

In Greenland, massive icebergs and gigantic glaciers quietly await you; nature's spectacular phenomenon of Northern lights (*Aurora Borealis*) can be witnessed, and it gets so cold that nothing but seal fur can keep you warm... Heba Hashem

A JOURNEY TO THE NORTH



Clockwise from this image: Huskies resting, Greenland. Image by: Jorgen Chemnitz. National Park; Humpback Whale off the coast of Kitaa. Image by: John Rasmussen. Two hunters in a kayak, Upernavik Narsaq. Image by: John Rasmussen.



About 400,000 years ago, Greenland may have been Green. But with the constant changes in temperature and sea levels which might have affected its geographical location, today only the southern parts enjoy greenery during the summer. The largest island in the world, 85% of Greenland is covered by ice. This could be the real "Land of Narnia". However, this one is reachable and the experience is mind blowing and one to remember for life.

From the Middle East, a simple route that will take you there is a flight to Copenhagen, Denmark. Alternatively, you can head to Reykjavik, Iceland. From either of those two cities, you hop on Air Greenland to reach Kangerlussuaq, a trip that takes about 5 hours. The only international airport in Greenland is based in Kangerlussuaq, an inland town on the West side, with a stable environment guaranteeing the timely arrival

of all flights. To visit any town in Greenland, this will be your first stop, before changing over to a short domestic flight to continue to your destination.

Nuuk is Greenland's capital city, and the country's largest and most inhabited, with a population of 15,000. It is also the world's smallest capital city! Sitting on the West coast of Greenland, Nuuk faces Canada's north eastern side, which explains the dozens of Canadian tourists wandering about. The city also boasts Greenland's University and the National Museum, where you can learn all about the Inuits' history. Moreover, Greenland's only light-controlled pedestrian crossing and roundabouts are found here.

Nuuk, which means 'headland' as it lies at the tip of a large peninsula at the mouth of a gigantic fjord, is Greenland's oldest town. It was founded by the missionary Hans Egede, which is also the name of the city's only 5-star hotel. Touring the city centre is fairly easy on foot, and opposite Hotel Hans Egede are most of the city's restaurants, which serve traditional Greenlandic dishes, cooked with fish, reindeer, lamb, beef or lobster meat.

While other towns offer them as well, whale-spotting excursions are particularly recommended in Nuuk, since these sea mammals are known to appear here more often than in other areas. Once on the boat, you will probably hear a whale before seeing it. The fountain of water gushing from its back will pull you to the right direction, with a sound similar to that of an elephant's trumpet. At that point, get ready to see a wild humpback whale in action, as it jumps out to take its regular breath out of water, taking yours with it too. Humpback whale trips are only available in the summer months between June and September mainly because they come to feed in polar waters during this season, before migrating to tropical waters to breed and give birth in winter. If you're lucky, you might also spot a Mink, Fin, Blue or Killer whale along the trip,

Clockwise from this image: Ittoqqortoormiit mountains, east Greenland, Image by: Destination East Greenland. Sunset on icefjords, Image by: Kristian Fridriksson. Northern lights aurora borealis in Nuuk capital city, Image by: Thomas Krämer. Red town houses, Ittoqqortoormiit, Image by: Jörgen Chemnitz.



and, of course, seals will be popping out from all directions to keep you entertained until a whale decides to make an appearance.

A helicopter to the Ice Sheet and Norse ruins is another trip to consider while in Nuuk. The journey takes you through fjords and over mountain tops, to the base of the fjord, where you will make your first landing to look at the ruins from the Norse settlement established some 1000 years ago. You then move on to the edge of the Ice Sheet, which allows you both the chance to walk on the Ice Sheet itself and perhaps to have a drink mixed with ice that is several thousands of years old.

Owned by Air Greenland and Royal Greenland, the **Arctic Umiaq Line** is Greenland's national shipping company, which can take you to most of the surrounding towns. Apart from the extraordinary landscape that is experienced in comparison to travelling with a domestic flight, the ferry also serves as means of transport for locals, which means you will take a peek into their day-to-day lives.

For example, from Nuuk you can use the AUL to take you to the northerly town of Ilulissat, where the UNESCO-protected ice fjord and ice cap are based. The ship offers both standard and more comfortable

superior rooms with hot and cold meals on board throughout the 48-hour journey. As you approach the northerly town of Ilulissat, hundreds of icebergs scattered all over the ocean entice you to stay outside on the ship's deck even though the weather might be not be that pleasant. During summer, however, the sun shines out during most of the day.

Dramatic scenery is guaranteed in Ilulissat, which means 'icebergs' in Greenlandic. It is home to approximately 4,500 people and 4,500 sled dogs. Ilulissat is beautifully located at the mouth of a 56 km-long ice fjord filled with enormous icebergs from the most productive glacier in the northern hemisphere - Sermeq Kujalleq. The glacier produces 20 million tonnes of ice a day, equal to the amount used by New York City in a year. A couple of hours further north of Ilulissat, a boat trip can take you to the Eqi glacier, where you can spend a couple of days in a hut. South of Ilulissat Icefjord is another charming settlement, Ilimanaq, which is one of the oldest settlements in Greenland. Most tour organizers arrange these trips.

Spending a few nights in one of the metallic, heated igloos of Hotel Arctic is an experience not to be missed. Fully equipped with a narrow shower, TV and white-blue interior, it feels like being in outer space.

Out of the 87 rooms that overlook Disko Bay, or Ilulissat's Ice Bank, five are external igloos and they are only available from May to October, so booking in advance is recommended.

Bjork, the Icelandic singer, is one of the igloos' biggest fans. On her first visit she liked it so much that she extended her stay for a further few weeks. Hotel Arctic is also known to have hosted 10 US senators, the Danish Prime Minister and the German Chancellor. In previous years, members of the Japanese, Thai and Danish royal courts were also guests there. It is no wonder that people from all over the world travel to this isolated spot. From your window, a breath-taking sight captures your senses at all levels.

From early autumn onwards, the night sky is regularly illuminated by the northern lights and, although this occurs all year round, it cannot be seen during the summer months due to the midnight sun. The phenomenon is often seen around midnight and is best experienced on a dark, clear night in the period from September to the beginning of April. If you are travelling during this period, you can see the northern lights from anywhere in the country, whilst in South Greenland the northern lights can be seen from as early as the end of August.

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Dog-sledding is another activity that is strictly seasonal. February, March and April are the best months to try this effortless ride, which has sled-dogs doing all the work. Upon a signal given by the driver, a group of harnessed dogs happily pull you along as you sit comfortably on a warm, reindeer-skin sled. As sunset falls, you will be left wondering whether you should remain a passenger or attempt to drive one yourself. This is in fact possible in Tasiilaq, on Greenland's East coast, where a few days of training are enough to qualify you for a dog sledding driving license!

The midnight sun in Greenland is a spiritual experience that disconnects you from the man-made concept of time. Children roam with their roller skates into midnight as the sun hangs down low in the horizon, and people sit dotted across the hills, sipping on hot drinks while enjoying

the never-ending warmth of the sun rays. The number of days of continuous summer sunshine and winter darkness will depend on the latitude of the places you visit. The further north you travel, the longer the midnight sun will be. Communities will be buzzing after months of cold winter, and going to bed during these days could be an unusual challenge!

Most restaurants in Greenland are found inside the town's hotels, while a few independent cafes and eateries can be found in the capital city and bigger towns. A classic traditional appetizer is a soup dish called 'suaasat', which is made from boiled fish, bird or meat from seal, whale or reindeer. Other favorites include dried 'ammassat' (a small herring-like fish in the salmon family called capelin), dried reindeer meat and whale skin with blubber, called 'mattak', which is a well-loved delicacy amongst the local population.

Before embarking on your polar journey, find out the activities in relation to the current season. This way you can avoid disappointments and ensure that you see and enjoy everything as expected. Thick coats and jackets are vital to this trip no matter what season it is, as Greenland is regularly hit by winds and, even if the morning sees sunshine, the night time is always chilly,

even in summer months. If you plan to take a camcorder along, then fill up on extra batteries as photography and video clips are simply the most valuable souvenirs you can get out of Greenland.

DID YOU KNOW?

- ★ In Greenlandic, Greenland is called “Kalaallit Nunaat” - the Land of People. Ironically, the population of 56,000 over 2.175,600 square km makes it an under-populated country.
- ★ The majority of the population lives in towns or settlements in the ice-free part of the country along the coast, mostly in Western Greenland.
- ★ Geographically, Greenland is part of the North American continent; geopolitically, it is part of Europe, and nationally the country is part of Denmark.
- ★ The ice cap was first crossed in 1888, and the journey was made on skis.
- ★ There are no roads connecting Greenland's towns. To travel from one town to the other, two ways are primarily used: aircraft/helicopter or ship.
- ★ The killing of baby seals is illegal in Greenland. It has never been a tradition to hunt them since they do not carry much meat.