

travel



Lights and luxury in the Arctic Circle

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First-timers this far north will be awed by Mother Nature and, despite evident global warming, will find icebergs amid the fjords the size of semis, bright northern lights and incredibly resilient Inuit people

Story and photos by Julie L. Kessler
Special to the Star-Advertiser

PERHAPS because I grew up in balmy climates of Hawaii and California, I've harbored an odd fascination with cold places. When I learned Silversea Cruises had a 15-day crossing that spent nearly a week in Greenland, followed by another week in remote Arctic Canada, ending in Newfoundland, I dusted off my cold-weather gear and made plans.

While the cruise commenced in Greenland, the fly-in point was Reykjavik, Iceland. From here Silversea chartered a plane for the 90-minute flight to Kangerlussuaq — formerly Sondre Stromfjord — north of the Arctic Circle. The area served as a U.S. military installation from World War II until its 1992 closure. From

the town of 550 residents, we drove 30 minutes to the Zodiac landing for a 10-minute ride to the Silver Cloud, a 220-passenger expedition ship.

The Silver Cloud is designed to navigate remote, icy waters in luxury, with large, all-suite accommodations that include personal butlers. Onboard there is a fitness center with daily exercise classes, several bars and lounges with live entertainment, library, photo studio with classes, heated pool, whirlpool spas, humidior, salon and full-service spa. There's also 24-hour room service that delivered outstanding meals within 20 minutes and four distinctive restaurants.

On our voyage, there were 181 passengers and 230 crew members. Onboard lecturers included a botanist, historian, geologist, archaeologist, ornithologist, marine biologists, naturalists, kayak guides and several bear guides. If anyone had a question, a knowledgeable expert was always nearby.



Greenland's backstory

Greenland is the world's largest island with the northernmost point just 340 miles from the North Pole. As most of Greenland is covered by ice cap, only 15 percent of its coastline is habitable, which is why there are only 56,565 residents.

With four months of perpetual darkness, four months of constant light and two seasons of perpetual twilight, not to mention some seriously glacial temperatures, to say that Greenlanders are hardy would be a vast understatement.

Paleo-Eskimos were Greenland's first explorers and inhabitants. The indigenous Inuit of Greenland today are direct descendants of the

Central Asians that arrived 5,000 years ago during the Thule Migration. Today, Inuit make up 85 percent of Greenlanders with the balance mainly Danish.

During the colonial era, many Inuit married Danes and other Europeans. In 1979, home rule for Greenland was established and, in 2009, the country became self-governing. Both Greenlandic and Danish are official languages and nearly everyone speaks English.

The Silver Cloud anchored off the east coast of Disko Island, Greenland's second largest, near Qeqertarsuaq — also known as Godhavn — home to the University of Copenhagen Arctic Station. Joining a small group we hiked 4 miles to Blaesdalen. Climbing basalt hills with massive icebergs floating nearby felt like hiking in a mirage.

Stops along the Greenland coast

Formerly Jacobshavn, Ilulissat is Greenland's third largest town with 4,350 residents, and home to its spectacular Ilulissat Icefjord — the most prolific tidewater glacier outside Antarctica that became a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2004. This icefjord regularly creates gargantuan icebergs. It's believed the berg that sank the Titanic came from this region.

On a gloriously sunny day, we boarded a 25-foot ice trawler from the ship and headed west. We lost count of the number of gigantic bergs majestically glistening offshore — many of these white giants were the size of office buildings. Several humpback whales frolicked amid bergs while colonies of gulls rested atop them.

Ilulissat was also the birthplace in 1879 of Knud Rasmussen, Ilulissat's most illustrious son. Rasmussen made seven heroic expeditions chronicling Inuit life and Greenland's topography. His most famous, was a 42-month dog-sledged expedition tracing the migration from Siberia to Greenland. At 54, he succumbed to salmonella poisoning from eating kiviak — an Arctic delicacy made from auk seabirds fermented for three to 18 months in seal skin.

An afternoon hike to Sermermit brought us to several different vantage points of massive bergs that often seemed more frozen illusion

The Northern Lights, or aurora borealis, appear in the sky over Bifrost, about 65 miles from where the author's flight arrived in Reykjavik, Iceland. Silversea's Silver Explorer with Akpatok Island's limestone cliffs in the distance. Greenland's town of Sisimut is known for its colorful homes.

Please see ARCTIC CIRCLE, E6

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ARCTIC CIRCLE

Continued from E1

than seascape. Around midnight the aurora borealis — northern lights — made an appearance. Wearing nearly all our clothes, we went on deck. The clear night sky lit up in all directions, rendering July Fourth fireworks lame in comparison.

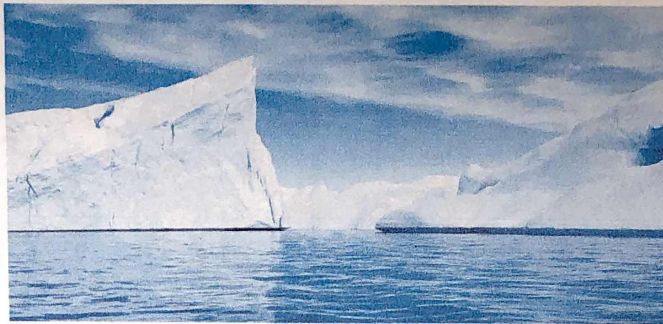
We sailed down the coast of the Davis Strait to Sisimiut, Greenland's second largest town. With just 5,500 residents and more than 1,300 dogs, this small fishing village is in a wide valley sandwiched between jagged peaks, 34 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

Our built guide explained the multicolored houses seen across Greenland originated when huts had no written language. Yellow signified the doctor's house or hospital, blue, a colonial office or fish processing, green for telecommunications and black for police.

In Sisimiut, we sampled musk ox soup (delicious though gamey), dried cod, dried minke whale and raw seal. The small Sisimiut Museum beckoned, but being dog lovers, we walked to Dogtown, where most of the sled dogs reside before winter commences.

Resembling huskies and malamutes, Greenlandic dogs are a separate breed, descended from wolves.

These are working animals with enormous paws. To maintain purity, they are the only breed civilians are permitted. Greenlandic dogs pull sleds in a fan-shaped formation, unlike the rows of paired dogs of other Arctic regions. While puppies, they are allowed to roam freely and are extremely friendly



PHOTOS BY JULIE L. KESSLER / SPECIAL TO THE STAR-ADVERTISER

and playful. Adult dogs live with their work group and pay humans scant attention, except for their musher.

In Dogtown, I spoke with musher Malene Olsen, who was about to feed her brood. Olsen has been mushing for 15 years and the love she had for her animals was palpable.

Important to keep in mind while in Greenland: Dog sleds always have the right-of-way.

Hiking later to nearby Teles Island, our guide brought us to Saqqaq peoples' graves, one 700 years old, open and exposed with bones visible, and the other, 1,200 years old. Also present were remnant mounds of traditional 18th-century houses, where residents lived out brutal winter months mostly underground.

Dining at the ship's Relais & Chateaux signature restaurant, La

Icebergs of Illussat, Greenland, as seen from an ice trawler boarded from the Silver Cloud. A polar bear roams not far from our zodiac as we meandered through islets in the Lower Savage Islands.

IF YOU GO

Arctic Canada and Greenland cruise

The best way: Silversea has nine to 34-day cruises in the region June to September in 2019 and June to October in 2020. All-inclusive rates start at \$10,620 per person. As the itineraries generally start at one location and end in another, it may be more cost effective to let Silversea book air. Call 877-382-6228 or visit silversea.com.

Dame, that evening was a marvel: chef Hilario Moreno's perfectly prepared Roule fole gras with Bordeaux poached pear, mushroom veloute with truffle oil, succulent lobster tail and a dreamy Grand Marnier soufflé.

Our final Greenland stop was the capital Nuuk, the country's first town and today its largest, with about 17,000 residents. In 1728, Nuuk was home to just 12 Greenlandic families when missionary Hans Egede arrived. Though now revered, Egede's resistance to Greenland's communal way of life initially caused social unrest.

Nuuk's wave-shaped Katuaq Cultural Center was inspired by the northern lights, and its well-curated Greenland National Museum has exceptional displays of traditional costumes, 1950s social change and the extraordinary, eerie Qiladsoq mummies, including a 6-month-old.

The Canadian Arctic and Atlantic Canada

The Silver Cloud crossed the Davis Strait to Iqaluit, which has been the tiny capital of Canada's territory of Nunavut on Baffin Island's south coast since 1999.

Established in 1942 as a U.S. airbase, Iqaluit had lost its strategic value by the time the Americans left in 1963. The hilly town is notable for its igloo-shaped St. Jude's Cathedral and old Hudson's Bay Co. storefront facing its expansive rocky shoreline.

Following another colorful showing of the northern lights, we anchored offshore of the Arctic Archipelago's uninhabited Akpatok Island. Imposing limestone cliffs rise more than 800 feet above the coast.

Even before we boarded Zodiac boats to explore the area, we saw a polar bear playfully ambling the

shoreline, another perched atop a ledge and yet another swimming 50 yards away. Thick-billed murre, black guillemot and peregrine falcons abound.

Off Baffin Island's southern rocky coast, we landed at Cape Dorset, a hamlet of about 1,500. Here traditional Inuit art — mainly printmaking and carvings — are produced and sold by cooperatives. And in Kangisajuaq, Nord-du-Québec, we hiked and chatted with friendly villagers en route.

In the Lower Savage Islands, our small boats cruised through islets while a young male polar bear stared at us, seemingly as curious about us as we were about him. Cruising Nachvak Fjord in Torngat Mountains National Park, a mama bear and two cubs walked the beach with gently sloping snow-covered mountains and odd rock formations in the distance.

A final day was spent in Twillingate, Newfoundland, where cod, prior to the 1992 moratorium, was once king. Its landmark red-and-white lighthouse amid dramatic, rocky cliffs and the friendly locals made it hard to leave.

Disembarking in St. John's, I thought of the plethora of natural wonders I saw on this voyage and reflected on the bravery of those who led the first expeditions to this vast, frigid region with little more than grit and curiosity.

Uttering a typically Greenlandic sentiment, the explorer Knud Rasmussen once said, "Give me winter, give me dogs, and you can have the rest."

Julie L. Kessler is a travel writer, legal columnist and attorney based in Los Angeles, and the author of "Fifty-Fifty: The Clarity of Hindsight." She can be reached at Julie@VagabondLawyer.com.



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