



**DEEP FREEZE**

A Zodiac boat floats into the heart of East Greenland's glaciers. More than 80 per cent of the land is covered in ice



ULTRA ADVENTURE

# THE HEART OF LIGHTNESS

East Greenland is one of the most starkly beautiful places on our planet – and has been almost impossible to access, until now. **Michelle Jana Chan** ventures deep into the land of the midnight sun



**T**here are a few words in Greenlandic that we've borrowed in the English language, including "kayak", "anorak" and "igloo" – and that probably reflects life in this remote place more than any history lesson. It is cold. It is icy. And the indigenous locals are incredibly agile in a one-man boat – at hunting polar bear, narwhal and seals to feed their large families.

Greenland, the world's largest island, must be one of the most inhospitable and starkly beautiful places on earth. More than 80 per cent of the land is covered in ice, albeit shrinking, and the coast is often blocked by sea ice. I saw no trees – vegetation in summer amounts to a few inches of dwarf fireweed and some dandelions. There is little wildlife, at least on the land: polar bears, some Arctic foxes and hares. Nobody knows how many. Offshore there are whales and seals. The skies are almost empty of birds. Every time a gull flapped by, I turned to watch in wonder.

Yet despite this hostile climate and tough terrain, Greenland does support communities along its shores. The gentler climate in the west hosts the main towns of Nuuk and Ilulissat, which have a Nordic flavour because of Greenland's long-standing affiliation with Denmark.

In contrast, the remote, rugged east is highly indigenous and here community values and traditions are stronger, from hunting and fishing

**LIVING ON THE EDGE**  
*Colourful houses (above) dot the landscape on an island near Tasilaq. Most settlements in Greenland are accessible only by boat, helicopter or snowmobiles. Right: kayaking the fjords. While paddling past, the snap, crackle and pop of air being released can be heard from beneath the icebergs*

to using husky dogs for transportation in winter. But for travellers, this region has been difficult to access. Most visitors to Greenland fly into the west and explore the coastline by small cruise ship, rarely looping around to the east.

But there is a new way of seeing this mysterious and magical side. Discover the World is working with the American operator Natural Habitat Adventures, partner of the World Wildlife Fund, which has established Base Camp Greenland, a semi-permanent collection of remarkably comfortable canvas cabins on the shores of an inlet off the sensational Sermilik Fjord. The area is almost entirely isolated, except for a small local village. What we all yearn for in this day and age is the luxury of space. There is so much here, it almost makes you feel twitchy.

My trip began in Reykjavik, Iceland, where I met up with the small group of 13, a mix of couples and single travellers from the US and Canada, and we caught a two-hour flight to Kulusuk, a small town with a gravel runway built by the US military. Today, the airfield is used mostly to bring in the region's supplies, a handful of tourists in expedition gear and the occasional local family wearing denim and leather. On our flight, a robust little girl was dressed in a skimpy Disney T-shirt and skirt appropriately decorated with characters from Frozen. I was wearing layers of Polartec and down, wishing I had brought my thicker jacket.

From here, the group travelled for 15 minutes in an old Huey helicopter, now painted a reassuring red, to the town of Tasilaq. Most of



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the settlements in Greenland are accessible only by helicopter or boat, or, in winter, dog teams and snowmobiles.

Facing the King Oscar Fjord, Tasiilaq is the biggest town on this side of the island, a collection of a few hundred colourful A-frame houses, in cinnabar red, forest green and butter yellow. There were polar-bear skins hanging on laundry lines and husky dogs howled in the morning like ululating women at a funeral. Some enterprising trader had obviously breezed through town selling trampolines, as every house seemed to have one: kids bounced up and down all day (and night, since the sun barely sets in high summer).

We visited Stunk, an artisanal workshop that, I was told, was intended to be Kunst ("art" in Danish), but the builder arranged the five letters in the wrong order. Inside were a half-dozen men and women making tupilaqs: small spiritual carvings in musk-ox horn and seal claw.

I also met the charismatic Dines Mikaelson, a dog-sled champion who talked about his huskies ("I spit in their mouths to train them, so they can smell my breath from 500 metres away"), as well as living in the "twin worlds", as he called them, of the traditional and modern. As he spoke, a drunk man staggered past shouting unintelligibly. Dines pointed out how tough it was for his community. "When two cultures meet this way, it can be very hard," he said, nodding towards the man. "Sometimes this happens."

The next day, the group left by boat, heading out to sea and into the Ammassalik Fjord. As we headed further inland, the waterway narrowed and calmed. We saw the blow of a fin whale, the world's second-largest species of whale, and fulmars gliding above.

Around one more bend and we arrived at Natural Habitat's impressive camp at the foot of domed granite peaks, with icebergs floating in the bay. Inside the canvas cabins it is supremely comfortable, with proper beds, thick duvets and hot-water bottles, a warming stove, en-suite WCs and private terraces. Excellent hot showers and warm changing rooms are in a separate tented area, as are the library and bar with its deep leather armchairs. The dining hall serves astoundingly good food, including hot soups with oven-warm home-made bread, local catches of Arctic char, and foraged berries and sorrel leaves from the lakeshore. A campsite catering to high-end American tourists makes for quality standards of comfort and service. It could not be more of a gem find.

Summer days are lovely and long, and we went on expeditions by Zodiac, mixing whale-watching with gentle hikes and delicious picnics. We regularly saw whales blow. One humpback fluked before it dived down. Another was bubble-feeding: a technique of blowing bubbles to corral prey. Seals bobbed their heads up like shiny bowling balls.

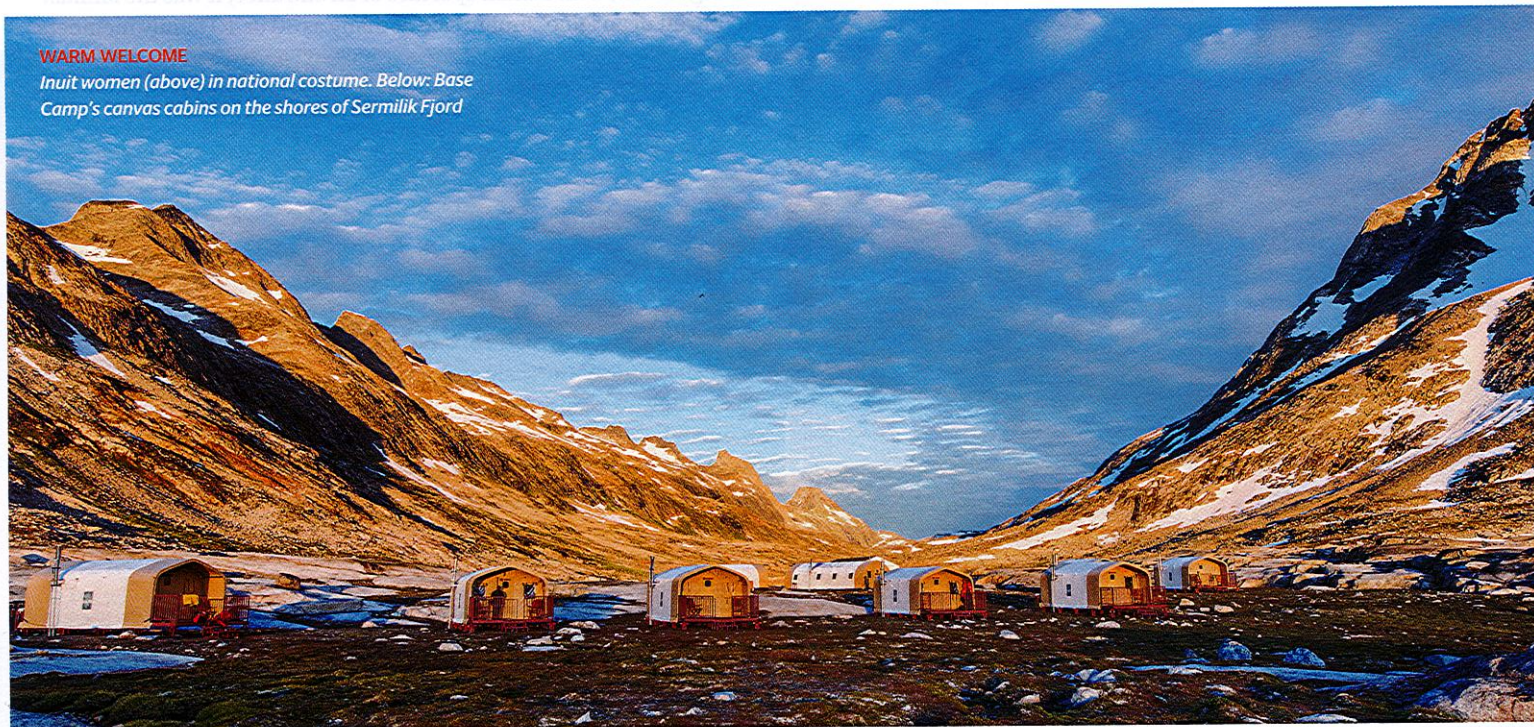
There were also serene kayaking excursions among the icebergs: some gigantic, tabular and pristine-white; others jagged, craggy and a Bombay Sapphire blue; some dimpled and coated in the detritus of moraines. All around was the snap, crackle and pop of air being released from the underwater zones of icebergs, and at times, this delicate effervescence was broken by the boom of one rupturing, sounding sometimes like thunder, sometimes like a shotgun, as the ice spectacularly cracked apart.



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#### WARM WELCOME

Inuit women (above) in national costume. Below: Base Camp's canvas cabins on the shores of Sermilik Fjord



#### WHAT TO PACK

**THE BAG** an Osprey Farpoint 70 with a removable daypack (£130; ospreyeurope.com).

**THE JACKET** The Montane Women's Alpine Pro Jacket (£330; montane.co.uk) is water- and windproof.

**THE OUTER LAYER** The water-resistant Berghaus Extreme Micro Down jacket with Nikwax (£190; berghaus.com).

**THE BASE LAYER** by Columbia (from £22.50; columbia-sportswear.co.uk) and Polartec Eider Wonder mid-layer (£90; cotswoldoutdoor.com).

**THE SHADES** Adidas Sport Eyewear Tycane Pro Outdoor sunglasses (£147.99; rxsport.co.uk).



MADS PHELIPST GREENLAND; BILL ARMSTRONG; MELISSA SCOTT; GETTY; ALAMY

One day, we cruised by Zodiac more than 70 miles along a narrow inlet, the Johan Petersen Fjord, to see three tidewater glaciers so colossal that their movement can cause earthquakes; and as they thin out and lose mass, the earth's crust rebounds. They may be grandiose at their best, but glaciers are also one of the most visible manifestations of climate change, retreating so swiftly that locals are worried. Juujuu Eertaaq, one of our guides, told me he has seen "three glaciers die in the last few years", meaning they have withdrawn above the waterline. "It's scary how fast they're melting," he said. "Will I be able to use my dogs in the future? Will the seals still come? Should I move further north?"

Jujuuu invited us to visit his pretty local village of Tiniteqilaaq, shortened to Tinit, a settlement of less than 100 with a helipad, a free communal laundromat and a youth centre. There were strips of seal skin drying on railings and a humpback whale calf dead on the shore that had been attacked by orcas and towed in by villagers to feed to their huskies. Daily life is unforgiving, yet the local community is warm and generous, centred on the life-or-death values of sharing and neighbourly support.

We visited Juujuu's mother-in-law's house for coffee and I asked her about the challenges of living in a cold, northerly place. "What's hard?"

**IN DOGS' COUNTRY**  
*Husky dogs (top) transport visitors and locals over the sea ice near Tasilaq. Below: an embroidered kamik boot, and inside a local bar, stocked with herbal schnapps*

she echoed, puzzled. "Nothing. Life is easy, compared to the old days." But she also spoke about how weather patterns have become more extreme. "We have colder nights, stronger winds and hotter days," she said. "Not like before."

On another day, we travelled north deeper into the Sermilik Fjord. On this journey we saw a humpback breach next to a rolling iceberg, perhaps because it was disturbed or simply jumping for joy. We also saw a mother and baby humpback blowing, parallel to each other: first the mother with its loud vigorous breath and tall spray, then the baby with its little spout.

We moored up the Zodiacs and hiked through a valley, passing banks of purple flowers, fluffy Arctic cotton, and identifying on the shoreline the terrain of tussocks, basalt dykes in the rock face and snow in the lee of gullies; in another, across the water, there was the Greenland ice cap almost as if it were steaming, with fine ice billowing across its surface.

That evening I sat on the deck of my cabin, studying in one direction the terrain of tussocks, basalt dykes in the rock face and snow in the lee of gullies; in another, across the water, there was the Greenland ice cap almost as if it were steaming, with fine ice billowing across its surface. It is a gloriously otherworldly landscape.

On the final day, we explored an abandoned settlement where there was a ruin of a sod house: a circular home built partly of stone, partly of vegetation, with a small aperture of an entrance; it was the familiar footprint of an igloo. Juujuu said as many as 30 or 40 family members might have lived in these cramped quarters, perhaps as recently as the 1960s. In fact, his mother-in-law had told me that she herself was born in a sod house.

We returned to camp, motoring through a so-called "iceberg graveyard", an area where fragments are trapped by currents and a spit of land, instead of floating out to sea. Here were some monumental icebergs breaking up or beached, fracturing and melting. There was something terribly sad about seeing this, like a child watching their snowman disappear.

And that strange tussle of emotions seemed always to be at play here: my marvelling at the scale and splendour of the glaciers and icebergs, just as they were losing power. Perhaps that is our story, too. Witnessing nature's battles here is like being at the frontline: Greenland is one of the world's most pure wilderness environments and a reminder of how we must not shirk from taking care of it.

*Discover the World (01737 214 291; discover-the-world.co.uk) offers a nine-night trip that includes four nights at Greenland Base Camp from £9,000 per person, based on two sharing, including return flights from London via Reykjavik to Greenland, domestic helicopter, boat transfer, guided excursions and most meals. Departures in 2017 begin in late July and end in early September. For more information: greenland.com*

