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By Lee Treloar

Destination Greenland Going to Extremes

A small fishing boat with passengers enjoying the twilight in Ilulissat, Greenland

It is the end of an expedition, and the team of huskies leans into their traces for the home stretch as they charge along the frozen sea of ice. I feel like standing on the sled and raising my arms in victory. Dogs, hunters and passengers alike, are eager to get back to the small community of Qaanaaq in the extreme North of Greenland where we started our epic adventure six days before. More importantly, we are getting close to cooked food, hot showers and warm beds.

We had travelled more than 200 bone-jarring, icy, kilometres and there were times when I was not sure that I could cope with the extreme conditions we encountered. But adversity, viewed in retrospect, becomes adventure. My bruises would heal and eventually I would get back the feeling in my fingers. I had done it!

The weather had been unpredictable, and the cold almost unbearable. Yet we were traveling in a photographer's

dream with 24-hour daylight, glacier-draped mountains and saturated sapphire-blue skies. The expedition was billed as a "Traditional Narwhal Hunt" but we had been assured that the only shooting would be with a camera.

Photography in extreme climates is always a challenge for both the camera and the photographer. I have travelled extensively in both the Arctic and the Antarctic and thought I had mastered

most situations for keeping camera gear and myself warm and functioning. But this dogsled expedition to the far North of Greenland took me back to the basics.

Getting to Greenland from the west coast of Canada was not as easy as it appears on a map. Though Greenland is our next-door neighbour in the far North, I had to fly to Copenhagen, Denmark to catch the regularly scheduled flights on Air Greenland. From Copenhagen we flew back across the Atlantic to Kangerluusaq, the main international terminal for air travel to Greenland. A milk run took us further north with multiple stops in small colourfully painted communities that hug the rocky coast.

Ilulissat, (pop 4052) was our first layover in Greenland. The word



(left) Lee and two Inuit hunters. They are wearing traditional polar bear pants and Kamiks (boots). These keep them far warmer than our modern high tech clothing and footwear.

(above) Icebergs float lazily in the harbour at Ilulissat, Greenland

(right) A colourful beach house along the frozen sea ice in Qaanaaq Greenland

"Ilulissat" means "iceberg" and it is obviously a well-named community. Greenland's biggest tourist attraction is Icelfjord, a UNESCO World Heritage site where a massive glacier tumbles into the sea calving hundreds of majestic icebergs. These icy cathedrals may remain grounded in the water of Disco Bay for years before they finally float south to Baffin Island and eventually reach Newfoundland, sometimes, sinking ships along the way.

That evening, the light was soft and golden and the water smooth as glass. We found a fisherman willing to take us out to the bergs for a photo shoot on his boat. This was the perfect night for photography as we sailed in and around some of Nature's most impressive art. It was also the last sunset we would see for a week.

Ilulissat is only half way up the west coast of Greenland and we still had one more day of flying north over the glacier covered mountains. I stuck my nose to the window of the little Dash 7, and took far too many photos of the fascinating geology of Northern Greenland until we reached the small community of Qaanaaq (pop. 645) at 77° 28' North.

The next morning, we finally began the journey we had come for; we met our drivers and their teams of beautiful

Greenland Huskies. These dogs are bred for their job and were howling and eager to pull. Tourism is new this far north

The next morning I woke early and tried to write in my journal. Fingers stiff, I was barely able to scratch out these cryptic words:

"Pen won't write fingers
don't move
First night camping,
Freezing cold
Early camp
Glacier
Great driver
Packing up to begin day 2"
If I didn't make it... at least
I'd left a note.

and dealing with passengers was as much of a novelty to these hunters as riding a dogsled was to us. I was waiting for instructions in dog sled etiquette when my driver motioned that I should hop on the sled; just hang on and ride was the message.

As we rode away from the tiny colourful community, I began to appreciate the magnificent landscape

around us: the meringue-smooth sea ice, the massive grounded bergs rising like icy mountains, and the blue skies that deceived us into thinking that this would be an easy ride.

But there was no time for reverie as fierce Katabatic winds soon began their relentless assault. I pulled my hat over my forehead and sank deeper and deeper into my parka. I looked at my driver's thin coat and wondered how he could possibly be warm. He just laughed in glee and the energized dogs tore along the ice with excited yelps.

At our brief lunch break, I pulled another jacket from my pack and put it on under my parka. I was getting seriously chilled. By 3pm, conditions were too cold to continue and the hunters called it a day. We were at the base of a brilliant blue glacier beside a massive mound of rocky moraine: surely one of the most majestic campsites ever!

I watched as two drivers pulled their sleds together and pitched a simple canvas tent over top: close quarters for two hunters and two passengers. Our bags stayed outside, and were used as ballast to hold down the tent during stormy nights.

That evening I prepared my just-add-water-to-the-bag supper, and looked back at the first day on the

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The colourful houses of a small community hug the shore of Greenland.

sled. Along with the cold, staying on the sled proved to be more of a challenge than I had thought and my muscles were aching. I was relieved to fall into my sleeping bag, only taking off my parka, boots and ski pants, and though I was still fully clad, and the sleeping bag was rated to minus 20° I shivered through the night. I really wondered how I could cope with these conditions. Every small task seemed so difficult.

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That morning I had added even more layers of clothing; my boots and my oversized leather mittens were stuffed with hand and foot warmers but still I felt the numbing bite of the North. Photos came second to survival.

That day things got worse. An hour out of camp, my driver stopped to help another driver with his dogs. I was

alone on the sled when our dogs took off. This situation was a nightmare: the dogs were careening across the ice without our driver and I had no idea what I could possibly do to stop this wild ride. The dogs are controlled by Inuit words, and the snap of a whip and I had neither. I was sure someone would come and rescue me any moment. But moments became long, heart-pounding minutes and when I turned around, I saw that the rest of the group was fading into the distance. This was not a good thing. I thought of jumping off but I really did not want to add broken bones to the mix. All I could do was hang on and hope.

I really have no idea how long that wild ride was or how far the dogs ran. Five minutes? Five kilometers? It seemed an eternity of terror. Eventually



The Inuit hunter and his dogs enjoy the day on the ice.

the dogs got hung up on a rugged block of sea ice and the team came to a panting halt. The other hunters and passengers finally caught up with us and I don't know who was more relieved: my driver that his dogs were safe, or I, that I had survived the wildest ride of my life.

Then the storm hit. Blinding snow, and freezing temperatures came roaring down from those beautiful mountains. It seemed impossible to continue but continue we did.

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Things changed the following morning; my attentive driver had a

surprise for me. He motioned for me to sit down on the sled and, like Prince Charming, he pulled off my

My mantra for a trip like this would be: "Simplicity and Organization." I travelled with my compact Nikon D80 with my trusty travel lens the Nikkor 18-200mm VR; a good choice for conditions where it's not always easy to change lenses.

boots and tied his own snugly warm polar bear skin Kamiks on my grateful feet. I padded around the campsite

proudly, warm and comfortable but with a considerable pang of conscience about the bear. Then another hunter brought me his beautiful furry polar bear pants, I felt like I was selling my conservationist soul. My objections dissipated quickly when I felt the radiant warmth flow through me. The thick black hide of the polar bear absorbs the heat from the sun and the each shaft of hair is hollow and provides even more insulation. Nature does it right. I was ready to enjoy the rest of the journey in comfort.

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Destination Greenland **Going to Extremes**



Dog teams leave the community of Qaanaaq for a six-day expedition across the frozen sea

In an environment without scale, distances are deceiving. On one clear and sunny day, our course was a straight line across the frozen sea to a tiny hamlet nestled against mountains that appeared to be only a few kilometres away. After a beautiful nine-hour ride, we arrived in the most northerly (77° 48' N) Inuit community on the globe, Siorapaluk (pop 75).



Destination Greenland **Going to Extremes**



Call of the Wild: Gliding along on smooth sea ice beside a blue glacier and jagged peaks.

always easy to access your pack, or change lenses. With only the 200mm zoom, I had been concerned that I might miss the distant shot of a polar bear, or rising narwhal, but in this case, I found the 18mm wide angle a far more useful option for the vast icy vistas. (Read: no bears, no whales!)

Cold weather can eat up a camera battery and I had researched the possibility of using a solar powered charger. In a land where there is 24-hour-daylight, it seemed that this would be a good choice but the solar options looked like they would complicate the situation rather than help. With six batteries, I managed with more than enough power for the six days. I kept my extra batteries next to me in my parka pocket and resisted the urge to review the images. When

I got home, it was like Christmas morning seeing the expedition images on the screen for the first time.

We were traveling in the Inuit's world and traveling their way. There were lessons here. The Inuit have survived for 4000 years in one of the most inhospitable and challenging environments on the globe

The trip itself was exceptionally rich in photo opportunities: not only for the magnificent scenery and beautiful

Greenland Huskies, but also for the complete cultural immersion that we experienced with our Inuit hunters.

We were traveling in the Inuit's world and traveling their way. There were lessons here. The Inuit have survived for 4000 years in one of the most inhospitable and challenging environments on the globe. For them a hunting trip, even in the 21st century, is not an adventure, it is about survival: finding food and shelter.

Much of the hunter's food still comes from the land or the sea: raw Narwhal carved off a frozen slab; walrus stew boiled in a huge pot of water and shared among the drivers; raw seal for men and the dogs. No packaging, no waste.

We learned about igloo building in a demonstration by some of the younger



Iceberg in Ilulissat: The birds provide scale to the colours and textures of this massive mountain of ice.

Inuit hunters of the group. Using only simple handsaws and a large knife they easily carved the frozen blocks of snow and piled them up into the spiral dome that is the iconic shelter of the North: instant shelter whenever you need it.

Some evenings, the hunters relaxed and enjoyed lively spear-throwing contests and encouraged the passengers to join in. The hunters made it look easy and when the novices' spears wobbled and flopped toward the target, the hunters had a good laugh at our expense.

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On the sixty-kilometer ride across the ice, I sat on my perch of caribou skins and soaked up that pristine and

powerful environment. I loved the endless solitude and the vast magnitude of that silent icy scene where the only sound I heard was the swish of the sled and the paws of the dogs as they powered through the snow. I turned off my camera and savoured my surroundings.

By the end of the fifth day, I sadly realized that this was my last night in the tent with my new friends. The journey that began with seemingly impossible challenges was coming to an end almost too soon. I knew that photos could never fully convey the intensity of the adventure, and I also knew that despite difficult situations, I had a better understanding of life at the end of the earth: I had walked a kilometer or two in their Kamiks. ☺