



ON TOP OF THE WORLD

A HIGH-LATITUDE ADVENTURER SOAKS IT ALL IN AS THE CREW OF *MIGRATION* MAKES ITS WAY DOWN GREENLAND'S ICY WEST COAST.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY STEVE D'ANTONIO

The Nordhavn 72 Shear Madness transits the ice field at the outfall from the Jakobshavn Glacier. The scenery is spectacular, but the bergs make the crossing slow and at times stressful.



Surveying the vast, unbroken expanse of pure white as it rolls beneath the aircraft's fuselage induces an almost hypnotic effect, and I refuse to take my eyes off it for fear I will miss some irregularity that offers a sense of depth or scale. We could be at 30,000 feet or 3,000 feet; it's impossible to tell. I wait patiently — five minutes, 10 minutes; it's spectacular, the breadth of it simply beyond imagination, and still nothing. Finally, a coal-black outcropping of rock: the tip of a mountain range sheathed in a two-mile-thick sheet of ice. This is Greenland, and I'm seeing the interior, a region gazed upon by precious few eyes.

I have a passion for high latitudes, and have done everything in my power to make my way to them for much of my adult life. I first became enthralled with these naturally beautiful and blissfully sparsely populated regions during a cruise to Newfoundland in 1996, while crewing aboard a 47-foot sloop. It was on that passage that I read a book from the ship's library, *Shackleton's Boat Journey*, by Frank Worsley, legendary explorer Ernest Shackleton's captain and navigator. That in turn further cemented my high-latitude passion (while spawning yet another for all things Shackleton and Antarctic). Since that Canadian Maritimes cruise, I've been fortunate enough to be able to slake my yearning by visiting — in addition to Newfoundland — Alaska, Antarctica, the Faroes, New Zealand's Fiordland and Iceland.

When I received the offer to check one more high-latitude box, one that's been on my North Atlantic to-do list for some time, it was difficult to say no, despite the difficulty and expense involved in making my way to the region and the vessel I was invited to cruise aboard.

Reaching Greenland presents almost as many challenges as cruising its ice-bound coast. In short, it involves a flight to Copenhagen, Denmark, an overnight there, and then another flight to Kangerlussuaq, a former U.S. Air Force base located well above the Arctic Circle on Greenland's west coast. From

Greenland's coastal towns seemingly cling to rocky outcroppings. A backdrop of towering ice offsets the colorful homes of Christianshåb.



there, it's a 30-minute hop aboard a twin-turboprop aircraft to the port where my ship, a Nordhavn 68 named *Migration*, awaits me. In Greenland, however, all schedules are theoretical, particularly when they involve ships and aircraft. Landing at the air base, I discover that heavy sea ice prevents *Migration* from making her way to our original rendezvous point, the port of Ilulissat. So I'm marooned in Kangerlussuaq overnight, then forced to catch a flight to the alternate, ice-free port of Aasiaat, where I finally rendezvous with the vessel that is to be my home for the next month.

M*igration* is a late-model Nordhavn 68, owned and operated by a couple from Georgia, my clients and longtime friends. Experienced cruisers, they and their golden doodle, Gulliver, took delivery of the vessel in Florida in 2010, and have since cruised it to the Bahamas twice from the Sunshine State, with a circumnavigation of Newfoundland (where I cruised with them in 2011) as a shakedown in preparation for a subsequent transatlantic crossing via Newfoundland once again, and then Labrador, Greenland, Iceland, the Faroes, Scotland, Ireland and England.

Along with a sister ship, the

Nordhavn 72 *Shear Madness*, with which we'll cruise in company for the next two weeks, *Migration* gets underway late the next morning, bound for Christianshåb. Along the way, we see a pod of humpback whales as well as the strange sight of sled dogs intentionally "marooned" on small, rocky islets. Leaving them there during the off-season, unrestrained, is apparently nothing unusual. Their owners visit them periodically to provide food, primarily fish, and water.

As I open the pilothouse Dutch doors to take photos, I can't help but notice the air; it has an almost sweet smell to it, one that makes me want to inhale deeply. The humidity is very low when it's not raining or foggy (a rarity), and the air is particulate-free. It offers astounding visibility that sometimes causes faraway land masses to distort through atmospheric lenses, making mountains and sheer cliffs look mushroom-like, and at times even enabling one to see over the horizon.

Both vessels remain for a few days in Christianshåb's well-protected anchorage while the crews venture ashore to explore, stretch our legs and collect delicious mussels. Cod are also plentiful in this anchorage, and easily caught with a simple lure. One feature common to all the villages we visit above the Arctic

The author finds hiking along the fjords challenging: Sun-drenched hills are suddenly doused with frigid, relentless rains (above). Migration is framed perfectly by a grounded berg sitting in nearly 200 feet of water (opposite).

Circle is the sled dogs, which typically outnumber the people — and there's no shortage of puppies this time of year. The adult dogs are for the most part very handsome, surprisingly docile, playful and even cuddly.

During one of our hikes we spy several large icebergs just outside the harbor entrance, and the urge to get close to them is irresistible. Using our partner vessel's tender, the two crews head out of Christianshåb to get an up-close look at the grounded islands of ice. The weather is calm and mostly overcast, which turns out to be ideal for capturing these subjects photographically. The towering immensity of these behemoths is overwhelming, which is predictable; the RMS *Titanic* likely struck an iceberg that was "born" in Greenland. There are, however, a few surprises.

Icebergs crackle, fizz and tinkle continuously — a constant din that's occasionally punctuated by a sharp but deep, distant, rifle-shot-like crack. Semi-clear veins of blue ice are visible in





Migration, in the foreground, lies at anchor with cruising companion Shear Madness in a well-protected bay (top). With few ports and even fewer services, traveling in concert offers some degree of support. In Asiaat, a monument made from a whale's jaw bone frames the harbor, a reminder that Greenland's past and present are linked by the sea's bounty. Icebergs, growlers and bergy bits light up Migration's radar (top, middle). An Inuit family heads out in their runabout on a seal-hunting expedition (lower middle). A fisherman's work is never done, there are always more nets that need repairs (right).

a few places. These are areas where cracks have developed in the pre-berg glacier and then refrozen after filling with water rather than snow. (These icebergs are made from calving glaciers, which are created from compressed and very old snow; the ice in Greenland's bergs may be as many as 15,000 years old.) A constant stream of bubbles rises up around each berg; they vary greatly in size — some as large as a softball — and create a sound similar to seltzer water when a bottle's opened. An iridescent green hue ascends from submerged portions of the iceberg; motoring over these parts is especially eerie. Finally, these icebergs have a distinctive, slightly fishy downwind odor, presumably a result of stirring up the bottom as they grind their way along the seafloor. Before departing the bergs, we collect some very old ice for our evening beverages.

The tender races along the frigid cobalt-blue waters outside the harbor, carrying us back from our close-up iceberg encounter. The 50 degree F air is surprisingly dry, and at rest doesn't feel cold; however, the tender's 25 knots induce a stinging windchill effect. My cheeks are numb within seconds and tears stream from my eyes, yet I'm smiling.

As we enter the harbor we pass a family seal-hunting expedition — mother and father along with their children, a girl and a boy. The children look to be about 8 and 12, respectively. They and a rifle are nestled in one of the region's ubiquitous 4-foot-cubed polyethylene fish boxes (serving as a seat, a cooler for the catch, and a lifeboat of sorts), which itself rests amidships in the family's 14-foot open runabout. The mother sits forward, and she waves her hat at us. The father is aft, his hand on the tiller, the ever-present cigarette pressed between his lips.

Seal hunting in Greenland is as common as deer hunting in my native Virginia; both carry a strong element of tradition and family bonding, although here the sustenance it provides plays a prominent role as well. One hunter tells me that a single seal will feed his family for five days. When asked about the marksmanship skills required to shoot a seal at great distance, in the head, from a rocking boat, he exclaims proudly, "We are Eskimo!" Clearly they are proud of

their hunting skills.

After three days at anchor in Christianshåb, we resume our trek. Ultimately we'll head to the southern tip of Greenland, but first we'll visit Jakobshavn Glacier, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The icy outfall becomes thicker with each passing hour. The sea ice is offset by a dramatic, sooty sky and a pewter-colored sea. We venture farther into the ice field at the glacier's terminus in an effort to shorten the distance to our next waypoint, the village of Ilulissat. *Migration* is the pathfinder, with *Shear Madness* following close behind. Racing the onset of fog, we reach the harbor entrance by midmorning. The glacier has a profound effect on the area's climate. At a frigid 36 degrees F, the water temperature is the coldest we've encountered yet, and the air temperature is just a degree warmer. More than 4,000 people and 5,000 dogs live in this community; many of the

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latter are specially bred here, and are prized for their physique and stamina.

Villages in Greenland seem to cling to, rather than be located on, rocky cliffs and hillsides, and Ilulissat is no exception. There's very little flat ground along the coast, and what there is of it is often man-made. It's typically used for a helipad or (short) runway. The harbor is crowded and offers no room to anchor; a sunken fishing vessel lies in the inner channel, yet no one seems to pay any attention to it. Just its masts and antennae protrude above the water. The channel around it is wide enough for us to pass, but with no room to spare, so we choose not to. With no good, accessible anchorage, we turn around and continue on to Rodebay. In hindsight it's a fortuitous decision, as it turns out to be a much more picturesque and less frenetic locale. We transit a riot of icebergs on this route. Some are pristine white, others are deep blue, and still others are dirty gray and black, embedded with rocks and gravel from the land over which they traveled over

the course of thousands of years.

Both crews opt to take *Migration's* tender back to Ilulissat in the afternoon in order to visit the glacier. It's foggy and raining off and on during the bone-chilling 30-minute ride. We dodge ice as we feel our way along the coast, and once, inadvertently, venture into a cove where a few houses are perched on the rocky shore, with small boats and a handful of inhabitants in view. They wave but must think their eyes are deceiving them: A small, very clean runabout zooming past with five crew in brightly colored foul-weather gear surely isn't a sight they see every day.

After securing the dinghy to a wharf, we make our way to the Jakobshavn Glacier. A light rain falls. The route requires a half-hour walk past the town's sled dog "ghetto." The dogs here don't look as happy or well cared for as those in the smaller villages. I spy at least one pitiful example that is holding up one lame front paw as he quivers, standing in a sea of frigid mud. As a lifelong dog owner and lover, my heart aches for him. I want to do something, but alas, it's not the way here. Dogs are tools, and only the strongest survive. In keeping with this Darwinian approach, there are no old sled dogs, although they are retired in a manner of speaking — put down when they reach the age of 7. I force myself to avert my eyes from him on the return journey.

The hike to the glacier proves to be worth the effort. As I reach the vantage point, the rain stops, the mist clears, and the view of the glacier is simply awesome. Reminiscent of Dover's White Cliffs, sheer ridges of ice meet the sea; in places the ice is virgin white, except where it's laced with turquoise vanes of refrozen meltwater. A small, open red boat powers though the water beneath the glacier's face, providing a sense of scale and color to the otherwise prehistoric vista.

As the day progresses, the weather continues to clear, and we decide to return to Ilulissat to attempt to see the glacier once again, this time by tender. Without rain, the ride is much more enjoyable, though it still chills me to the bone. The area is enshrouded in fog, making the glacier all but invisible. As we idle through the calm, dark water, we encounter a ghostly apparition: A whale-hunting vessel is on the prowl for



its quarry, the intent of its foredeck harpoon gun all too obvious. After a while the fog lifts, and the glacier appears before us. Its grand and imposing form has us all slack-jawed.

The late evening sunset over the village at Rodebay is spectacular, and like all sunsets in high latitudes, it lasts for nearly two hours, offering a pallet of blood red, orange and yellow, which then fades into green, blue and finally gray hues.

The weather is predicted to deteriorate in a few days, and so we plan on heading south in the morning, where we'll part company with our cruising sister ship, *Shear Madness*. *Migration* has approximately 700 nautical miles to cover, and while it's best to avoid the aforementioned schedules, I do have a flight to catch, and we have just four or five days of fair weather in which to complete the run. A tough haul, yet the alternative — heading into the teeth of heavy wind against the Greenland Current — is even less appealing.

As we make southing, the coastal landscape evolves, changing from low hills and rounded mountains and mesas to jagged, snowcapped, Rocky Moun-

Countless bays and inlets make Greenland's west coast a cruiser's delight, though conditions are rigorous (above). Harking back to Greenland's seafaring past, a lone kayaker heads out for an evening paddle (opposite).

tain-like peaks. We remain fortunate in that the wind is on our starboard quarter, as are the seas, making for a continued comfortable ride. Whales appear off our starboard bow, blowing spouts repeatedly in the distance. These hang in the air like smoke signals while the whales offer their distinctive arched dorsal broach.

As the sun sets I mention to my watchmate that the conditions look ideal for the fabled green flash. In all my years of cruising, and much to my chagrin, I've never witnessed one. She scoffs, "I don't believe in it," with an air of resignation. Nevertheless, we both poise our cameras at the ready as the sun sinks below the horizon. Suddenly the flash makes its fleeting appearance (longer than I had expected — I had actually lowered my camera and had time to raise it to capture the last millisecond of green), and I can't resist saying, "Now do you believe in it?"

By the following evening we are upon the entrance to an inland passage, a shortcut that will take us through a series of fjords. The plan is to anchor in one of them overnight. This narrow rift, separating Nunarssit Island from the mainland, provides us with a protected and geologically wondrous passage.

The entrance is called Ikerasatsiaup Nunâ. The walls are sheer and the width narrow, a keyhole through which we pass, yet the water's depth is nearly 1,000 feet. The first anchorage we had planned to use is unsuitable; it's too small and too

exposed to katabatic winds. We press on to our second choice. Just before darkness falls, we anchor in a cove for which no cartography exists; we are literally off the chart. We creep in using our fathometer and the sonar, and anchor in 60 feet of water, setting 350 feet of chain.

We have a late dinner and head to bed, our first night not underway in three days. It's blowing 20 knots even in our protected anchorage; however, with 1,000 pounds of rode out, we remain fixed to the bottom. Standing in the cockpit, I gaze out around us. I know low hills are nearby; I saw them when we came in and can see them with the infrared camera. Now, however, they have been swallowed in absolute blackness. We are alone, and the nearest humans are 50 miles away.

Migration comes alongside a dirty fishing-station wharf at Nanortalik. We set fenders between the hull and the huge excavation-equipment tires that are chained to its bulkhead. This is my final stop. I depart Greenland the following morning with my shortest-ever commute. *Migration* is moored a mere five-minute walk from the town's airport. It consists of one small building and a helipad, which opens at 0800; the flight is at 0825. My hosts walk me out to the helicopter, a ruby-colored six-passenger, "Huey," and wave goodbye as it lifts off.

Strapped in my four-point harnessed outboard-facing seat, I have a million-dollar view of the land and seascape during the 40-minute flight. I watch the teal-colored bays pass below, along with one village and, surprisingly, two homestead-type farms. This is a strictly visual-flight-rules hop. There are low clouds and so we fly lower; from my vantage point I can see the altimeter, and it never exceeds 2,000 feet. Beyond us are snowcapped mountaintops and the ever-present icebergs, which I now see from the air for the first time, and discover that many include interior "lakes."

Like many of the high-latitude destinations I've visited, Greenland has resonated with my soul. I dream about it. It's remained with me. I suspect it always will. ❁

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