruises offer a great way to see Greenland's highlights. Left: for Greenlanders, dogs are kept as working animals rather than as pets. Below: with their thick, double coats Musk Oxen are perfectly suited to harsh Arctic climates

tailed Eagles which are at the northernmost point of their range at the glacier.

Greenland's specialities such as Snowy Owl, Walrus, Lemming, Polar Bear and Arctic Wolf are found in greater numbers in the world's largest National Park in the north and east of the island. It's a treasure trove of scenery and a wilderness with wildlife that simply cannot be matched in the inhabited areas of the country; but you need a permit to visit and, because of the distances involved, it's not practical to combine it with either a visit to the west side or a land-based trip, so this is where a specialist cruise comes into its own.

My cruise took in the Disko Bay area on the west coast where the icebergs are awe-inspiringly beautiful and the nutrient-rich waters attract a wealth of wildlife. So there may not be the numbers of some animals that you can find in the National Park, but they are there to be seen all the same.

Here, above the Arctic Circle during the summer months, there's 24-hour daylight, so if you can't sleep you can at least whale watch! On the first morning I saw a pod of Minkes, a Bowhead Whale, and the distant fins of Orcas plus of Greenland and Bearded Seals.

Northern Fulmars could always be seen around the ship. It's easy to spot that they're members of the albatross family by their size, presence of nasal tubes and the hook at the end of the bill. It's a good idea to scan the small ices flows for the white Ivory and pale grey Iceland Gulls, too, whilst flocks of Little Auks and Black Guillemots are regular sightings.

SMELL OF SUCCESS

The impressive but odorous Musk Ox is the largest land mammal in Greenland

Musk Oxen weigh up to 400kg (880lb) each and you don't have to travel far from the airport before having a good chance of seeing them. They are not indigenous to the area, having been reintroduced in the 1990s, but they are now thriving.

The Musk Ox is named for the strong odour emitted by the males during the seasonal rut; it is a musky smell that is attractive to the females. They are perfectly adapted to their extreme environment, being well insulated with a thick coat of hair and woolly undercoat.

Apart from man, the Ox's only enemies are Polar Bears, Arctic Wolves and foxes. If the herd is attacked the animals do not stampede but form a circle, which is virtually impossible to break into, to protect the calves.

Some herds consist solely of young adult males, and although the animals are primarily grazers, eating sedges and grasses, they will also eat shrubs. The females calve long before the snow melts so their milk is supported by the cow's fat reserves, which she has to replenish during the brief summer.

For their winter ranges they typically search out areas of shallow snow to reduce the energetic costs of digging through it to reach fodder.

In Greenland, Musk Oxen occur in four protected areas, with indigenous populations in the vast National Park and three introduced populations in Arnangarnup Qoorua Nature Reserve, and Kangerlussuaq and Maniitsoq Caribou Reserves. Outside the protected areas, controlled hunting is allowed. Quotas are determined annually and hunting is permitted only

by full-time subsistence hunters.

The Ox's innermost coat, the wool layer, is used by the Greenlanders to make clothing and handicrafts.



DURING THE 10 DAYS we were on board our cruise ship we travelled as far north as Upernavik, some 360 miles (590km) above the Arctic Circle, and visited some 10 settlements that varied in size from just 50 inhabitants to 3,000. These visits are made by small boat, often landing on the shoreline and only sometimes a jetty, so you have to be prepared for the possibility of cold, wet feet!

As you might expect, it was a visit to the abandoned settlement of an old coal mining town called Qullissat that produced some of the best wildlife sightings.

Qullissat was founded to exploit the resources of Disko Island and operated for 48 years before closing in 1972. Beneath its ruined houses we saw Arctic Foxes making dens and two Arctic Hares rushing across the mountainside. They

TRIP ADVISER

COST RATING ★★★★★☆

SAMPLE PACKAGE TOUR

Because of its size, travelling around the coastal strip of Greenland is expensive as there are very few roads and transportation is by air or ferry. As such you are strongly advised to go with a specialist wildlife spotting trip or cruising company that uses small boats for ship to shore landings. Hurtigruten Cruises offers trips on the specialist ice cruising vessel MS Fram which operates five-star cruises in both polar regions.



CRUISES INCLUDE:

■ Arctic Wilderness Adventure

The northwest of Greenland in the Disko Bay area, and the rarely visited settlement of Upernavik, boast giant icebergs, fjords, wildlife and spectacular landscapes. Duration: 12 days. Dates: 12, 22 June 2015. Cost: from £4,980 pp (two sharing an inside cabin).

■ Disko Bay And The Southern Fjords

The highlights of Disko Bay and the less visited southern parts of Greenland. Visit traditional Inuit settlements, historic sites, the city of Nuuk and the impressive alpine landscape. In June from Reykjavik. Duration: 13 days. Dates: 2 July 2015. Cost from £4,622.

■ National Park Expedition

An exclusive expedition to three Arctic islands; Spitsbergen, Greenland (for the largest national park in the world) and Iceland. There is also a chance of seeing the Northern Lights. Duration: 15-16 days. Dates: 26 Aug, 10 Sept 2015. Cost: from £4,783.

Flights for all cruises are from Copenhagen to Kangerlussuaq. In some cases accommodation is provided in hotels in Copenhagen before or after the voyage.

VISAS FROM THE UK: Not needed

TIPS AND WARNINGS: Mosquitoes can be a problem in so take repellent and a head net. Do not attempt to fuss over the sled dogs - some can be vicious. Sea sickness patches are a very good idea as Arctic storms can come out of nowhere.

SUGGESTED READING:

The Arctic - a Guide to Coastal Wildlife by Tony Soper. RRP £16.99, our price £13.99, quote WT086. See page 100 to order.

WHEN TO GO:

You are dependent on the timetable of the cruises, but whales are best seen around July.

TOUR OPERATORS

HURTIGRUTEN CRUISES

Tel: 0203 582 6642
www.hurtigruten.co.uk



Clockwise from above: Greenland tour guides are trained to know how to react when encountering Polar Bears; tourists viewing icebergs from a zodiac in eastern Greenland; Beluga Whales inhabit the country's coastal waters; an adult female Snow Bunting collecting insects in her beak for her chicks



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were taking a chance as some of our party had earlier spotted a Gyr Falcon gliding across the peaks, which would like nothing better than a hare supper. Speaking of being supper, on all our shore landings the expedition team took rifles in case of Polar Bear encounters. It was made very clear that we were guests in the bears' territory and that they would only be shot as a very last resort.

The Disko bay area is the magnet for visitors as it houses the Kangerlua Glacier, the largest outside Antarctica, that produces icebergs weighing up to 7 million tonnes. The ice fjord is one of the incredible sights of the world, which we took in on a boat trip, although some went even better and flew over it by helicopter from Ilulissat town.

Not that our journey was any less exciting. The icebergs can shatter into smaller iceflows due to the force of the glacier behind them, and these flows can cover the sea. I was very apprehensive as we approached the town by ship, crawling along very slowly and pushing the ice out of the way. She may have had a strengthened hull for her trips here and to Antarctica and Svalbard, and the Captain and crew may have been experienced ice sailors, but it was still unnerving.

The apprehension is well worth the rewards you get from

being close to the smaller flows where you can find sleeping Harp and Ring Seals. Belugas can be spotted here beside Narwhal with their curious long single tusks, and Humpbacks, Fin and even Blue Whales, which come into the bay in July.

The Greenlanders are some of the friendliest people I have met anywhere and they love a chuckle. I had some memorable conversations with people in the small communities, although neither of us had any idea what the other was saying. We had a great time using gestures and play acting to make our points.

THE INHABITANTS OF GREENLAND have a closeness to the land and sea and wherever you go you find wooden frames outside houses drying shark, halibut and wolfish, animal pelts, sealskin and blubber. It's not unusual to see Musk Ox heads being fed to the sled dogs.

Around these small settlements you can find Snow and Lapland Bunting and Northern Wheatears which migrate here each year from western Africa. You're also certain to hear and see ravens, if not flying free then hanging above the fish frames as a warning to others who might try to steal the food.

You need to have an open mind about hunting and fishing

in this country, and you could find some sights you may see in the smaller communities disturbing. Karl Hansen, in his book *A Farewell to Greenland's Wildlife*, uses statistics provided by Greenland's own biologists to document the decline of living resources and what he considers to be the Greenlanders' enormously wasteful hunting and fishing practices.

A lot of the wildlife in Greenland is under threat. To the Inuit or Greenlandic people, hunting and fishing are a way of life and so the skins you see could easily be Polar Bear. There is a quota on the hunting of Narwhal, whales and seals, but the monitoring of this is difficult.

The Inuit culture is changing dramatically, though, as westernisation takes hold and global warming begins to bite. Native Greenland, Kristian Nielsen, has been a hunter and fisherman for all of his 60 years. "Ten years ago the ice was so thick that we thought nothing of taking the dogs out many miles," he says, cradling a sled dog puppy. "Now it's much thinner and we have a long pole with a chisel on the end to test its thickness as we go along."

All of this being said, no one can fail to find Greenland a magical place, where the people are so welcoming and the animals and their landscapes so fascinating.