

## GAZING OUT TOWARDS THE VAST GREENLAND ICECAP

*Watkins Mountains, Greenland, 2003.*

*By Grant Dixon*



We fly low above a grey sea. Less than an hour out of Iceland's northwest outpost of Isafjörður, sea ice appears below, and the sea is completely frozen long before we cross the Greenland coast. Snowy bluffs of the summer coastline soon give way to steep-sided peaks and ridges separated by broad glaciers as we continue 60km inland. We are soon flying level with or below the surrounding summits, before a bumpy glacier landing in the heart of the Watkins Bjerger (mountains), a cluster of the highest peaks north of the Arctic Circle.

A ski-equipped Twin Otter flight from Iceland is an easy way to access remotest Greenland, but flying for a couple of hours over icy sea and massive glaciers, then listening to the fading drone of the departing plane, rather emphasises our distance from sensible, settled people. To what end, to stand atop basalt layer-cake peaks capped by snow and gaze out towards the vast Greenland icecap.

We sit amongst our pile of gear, a windless day with a clear blue sky, and it is so quiet. Occasionally the odd seabird may fly or be blown inland, but in general nothing lives here. The colours of the area are basic and elemental – white, blue and brown – and our bright clothing, tents and skis emphasise our foreignness. We are here for a brief flirtation with this apparently lifeless land.

It's May, with 24-hour daylight here in the far north. The light and excitement make sleep fitful this first night. Lying awake at 1am, I admire the pastel colours of sky and snow from the relative warmth

of my tent, as the sun dips towards the northern horizon. It's a hint of what Arctic explorer Fridtjof Nansen was alluding to:

*'Nothing more wonderfully beautiful can exist than the Arctic night. It is dreamland, painted in the imagination's most delicate tints; it is colour etherealised. One shade melts into the other, so that you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins, and yet they are all there.'*

We head first to Gunnbjørns Fjeld, the highest peak in Greenland. Distances are greater than they appear in the clear Arctic air, and it is a long haul to the base of the final ice wall below the summit. Inland, beyond the huge Christian IV Glacier, 15km wide, the Greenland icecap forms a white horizon. The icecap is 2500km long, up to 3000m thick and covers 85% of this 2.4million-sq-km island. Tiredness is temporarily forgotten as we don skis for the 1500m descent back to camp, exhilarating runs punctuated with cautious weaving between crevasses. Sleep comes easily in my cosy tent that night, despite the light.



We move camp several times over the subsequent weeks, towing small sleds laden with food and survival gear up to camp on the névés of various glaciers, then climbing the surrounding peaks. Such glacier travel is a slog at times, sled hauling through softening snow, and balancing burning thigh muscles with the grip limit of our skis' climbing skins on steeper gradients. If the glacier surface isn't smooth, at day's end tender hips are often the price for jerking the laden sleds over ice ribs and sastrugi. However, the views are always worth the effort – striated walls of rock and snow, castellated ridges, tottering séracs perched on steep slopes, ice fields with rocky ridges and nunataks fading into the distant haze, and, to the far east, flat sea ice glistening in low sun beyond the ranges.

Glacier life has its quirks and rituals. In camp, the roar of our stove often disturbs the stillness, but melting snow for water is an essential multi-hour daily chore. Ironically, staying cool when moving is sometimes more difficult than keeping warm, and can involve repeated clothing tweaks. Radiant heat on clear and sunny days can be considerable, despite low air temperatures, and sweat-damp clothes are worth avoiding as they may later freeze.

We leave camp at 5am for our final climb, the air frigid and snow frozen hard, but still we are soon sweating with effort. Cloud fills the valleys today, but we rise above it. Hours later, by the time we lunch atop another summit, the cloud has thickened and now forms an unbroken mass from coast to icecap, the surrounding peaks and ranges protruding islands. Our ski descent changes character as we enter the rising cloud layer; the light is flat and dull, and even when I can see some distance ahead, there is no depth perception. We creep downwards, my companions mere ghostly outlines in the mist, snowploughing slowly and trying to discern our upward tracks to plot a safe route amongst the crevasses.

We scan a sky bisected by the vapour trail of an intercontinental jet, a reminder we aren't alone, and eventually a small moving dot appears above the distant mountains, the engine sound reaching us a little later. It's time to rejoin the other world.



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