

FOOTLOOSE IN GREENLAND

Trekking on both sides of Greenland, 2003.

by Grant Dixon



The Greenland icecap, 2500 kilometres long, up to 3000 metres thick in places and drained by thousands of valley glaciers, covers 85% of this huge island, but as it is the world's largest island (2.4 million sq km) there remains much ice-free land. This ice-free coastal strip is widest in the west, up to 200 kilometres inland from Sisimiut, whereas in the east ice extends close to the coast in many areas.

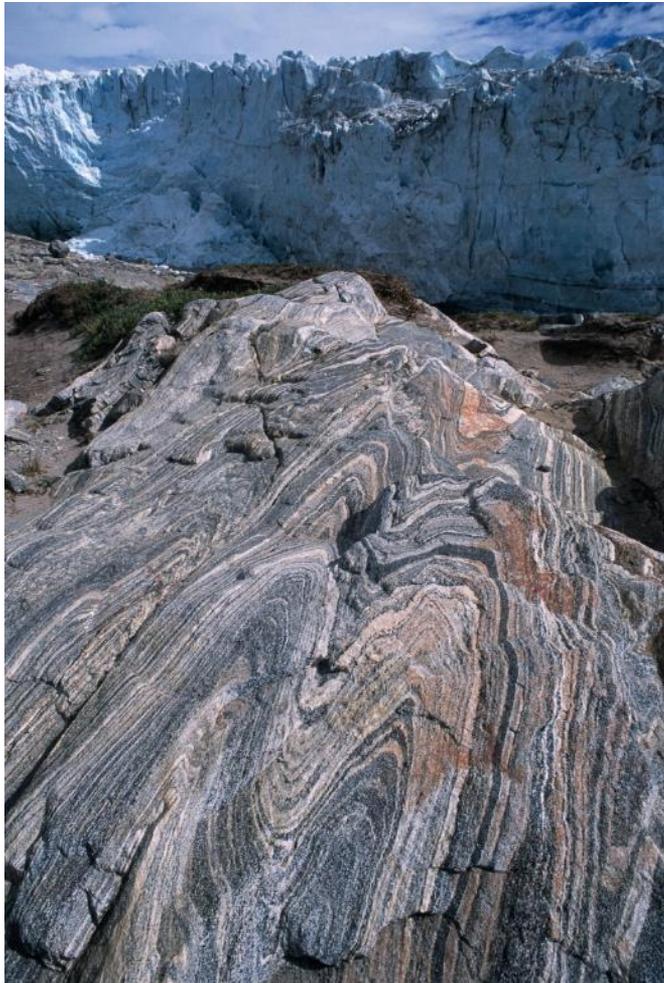
If you're not planning a major expedition, the most accessible parts of Greenland are in the east and west around the latitude of the Arctic Circle, and the southwest coast. These are where the main, primarily Inuit population centres are located, but with less than 50,000 people in Kitaa (the western side of Greenland) and a mere 3500 people living in two towns and several villages on the entire vast east coastline (Tunu, or "the other side"), crowds are not an issue.

Flying in from Iceland, our approach to Greenland was spectacular, sea ice and scattered rocky islets appearing below as we descended out of the cloud towards the gravel runway at Kulusuk. Awaiting my onward flight to West Greenland, I escaped the quarry-like surrounds of the small terminal for a few hours and wandered to Kulusuk. This village of wooden houses perched above a bay full of small icebergs sits two kilometres away out of sight and sound of the air terminal. I sat, watched and listened to the pop and crash of icebergs bobbing in the bay and the distant howling of chained sled dogs - archetypal Greenland.

Flying west, ice-filled fiords, bare, brown islands and jagged peaks of the Ammassalik region (to which I would return in three weeks) soon gave way to the gleaming white icecap. Stretching to the horizon and contrasting with the clear deep blue sky, the icecap surface was featureless at first. Further west an extensive network of meltwater channels and jewel-like turquoise pools of meltwater appeared, then arcuate crevasse lines and moraine bands as we approached the western margin. Descending past the ice margin, a rolling landscape with sand, grass and low shrubs flashed beneath, then the plane was on the ground at Kangerlussuaq.

Kangerlussuaq is located at the head of the 160 kilometre-long fiord for which it is named. It is a former USA airbase, built in 1941 as a refuelling stop for flights to wartime Europe and subsequently used during the Cold War. Architecturally and climatically, it is unlike any other of Greenland's permanent settlements. Being far inland, the climate is stable with warm, dry summers and very cold winters.

After visiting the edge of the Greenland icecap, lying a mere 25 kilometres east, I planned to turn west again and trek to the coast, 200 kilometres and up to two weeks away. My route from Kangerlussuaq to the coast at Sisimiut would partly follow a version of the Arctic Circle Trek. This is Greenland's most popular long trek (although that isn't particularly popular) but is mostly relatively trackless. Furthermore, late June was fairly early in the summer season so I didn't expect to meet many other walkers.



Russell Glacier is a small and broken glacier with serried ranks of seracs extending up towards the great white mass of the icecap. Its terminal face was a vertical blue-white ice cliff, grounded on an ice-smoothed pavement in which the convoluted folding of the ancient rocks was exposed amongst scattered ice blocks that had fallen from the glacier face above. The glacier gives rise to a turbid river which flows west. I followed the river past splashes of pink Niviarsiaq (Rose Bay, the national flower of Greenland) on the sandy valley floor. Later, walking across terraces blanketed with yellow grass and prostrate willow or birch thickets, I came across a Musk ox grazing amongst the shrubbery. These shaggy animals with heavy-looking horns have an almost prehistoric look, and are surprisingly small. After a brief meeting of eyes this generally shy animal wandered away.

Back in Kangerlussuaq, I bought supplies for 12 days, then hitched westwards, a passing jeep saving a few hours plod. The walking from the roadhead was initially straightforward, past grey-blue lakes surrounded by ice-smoothed and plucked rocky knolls and bluffs. Later, hilly terrain, with marshy flats and low thickets, combined with my heavy pack, to make the going feel surprisingly strenuous.

I encountered clouds of insects during the warm and still day and, while they were mostly non-biting small flies at this stage, I hoped they were not a omen of things to come. The mosquito is one of the smallest of Greenland's wildlife, but easily the most numerous during a brief period in mid-summer. I had hoped that my June trek was early enough to avoid this irritant.

I camped on an exposed knoll above a lake rimmed with the fluffy heads of Cotton grass hoping any breeze would disperse the insects. Eventually I retired to the protection of my tent and tried to sleep despite the daylight. At Arctic Circle latitudes during summer, the sun hardly sets, and nowhere in Greenland is it dark between late-May and mid-July.

Next day I wandered through an undulating landscape in misty rain and a cold breeze, but this at least meant no insects. Underfoot ankle-high birch and willow displayed spring growth in places, but many areas were still brown and dead from up to eight months of burial beneath winter snow. After crossing several rocky ridges, with scattered erratic boulders dumped as the icecap retreated inland several thousand years ago, I descended to camp beside Amitsorsuaq lake.

Stunning lake reflections next morning soon gave way to a cold wind and showers again. Combined with the often-soft ground, it seemed a long 20 kilometre plod along the shore to the far end of the lake. Walking bent forward, and so gazing downward, for much of the day made me appreciate the delights



of the ground cover. Small cream and purple wildflowers added colour to the mosaic of yellow grass and green mosses, themselves sometimes overgrowing the occasional old, shed caribou antler. The calls of small birds, ducks on the lake and the cries of falcons, invisible amongst the rock bluffs above, completed the sensory experience.

A broad marshy valley leads from the far end of Amitsorsuaq down to an even larger lake, beyond which the terrain becomes somewhat more mountainous. Smooth bluffs some 500m high fall to the far side of the lake, but the mountains, up to 1400m high, have a rounded form, abraded by the advance and retreat of the Greenland icecap.

I descended to Kangerluatsiarsuaq, a large bay with an extensive beach, but the temperature and breeze were not conducive to lying in the sun. After a quick lunch in the lee of a boulder I headed away from the shore and steeply up onto a dissected rocky plateau comprising parallel rocky ridges with



elongate lakes and tarns filling the intervening gulches. As this was the first extensive section of higher country I had traversed on the trek, I searched for a spot to camp and take in the view at leisure. Now more than 60 kilometres away, the icecap could be glimpsed gleaming beyond the many lakes and hills to the east.

The still and clear morning came with clouds of mosquitoes so, despite the radiant warmth of the sun, I had to remain well-covered while eating breakfast and packing up; either that or plaster myself liberally with insect repellent. However, once underway, it was generally possible to strip off somewhat and even walk in shorts.

After a steep descent from the plateau, I wound my way across the Itinneq valley flats to a river, following slight rises defined by low birch scrub between marshy hollows. This deep but slow-flowing stream drains the large Tasersuaq lake to Maligiaq fiord, the head of which now glistened in the distance. A single battered canoe abandoned on the river bank provided a potential opportunity to cross the river and remain dry. But given it is desirable to leave the canoe on the south bank (most walkers undertake the trek from this direction) this is problematic if one is walking solo. I paddled across the stream in the canoe, left my rucksack on the far bank, then brought the canoe back to the south bank. I then swam back across the river - the water was, shall we say, refreshing!

Heading west once more, I followed the river bank and a series of terraces to camp overlooking the head of Maligiaq fiord. This is a salt water inlet, but it would be a couple more days before I could gaze from the coastal mountains out across Davis Strait, beyond which lies Canada's Baffin Island. Camped near me that evening were the only other walkers I met during the trek. I shared a large trout which these four Danish students had caught, a tasty change from my otherwise bland fare.

Next morning I traversed a rising terrace above the inlet, then climbed to a pass behind the rocky knoll of Arnaq Qallunaq (the Danish woman) to a stunning view. The clear air and bright sun made the landscape colours seem almost surreal - blue lakes set amongst grey rock whalebacks and green birch and willow shrubbery, with the calm blue-green sea below. Descending past the lakes I ambled across

the slopes and amongst banded gneissic rock outcrops before climbing again to camp by a lake perched on a shelf overlooking the fiord.



The day had remained still and was quite warm by late afternoon, so the mosquitoes were by then well revved up. The only options were to either sit rather

overdressed outside or hide in the tent, which was almost as hot. Out photographing late in the day, it was hard to concentrate on composition with the whine of mosquitoes in my ears and numerous black specks dancing in front of the lens.

Mornings were the best time of day - cool, often breezy, the air generally clear, and any mosquitoes were less active, if at all. I decamped early next day and headed up into more rugged terrain. The climate is wetter in these coastal mountains and the vegetation changes accordingly, with willow scrub, herb banks and moss beds becoming more common. Walking is correspondingly slower, but every rise or bluff hides another impressive view, so the walking is always interesting. Cresting one broken ridge I disturbed an Arctic fox on a ledge just below, its dark coat contrasting with a light bushy tail. It stared golden-eyed at me for several minutes before bounding away.

I reached the edge of the coastal escarpment suddenly. A large lake was cradled far below and beyond the view extended across Ikertoog, the mouth of the fiord, to Davis Strait beyond. A steep descent and sidle above the lake brought me to the shores of the narrow Imartuninguaq channel. A local family had set up a fishing camp here, with split fish spread out drying on the nearby rock slabs. Over shared coffee and biscuits we had a sort of conversation, but there weren't many shared English words.

Just across the narrow channel the tiny settlement of Sarfanguit (the little channel) comprises small and colourful wooden house climbing the steep rocky slope of an elongate island. I hitched a lift across in a dinghy fishing the channel and treated myself to an icecream at the village store and a few luxuries for the night's dinner, before returning to the mainland and wandering a bit further to camp and enjoy them.

Climbing steeply away from the coast again, a gully opened to a lake-floored basin. After another ascent and crossing a barren pass, I descended through a moss-carpeted basin, then down beside a canyon, in the shaded depths of which lay deep snow drifts. The blue waters of Utoqqaat inlet glistened below.

Jumping from rock to rock, I crossed, dry-footed, a stream just below the cascading outlet of a large lake. Lunch here in the sun was pleasant, but the spectacular cirrus clouds filling the sky did not inspire confidence in the good weather lasting long. And by the time I had climbed to the second pass of the day, narrow and lake-filled, it was grey and cold.

After camping behind the narrow beach of yet another lake, I headed westwards again, traversing a coastal terrace above the waters of Kangerluarsuk Tulleq fiord then up to the long Qerrortusup Majoriaa pass.

The nearness of Sisimiut was now evident from the swathes of broken shrubbery caused by locals using their snow machines as the snow melted through spring. I followed a valley beneath the ramparts of Nasaasaaq, the distinctive 784m peak overlooking Sisimiut, but the town itself is largely hidden until one is virtually upon it.

Sisimiut, 75 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle, is the northernmost town with an all-year ice-free port and the southernmost town with dogsled traffic in West Greenland. The town is home to 5000 people and probably as many sled dogs, and the howls of these dogs, chained up for the summer, are a constant backdrop in the town. Clusters of coloured box-like multistorey buildings vie with wooden houses for level space above the small harbour.



East Greenland is both culturally and linguistically different to the west. Inuit people migrated here later than in the west and the few European settlers arrived more than a century ago. Traditional Inuit activities of sealing and hunting are still widely practised (albeit using Western technology) and play a major role in

providing meat. Tasiilaq (“the place which is almost like a lake”), situated on Ammassalik island, is the largest town on the east coast (1800 people). The ubiquitous small, colourful wooden houses climb slopes from the shore of the wide, open fiord surrounded by rocky mountains for which the town is named.

The icecap lies close to the coast in the Ammassalik region, with its glaciers draining to the sea and calving numerous icebergs. However a 75 kilometre-long ice-free peninsula and associated large and small islands provide many trekking opportunities. I planned a circular trek around the 40 kilometre-wide Ammassalik island. The island consists of a rolling ice-smoothed landscape to the west, rugged

in detail with many cliffs and ravines, with higher (>1000m) more-jagged peaks to the north and east. The vegetation is sparse and more tundra-like compared with the west and there are extensive areas of rocky uplands.

I passed the cemetery heading out of town, an array of freshly-painted white crosses on graves decorated with bright plastic flowers, and continued up Flower Valley, appropriately-named and dotted with its own patches of floral colour. Vegetation gives way to rock and scree at much lower altitudes in the Ammassalik region compared to West Greenland and soon after passing a green-fringed lake I entered terrain of brown and grey. Climbing higher still, I entered another lake basin where drifts of winter snow still lay and large slabs of broken ice were still adrift in the lake and white and blues entered my immediate world.

By late afternoon I had waded through deep snow across a pass and set up my tent on a rock slab beside a small tarn, perched overlooking the Sermilik fiord. This massive fiord, fed by many large glaciers draining from the icecap, was dotted with icebergs, and the icecap itself was visible beyond. I admired the view from my tent (clouds of blackflies made it less pleasant outside) as the evening progressed, the sun finally dipping below the mountains to the northwest (albeit only for a couple of hours) at 1AM.

Next day I descended rock slabs onto the Mittivakkat Glacier, a shortcut to avoid descending further and traversing rugged terrain near the coast. While the glacier surface was smooth and crevasse-free, instep crampons made the going easier. All went well crossing the glacier until, after some three kilometres, I neared the far side where an ice cliff fell directly into a turbid glacial lake. This I eventually managed to outflank by climbing further up the glacier and descending a steep snow slope.

I scrambled over loose moraine ridges, sporadic green cushion plants and pink flowers providing colour. The flat outwash plains between rocky ribs appeared attractive, but the saturated silt between braided stream channels sometimes contained patches of quicksand.

Descending a steep bouldery slope I reached a stream draining another tongue of the Mittivakkat Glacier and too wide to ford dry-footed. Sitting on the far bank, teary-eyed, as my feet painfully re-warmed after their frigid dip and reflected on the sense of removing boots and socks for sandals for the crossing.

A warm morning and consequently sweaty climb brought me to a pass leading back east. Snow still covered the frozen lake which floors the pass, hiding the shoreline and forcing me to traverse the soft slopes above to make sure there was no chance of me falling through the ice. Given the good weather, I climbed higher up bouldery slopes and rock slabs, then plugged steps in soft snow to set up my tent on a high shelf below a range of jagged rocky peaks.

After lunch and a siesta, I headed on up towards the nearest rocky peak in the late afternoon. Tedious snow plodding eventually gave way to rocky sections on a narrowing ridge, the final scramble being quite airy. The isolated summit fell away precipitously to the east and provided panoramic views. I was now



high enough for the icecap to form the horizon to the west. Eastwards, beyond a frozen inlet, icebergs floated in Ammassalik Fjord and sea ice still choked the channels between the rocky islands beyond. Across the valley several glacier tongues descended from another range of jagged peaks and I could hear the roar of the glacial river that drained them far below.

The stable weather continued as I descended a complex series of terraces and slabs of banded rock. Following a series of lakes down-valley, and climbing high to pass bluffs in places, I eventually crossed a cascading stream to the shore of a large lake, Qorlortorq So. Lush vegetation lined the stream, seeming all the brighter against the surrounding grey rock, but the clouds of mosquitoes in this sheltered spot did not encourage lingering. On a couple of occasions I flushed a Snow Bunting, a fat, cream ground bird, from its rocky shelter.

The setting was attractive and the weather still and clear so I camped early, atop a bluff above the lake. Scattered tarns occupied the numerous scalloped depressions and glacial erratic boulders perched on the surrounding slabs. Below the lake mirrored the mountains opposite. Again, the only downside of such still conditions were the mosquitoes. Relaxing outside the tent required a headnet which did little to enhance the view and, when lifting the net to quickly stuff food into my mouth, the insects often made use of that brief opening to dart into my mouth or any other available orifice.

My final days were also quite leisurely. I climbed a high bare ridge beneath another rocky peak, but balmy weather and deep and soft snow made sitting in the sun more attractive than plugging higher. My route to the shore of Tasilaq inlet involved a pleasant descent of grassy slopes carpeted with pink, purple and yellow wildflowers but ended with another painfully cold ford.

I camped for my final night above a small bay at the head of the inlet where a number of small icebergs were grounded, driven ashore by southerly winds. Next morning, the thawing icebergs, intricately sculpted with flutings, small arches and undercut rims, shone gleaming white and deep blue in the sun.



I waited for low tide to allow an easy few hours walk around the shore back to Tasilaq town. More grounded icebergs stood off the various gravely beaches, yellow flowers dotted the bright green vegetation along drainage lines on the slopes above, and a slight breeze meant the mosquitoes gratefully took a rest for my final walk in Greenland.

First published in [Wild](#) magazine, issue 96 (2005)