





Discovering **GREENLAND**

by **Joseph Pedro**



Time is coming in Greenland...it's not something that passes," Kuuna says to me in her home overlooking the bay. "Anticipation is useless, everything comes in time so don't think too much about the future, you'll just waste the present."

I am standing in Kuuna's home in Qeqertarsuaq, a town on Disko Island off mainland Greenland, as she realizes that she doesn't have enough water to bathe both of her children. *Not enough water?* It's hard to imagine that this island town, so connected to the water, between gigantic icebergs and glacial waterfalls, doesn't have modern-day indoor plumbing. She doesn't panic though. "It will come," she says reaching her hand to turn a switch that illuminates a red light on her key lime-green home. The light signals a public service to refill her water tank. "It's just a matter of time."

Kuuna steps outside to check and see if the light came on, her Doc Martins leaving behind footprints in the permafrost. She quickly glances up at the red light with a gray, luminous sky serving as a backdrop. "Aha," she says. "While the water is on its way, we'll work on dinner." Her husband's Ford pickup truck pulls up into the gravel driveway. "He has just brought back freshly caught seal, I'll show you how I prepare it," she says. Supermarket chain Pisiffik exists along the town's main street, but her family still very much relies on the land, and why shouldn't they? Modernism has brought Coca-Cola, Hershey's, and French fries, but it hasn't deafened her intense connectedness to Greenland, and the cultural ties that come with thousands of years of tradition.

Her scrawny husband pops out of the truck with a Marlboro Red dangling out of his mouth and a newly bought pack sprouting from his brown Carhartt jacket. He goes to the back and grabs two seals and brings them to Kuuna.

My grandmother may have had a process of making lasagna—a little oregano here, a pinch of red-pepper flakes, and the finest, fattiest Polly-O mozzarella—but Kuuna has a ritualistic and spiritual way of butchering, drying, and salting seal that should help feed her family for at least two weeks. "It's not science," she explains with her black hair swooping in front of her dark eyes as she dips the seal meat into a salt mixture. With her eyes now closed, she says in a soothing voice, "I like to pay respect to the animal, though."

She then brings the seal meat to an already well-used drying line. Holding the meat, she steps over her two, chained-up sleigh dogs, whose noses perk up at the smell. "They are hungry now, I only feed them twice a week in the summer," as the 30-degree ocean breeze rushes through my bones. I sway back and forth for warmth and hide my mouth and nose in my jacket collar; she looks at me. "This is summer!" she laughs. "It's beautiful weather and perfect for the meat to dry." She hangs the fresh seal to dry for a couple days as a blue maintenance truck with a polar bear



logo pulls up. "Here already!" she exclaims wiping the remainder of the salt and seal parts on her jeans. "We have water." The last tender back to my boat is about to leave so I have to go, and I give this newly befriended stranger a big hug. Things in Greenland are difficult, but life here is about appreciation and what comes with time—a simple, yet profound way to think about existence.

Chances are you've flown over Greenland on your way to Europe. It's the massive landmass that appears almost completely white on the plane's flight-status map. Besides hoping the aircraft doesn't have to make an emergency landing on this Arctic giant, you've probably never given the world's largest island (that's not a continent) much thought. But for those with wanderlust, who are not afraid of icy temperatures, in-your-face wildlife, wondrous native culture, and an experience that will make even the most seasoned travelers jealous, look no further than a trip on one of **Hurtigruten's** cruises to Greenland (www.hurtigruten.com).

I arrive in the town of **Kangerlussuaq** (Dutch: Søndre Strømfjord) early in the afternoon, but I'm disoriented. I'm not sure what day it is. I think I left New York yesterday, but the flight to Copenhagen, the day layover, and the flight back across the Atlantic to Greenland has completely confused my sense of place and being. My body doesn't care—I'm in Greenland, I don't have time to counteract jet lag. I step out directly on the tarmac and immediately fall in love with the blue skies clashing with the bare, clay-brown mountains, and the sight of the red **Air Greenland** plane sitting like a toy among the natural environment. My traveling companions on this trip are a mostly older, Northern European crowd intent on discovering something new about the world, and possibly about themselves.

Groups are immediately shuttled by rickety school buses to one of



Photo: Joseph Pedro



Ukkusissat

Photo: Joseph Pedro

Above the Arctic Circle, it's a whole new world. Our boat passes icebergs that rival our ship's size—like a snowflake, each a different shape and intricate pattern.

Greenland's calmest ports where our boat awaits. During World War II, the Americans chose Kangerlussuaq to build an airport and base in this region precisely because it's generally considered to have the best weather in the entire country, and today's sunshine and warm weather affirms the air force's climatologists.

At the port, we spot our home for the next eight days, the expedition vessel **MS Fram**. It's stationed a few kilometers offshore in a picturesque blue bay. The 12,700-ton, Italian-built, six-passenger-deck ship looks like a miniature boat among the massive circling mountains. The black, red, and white ship is appropriately named after the famous Norwegian ship Fram that made history by navigating uncharted water to the North Pole. We'll be taking Polarcirkel boats to get to the ship (which we'll become very accustomed to by the end of the trip), but we're warned that there are some rough waters between us and the luxury liner. Though, by looking out at the MS Fram reflecting enough sun to make me squint, it appears to sit calmly and gracefully despite these "rough waters." Three German couples and myself find out the hard way just how strong the water is. The 15-minute ride out is indeed rough. While there is a clear language barrier (my hellos are returned with blank stares), the freezing water smacks us in our faces and drenches our bags and jackets. At that point, we all speak the language of laughter. It's as if we are on a river rapids ride, laughing at each other's water-saturated misfortune.

The MS Fram isn't your typical cruise ship. It was designed with the

sole purpose of exploring the Arctic and Antarctica. So, for those who need non-stop entertainment, open bars, and happening nightlife, you may want to pass this up. This is for passengers who like to snuggle up to a good book while admiring icebergs and glaciers, for those who want to take up-close photographs of whales, and for people who love lectures on wildlife, geography, and culture. The ship has 112 outside rooms (windows) and 24 indoor rooms (no windows). I first thought I was cursed with a windowless room, but it turns out to be a blessing. With 24-hours of sun in the summer, I consistently had wonderful nights' rests, and it also forced me to sit in one of the many common areas where I was one of the first to hear about any wildlife sighting, and any special changes to the schedule. It also forced me to make friends. The ship's interior is rather simple, though the main décor highlight is the artwork by crewmember and native Greenlander Mikki. If the weather is right, you won't want to spend too much time inside anyway, as the ship is outfitted with plenty of deck space.

Every itinerary on Hurtigruten is completely dependent on the weather and the conditions of the port. A proposed schedule is laid out at the beginning of the trip with the various ports of call. At each anchoring, you also have the option of signing up for "extra" excursions that range in level of difficulty and price (from \$30 to well over \$1,000). Each night, a briefing takes place where staff members describe the destination, explain the optional and included excursions, and the likelihood the ship will be able to



greenland

reach the port. While the ship can hold 400 people (my voyage wasn't this full), you'll quickly find a niche among the passengers. Briefings, excursions, and dining (two assigned seatings) are divided by language. On my ship, there are only two other Americans; the other English speakers are from the UK. We all naturally form a bond.

The first night, the boat steadily careens as it makes its way up the western coast of Greenland. It isn't hard for me to sleep after the day's journey and my wake up call is a loud speaker above my bed. A quick glance at my clock shows it is 6 A.M., but I requested an 8 A.M. wake up call. The announcement begins with loud beeping. Then, a tremendously loud woman speaks in German, then she repeats the message in Danish, and then (finally) she announces in English, "Breakfast is currently being served." You'll grow to hate these unnecessary morning announcements by your eighth morning (one morning she wakes the ship up because she spotted a seal).

The bow is packed with people wearing remarkable Canon cameras, each person eagerly trying to out zoom and out shoot one another as our boat pulls close enough to **Sisimiut**—our first true encounter with Greenlandic civilization. Emerging from the fog is a rainbow of colorful buildings clinging to near-barren hills. It's like nothing I have ever seen. Reds, blues, greens, and yellows all work to form a rainbow of cheerfulness in what is a rather gloomy-looking environment. The structures are a feast for our eyes. We haven't seen anything but a gray fog since we left the port.

This is Greenland's second-largest city with a population of just over 5,000. It's also one of the country's largest ports. Stacks of shipping containers labeled "Royal Arctic" greet our boat, signifying the country's continued reliance on Denmark. For the day, we're allowed

to freely roam the town. Without any friends yet, I venture off alone with absolutely no idea what to expect. A local fisherman decked out with a baseball cap and cigarette waves hello as he stares over a cardboard box filled with bloodied parts. "Hello! What is that?" I ask. "Seal," he says. "Only a million Euros," he laughs as smoke huffs out of his mouth. He clearly is aware that I am not a local. The town's main attraction is the Sisimiut Museum that contains a Greenlandic peat house (looks similar to a hobbit home), which is what most of the island's people would have lived in before the arrival of the Danish. I hop on the local blue bus, which creaks up the steep mountainous terrain and loops around the settlement. The postcard-perfect view from the boat doesn't hold true upon closer inspection. With the Royal Greenland fish processing plant located in town, a majority of the men make barely a living wage in the fishing industry. Much of the town consists of large, Danish-built apartment blocks from the 1960s that are in much need of repair. It's a taste of real-life Greenland. This city stands at the crosshairs of modern-day living and native culture, and the problems that arise from this: pollution, poverty, poor education, and alcoholism.

Before boarding the bus, I pop into the Sisimiut Workshop of Arts. Here, various craftsmen work on all sorts of fun souvenirs, particularly carvings. For Americans, be careful what you buy in Greenland. The United States has the toughest importation laws when it comes to products made out of animals. I spend plenty of time trying to chat up these men while admiring their intricate work.

That night while sitting perplexed by the evening's entertainment—the crew singing karaoke—I bond over the cringe-worthy performances with an older Scottish couple and another travel writer from Scotland. The entertainment has an unintended outcome,





though, as everyone is talking about how bad it is. By midnight, the sun is still high in the sky as our boat glides north, and while we laugh over a crewmember's rendition of "Achy Breaky Heart," a baby iceberg is spotted. This little guy becomes an instant celebrity. Little did we know that icebergs would become commonplace.

Above the Arctic Circle, it's a whole new world. Our boat passes icebergs that rival our ship's size—like a snowflake, each a different shape and intricate pattern. Their color attracts me the most. A rainbow of blues that if described could exhaust all adjectives. Our boat slowly pulls up to what looks like an oasis. Light shines through the heavy gray sky and illuminates a small circular harbor and colored houses lining a small strip of land. We arrive in **Qeqertarsuaq**, or Big Island in Greenlandic and Godhavn (Good Port in Danish). We quickly learn it's a special day on the island. The townspeople are donning the Greenlandic National Dress. The women here stand out over the men, sporting colorful, gorgeously beaded tops and oversized boots while the men wear animal furs. Today is the National Day of Greenland (the longest day of the year), and the entire town is standing on a rock singing the national songs. We don't want to disturb the celebration too much as we pass directly in front of them, though it's hard not to stare as they dance, sing, hoist the national flag, and set off canons. Later in the day, the celebration will continue with a game of "first to catch a seal," followed by cake at the church.

In Qeqertarsuaq a more traditional society continues to exist. Small houses dot the one-road town; outside each is a pack of sled dogs chained up. With no roads connecting settlements, these stunning animals are used for transport in the winters. They aren't seen as pets for

the families, though they are immensely respected for the job they perform. The Greenlandic Dog is the only species of canine allowed above the Arctic Circle, making it one of the most pure breeds in the world. Howling and barking in unison, they don't seem to appreciate our chattering about how adorable they are while taking photos (though it is hard to resist when there's a litter of snow-white Greenland Dog puppies). We're guided on a walk to the Valley of the Winds and slowly reach the top. At a leg-shaking height, ice-cold mists from two waterfalls surround us and rainbows shine down the carved valley. I leave the group behind and descend to the shore, placing my hand in an oncoming wave. Behind me are stones placed in intricate patterns on the shore spelling out things like "I Love JJ," probably the work of some creative (or bored) town kids. I fall back on a bench and try to soak in the view, when I hear a loud thunder clap. "The iceberg," one of the crewmembers shouts. It calves in half and large waves come ashore. If that wasn't exciting enough, I look back to see a group of passengers pointing at the water and before I know it a group of whales flukes about two kilometers offshore. Walking back, I see more dogs outside an adorable key lime-green house; my nosiness pays off. It is here where I meet Kuuna who waves me over.

The next day our boat reaches the settlement of **Uummannaq**. It's sunny for the first time since we arrived, and the whole town is excited by our arrival. The other journalist and I begin walking into town, but are quickly distracted by a café that boasts extremely expensive lattes. Caffeine craved from solely drinking the cruise ship's insta-coffee, we shell out well over \$12 for this treat. While we indulge, ten young mothers and grandmothers walk by pushing baby strollers. It's a parade of adorableness. The big-cheek babies give us puzzling looks. In the main



GREENLAND'S CHANGING ENVIRONMENT

With 80% of Greenland covered by a 660,235-square-mile ice sheet, its greatest environmental concern is global warming. Increased global temperatures have caused the ice sheet to thin and at an alarming rate. While more research is still needed on the effects of climate change in Greenland, scientists agree that as a result, global sea levels will rise. A geographically changing Greenland has even exposed an additional landmass with the 2005 discovery of Warming Island on the east coast. Melting ice has also led to new industries that are threatening the environment, including mining for gold, diamonds, and other minerals, as well as the oil industry. Greenland works hard to preserve the environment, and the entire northeast of the island makes up the Northeast Greenland National Park, which is the largest national park in the world (it's larger than 163 countries) at 375,000 square miles. Despite being the largest island in the world, Greenland has a population of only 57,000, with a population density of .069 people per square mile compared to New York City with 27,532 people per square mile. Whaling has provided the people of Greenland nutrition and essential products since 1,000 C.E., but this tradition has come under attack because of the world's overfishing and strict whaling guidelines. Greenland catches around 175 whales compared to Japan's near 600. The world's overfishing also threatens the country's largest industry. For more information about the environmental challenges facing Greenland today, visit Greenpeace.org.

—Joseph Pedro

square, the townspeople set up a miniature market of handicrafts filled with carvings and handmade baby booties. Some of the cruisers sit through arranged question and answer sessions with hunters and school children, but I decide to go on a hike to “Santa Claus’ Cabin.” It’s a more challenging hike with spectacular views of the snowcapped mountains surrounding the iceberg-filled bay with the colorful town below. We reach a small, green wooden shed that was the site of a wildly popular Danish television Christmas special. In the spirit of things, we drink hot chocolate and eat cookies.

That night, our boat makes a surprise visit to the smallest town yet—**Ukkusissat**. This village of only 170 people is the most northern longitude we will travel on this trip (71°05' N). This isolated town welcomes us with open arms. The children are waiting for us at the dock and quickly grab our hands to usher us into their church for some refreshments that the town's women made with their precious resources. Living so far north, supplies like coffee and ingredients to make cake don't come every day, so this spread of treats is a testament to their generosity and kindness. It's hard to believe that people can live this detached from the rest of the world, but if the natural beauty and hospitality I experience is any indication of how life is in the Arctic, I want in.

That night, the midnight sun is doing incredible things. Rays are shining through cloud strands and illuminating snow-capped mountains. While sunset never happens, it is as if the sun is teasing us. Pinks and purples play in the sky and serve as a fantasy-like backdrop to the town's colorful display. Drying clothes dance on clotheslines and the sled dogs howl at the sky. Way down below, our ship is bathing in this whimsy; it's nothing short of magical. I am invited to take part in a soccer-like game with the town's kids. I play with the boys for a minute, but I gravitate toward the girls who are playing with a puppy and a grandmother with a baby. It's hard to say goodbye to this place, but our boat is ready to make a return south.

High from my experience in Ukkusissat, I can't wait to venture to Ilulissat. Unfortunately, Neptune has other plans. (I say Neptune because a staffer literally dresses up like Neptune on this afternoon and pours ice down our backs in exchange for shots of rum.) What is about to be our most adventurous day (helicopter ride; boat trip to the World Heritage site, the Ilulissat Icefjord; and a lengthy hike to Holmsbakke) is thwarted by icebergs blocking the port. It is, after all, the location of the ice sheet where all the icebergs we've seen were born. We react, though, with anger and disbelief—everyone is visibly upset. Since we can't dock, there is little for us to do. Some passengers





The MS Fram

Photo: Joseph Pedro

opt for quiet reading, uploading photos, spending money to use the Internet, or purchasing expensive cocktails; I opt for a few hours in the outdoor hot tubs. Watching massive chunks of ice pass by while I am sweating is an incredible, transformative experience. While we may have missed a major Greenlandic destination, the crew decides to take the groups out on the Polarcirkel boats to get up close to the icebergs. So close, in fact, I get to eat a piece.

The following day began in a similar fashion, and we squirm at the thought of being stuck on the boat. For once, we anxiously wait for a loud German announcement, but thanks to the captain's quick thinking, he reroutes us to **Aasiaat** (Greenlandic for spiders), which is the fifth largest city in Greenland. We make history as the first Hurtigruten ship to dock here. Similar to **Sisimiut**, this "big city" has some local attractions like a museum and peat house. The Scottish woman and I make our own fun, by investigating various homes and random roads. We then wander into an elementary school, which is hosting a wedding reception (oops). Of course, they invite us in and offer to feed us a mix of freshly caught whale meat (still bleeding), scalloped potatoes, seal, and some coffee and Jameson. We kindly turn down the offer. "Here, here chew on the skin [of the whale] it's good for your teeth," she says as a little boy takes a knife to the bloody whale fat and skin to demonstrate. I try it, thank her, and rescind toward the door so I don't spit out whale blubber at her wedding reception. We watch girls from a local theatre club perform traditional dances for us and then meet some boozy locals who are gearing up for the weekend nightlife (the billiards club opens at 9 P.M.).

Our last day brings us to the tiny town of **Itilleq** (only 112 people). Here, we're invited into homes for *kaffeemilk* (coffee/cakes). When we compare our visit with other passengers' experiences, we find ours is wildly different. We step into a large, nicely decorated house. Our hostess with a beautifully knitted pink sweater and diamond earrings says she is feeling very under the weather and leads us to a leather couch where there is a large homemade trifle, a cake, and cookies. She pops on a flat-screen Bang & Olufsen television set complete with an X-Box 360, and she walks away into the bedroom. We're quiet

for a minute as we look around at all the decorations and sip Keurig-made coffee. The Scottish woman breaks the silence with "Well, isn't this bloody nice! It's nicer than my flat, but with an ocean view, ain't that something!" We all laugh and eat. Turns out that the other groups' experiences were more traditional—complete with a fire heating their coffees, not a pod coffee maker.

We disembark from the boat back where we began in Kangerlussuaq. Like at the end of most long trips it's hard to believe we've been gone for so long, but most are ready to take on the epic journey home. Although we have visions of our favorite foods from home in our heads, we're treated to the best meal of the entire trip: musk ox burgers (so good) and venison sausage. After eating, we explore the area further, and it's an interesting town to end the trip, especially for Americans. Its *raison d'être* is the American military, which needed an air force base closer to Europe during World War II. Soldiers lived at Sonderstrom Air Base up until the early 1990s, so the town has a quirky Americanized culture. There is a bowling alley in a converted barracks, an American-style bar, and even a pizza parlor. One of the excursions offered here is a World War II walking tour, but we opt to get out of the town and take a big-tired van to a nearby glacier. After a week of trudging through ice and stumbling on volcanic rocks, I'm surprised by my surroundings. It's a desert. Purple and yellow flowers bloom along the road that turns from well pacted to very bumpy. Then, looking out into the distance, the desert turns to whites and blues. We arrive at the Russell Glacier. It's a testament to the beauty and magnitude of nature.

I find a beach that leads to a lake filled with ice chunks under the massive glacier. With the sun shining high in the sky, I fall on my back. Looking up, I watch clouds disappear behind the glacier, wind whips off the ice sheet, and I hear the sounds of small pieces of ice falling into the water. I take a deep inhale and begin to dread the imminent day's journey back to New York that's ahead of me. I think of Kuuna. "Home will come," she'd say. "Just enjoy it." I close my eyes and reflect on the people I met here and the inspiring nature that will forever spoil my concept of beauty. I can't wait to come back. I stand up and dust off sand. My return will come, I think to myself, in time. ■