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 Book 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 Kangrulussuaq 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.

Migration 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 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 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

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).

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).
A fisherman’s work is never done, there are always more nets that need repairs (right). Migration jaw bone frames the harbor, a reminder that Greenland’s past and present are linked by the sea’s bounty. Icebergs, growlers and in a well-protected bay (top). With few rocking boat, he exclaims proudly, “We seal at great distance, in the head, from a marksmanship skills required to shoot a for five days. When asked about the here the sustenance it provides plays a tradition and family bonding, although Virginia; both carry a strong element of the family’s 14-foot open runabout. The mother and father along with their 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 a year. 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 Eskimos!” Clearly they are proud of their hunting skills. After three days at anchor in Christianshavn, 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 Shuur Madshus following close behind. Racing the onset of fog, we reach the harbor entrance by midmorn- ing. 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 Seals 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 the entrance of the fjord. 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 cave 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 barely 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, shear ridges of ice meet the sea, in places the ice is virgin white, except where it’s laced with turquoise vases 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. This is the last time we’ll see the glacier, 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 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 Assistant, 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 beauty. 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).
seafaring past, a lone kayaker heads out (above). Harking back to Greenland’s delight, though conditions are rigorous Greenland’s west coast a cruiser’s. Countless bays and inlets make gray hues. then fades into green, blue and finally blood red, orange and yellow, which for nearly two hours, offering a pallet of like all sunsets in high latitudes, it lasts a village at Rodebay is spectacular, and imposing form has us all slack-jawed. Its grand and while the fog lifts, and the glacier appears before us. Its grand and geologically wondrous passage. 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 treads 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 alimeter, and it never exceeds 2,000 feet. Beyond us are snowcapped mountaintops and the ever-present bergs, 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.