Greenland Odyssey Part II

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From the Editor

Each time I receive an e mail or a call from a client or reader, seeking assistance with a failure of his or her vessel’s gear, I’m reminded of the importance of systems reliability. Ensuring and enhancing seaworthiness, reliability and safety is a mantra I’ve lived by for nearly my entire 26 year marine industry career. A few months ago a major boating magazine featured an editorial that damned single screw vessels, and their operators as dangerous and reckless. The premise being, propulsion systems are too important to rely on just one. It’s a philosophy with which I do not necessarily agree, millions of miles have passed under the keels of single screw vessels, recreational, commercial and military without incident. This past year alone two single screw Kadey Krogen yachts crossed oceans, without incident. In 2002 I, along with my colleague Bill Parlatore, the then editor and founder of Passagemaker Magazine, made a passage from Chesapeake Bay to Bermuda, roughly 700 nautical

miles, aboard a 30-foot single screw vessel (I believe it holds the record for the smallest inboard power vessel passage to that island), without incident. That vessel also made the return voyage with another crew, without incident. Were those passages reckless or foolhardy? Provided the vessels were well-found and well maintained, and operated by experienced and knowledgeable crews, the answer is no.

While I have nothing against the redundancy and peace of mind twin engines clearly do provide, my real issue is with the false sense of security into which they may lull users. Twin engines are of little use aboard a vessel whose seacocks are ill-maintained or frozen; steering components are worn out or leaking; hoses are cracked and deteriorated; batteries are not properly secured; wiring is not properly protected with fuses or circuit breakers; potable water tanks are contaminated; smoke and carbon monoxide detectors are out of date, or worse, not present at all.

Boats, power and sail, and their critical systems encompass more than just engines. A working or redundant propulsion system, whether it's a the second engine, wing engine or a sail, is of little use if a vessel's deteriorated stuffing box hose parts, with the resultant fire hose-like flooding. Critical systems, propulsion and otherwise, must be well-designed, properly installed and regularly inspected and maintained, regardless of how many engines, or sails, a vessel is equipped with. By the same token, propulsion system upkeep and maintenance should possess the same level of urgency for twin and single screw vessels alike. Ultimately, there's no substitute for a thorough understanding of your vessel's critical systems and proper upkeep.

This month's Marine Systems Excellence Ezine continues the story of the passage I made this past summer, along Greenland's rugged and picturesque west coast, in 'Greenland Odyssey Part II'. I hope you find it both interesting and enjoyable.

Greenland Odyssey

Part II

Last month, in part I of Greenland Odyssey, I described the trek from North America, via Denmark, to the windswept and ruggedly beautiful coast of Greenland, a close up encounter with an iceberg, and the vagaries of travel in this region. This month we'll visit a UNESCO World Heritage site glacier, as well as encountering whale and seal hunters, fishing villages and the people that inhabit them.

Glaciers mark time in a way that's difficult for humans to comprehend, more akin to the rings of a giant redwood than a

conventional calendar.

The tender sped along the frigid cobalt blue waters outside Christianshaab harbor, carrying the crews of *Migration* and *Shear Madness* back from our close up iceberg encounter. The 50° Fahrenheit air is surprisingly dry; however, the tender's 25 knots induce a stinging wind chill effect. My cheeks are numb within seconds and tears stream from my eyes. Albeit cold, the air is also intoxicatingly fresh, I find myself breathing deeply, almost unconsciously; it simply feels good to do so.

As we enter the harbor we pass a family seal hunting expedition, mother, father, girl and boy. The children, they look to be about eight and twelve respectively, along with a rifle, are nestled in one of the region's ubiquitous four foot cubed polyethylene fish boxes, which itself rests amidships in the family's fourteen foot open run about. The mother sits forward, she waves her hat at us, and the father is aft, his hand on the tiller, and the ever present cigarette between his lips.

A Greenlandic family goes seal hunting. Hunting seals, reindeer and whales, and fishing, are a way of life here, part

tradition and part survival.

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 a family for five days. When asked about the difficulty of, and marksmanship skills required for shooting a seal at great distance, in the head, from a rocking boat, one hunter exclaims proudly, “We are Eskimo!” Clearly they are proud of their hunting skills.

Early the following morning, amid light rain and mist, we bid farewell to Christianshaab, The sea remains calm and the run is uneventful, rain showers come and go, yet visibility remains good for the most part, however, the volume of ice bergs, growlers and bergy bits increases ominously with each passing mile.

Passing Jakobshavns Isfjord glacier, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the icy outfall thickens still more; it’s offset by a dramatic sooty sky. We venture further 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 are able to make it to the harbor by mid-morning. The glacier has a profound effect on the area’s climate, at a frigid 36° Fahrenheit, the water temperature is the coldest we’ve encountered yet, and the air temperature is just a degree warmer. Over 4000 people and 5000 dogs live in this community; many of the latter are specially bred here, and we are told they are prized for their physique and stamina.

Rain and fog are constant companions in Greenland, however, when the sun does shine it does so with a unique ethereal quality that's leaves its mark on one's soul.

Villages in Greenland seem to cling to, rather than be located on, rocky cliffs and hillsides, there's very little flat ground, and what there is of it, is often man-made. 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 it's masts and antennas protrude above the water, the channel around it is wide enough for us to pass with no room to spare, we choose not to. The Hapag-Lloyd expedition cruise ship *Bremen*, I encountered the very same vessel literally at the other end of the world, in Antarctica's South Georgia in 2003, is alongside the quay. With no good accessible anchorage we turn around and continue on to Rodebay. In hindsight it was fortuitous, as the latter turned 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.

For every sunny day a price must be paid, often with three days of wet, chilly weather.

By mid-afternoon we've dropped anchor and, after several tries find moderately good holding ground, assisted by the ton of chain, literally, we pay out. To our surprise we aren't alone; we share the anchorage with an aluminum sloop, *Polaris,* crewed by a couple from Germany. This is only the second pleasure vessel we've seen, and it will be the last for the remainder of our time in Greenland.

On the way to this anchorage we take a detour after encountering gargantuan iceberg, complete with a large hole bored through its center. The temptation to conduct a photo shoot, using the berg as a frame, is too great to resist. It's the sort of opportunity photographers and boat owners

alike dream of, at least those with a passion for high latitudes. In order to photograph both vessels through the hole I make an at-sea transfer, stern to stern, swim platform to swim platform, from *Migration* to *Shear Madness*. The sea is relatively calm and the expert boat handling skills of both skippers, along with direction from the crew via wireless headsets, make the task appear easy. In reality, however, maneuvering two 100+ ton vessels to within a foot of each other, in open water, blind, is no easy feat.

A photo opportunity that was simply too good to pass up; Migration framed in an iceberg.

The now familiar weather pattern has ebbed and flowed, heavy rain, partial clearing, then rain again. The wind was blowing 20 kts when we arrived, but shortly after anchoring it shifts 180° then drops to dead calm, and it remains that way all night. By morning we are enveloped in a thick fog, however, it lifts; the sun makes a brief appearance, twice, in one case

illuminating the small nearby settlement in an ethereal, warm light. Three birds, looking like plump balls of feathers with feet and heads, perch on the foredeck for a few minutes, time enough to have their photos taken, after which they flitter off into the fog.

A trio of birds rests on Migration's deck crane. Small delicate life forms contrast harshly with this land's rugged unforgiving environment.

Both vessels' crews opt to take *Migration's* tender back to Ilulissat this afternoon. It's foggy and raining off and on during the thirty minute bone chilling ride; we dodge ice as we feel our way along the coast, once inadvertently venturing into a cove where a few houses were perched on the rocky

shore, with boats and a few inhabitants in view, they wave but must think their eyes are deceiving them, a small, very clean speed boat with five crew in brightly colored foul weather gear zooming past probably isn’t a sight they see every day.

Ilulissat Harbor is a frenetic place, busy with fishermen, seal and whale hunters and glacier gawkers, it has reminds one of a frontier gold rush town.

Ilulissat Harbor is chock-a-block with boats, from large fishing boats, a Canadian registered research vessel, whose crew we chat with for a while as they set up a mount for side scan sonar, and factory fishing vessels, to small open outboards, along with the aforementioned wreck in the middle of the channel. We find a tender dock and make fast our lines. The town is busy with fishermen, hunters and tourists who have come to see the glacier; it has the feel of a frontier railroad or gold mining town. Rifles are stacked at the entrance into the grocery store, which we visit to obtain

essential provisions such as milk, fruit and vegetables. Prices for food, clothing and alcohol are astronomical; a steak in the meat section is $30, as is a winter hat, a smallish bottle of single malt Scotch, all liquor is kept behind the counter, is the equivalent to nearly $150. An outboard fuel filter, one that would cost about $14 in the US, is nearly $50.

What would northern Greenland be without its sled dogs? They are everywhere, outnumbering people. For the most part they appear happy and well cared for, although there are exceptions. This owner untangles his dog's leach.

After securing the dinghy we make our way, by land this time, to the main attraction, the Jakobshavns Icefjord or glacier. A light rain falls. The route requires a thirty minute 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 shivers, while standing in a sea of frigid

mud. As a life-long dog owner and lover, my heart aches for him, I want to do something, 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, they are put down when they reach the age of seven. I force myself to avert my eyes from him on the return journey.

The scale of the Jakobshavns Icefjord or glacier, a UNESCO World Heritage site, is difficult to comprehend, with its millions of tons of ancient ice that's always in motion.

It's worth the hike, as I reach the vantage point the rain stops and the mist clears, the view of the glacier is simply awe inspiring. Reminiscent of Dover's white cliffs, shear ridges of ice meet the sea; in places the ice is virgin white, except where it's laced with turquoise vanes of re-frozen melt water. A small open red boat powers though the water beneath the glacier's face, providing a sense of scale, and color, to the otherwise surreal scene.

Because the terrain is impossibly rugged, and roads few and far between, travel by small boat is a way of life for Greenland's inhabitants.

I return to the tender earlier than the rest of the group and drink in the scene around me. Fishing boats come and go as men unload freshly caught cod, and butchered seal. The catch is accepted by a receiving crew from the fish processing plant. One fish looks unlike any I've ever seen. I ask a large man in blue coveralls who is handling it, he's wearing stylish prescription sun glasses, and looks Scandinavian rather than Greenlandic, what type of fish it is. He replies, "Catfish", but with its leopard-like spots it doesn't resemble any catfish I've ever seen.

A day's catch is unloaded from a fisherman's catch bucket and brought to one of the ubiquitous processing plants. This example was referred to by locals as catfish.

The ride back is drier and with better visibility, although still ice-choked; we take the shortcut into Rodebay through a keyhole slot in the cliffs just north of the village. As we pass through this cut I notice the remnants of a large old winch, now frozen and rusting, it stands at the head of a natural stone shelf. I later learn this is part of a former Dutch whaling station; this was the flensing area where catches were butchered.

A whale hunting vessel plies its trade, its harpoon cannon clearly visible on the foredeck.

We return to the security of our mother ship's saloon. I unpack my cameras and let the cabin's warmth sink into my bones. I'm wind burned, wet and tired, yet satisfied. There's something about a glacier that stays with me each time I see one, they are a natural record of sorts; like the rings of a giant redwood, they keep time using a clock that's difficult for humans to fathom.

Morning breaks with brilliant sunshine, a welcomed respite from the all too frequent rain and fog. The air is still. Within a few hours, however, we are enveloped in a heavy, rolling fog that slips over the hills that shelter our anchorage. The small group of houses located a quarter of a mile to the east of us quickly disappears, and then reappears as the misty white blanket passes over and away from us. We use the clearing opportunity to go ashore and explore the village of fifty people and two hundred dogs, all of whom look much happier than those in Ilulissat.

The buildings include a hotel, communal bath house and, surprisingly, a restaurant. A bright red tourist vessel, a former wooden fishing boat built in 1960 in Denmark, chugs into the anchorage and ties up to the fishing pier. A member of Shear Madness's crew and I walk over for a closer look and we are invited aboard; it's cozy with nine berths and a tiny galley. The crew seems surprised when I ask to see the engine room, but permission is granted. It has familiar and not unpleasant aroma of wet wood, hot oil and diesel fuel.

Small sightseeing or tourist vessels like this one are a common sight near natural areas of interest. Most are former wooden fishing vessels, with bottoms clad in aluminum; all are painted red.

The village restaurant is called “H8”, a reference to navigation coordinates used by WWII aircraft that flew over this region. Its unremarkable exterior contrasts starkly with what’s inside; a surprisingly warm and inviting, richly decorated dining room, adorned with mounted local birds, whale bones and other regional relics.

The "H8" reference painted on this building's roof dates back to WWII, when allied aircraft flew and attempted to navigate over this area. This is one of several encountered, it's now a restaurant named…H8.

As they day progresses the weather continues to clear and we decided to return to Ilulissat to attempt to see the glacier by tender. Without rain the ride is much more enjoyable, however, it was still bone chillingly cold. The area is enshrouded in fog, making the glacier all but invisible. As we idle through the calm black water we encounter a ghostly apparition, a whale hunting vessel is on the prowl for its quarry, the intent of its foredeck harpoon cannon impossible to ignore. After loitering for a while the fog lifts and the glacier appears before us, its grand and imposing form has us

all slack jawed.

Sunset at Rodebay offers up a pallet of dazzling colors. High latitude sunsets are a photographer's fiend, as they progress at a glacial pace, giving one plenty of time to capture them in all their glory.

The late evening sunset over the village at Rodebay is simply 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.

Next month, in the third and final part of Greenland Odyssey series, we'll make a stressful transit of a large ice field on our way to Disko Island, take on several thousand gallons of diesel at a remote fueling station, the northern lights make an appearance, and we'll traverse a 300-yard wide 800 foot

deep fjord as Migration heads to Greenland’s southern-most tip.