

## On the Arctic Riviera

### ***Off a remote coast of Greenland, you can kayak among majestic icebergs 10-storays tall***

By Margo Pfeiff, National Post

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I am surrounded. Pivoting in my kayak seat, I count five puppy dog-eyed pinnipeds staring at me. Whiskers dripping, the ringed seals pop up and down through the slushy water as if this were some Arctic Whack-a-Mole game. A distant shotgun-like crack rings out, followed by a watery crash as the glacier we're paddling alongside sheds a cube the size of a motor home.

A message sputters over the hand-held radio of our guide, Al Bakker: "We're to watch out for a pair of narwhal near the ship," he tells us, then adds, "It's borscht and spare ribs for lunch." Just the impetus we need for the long paddle back to our mother ship.

Sunlight bounces off the blue and white glacial landscape at the head of Nansen Fjord as we weave through a flotilla of icebergs and bergy bits on the way back to the Polar Pioneer, our home afloat for 10 days as we explore the East Greenland coastline. This is the most remote part of the world's biggest island, sparsely populated, rarely visited. So far-flung that even the Inuit call the eastern shore of their continent Tunu, "the Back Side."

Six days earlier in Iceland, we had boarded the 71-metre long Finnish-built Polar Pioneer, one of several former Cold War "research" ships that were ice-strengthened in St. Petersburg in the 1980s and now spy only on polar bears and penguins during Arctic and Antarctic summers. With a capacity of just 54 passengers, shore landings in dinghies are quick and easy, and the vessel's small size allows us to poke into areas inaccessible to larger ships.

We had barely left Iceland before the notorious Denmark Strait began to tumble us in a sickening corkscrew motion as we sailed west toward Greenland. Most seats in the two cozy dining rooms were vacant, the spaghetti bolognese untouched. When seas calmed the following morning, a group of humpback whales feeding in the deep submarine canyons off Iceland came alongside.

Led by veteran Australian mountaineer Greg Mortimer, the passengers included Dr. Gary Miller, a biologist with a specialty in penguins. He gave an Arctic talk about pingos and polygons, but the subject we were most interested in -- after insight into the latest meds for motion sickness -- was polar bears.

"Over a short distance of 100 metres or so," said Dr. Miller, who had done his masters degree with the bears of Churchill, Man., "a polar bear can outrun a racehorse." He had our attention. Yes, we would stick with the group and, yes, we would keep an eye out for white "rocks" or "snow patches" moving across the tundra.

There is no greyer place on Earth than the Arctic on a grey day. We awoke on our second morning to drizzle. But the sea was blissfully calm as we had sailed during

the night into the shelter of Scoresbysund. The biggest fjord complex in the world, it is an octopus-shaped labyrinth covering 38,000 square kilometres. Its opening to the Atlantic is 30 nautical miles across and in mid-winter an Arctic curiosity occurs there: Although the fjord freezes solid, the waters at the entrance do not. Marine mammals such as whales and seals love the patch of open water as a year-round feeding ground. So do Inuit hunters, which explains the ultra-remote settlement of Ittoqqortoormiit, population 562 on our first landing.

The howling of sled dogs reached us before the cluster of brightly coloured houses came into view and once on shore we were swamped by a squadron of rambunctious Inuit children. Only a handful of locals spoke English, so we were split into groups for a town tour. My guide was Christian Vernlow, a quiet young blond and the son of the town's harbourmaster. He had only recently arrived on his first visit to Greenland. Sweat still broke out on his brow when he talked about the polar bear he had to shoot five days earlier. "I was staying in an old hunting cabin while I was kayaking for the past six weeks," he explained. When he returned from paddling one afternoon, a bear surprised him. "He ignored my warning shot." When the bear strode toward him, he shot it at 0 metres. "I've only ever seen a polar bear in a zoo before and now I had to shoot one."

Christian led us through the old church, a museum and the town grocery store stocked with everything from butter cookies to ammunition. On the front porch of one house, a row of sealskins flapped from the clothesline. At another I spotted a muskox head. Inside, the hunter's wife sat on the floor, cleaning the pelt with a half-moon ulu knife.

Ittoqqortoormiit is the gateway to the world's biggest national park. Established in 1974, North-east Greenland National Park covers 972,000 square kilometres. For many years it was closed to all but walruses, muskox, caribou, wolves and scientists, but the vast pristine area dubbed the "Arctic Riviera" is now accessible to private expeditions as well.

We sailed deeper into a tangle of fjords. Cliffs rising straight from the water reached as high as 2,500 metres. Often we moved slowly, dodging massive icebergs. They continually calve from glaciers that streak the cliffs walls. Icecap covers 85% of Greenland's land area. Some glaciers are coloured pink from snow algae.

It was hypnotic watching it all pass by from high up on the bridge of the ship. Not built for tourists, the Polar Pioneer has no wide-windowed viewing salon, but the bridge was open at all times to passengers. It was my favourite place on the ship. Binoculars lay on a window shelf alongside wildlife books. The crew under Captain Sergey spoke quietly in Russian as they navigated and steered the ship using modern equipment. The depth gauge mounted on the wall was a constant source of conversation.

The ship may not have been a luxury vessel, but it was comfortable and homey. In all, there were 24 Russian crew including the stewardesses in the dining room. A bonus on board, especially after a long hike on the tundra, was the cedar-lined sauna below deck.

Our first trek was in the rain at Syd Kap in the Nordvest Fjord, weather that made the old gravesite we found all the more gloomy. Several 3,000-year-old graves were tucked into a hillside, above-ground rock mounds that had been disturbed long ago. A human skull and leg bone embroidered with orange lichen lay on a bed of moss.

The next morning, the weather cleared. It was just after dawn when I reviewed the "donning and doffing" instructions of how to get into and out of a dry suit. The Polar Pioneer offered scuba diving and kayaking. I prefer a layer of rigid plastic between myself and 3 deg C water, so I opted for a kayak under the guidance of Vancouver-born Al Bakker.

There is nothing quite like paddling in the sunshine amid a pack of grounded bergs the size of 10-storey buildings with tunnels and aquamarine lakes in their shallows. Gliding over the inky water, I could see their greenish bulk underwater. With not a ripple on the surface, it was like moving over glass. The bergs were sweating, dripping in the warm sun that by noon reached a balmy 12 deg C. In the distance they cracked and crashed, the echoing sound a reminder of the violence of these huge ice traps. That night, just past midnight, the Northern Lights we had been hoping arrived. We all raced on deck, clad in pyjamas and down jackets, to watch neon curtains of pink and green swirling across the sky. The North Star was straight above.

Some days we kayaked amid a sculpture garden of bergs. One morning we followed a pair of female narwhals swimming barely 10 metres away. At the end of the day, we were glad to return to meals such as roast lamb with apricots and garlic potatoes, and blueberry pie for dessert.

We settled into an easy routine of kayaking, hiking, dinghy rides and lounging on the bridge. Outside on deck was the sound of the wind and the silence of the Arctic. Inside, the railings were draped with dripping dry suits, dive regulators and kayak skirts.

On our seventh day, we sailed out of Scoresbysund and headed south along a convoluted coastline, much of it uncharted and unnamed. The thought of poking up nameless fjords had us thrilled. We landed on a long pebble beach littered with logs and rolls of birch bark that had spent two years travelling over the North Pole from Siberia, freezing for one winter into the pack ice.

Nursing a cold, I decided to sit out the kayaking and the trek along the lagoons in favour of a sunny spot on the hillside above an abandoned trapper's hut on the beach that curiously contained several issues of Hustler magazine from 1987. The silence was exquisite, the sun warm. I had just drifted into a nap when someone below shouted "Iceberg calving!" I could barely hear the voice, but the crack and subsequent crash of tonnes of ice reached me loud and clear as an iceberg just offshore dropped half its bulk, spun on its axis and, sending an impressive bow wave in all directions, littered the fjord with a slurry of ice that appeared as if it had been through the blender en route to a margarita.

Miraculously for Greenland in September, the weather had held calm and sunny for us for six days, but as we returned to ship that afternoon, the skies turned black and the waves crashed off icebergs that rocked and rolled drunkenly. The Russian crew battened down the hatches, Captain Sergey turned the Polar Pioneer east toward Iceland, and we all headed off to our bunks clutching lifesavers in the form of little white anti- nausea pills.

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