

66° North – Kayaking along the



Arctic Circle

By Uta Machold





'Slaloming' around icebergs has been on our list of dreams for more than 10 years, from the day we had seen slides about a kayak trip somewhere along the coastline of Greenland. Finally it felt like it just 'had to be done' - now or never! Coming to that conclusion, investigating our options and deciding on a suitable trip was all done within a week around the end of 2016. From then on, the hardest part of our preparations was to patiently wait for that magic day in July when we would make our way up north to the Arctic Circle - at 66° north, right into the Arctic summer.

What lay ahead of us was an organised kayak trip within the Tasiilaq District on the sparsely populated east coast of Greenland. We were a group of six paddlers – plus Calle, our Swedish guide, who has lived in Svalbard (midway between continental Norway and the North Pole) long enough to be considered a real Norseman. Together with my long time paddle friends Nele and Dagmar from Germany, we were convinced that the other half of the group (three handsome men) just had to be all right – and sure enough, we couldn't have hoped for a better team, or a better guide!

Greenland is the largest island on this planet, with an area roughly eight times bigger than that of New Zealand. About 80% of the land surface is covered by the Greenlandic ice cap, leaving only a narrow strip of 'green land' along the coastline suitable for habitation. No more than 56,000 people live in Greenland (and only 3,000 along the east coast), which makes it the second least populated place on earth – after Antarctica.

Getting to Greenland from Iceland is no big deal, a mere two hour flight following the Arctic Circle straight to the west and we arrived in Kulusuk. This tiny colourful village is home to only 267 (and declining) hardy souls, and an airstrip on solid - permafrost - ground dotted with some puddles made the landing rather interesting. Calle was waiting here with our single

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plastic kayaks, brand-new dry suits, neoprene pogies and shoes, and not quite so brand-new tents. The weather didn't really make an effort to spoil us right from the start. With 4°C, light drizzle and a heavy grey sky it seemed more like a test if we were brave enough to face a kayak trip in the Arctic.

There were a few surprises for us on day one, the first one being that we would have to do polar bear watches each night, rain or shine - and Calle was clearly not joking about it. We even discovered he had a rifle packed for emergencies. Then there were those impressive mountains of food including tons of chocolate, nuts, biscuits and cakes that had to be squeezed into the kayaks, along with all the other gear needed for a two-week trip away from civilisation. We were wondering who was going to eat it all, but Calle's second principle was that only a well-fed kayaker is a happy kayaker. We didn't object. His third, and last, rule was 'The guide is always right!' - and if for once he is not right, rule number three shall be applied immediately.

Our trip took us from Kulusuk to Kuummiit and Tiniteqilaaq, two more tiny Inuit villages dotted with colourful wooden houses. This part of the trip involved paddling along the Ammassalik Fjord, followed by the narrow Ikaasatsivaq Fjord with some 1000 m high, glaciated mountains towering on both sides. Crossing the 10 km wide Sermilik Fjord was something else. The fjord is famous for its numerous and massive icebergs travelling down from enormous glaciers further north, and being here on a perfectly sunny day with glassy seas was just a dream. By now, the weather had improved considerably, the sky changing colour to dark blue and temperatures rising to almost 15°C - meaning we made good use of NZ proven sunscreen. At the end, a few days were spent in the Johan Petersen Fjord, a real playground for kayakers. At least five impressive glaciers are constantly releasing new icebergs into the sea, and kayaking close to 50-60 m high glacier faces was spectacular. The 'choreography' of the trip was perfectly devised, each day felt like it was topping the one before and whenever







we thought it couldn't be any better, Calle put on his big smile, obviously thinking to himself 'just wait and you will see'.

Did we slalom around icebergs? We surely did. And definitely more than we had ever dreamed of. They came in all shapes, sizes and colours – and even though we paddled around and between hundreds or thousands of them, we could never really get enough. While on day one and two we had still made the effort to paddle long distances to get near those enticingly blue, turquoise or even translucent formations, from day three onwards we found ourselves surrounded by them. Keeping a safe distance was no longer possible. Paddling close to icebergs is very tempting, but actually quite hazardous: they can turn over unexpectedly, creating a powerful wave, or drop large pieces of ice as they melt. But crossing the Sermilik Fjord there was no choice - we had to abandon the last bit of caution and respect for those giant icebergs, as gaps between them were now getting smaller and smaller. A number of times we were literally stuck in the icy labyrinth and had to turn around to find a passage somewhere else. At one point, the entrance to a narrow channel between two islands was entirely barred by blocks of ice at low tide, which forced us to carry seven heavily loaded kayaks quite some distance over the rocks – a time - and energy-consuming undertaking! At the far end of Johan Petersens fjord, the place where Hann, Brückner, Heim and two other nameless glaciers meet the sea all within a distance of a couple of kilometres, it felt like paddling next to the pack ice. It was a feast for all senses, with the unassuming sound of dripping water and air-bubbles being released from inside the ice being just as impressive as the thunderous sound of rolling, cracking and bursting icebergs in the distance – and occasionally alarmingly close to us.

Apart from all the paddling, we also spent two full days climbing mountains. While most of the rugged mountains look impregnable, some nameless peaks are accessible for the experienced 'off-trail' trapper or mountaineer. There was our so-called 'Calle Peak' at an impressive 930

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m and 'C2 Peak' at 797 m. These tramps turned out to be quite a mission. Starting at sea level, we had to scramble over countless boulders, rocks and snowfields, all in untracked terrain and with plenty of ups and downs. Views were stunning, overlooking a number of fjords dotted with icebergs, as well as vast mountain ranges with peaks up to 2500 m in altitude. Gunnbjorn Fjeld (3694 m), the highest mountain in Greenland as well as the highest north of the Arctic Circle, was just out of sight but only a couple hundred kilometres north of us. Descending from the summits on steep snow fields was quick and fun!

How about wildlife sightings? Not exactly sure why - was it due to our frequent, full-throated singing or the presence of hunters with their deadly weapons? Just about one motor boat crossed our path about every other day, but unfortunately we only spotted two or three humpback whales along with three Arctic ring seals during the entire two weeks. Arctic flowers are scarce but colourful along the shores and high up in the mountains. Carpets of the pink Arctic willow, the national flower of Greenland, were eagerly soaking the sun during the short Arctic summer in barren, glacier-formed valleys. There are no trees in this part of Greenland – but wait, in one place Calle pointed out a 'birch forest' to us. Turned out that they were creeping along the ground, sticking out from the rocks by barely 5 cm! In the villages, we saw lots of fish, seals and the skin of a polar bear hanging up to dry - the bear having been shot because he was roaming in the vicinity of the village.

Within our 10 kayaking days we covered a total distance of almost 200 km, the last day involving just a very short paddle to meet some Inuit with their motor boats, who managed to retrace our entire tour back to Kulusuk in less than three hours! By the way, tourism is not really big in this part of Greenland, we might have met 20 odd tourists during 15 days, all of them in and around Kulusuk, within 5 km of the airport.

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Never-ending laughter, joking and singing was regularly heard around our basic but romantic camps and seemed to be proportional to the amount of rain and toughness of conditions - no wonder the polar bears kept a safe distance. Although... our piles of dessert cream provoking a choir of indulgence may well have made the polar bears curious. Looks like we will have to return to the Arctic some day to see them! But this is just one of the reasons why we decided right then and there, that we would all get together again for another kayak adventure up north – most certainly with our well-proven guide Calle. Svalbard 2019 – we are coming!

SOME TIPS FOR THE INTERESTED PADDLER:

Sea conditions: Paddling was by far the easiest part of the trip, carrying the heavily laden kayaks to and from the water, climbing mountains in untracked terrain and getting through heaps of good food proved to be much harder! The wind we encountered was never more than 10-12 knots, and no waves with whitecaps were ever seen. Icebergs typically serve as perfect breakwaters, often creating a sea like a mirror. It is, however, a well known fact that unpredictable katabatic winds may arise at any time, originating from high up on the ice cap and capable of causing trouble for kayakers.

Equipment: Slaloming around icebergs bears some similarity to 'rock-gardening', so plastic kayaks are the way to go! Bring a strong, rain and wind-resistant tent. A warm and waterproof hat, dry suit, several layers of long johns & long shirts, lots of warm socks, pogies and sturdy paddle shoes are essential. Wear proper tramping boots, bring a seat cover (for cold kayak seats and rough rocks) and binoculars plus good rain gear for bear watches. Leave your head torch at home (there is no night in the Arctic summer!) as well as your swimming togs, which won't make a difference should you be brave enough to risk a swim in 2°C cold water.





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