CRUCIBLE
OF
ICE
Crucible of Ice

Two Weeks in Greenland

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PROLOGUE I, 1981: GREENLAND ON THE MAP

When I was a child we had a world map affixed to our kitchen wall. The map was a free awareness-raising tool supplied by Oxfam. What was notable about the map was that it used the Peters projection, which preserves areas at the expense of angles, rather than the more common Mercator projection, which preserves angles and so aids navigation at the expense of distorted areas. The text accompanying the map explained that the purpose of using this equal-area projection was to emphasise the much greater size of developing nations relative to the smaller land areas occupied by the rich North. The text went on to explain that Greenland was a particularly egregious example of this distortion of area, claiming that the Mercator projection made the entire continent of Africa appear to occupy an area less than that of Greenland. Indeed, the map depicted Greenland as a small squashed triangle whereas Africa appeared large and in proportion to its true area, some fourteen times greater than that of Greenland. So it was that I first became aware of the existence of Greenland.

PROLOGUE II, 1994: AN AMBITION FORMS

At the age of nineteen I spent the university summer vacation in the United States on an educational exchange. The experience kindled within me a powerful dromomania. I spent hours in bookshops perusing guidebooks, becoming increasingly familiar with the many and various nations of the world. As I digested the information and inspiration, Greenland emerged as an especially enticing destination.

On a globe, Greenland occupies an area greater than Saudi Arabia and only slightly less than Algeria. So, while Greenland is certainly not as large as Africa, it is nevertheless large. However, despite this size, few people
know anything about the world’s largest island (geographers consider Australia to be a continental mass). Certainly, unlike Eritrea or Tajikistan, most people can identify Greenland on a map. Most people will also have some idea that Greenland is cold, icy and not especially green; quite possibly a randomly selected individual will know the story about Erik the Red coining the name Greenland to encourage more Viking settlers to travel there.

However, few people have any idea at all what Greenland is like as a nation. This was certainly true in my case. When I started reading Lonely Planet’s guidebook *Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands*, it was Greenland rather than Iceland or Faroe that I felt drawn to. I learned that this is a nation of a mere 56,000 souls, sparsely sprinkled around the coastline but until recently 1% of them lived under one roof in an apartment block in the capital city of Nuuk. The people are of mixed Inuit and Danish heritage and have only recently stopped living by subsistence hunting. Far from being a place of Scandinavian calm and orderliness, the small towns of Greenland have something of a Wild West feel. The lengthy Greenlandic place names, rich in vowels and sporting q’s bereft of their partnering u’s, struck me as even more exotic than the place names I had encountered in the deserts of Central Asia or the archipelago of Indonesia: Kangerlussuaq, Uummannaq, Qaqortoq, Aasiaat, Qaanaaq. The landscape was brutally rugged and as beautiful as anywhere in the world.

However, I was most attracted by Greenland’s sheer obscurity. The guidebook quoted a traveller aphorism: ‘After you’ve been everywhere, there’s always Greenland’. When I visited a travel agent to ask about flights to Greenland the consultant confessed that she didn’t know the name of the international airport and consulted an atlas. Information about Greenland was sparse: there were no other guidebooks and in those pre-Internet days public libraries were the only other place where one could seek information. They didn’t have anything about travel in Greenland. However, this paucity of information only served to emphasise the nation’s obscurity and bolster my desire to visit.
A natural consequence of Greenland’s remoteness was that it was difficult and expensive to reach. The most basic itinerary would start with a flight to Copenhagen. From here the traveller would fly to Greenland’s international airport in Kangerlussuaq at very considerable expense. Kangerlussuaq is just a cluster of buildings around an airport and has a population of only 540. As such, most travellers would want to travel on to a larger settlement. For this there were only two options: a ten-day hike to Sisimiut or else another flight to a domestic airport. The latter comes at a cost comparable to an international flight elsewhere.

Accommodation was another considerable expense. The hotels were as expensive as those in London and even a bed in one of the few youth hostels cost ten times as much as an en-suite room in some of the Asian countries I had visited. Camping, on the other hand, was free of charge and widely permitted. However, I had also read that the land was plagued by mosquitoes throughout the summer.

These logistical and financial challenges discouraged me from visiting Greenland in my time-rich, cash-poor student days. When I found gainful employment in 1997, the abundance of other fascinating and beautiful places around the world served to distract me from my cold and remote objective. However, whenever I was asked about my travel ambitions, I would always cite Greenland and Namibia as my dream destinations.

In 2011 I visited Namibia; my desire to visit this arid and sparsely-populated nation in South-West Africa had formed alongside my desire to visit Greenland. When 2013 came along, I decided it was time for me to visit the cold and sparsely-populated nation of Greenland.
PROLOGUE III, 2013: FROM İSTANBUL TO ILULISSAT

In February 2013 I visited İstanbul. One evening, after a meal at a Turkish café, I decided that I would procrastinate no longer on visiting Greenland. While sitting in my quirky room at a boutique hotel in the Şişli district of northern İstanbul I studied my diary in conjunction with climate data and Air Greenland’s on-line booking system. At around 1AM I reached for my credit card and booked a flight from Copenhagen to the tourist hub of Ilulissat by way of Greenland’s primary international airport at Kangerlussuaq. The trip was no longer a pipe dream; either I would go to Greenland or else I had just wasted a great deal of money.

In the weeks that followed I built up the rest of the trip with the aid of a detailed spreadsheet and numerous email exchanges. I decided to visit Uummannaq as well as Ilulissat. I had found the Lonely Planet guidebook’s entry for this town particularly inspirational when I first read it in the 1990s; the photograph of Uummannaq Mountain showed a dreamlike scene and the text described an island of solid rock with little greenery. I organised a return flight to Copenhagen with a budget airline and booked a homestay room in Denmark’s capital for my outward and return journeys. Once I had all the arrangements in place I kept a keen eye on the exchange rate between the Pound Sterling and the Danish Kroner. I read all the books that I could find on Greenland, although these were surprisingly few in number.

WEDNESDAY 29 MAY 2013

Adventurous trips often start with an early rise. Fortunately this was not the case for my trip to Greenland. I awoke at my usual weekday time and accompanied my wife on the train into central London. We said our goodbyes at Drayton Park station and I continued to Victoria whence I took a train to Gatwick Airport. As I waited at Gatwick for my flight to Copenhagen the furious sound of power tools tore through the reassuring murmur of transient space. Renovations were under way in the departure lounge, which meant large chunks of it were walled off with temporary wooden boards, crowding this normally spacious terminal. I
sat in a coffee shop and sipped a latte while reading a popular science book on physiology. In a chapter entitled *Scared to Death* it described at length the stress that loud noises place on both humans and animals. Greenland was to provide me with abundant silence and space.

A short easyJet flight took me to the smart terminal at Copenhagen’s airport. I hopped on the metro and rode to Frederiksberg station to find my homestay. I located the apartment in a large brick-built block in a quiet side-street. When I rang the buzzer I found that my hosts were not at home so I set off to explore the area a little more. I found Frederiksberg to be a vibrant suburb of Copenhagen with plenty of interesting shops. Among these shops was one that sold only chess equipment. I pondered the economic viability of such an enterprise as I bought some bread rolls for my supper from a charming artisan bakery. A warm early summer sun shone from a perfect blue sky, bringing out the best in the historical buildings.

I returned to the apartment to find that my hosts were now at home. As soon as my hostess Valentina opened the door she started to apologise profusely, saying that my room was not available. Briefly I feared that I would be forced to check in to the Radisson Blu Copenhagen at some exorbitant walk-in rate but Valentina quickly went on to explain that the previous guests had not yet vacated the room but would do so shortly. Rather than cast me back into the street, Valentina and her partner Ben took me out for a walk around Frederiksberg. Although a chain hotel would have undoubtedly offered a smoother check-in experience, a pleasant afternoon stroll with the receptionist would have been out of the question.

Valentina and Ben were exceptionally welcoming hosts. Their motivation for taking guests was clearly not just financial: they took a genuine interest in me and my trip. We chatted at length as we looked around Frederiksberg and I learned that Valentina was Argentinian and Ben was Canadian with some Malawian heritage. Both had interesting careers: Valentina worked in design and Ben was finishing a doctorate in biotechnology. We headed to Frederiksberg Park, a well-maintained landscape garden dating back to 1699. Here I saw Frederiksberg Palace with the flags
of each of the four major Nordic countries flying from it. This palace was constructed at the same time as the park was created and is still used as an army officer academy. Groups of people sat on the grass, enjoying picnics in the warm weather. From the park we continued to a bar where my hosts kindly treated me to a delicious craft beer. We sat outside and talked at length; far from feeling awkward about staying in a stranger’s house I felt as though I was visiting friends.

Back at the apartment we found that the previous guests had left so Valentina showed me my room. I had been expecting a modest space, perhaps a box room. The reality was quite different: it was the main room in the apartment, spacious and airy with large windows and a balcony. Delightful though the room was, Copenhagen was out there to be seen so rather than sit on a comfy sofa in front of a television, I hurried out into the evening to make the most of the long hours of daylight.

My first stop was a convenience store, where I assembled a picnic supper. While in the shop I noticed a wide range of premium-strength lagers. Pre-eminent among these was a tipple called Carlsberg Elephant. I had noticed a dishevelled woman drinking a can of Elephant while sitting on the steps of Frederiksberg station, the sunlight filtering down from street level through the smoke of her cigarette. Mindful of this pitiful figure but still fancying some beer, I chose a non-alcoholic brew. I then walked past the hundreds of bicycles near the station entrance and took the metro to the centre of Copenhagen.

I alighted at a station called Kongens Nytorv, named for a large cobbled square nearby. The name translates as ‘King’s New Square’, with the ‘New’ being fairly misleading nowadays because the square was originally laid out in 1670. My objective was The Little Mermaid, the most obvious of all destinations for a visit to Copenhagen. Although the time was past eight in the evening, there was plenty of light in the sky and as I walked through the Rosenborg Palace Gardens I saw people still sitting outside, surrounded by the long shadows of trees. The streets I walked through were quiet and consisted mostly of historical buildings. Germany did not bomb Denmark in the Second World War because the country pragmatically capitulated within six hours of the start of the German
invasion of 1940. It appears that in the second half of the twentieth century city planners resisted the temptation to tear down old buildings and erect new ones.

Half an hour or so of walking brought me to the waterfront near Copenhagen’s citadel. It was easy to spot the location of The Little Mermaid (Den Lille Havfrue in Danish) by the group of people surrounding the statue in an otherwise quiet area. I sat on a bench to eat my supper as the sun slid slowly towards the horizon. By the time I had eaten the group had moved on and I was able to admire this pleasingly modest icon of Copenhagen in peace.

I then went to explore the Citadel (Kastellet in Danish). It is a large star fortress surrounded by thick walls and a moat. Inside was a complex of buildings, including a windmill and a former barracks, which were painted a fetching shade of red-orange. Despite still being used by the Danish military today, the Citadel doubles as a popular public park. At sunset I heard a loud dull bang, which I took to be a ceremonial cannon shot. By the time I left the park it was twilight and almost ten o’clock. As I departed I passed a group of soldiers carrying a flag, presumably putting it to bed for the night. Denmark is not generally thought of as a military nation, but the number and prominence of military buildings that I saw in my short stay in the city suggests otherwise.

When I arrived back at the apartment Valentina was still up and about. She presented me with an old mobile phone that I could use as a second alarm clock; I was a little nervous about relying on my digital watch to wake me up in time to leave for a 9AM flight. Even though my room was comfortable I slept poorly because of my excitement at what was, quite literally, the trip of a lifetime.
My alarms woke me at 5.30 AM. Outside there was full daylight; at this time of year in Copenhagen there is barely six hours of darkness; the city lies at a similar latitude to Edinburgh. I slipped out of the apartment quietly and walked to the metro through the empty streets under the sunny sky.

I surveyed my fellow passengers as I waited in the check-in queue at the airport. Many were carrying large quantities of what I took to be expedition equipment. Others looked distinctly Inuit; I had never knowingly seen ethnic Inuit before. In appearance they reminded me of the people of Central Asia that I had seen in Xinjiang, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Indeed, the Inuit are thought to have originated from Eastern Siberia, crossing the Bering Strait thousands of years ago and migrating around the Arctic Circle. Twenty-four hours into the trip I was at last starting to feel some contact with Greenland. The monitor above the check-in desk displayed the destination as Kangerlussuaq. After two decades of prevarication I was at last going to my dream destination.

On the flight I found myself sitting next to a native Greenlander. I had read that the Greenlanders, like the English and Eritreans, tend to be rather reserved. This was emphatically not the case with my neighbour. He introduced himself as Christian and chattered for the whole of the flight. I imagine that English was his third language after Greenlandic and Danish but he was nevertheless quite fluent. Christian told me that he had been visiting relatives in Denmark for the past few months; this appeared to be linked to his complex family arrangements. I didn’t manage to grasp the subtleties but I did learn that Christian had one ‘official daughter’ and five ‘unofficial children’. He was ecstatic to be returning to Greenland, to the extent that he spontaneously burst into song a few times during the flight. He told me that he didn’t like Denmark at all. It was clear that this wasn’t a slight to Denmark in particular but to the non-Greenlandic world as a whole. It seemed that Christian truly loved his homeland.

Christian also loved photography. He cradled a sophisticated SLR camera in his lap and snapped numerous pictures throughout the flight,
including pictures of the cabin crew. He showed me the pictures he had taken during his stay in Denmark. Some were of his ex-wife, of whom he had such a low opinion that he described her as ‘garbage’. He complained that she smoked cannabis and drank too much. Substance abuse is indeed a problem among Greenlanders. Christian told me that he hailed from Qaqortoq. Formerly known as Julianehåb, this town is the fourth-largest in Greenland and lies at the southern tip of the island on a similar latitude to Unst in Shetland. He gave me his spare lens cloth, which was printed with the name of an electronics shop in Qaqortoq and an image of the flag of Greenland. I still use this cloth and so am often reminded of Christian.

Christian’s other passion was football. He wore a football shirt bearing an emblem that included a cartoon chicken foot. Christian told me that he had once travelled to London in a group of twenty-five Greenlanders to watch a football match between the teams of West Ham and Manchester City. Football is popular in Greenland, with the scarce flat ground being assigned to airports first and football pitches second.

The flight would have been a pleasant one even without the entertainment provided by my neighbour. Even though Air Greenland’s fleet comprises only one Airbus A330-200 airliner and nine smaller planes, they provide an in-cabin service as good as any major airline. My vegetarian meal was a decent curry; I was a little apprehensive about my vegetarianism on this trip because Greenlanders traditionally subsisted almost entirely on meat that they hunted themselves. As it turned out, I didn’t even need to compromise by eating fish because bread and chocolate were both widely available.

I watched the video flight map as we passed over Stavanger in Norway, Shetland, Faroe and Iceland. Some time later we started to cross Greenland’s ice cap. This is the second-largest ice cap in the world, the largest being the vast ice sheet that covers Antarctica. The sharp tips of substantial mountains poked out from beneath the ice. This geological formation is known as a nunatak, a Greenlandic word that has been used in English since the 1870s, especially in reference to Antarctic exploration.

On landing at Kangerlussuaq we shuffled off the plane and straight out
into the terminal. There were no passport or customs checks, although we did walk past a sniffer dog. Whether this lack of arrival formalities was a consequence of Greenland’s semi-dependent status within Denmark or simply that Greenland’s authorities did not feel the need to check arrivals was unclear. The terminal looked more like a prefabricated rural community centre than the primary international airport of an entire nation. However, it was clean and well-organised and, given the paucity of traffic, passengers can be confident that congestion will not force their plane into a holding pattern.

Although congestion is not a problem at Greenland’s airports, the weather is. The reason Greenland’s primary airport is located in a tiny settlement of five hundred people is that Kangerlussuaq lies a hundred miles inland at the end of a long fjord; Kangerlussuaq means ‘Big Fjord’ in the Greenlandic language. This distance from the sea makes it less susceptible to fog and unfavourable winds, which in turn makes it a better location for an airport. This civilian airport was originally an American military airbase known as Bluie West-8. In Danish the town is called Søndre Strømfjord and indeed one of the airline staff used this name to me while I was at Copenhagen airport.

This geographical isolation means that Kangerlussuaq is more of a hub than a destination, with most passengers changing planes to head off to more populous destinations. Christian had explained his plan to travel home from Kangerlussuaq by a series of steps including a boat journey with one of his friends. My onward flight to Ilulissat departed the next day, so I had an overnight stay in Kangerlussuaq.

I had booked a hostel bed at a place called Old Camp, a mile or two away from the airport. In our email exchanges the hostel had insisted on collecting me from the airport. However, when I stepped out of the terminal building into the bright sunlight there was no sign of anyone waiting for me. I wandered back into the terminal and found a sign for Old Camp with a tanned, rugged-looking man of Danish appearance sitting beneath it behind a small counter. I introduced myself and the modern-day Viking told me that I had been the only person booked into the hostel. As such, the management had chosen to leave the hostel
closed and instead put me in a room at another of their properties, the
Polar Lodge.

The Polar Lodge was a modest hotel located only a few minutes’ walk
from the terminal building. There was a patch of boggy ground along the
way, over which ran a wooden walkway to allow guests to arrive with dry
feet. The outside of the building was like almost all of the buildings in
Greenland: a brightly painted prefabricated wooden box elevated off the
ground to avoid melting the permafrost. Inside the lodge was clean, light
and orderly. My single room was spotlessly clean, comfortable and plain
in the classic Scandinavian way. I noticed that the window was covered
with mosquito netting.

I asked about renting a bicycle but the Polar Lodge told me that their
bikes were no good and that I should ask at a nearby expedition supply
shop. The presence of this shop indicated that Kangerlussuaq acts as a
staging point for expeditions into the wilderness and on towards the ice
cap, which lies about twenty miles away from the airport. It struck me as
slightly odd that an expedition might arrive in Greenland and suddenly
remember that they had forgotten a pair of mittens or a satellite phone,
but it appears to happen. I abandoned the idea of cycling and instead
went to investigate the local supermarket. Like the expedition shop, it
sold guns. In the USA it is quite normal to see lethal weapons for sale
in a supermarket, but being English I was a little taken aback. When I
took a domestic flight to Ilulissat the next day I noticed that there was no
security check at all. Therefore it seemed perfectly possible to walk into
the supermarket, buy a gun, cross the road to the airport and carry it on
to a plane under a long coat.

I stocked up on crispbreads and cheese for my lunch rather than
firearms; the westerly direction of my five-hour flight meant that it was
still morning in Kangerlussuaq. I noticed that the vegetables on sale
looked rather tired, which was hardly surprising given that Greenland
is (for the most part) ill-suited to agriculture so vegetables must be
imported. The supermarket also sold DVDs and games for children;
presumably these were intended for the local population rather than
expeditionists. The sun was still shining gloriously – Greenland’s tourist
The bureau boasts that Kangerlussuaq has more than 300 days of clear skies a year – so it was with great enthusiasm that I set off on the dusty track that led inland.

I soon left the buildings of Kangerlussuaq behind me. I found myself in a vasty expansive landscape. On my left, to the north, hills rose steeply. To my right there was a wide river flood plain with a trickle of water flowing through it. Beyond the flood plain rose more hills; the higher mounts were dusted with snow. There was no snow near the track; indeed the weather was downright warm, at least when standing in direct sunlight. Low thorny bushes grew either side of the track, which gave the scene the arid feel of a desert. There was also no wind; the only sound was that of my footsteps thudding in the dust. This wild and majestic landscape made me feel that all the effort that I had put into the trip thus far had been worthwhile just for this experience alone. If I had left for home the next day I would have been satisfied. Nevertheless, I was glad that there was much more to come.

I passed a few wooden constructions that appeared to be acting as some sort of retaining wall, possibly to prevent landslips or perhaps a remnant from Kangerlussuaq’s days as a military base. I came to a small quarry, which had presumably been used to extract stone to build the track or the air base or both. I followed a track up to this artificial hole in the ground and noticed that the route climbed higher into the hills. I continued to climb and encountered another walker as he was descending. We exchanged greetings and then continued on our respective ways. The path veered to the left where I found myself in a boggy patch of ground. It is in the nature of Arctic ground to be boggy in warm weather: although the surface of the ground thaws in the summer, the lower permafrost remains frozen and impermeable. Thus the meltwater from the snow and ice does not drain away but instead saturates the soil. I was glad of my gaiters and Gore-Tex boots. Wishing to walk rather than wade, I retraced my steps and tried my luck on a different path heading east. This led through a gully in the hills, with a ridge to my right and the hills continuing to rise to my left. This route proved to be drier underfoot. I passed a few ponds that extended the full width of the gully. Some of the
ponds were still partially frozen, suggesting that the weather had only recently started to warm up. Although I was but a short walk from an international airport, I had a strong feeling of wilderness and solitude.

I followed the gully for half an hour or so before clambering up the ridge and walking back to the quarry along it. From this vantage point I could see that the gully was completely blocked by a large body of water and ice a few hundred yards along. I could also see a patch of white in the distance that looked like either a bank of cloud or Greenland’s ice cap. Making this distinction poses a challenge to climatologists; a friend of mine did a significant amount of academic research into distinguishing between ice and cloud in satellite data collected over Greenland. Looking in the opposite direction I could see the airport. Although it was a mile or two away, I could see it quite plainly because the air was completely free of haze. The clarity of the air in the Arctic is much beloved of photographers and added to the feeling of expansive space. Beyond the airport there seemed to be fog and I felt a little concerned that poor weather might be rolling in, but the clouds stayed where they were and I experienced nothing but sunshine for the whole day.

I descended back to the track and continued inland. I passed Kangerlussuaq’s golf course, discernible only by a blue sign that read Golfer-tarfimmut. There was no sign of manicured grass or carefully maintained bunkers; in fact the area purporting to be the golf course looked especially barren. A little farther on I noticed a handful of stunted coniferous trees rising a few feet above the low scrub. Trees do not thrive in Greenland and these were the only ones I saw during my stay. In traditional life the Inuit used animal bones, especially whale bones, instead of wood. The Inuit did make use of driftwood when it was available, mainly for building kayaks and dog sleds. Traditional dog sleds were bound together using animal sinews, which provided just the right amount of flex in the structure. Today, almost all of Greenland’s houses are made of imported wood, as are the dog sleds.

I came to a sign indicating that the area on either side of the track was prohibited. Within this area there stood a solitary building and a single orange tent. The sign was riddled with bullet holes; it appeared that
someone had been using it for target practice. My guidebook was clearly not joking when it spoke of Greenland’s Wild West character. There were no gunmen in sight, so I continued on my way.

In front of me was a peak called Sugar Loaf Mountain. In as much as I had a destination, this was it. I climbed up to the top; at only 353 metres in altitude this was not a major undertaking. From the summit the view of the rugged, empty landscape through the clear air was quite overwhelming. I could see the Russell Glacier about ten miles distant and the main ice cap behind it. The Russell Glacier is a popular destination for tourists staying in Kangerlussuaq; a few all-terrain buses had passed me on the track, presumably taking people to see the glacier.

Although the view from the summit of Sugar Loaf Mountain was impressive, the summit itself was rather untidy. There was a derelict wooden hut, a wooden frame covered in chicken wire, several poles standing in the ground and a solar-powered device that I took to be a radio transmission antenna. Despite the exertion of the ascent, I started to feel a little chilly, perhaps because of the cool breeze. Therefore I descended and continued along the track. I passed a weather station located at the base of Sugar Loaf Mountain; in this wild landscape even the smallest man-made installation was noticeable.

Beyond the mountain I found a sign that read Vandfald, which is the Danish word for waterfall. During my walk I had been following at a distance the river known as Qinnguata Kuussua, which originates as meltwater from the Russell Glacier. The river had looked too low and dry to be able to produce a decent waterfall, although the width of the floodplain indicated that the river varied in size quite considerably. Nevertheless, I turned right o\(ff\) the main track and followed the deep scores that had been left in the delicate tundra by what I took to be the tyres of all-terrain vehicles. When walking through featureless landscape like this there is often no obvious landmark to choose as a point to turn around; this was the case here and I eventually decided to retrace my steps when I reached a lump in the ground. No waterfall presented itself.

Unsurprisingly, there was no circular route to follow so I simply headed back the way I had come. I spent less time exploring on the return walk,
although I did stop to admire a frozen lake. The edge of the lake had thawed but there was still a thick layer of ice that started about a metre from the shore. No doubt the ice would melt as the summer progressed. Indeed, I could hear the rush of meltwater in Qinnguata Kuussua, even though it was some distance from me; there was no wind or traffic to mute the more delicate sounds. One noise I did hear throughout the day was that of planes and helicopters taking off and landing. The vast scale of the landscape meant that the airport had remained in view and earshot for the entire day.

It took me a couple of hours to walk back to the town. On the way a red pick-up truck stopped and the driver offered me a lift. I declined because I was enjoying walking. As tends to happen in arid areas, each vehicle that passed me kicked up a cloud of dust. About half an hour from the airport I saw a reindeer walking in front of me. Reindeer live wild in the area around Kangerlussuaq, the terrain of which is well-suited to their survival. I followed the animal at a distance, marvelling at the size of its antlers; it is a peculiar quirk of evolution that certain ruminant mammals develop such large and unwieldy appendages to the head. I lost sight of the beast as it trotted up a hillside. Kangerlussuaq also supports a population of stocky bison-like animals called musk oxen. Although of bovine appearance, they are more closely related to sheep than cows. They originate from Arctic Canada and north Greenland and were artificially introduced to Kangerlussuaq where they thrive.

As I entered the town I greeted some local children, who were playing in a municipal playground. The abundant space and lack of traffic that Kangerlussuaq offers must allow children to play with much greater freedom than most places, at least in summer. I passed a conference centre attached to the airport; Kangerlussuaq is a natural place to hold a conference in Greenland because its status as the nation’s airline hub means that it will be comparatively easy for delegates from all over the country to travel there.

Two local restaurants served musk ox steak, but I instead dined on crispbreads and cheese in the guest kitchen of the Polar Lodge, which also served as a common room and breakfast room. I shared the kitchen with
a pair of rugged Danish men who looked as if they were in Greenland for an expedition. A British science fiction drama played on the television; it was set on a submarine in the Arctic and served to entertain me until bedtime. It was with some trepidation that I went to bed in broad daylight but the exertions of the day caused me to drop off almost immediately.

I awoke early, partly because of jet lag. Greenland spans four time zones, with Kangerlussuaq and most of the rest of the country being three hours behind London and four hours behind Denmark. Greenland observes daylight saving time, perhaps to keep in step with Denmark rather than to save any of the endless summer daylight. As I lay dozing I noticed that the silence in my room was absolute; there was no noise from air conditioning, heating, fellow guests, traffic, wind or birds.

At six o’clock I arose and popped over to the airport to check in for my flight to Ilulissat. I then returned to the Polar Lodge and sat on the decking to write in the sunshine; by this time the sun was already high in the sky, warming anything that stood out of the shade. Bicycles and motor vehicles passed to and fro. When I headed inside for breakfast I found that the spread on offer was better than might be expected at a three-star hotel in continental Europe. There were fruit juices, cereals, black bread, bread rolls and large jugs of coffee. My favourite item in the spread was the cheese or, more precisely, the cheese slicer. The device used a screw mechanism to raise the block of cheese slightly as the user took a slice with the cheese wire. This left the cheese in a position ready for the next diner to cut another slice of perfect thickness. It appeared that innovative Scandinavian kitchen design had made it as far as Kangerlussuaq.

On returning to the airport I almost literally bumped into Christian. We exchanged greetings but did not stop to chat; Christian appeared to be hurrying for a flight. I sat outside on the airport’s sun deck. It is not common to find a sun deck at any airport, and Greenland is perhaps one of the last countries where one might expect air passengers to be provided with sunbathing facilities. Nevertheless, here it was. The deck provided a view over the air field to the hills beyond. On the deck itself
stood a multi-destination signpost giving the flight times to a variety of major cities and the North Pole.

As I sat in the sun I idled away the time waiting for my flight to board by watching the comings and goings of the airport. A major airport such as Heathrow or Bangkok has so much going on that watching it all would be tiring. Here the traffic was so light that it provided a source of gentle entertainment. I was interested to see a US Air Force plane land, perhaps a remnant of the airport’s incarnation as Bluie West-8 airbase.

There were only a few dozen people on the Dash 8 plane that took off for Ilulissat. The view from the plane at take-off was astounding, but the forty minutes of the flight were mainly over coastal cloud cover. As we came in to land at Ilulissat I saw icebergs for the first time, just little lumps of ice in the sea but enough to assure me that I was in the Arctic.

The airport at Ilulissat was a squat blue building with the name of the town written on it in purple lettering. A local guide called Lars met me off the plane and led me to a minibus. He pointed out a giant dog sled standing by the road as we pulled out of the car park. It was some 15 metres long and bore the name of the tour company that Lars worked for, one of three such companies in the town. Lars told me that on one occasion enough dogs had been harnessed to the sled to make it move a short distance. He assured me that it was the largest dog sled in the world. Given that dog sleds are typically little larger than a supermarket trolley, I found this easy to believe.

Lars pointed out the snow that lay all about. I was not surprised to see snow inside the Arctic Circle, but Lars told me that it was unusual. He went on to explain that the winter snows had thawed some time back but there had subsequently been a freak snowfall that had not yet melted. Lars went on to tell me that the mosquitoes would start to appear in about six weeks’ time; it appeared that I had timed my visit well.

I had expected to be taken to the house where I had booked a room, but instead Lars took me to the office of the travel agency in the centre of Ilulissat. Here I met the owner, a stocky Italian man with an impressive moustache by the name of Silver. Silver told me that he had lived in Ilulissat for thirty years having married a Greenlandic woman. I spent
about half an hour waiting in the shop-cum-office, during which time I drank the jug of coffee they offered me and chatted with a tour guide from Barcelona.

The tour guide had previously worked as a consultant in Catalonia – quite a successful consultant it seemed. He had married a woman from Denmark, so they had started to think about where to live. His wife was a Spanish teacher and he wanted to get out of consultancy and embrace his passion for mountaineering by becoming a mountain guide. Denmark is notoriously flat and Spain has limited demand for Spanish teachers so they decided to move to Greenland, where there are ample opportunities for both mountaineering and teaching. A suitable teaching job came up in the town of Aasiaat so they moved to this relatively large settlement, which lies ninety kilometres to the south-west of Ilulissat. Unfortunately, Aasiaat is located on a flat island only four miles in length, a fact that had clearly not come to light before they departed. With opportunities for mountaineering somewhat restricted by Aasiaat’s geography, the guide had travelled further afield to Greenland’s primary tourist destination of Ilulissat for work. This romantic tale of love, dream-chasing, exotic travel, disappointment and separation seemed more like the plot of a novel than real life and held me in rapt attention as I listened.

The time came for Lars to take me to my homestay. This was located on the outskirts of town. Even though Ilulissat is Greenland’s third-largest town, it has only around 4,500 inhabitants, so even the outskirts are less than a mile from the centre. When we arrived the house was empty, so Lars showed me my room, the bathroom and the kitchen. My room was fairly small but spotlessly clean and perfectly adequate.

I unpacked my bag to settle in; I was to stay here for a few days. I washed some socks and put them out to dry on the balcony. Although the sky was thick with cloud and the air temperature was in single digits, the dry Arctic air would see my laundry dry within a few hours.

Having installed myself in my digs, I went out to explore Ilulissat. The town’s name means ‘The Icebergs’, in reference to the nearby icefjord. Many of Greenland’s towns are named after local features; for example Nanortalik means ‘place with polar bears’ and Nuuk means ‘promontory’.
I walked uphill back into the centre of town and found myself in a busy area where stood a sports centre, a supermarket and a football pitch, which was covered in dust rather than grass. Outside the sports centre there stood a giant Santa’s post-box, one of several distributed around the world as different Arctic tourist offices attempt to claim Santa’s oceanic North Pole residence as their own. The post box had a window in the front so I peered inside. I noticed that the letters had arrived from all over the world. A postcard from the Far East gave a short list of selfless requests hinting at a view of Father Christmas as an omnipotent benevolent deity rather than a distributor of toys:

- Make the world happier
- Make my family safe and sound
- May every dream come true

A large bright red cartoon sleigh stood close to the post box, providing a photo opportunity for visitors. It was a rare instance of whimsy in a town that is mostly utilitarian in appearance.

Farther up the road I came to a building marked ‘Disko Line’. This referred not to a nightclub but rather to a passenger ferry company that serves the Disko Bay area of Greenland. Disko Bay is named for Disko Island, which is slightly smaller than Corsica and so ranks as the world’s 85th largest island. The Disko Bay area has four of Greenland’s larger towns: Ilulissat, Aasiaat, Qasigiannguit (population 1,170) and Qeqertarsuaq (population 845), the latter of which is the only settlement on Disko Island itself. As part of my trip planning I had identified a date on which the ferry timetables would allow me to take a day trip to Aasiaat from Ilulissat. I ventured into the office, which was spacious but empty save for a clerk behind the counter who sold me my tickets and pointed out the departure point on a map.

I continued walking through the centre of town. I noticed a traffic sign warning drivers to look out for dog sleds. The roads were dusty and there were no separate pavements for pedestrians. Greenland has only 90 miles of road, less than half of which is paved and all of which is for transport within settlements. There are no inter-settlement roads...
in Greenland, with the minor exception of a three-mile track from the southern settlement of Kangilinnguit to the abandoned mining town of Ivittuut. Nevertheless, there were plenty of cars in Ilulissat and I took care to give them a wide berth. I did not wish to experience the irony of being run over in a roadless nation.

The harbour area was busy with the town’s primary business of fishing. Despite being Greenland’s main tourist destination, Ilulissat’s economy gains more from fish than tourists. I popped into a large Spar supermarket located near the harbour. Here I saw some rugged fisherman in their rubber overalls eating hot snacks and drinking coffee at the fast food counter near the entrance.

I crossed a bridge over the gully that fed into the harbour and walked on in the direction of the airport. I passed the Hotel Arctic, which provides Ilulissat’s poshest lodgings and claims to be the world’s most northerly four-star hotel. I noticed a footpath leading into the tundra and started to follow it. The snow cover, rocks and bogs meant that walking randomly in the tundra was not straightforward so I was glad to find a marked footpath to follow. The trail turned out to be rather short and I soon found myself back on the airport road. This road bears the name Aaron Mathiesenip Aqquserna and was named for a nineteenth-century preacher from Aasiaat. The walk provided ample opportunity to admire the icebergs; the sky had brightened up somewhat and the bergs glistened in the sun.

I stopped off to look at the town cemetery, which is located close to the airport. The graves were well-tended, with lanterns and artificial flowers laid upon them; real flowers are not a practical option in Greenland. Some graves were surrounded by tiny white wooden fences. The flag of Greenland hung from a flagpole, fluttering in the wind. Greenland adopted its national flag in 1985, using a design submitted by the Greenland Thue Christiansen in a national competition. It is the only Scandinavian flag that does not feature the Nordic Cross.

When I reached the airport, I sat and rested for a few minutes before heading back outside to investigate the footpath to Oqaatsut, a tiny settlement that lies several miles to the north of Ilulissat. I located the
trail and determined that it was rather soggy underfoot and obscured by snow in places but well-marked and easy to follow. I knew I would be returning to this trailhead later in my trip. The airport was busy with people arriving and leaving by car; there was even a full-sized bus that appeared to ply the airport route.

I chose not to take the bus and instead walked back to the centre of town. I descended to the working part of the harbour and admired the large boats and stacked shipping containers. It seemed a dangerous place to linger, so I quickly ascended back to the main street.

I visited Ilulissat’s main supermarket, which goes by the name of Pissifik and stands opposite the town’s sports centre. The store was large and stocked with as wide a range of goods as I would expect to see in London. As well as food it sold fancy wines and various homewares, from brightly-coloured cheap trinkets to wide-screen televisions. Even the vegetables seemed to be in reasonable condition, looking much fresher than those I had seen in Kangerlussuaq. Some of the goods on sale, such as sled-dog food and insulated trousers, reflected the local environment but otherwise the main hint that I was in a remote location was the high prices. Although supermarkets are rather prosaic destinations, they are interesting places to explore when travelling because they provide an insight into daily local life. I assembled a picnic and ate it while sitting on one of the benches that overlooked the football pitch.

From here I walked up a dusty hill towards a location described in my guidebook as the ‘Old Heliport’. Here I encountered sled dogs for the first time. Naturally, I knew about Greenland’s sled dogs but I hadn’t expected quite so many of them occupying such a large area. A substantial proportion of the land in and around Ilulissat is given over to space for sled dogs to live. The dogs are half-wild and by law they must be chained up; I never saw a loose adult sled dog throughout my stay. I saw many puppies among the dogs; with their thick fur they looked rather cute but I knew better than to approach them. The dogs’ thick fur enables them to sleep curled up in the snow, nose tucked under the tail. Some dogs had been provided with wooden kennels, others just seemed to live outside. The locals treat the dogs as working animals rather than pets
and are quite ruthless about destroying them when their useful life has come to an end.

At the top of the hill I saw no heliport but I did find some signs giving information about the icefjord and its status as a UNESCO World Heritage site. UNESCO granted the icefjord this status in 2004. There are about a thousand World Heritage Sites worldwide. Ilulissat’s icefjord is one of only 197 World Heritage Sites classified as ‘Natural’; the rest being classified as ‘Cultural’ or ‘Mixed’. An icefjord is a rare geological formation where a glacier calves directly into a fjord. Ilulissat has the world’s only example outside Antarctica, and a fine example it is too. The glacier that feeds into the fjord is known as Sermeq Kujalleq in Greenlandic and Jakobshavn Isbræ in Danish, Jakobshavn being the old Danish name for Ilulissat. This glacier is the world’s most prolific outside Antarctica: it advances by 19 metres per day, drains 6.5% of Greenland’s ice sheet and produces 10% of Greenland’s icebergs from a glacier front five kilometres long and 1100 metres thick, although only eighty metres of the front extends above the sea. The glacier calves 35 cubic kilometres of ice annually. It is considered likely that the iceberg that sank the Titanic came from Sermeq Kujalleq. The sea becomes shallower further along the fjord, so the larger bergs stick on the bottom and either break up or else are forced along by the pressure of ice behind them. The overall effect is an awe-inspiring seascape choked with an ever-changing pattern of ice.

The sun was low in the early evening sky. The signage advertised three hiking routes: Red, Yellow and Blue. The Blue Route led down to the icefjord, so I followed the markers and found myself walking along some wooden duckboards. The combination of the delicate tundra and the number of people (both tourists and locals) taking this route means that without such protection the ground would soon become an impassable churned-up mess. The tundra was still covered with snow, although it was melting in the sun.

The walk brought me to a place called Sermermiut, the location of an ancient Inuit winter settlement, which dates back literally thousands of years and which was only finally abandoned in 1850. The name means ‘people that live near the glacier’. In wintertime the Inuit lived in turf
huts; they moved to sealskin tents with a driftwood frame in the spring. There was little to see of the archaeological remains but a sign warning of ‘Extreme Danger’ caught my eye; it advised visitors to stay away from the shore for fear of being swept away by a tsunami caused by the calving of an iceberg. I never saw an iceberg calve while I was in Greenland; such a sight is a rare and coveted experience.

From Sermermiut I climbed up a nearby rocky peninsula to admire the view over the icefjord. The rocks where I stood included Kællingekløften, which means Witch’s Gorge. This place is also known as Suicide Gorge because of its historic use as a place for elderly people to jump into the freezing sea when they felt that they had started to become a burden on their family or had otherwise decided that the time had come for life to end. The Inuit lived on the very edge of human endurance and some of their customs borne of necessity seem terribly harsh from the vantage point of post-scarcity Western Europe. However, this dark history was far from my thoughts as I admired the giant icebergs in the fjord. I admired the scene for a while and then returned up the wooden walkway and started a coastal walk over some headlands. I picked my way over a varied surface of rock, peat, snow and low vegetation. I walked for an hour or so under the blue sky as the sun lowered towards the horizon. To my left were giant icebergs floating in a calm sea. Towards the end of the trail I came to a traditional-style turf house standing in the tundra. This single-storey house was the size of a small cottage and had tiny windows set into the thick walls. The roof was made of roofing felt rather than the turf that is common elsewhere in north Atlantic nations. The building is used by Greenlandic newlyweds as a place to spend their wedding night.

A few minutes later I reached a long wooden staircase, which afforded me an easy descent of the steep slope. I found myself next to Ilulissat’s power plant, a large blue building with drums of oil piled up outside. The building’s tall chimney was painted with a sort of seascape in white and blue, thus making this prominent feature less of an eyesore.

I followed a road into the part of Ilulissat where I was staying. The houses here were all prefabricated and similar in appearance, so I attempted to identify my lodgings by the socks I had left drying outside.
My socks were nowhere to be seen but I did find a likely-looking house and so attempted to unlock the front door, thankfully meeting with success. Inside I found my socks lying bone dry on my bed. My hostess was nowhere to be seen so I went back outside to find some food. One might not expect late-night shopping in such a small place but in fact there was a Spar convenience store just up the hill, open from seven in the morning until eleven at night.

When I returned to my digs I found that my hostess was at home. She greeted me and introduced herself as Dorthe. She was a sturdy middle-aged woman with well-coiffured dark hair and an air of self-assurance. She was bilingual in Greenlandic and Danish and also spoke a few words of English. Once she had checked that I had locked the front door Dorthe was happy to leave me to my own devices. I took a shower in the warm and windowless bathroom before turning in for the night. I found that the venetian blind in my room was powerless to keep out the bright sunlight so I donned my airline eye mask. In Arctic Norway the houses are designed with bedrooms in the basement to promote summertime sleep. However, this is not practical in Greenland, where houses are typically built either on stilts to protect the tundra or else on solid granite, which does not lend itself to excavation.

SATURDAY 1 JUNE 2013

Dorthe had laid out an impressive breakfast spread with cheese, black and white bread, yoghurt, jam, marmalade and a large jug of coffee all to myself. Greenlanders are enthusiastic coffee drinkers. They have a custom called kaffemik, which is a social gathering where the hostess serves coffee and cakes. A kaffemik may be held for no particular reason or to mark a specific occasion, such as a wedding, a birthday or a child’s first hunting kill. The emphasis is firmly on the social side of the gathering; I saw no hints of Greenlandic coffee connoisseurship or snobbishness. Social bonds hold an important place in all cultures and in Greenland they form a key part of the traditional survival mechanisms. As subsistence hunters, the supply of food to any one individual could be somewhat erratic because of the capricious fortunes of hunting. Therefore it was
important to be able to rely on the sharing of kills which, in turn, required strong social bonds.

We chatted a little by means of Dorthe’s few words of English and some sign language. Dorthe told me that she worked as a cook, which was consistent with the large breakfast spread and immaculate kitchen. Dorthe told me that her husband worked in a gold mine at Nanortalik, which lies in the far south of Greenland on what is wryly known as the Sineriak Bananeqarfik or Banana Coast. Nanortalik is Greenland’s tenth largest city with a population of around 1,300. Dorthe showed me some rocks streaked with gold on her window ledge.

The thermometer on Dorthe’s window ledge told me that the temperature outside was -1°C. Heavy cloud darkened the sky as I set out to explore the town further. I passed a simple eatery that bore the name ‘Hong Kong Café’. It stood next door to Ilulissat’s town museum, in front of which stood a variety of outdoor exhibits. These included another turf house and the jawbone of a fin whale. The fin whale is the world’s second-largest animal after the blue whale and the jawbone had been set in the ground vertically so that it formed an arch high enough to walk through. I resolved to visit the museum properly on a rainy or snowy day.

From the museum I could see a building with a hand-painted sign on the front identifying it as ‘Arctic tv’. Despite its unpromising appearance, this is a real television station that started in 1972 and serves the Ilulissat area with programmes broadcast in the Greenlandic language. The small amount of television programming I saw in Greenland was Danish-language European fare.

As I walked away from the museum I saw two local men fishing hunks of ice out of the sea. They were putting them into plastic bags and loading them into the back of a pickup truck. Traditionally the Inuit would melt sea ice for their drinking water, although naturally this is no longer necessary except on hunting expeditions and the like. Once possible reason they were harvesting ice was to sell it to the premium Japanese whisky market, where iceberg ice is seen as a status symbol.

I crossed some rough open ground to an 18th century building called Zion Church (Zions Kirke in Danish). Dating from the Danish colonial
days, this church was the largest building in Greenland when it was built. I didn’t venture inside but instead stood and admired the icebergs floating in the sea. A fellow iceberg-fancier struck up conversation with me. He was a Danish man by the name of Erik, an academic who was allowed to spend a portion of his time working on projects of his choice. Erik chose to spend that time doing research in Greenland. He invited me to join him on a waymarked walk along the coast and I gladly accepted; with the snow still thick on the ground hiking was somewhat treacherous and many times more so for the solo walker.

We started the walk by climbing a long flight of steps. Greenland’s towns and settlements typically lie on ground riven by clefts, cliffs, bogs, boulders and streams. As such, the towns are equipped with well-placed and well-maintained wooden walkways that enable pedestrians to traverse these Arctic obstacles.

We followed the footpath around the coast, taking care to keep our footing on the snowy ground. Erik wore high-quality Arctic clothing and carried an SLR camera. Despite the poor light, we both took numerous photographs; so alluring are icebergs that it is difficult to do otherwise. We talked at length as we walked. As a frequent and observant visitor to Greenland, Erik knew a great deal about the place and I listened intently. When we came to Sermermiut we turned inland and walked back up into Ilulissat along the duckboards. Erik told me that the town takes up the duckboards over the winter and puts them back down after the thaw. The unexpected post-thaw snowfall had engulfed parts of the walkway in snow.

Erik invited me to join him for a snack at Café Iluliaq in the centre of town. The café was warm and had large windows so it was ideal for watching the street life outside. The establishment had a dancefloor in an adjoining room so it appeared that the place converted to a nightclub for evening revelry. My guidebook warned me to be cautious of Greenlandic nightlife; apparently trouble is common. Indeed, a colleague of mine told me that he had once spent two weeks in Nuuk to install some telecommunications equipment. Late one afternoon he strolled into a bar for a post-work beer. He found the place filled with steaming drunk
Inuit dancing to Abba. The barman explained to him that the revellers worked on fishing boats, starting at two o’clock in the morning and finishing around noon. As my colleague sat on his bar stool, a woman approached him unprovoked and started shouting at him in Greenlandic. She smashed a bottle and attempted to lacerate his face with the broken stub. My colleague grabbed her arm to fend off her attack. After the fracas the barman explained that she was enraged by the presence of an outsider who, she felt, was stealing local jobs.

There was no such brawling in the café during my visit. I was pleased and surprised to be able to order Pad Thai soup from the menu. I welcomed the dual warming effects of the hot soup and the chilli. Over 150 Thais live in Greenland; they are the country’s second-largest minority after Icelanders. Greenland is also home to over 130 Filipinos.

As we ate, Erik explained that he worked on his academic projects in the early morning, leaving the latter part of the day free for exploration. Erik preferred Ilulissat over all other destinations in Greenland. His work normally took him to the capital of Nuuk but he would come up to Ilulissat for leisure trips. As we went our own ways for the afternoon, Erik mentioned to me that the Zion Church would be holding a service at nine the next morning and that I would be welcome to attend. It was clear that Erik’s recommendation was cultural rather than religious so I resolved to join him.

I had not yet had my fill of walking, so decided to investigate another hiking trail. I walked back up the dusty hill to the Old Heliport and identified the trailhead. The route took me over the rocks, grass and moss of the tundra towards the coast. It was a relatively short walk and before long I had joined with a longer coastal route. I followed this trail further out of Ilulissat. Although I was less than two miles away from the centre of the town, I felt as though I was in deep wilderness. The only sign of any human activity was the track worn into the tundra and the blobs of blue paint to mark the route: farming is impossible at this latitude and there was no litter.

I reached a frozen stream with rocky cliffs rising on the far side. The trail turned inland, alongside the stream. As I followed the route
I admired the forbidding sheer face of a black mountain. It looked distinctly moody under the grey sky. The path gained height and then abruptly turned left into a cleft in the hill. The route became steeper but the way to the highest point of the cleft was not unduly challenging. From the top I had a good view of Ilulissat a mile or two away but the foreground was less welcoming: right in front of me I could see a steep descent through deep snow. Light snow fell as I made my way down with abundant caution. I reached the tundra at the base of the cleft without mishap and followed the blue circles of paint towards the town. In places the snow was hip deep, which introduced the unpleasant possibility that I might step through to some ankle-snapping rocks. I was relieved when I reached a sled dog area at the edge of town.

The snow was melting in this area of Ilulissat, leaving the grass and moss covered in icy water and so forcing the dogs to stand on the rocks. The ramshackle wooden kennels added to the feeling of wasteland. In contrast, I saw a few shiny snowmobiles parked next to a pile of bags of cement in a building yard. These were the only snowmobiles that I saw during my time in Greenland; Greenlanders generally prefer dog sleds.

By now the time was eight in the evening, although the day was still as light as it had been at noon. As I walked back to my digs I dropped in to a small supermarket housed in a prefabricated building to stock up on chocolate and shortly afterwards crossed a rocky gorge where a stream had scored its way through the granite over many millennia. Greenland has a way of bringing home the fleetingness of human existence.

Sunday 2 June 2013

At breakfast Dorthe sat reading a Danish-language women’s weekly. As far as I could tell the magazine placed a strong emphasis on the Danish royal family. The language barrier limited our conversation, although we did manage to discuss my travel arrangements.

I arrived at the Zion Church at five minutes to nine. Outside there stood a row of young Greenlandic women in traditional costume. Greenland’s national dress is notable for being the only one for which women wear trousers rather than a dress or skirt. Traditional dress sees Greenlandic
women wearing shorts with long sealskin stockings and boots called *kamik* to cover the legs. On top they wear a brightly coloured blouse, which is mostly covered by a wide necklace made of glass beads, a luxury introduced by European traders a few hundred years ago. Erik told me later that the pattern of coloured beads in the necklace indicates the wearer’s home region.

Some young Greenlandic men stood nearby. They wore white parkas, complete with hoods. It appeared that these garments were the formal wear of Greenlandic men. While smart, they looked decidedly plain compared to the women. Some of the young men also wore a bow tie. With these young people stood the Lutheran pastor, dressed simply in a black cassock with a white ruff reminiscent of Elizabethan England.

When I entered the church I was a little surprised to find it packed with locals, many of whom were also wearing national costume. I found one of the few remaining seats and looked about me as the service started. The interior was quite splendid and was lit with candles. A model of a sailing ship hung from the ceiling, reflecting the importance of seafaring to the community. It became apparent that I was witnessing a confirmation ceremony and that the youths outside were the confirmands. This was clearly an important event in the lives of the Greenlanders; I heard an old man weeping with emotion when his daughter went through the ceremony. Christianity has largely supplanted the rich shamanistic traditions once held by the Inuit, although the animist influence persists.

The church was equipped with a fine organ and the locals sang hymns in Greenlandic without the aid of hymn books. The pastor’s monologue was the only opportunity I had in my entire trip to hear Greenlandic spoken at length. Unlike the vowel-heavy transliteration of Greenlandic, the spoken language was rich in consonants and sounded like no other tongue I have heard before or since.

As the service proceeded, people wandered in and out much as they do in Christian Orthodox churches. Two boys aged about ten wandered in and sat next to me in the pew; I had seen them on my way to the church when they whizzed past me on a BMX bicycle. They paid little attention to the service, instead playing a hand-held computer game. Erik was sitting...
in a different pew and after about an hour and a half he indicated to me that he was leaving and beckoned for me to join him.

This I did and we set out on another walk along the coast. There were few other walkers but we did meet a group of Finns who were also visiting Ilulissat. Erik and I stopped on a hillside to admire the view and eat our packed lunches; each morning Dorthe kindly allowed me to make up some sandwiches for lunch from the food laid out for breakfast. Erik quaffed a bottle of Greenlandic beer with his lunch. We returned to Ilulissat where we warmed up with coffee and soup at Café Iluliaq. We exchanged email addresses and goodbyes; I felt extraordinarily lucky to have met someone who was at once so genial and also so knowledgeable and articulate on the subject of Greenland.

I wandered around the town for a while and suddenly remembered that I had not paid for my drink at the café. As well as a desire to be honest, I was conscious that news travels quickly in small communities and I did not wish to be known throughout Ilulissat and possibly the whole of Greenland as a bilker. Therefore I dashed back and handed over my dues; fortunately the server took my error in good humour.

As evening approached the sky started to clear a little so I walked back to the coast and followed it as far as the frozen stream before doubling back. I considered crossing the stream but it looked too treacherous. On the return journey I took care to admire the icebergs in the better light. There was no wind so every ripple on the water was plain to see. The lack of wind, people, animals and traffic also meant that when I stopped walking there was absolute silence; I could hear nothing at all other than the mild whistle of tinnitus in my ears.

By the time I got back to my homestay my hostess was already asleep. As I sat in my room munching on some food I noticed that the walls were decorated with ornamental plates depicting idyllic scenes of sled dogs and ships in icy waters. The spirit of these ornaments seemed to be the same as English Wedgewood plates depicting shire horses and thatched cottages, except that the subject matter was local to Greenland. The Danish-Inuit cultural blend manifested itself in many ways.
I awoke before six to another overcast day. As I dozed I heard my hostess preparing to leave for work. I learned later that Dorthe’s job as a cook was located at Ilulissat’s prison which, like almost all the buildings in the town, is made of wood. The prison was quite close to the house and I passed it whenever I walked back to my room from the wooden steps by the power plant. Unfortunately Greenland is not without its social problems and while petty crime is fairly low, the murder rate is shockingly high*. Greenlanders convicted of serious crimes are sent to Denmark to serve their sentences. The prisons in Greenland are all open and prisoners are allowed to walk free during the day; this practice originates in traditional Inuit ways of handling wrongdoers.

My first stop of the day was the post office. I was hoping to find a public telephone so that I could tell my wife that I was still alive. There was no such facility available but I did notice that the retail part of the office sold a wide range of mobile phone accessories and philatelic stamps. In the same building I saw a large array of bright red postal boxes, into which presumably many or all of the locals received their mail. While researching my trip I had noticed that many addresses were given with po boxes and it was now clear that this was more likely to have been out of necessity rather than coyness.

The weather was ill-suited to hiking so I took the opportunity to visit Ilulissat’s museum. In the reception area I found that various Greenlandic artefacts were on sale. Some items indicated that it was illegal to take them out of the country. The museum itself was highly engaging. I had the place to myself, except for a brief visit by the group of Finns I had encountered the day before. One display showed archaeological finds from the early inhabitants of Greenland, along with explanations of the waves and patterns of migration. Another display showed the considerable impact

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* The nation’s tiny population means that the rate varies widely from year to year. The last year for which numbers are available is 2009, when there were 19.4 murders per 100,000 people. This rate is not atypical and ranks Greenland as the 24th most murderous nation in the world, just below Nigeria. The suicide rate, especially among young people, is another cause for serious concern.
of climate change on Greenland; it included a striking map showing the startling recent retreat of the glacier that feeds Ilulissat’s icefjord. I was particularly interested to see displays depicting everyday Greenlandic life in recent decades. One exhibit was a schoolbook entitled ‘абд’ because the Romanization of the Greenlandic language does not use the letter ‘c’. Also on display was a clocking in and out machine from a fish processing plant. The signage made the astute point that the requirement to clock in and out of a factory was a strong contrast to the free unscheduled life of a hunter.

The museum is located in Knud Rasmussen’s birthplace and former residence and so naturally dedicated a room to his considerable achievements. The centrepiece recreated a sledging scene from one of his expeditions. Rasmussen was born in Ilulissat in 1879 of mixed Danish and Inuit parentage. He dedicated his life to exploring and documenting Inuit culture around the Arctic. He survived many years of polar exploration only to die of pneumonia in 1933, which he contracted after suffering a bout of food poisoning. The food poisoning is thought to have been brought on by eating the Greenlandic dish kiviak. Kiviak is made by stuffing around five hundred dead auks into a seal carcase, which is then buried under a stone and allowed to ferment for several months. Greenlanders consume the resulting delicacy during the Greenlandic winter, particularly on special occasions. One can only wonder that the kiviak itself didn’t kill Rasmussen directly. The Inuit still eat kiviak today; it is said to taste like the Japanese delicacy nattō, which is made of fermented soya beans.

The Rasmussen room had a television playing the great explorer’s 1934 film The Wedding of Palo. It is set in a Greenlandic Inuit summer encampment and tells a story of romantic rivalry, primarily as a vehicle to provide the audience with an insight into the traditional life of Greenlanders. I sat and watched the entire 112-minute long work. It depicted numerous scenes from traditional Inuit life and the climax involved the hero paddling a kayak with his sweetheart lashed to him back-to-back.

I was due to fly to Uummannaq that afternoon and watching the film had left me with little time to see the last room in the museum, which
housed a temporary exhibition about local perceptions of climate change. I glanced over the photographs and testimonies before starting a hasty walk back towards my homestay, where I was to meet my transfer to the airport. As I walked a grey minibus passed me and then turned around. Lars hailed me and I climbed inside. We stopped off at my homestay so that I could collect my rucksack and then drove to the airport.

I had been drinking copious quantities of coffee over the past few days and the anxiety-producing effects of the caffeine kicked in rather strongly at the airport. I became overly concerned that I had failed to lock Dorthe’s front door on my hurried departure from her house and ended up taking a taxi back into Ilulissat so that I could check. Of course, when I arrived I found the door firmly locked. The futile return journey cost me the equivalent of £30. In a sense this was a bargain because in the past I have periodically given up caffeine only to fall off the wagon and become addicted again. On my return to England I gave up caffeine once again and have since managed to stay off it for good simply by recalling this coffee-fuelled folly whenever I am tempted by a double espresso.

My journey to Uummannaq involved a change of aircraft at the small settlement of Qaarsut (population 196). Uummannaq does not have enough flat ground for an airstrip so passengers change to a helicopter at Qaarsut for a ten-minute hop over the water to the rocky island that had captured my imagination for so many years.

The flight to Qaarsut took about forty minutes. The views over the vast wilderness below were quite breath-taking. Particularly spectacular was the sight of Uummannaq Mountain erupting out from the blanket of cloud that covered the wide fjord. When we landed I noticed that the airport displayed the name ‘Uummannaq’ instead of Qaarsut. I had deliberately booked my helicopter flight a couple of hours after my arrival at Qaarsut to allow myself an opportunity to look around the village. I walked through the small but busy terminal building and out into the open air. I was now on the Nuussuaq Peninsula, with an area of some 15,000 square kilometres and fewer than six hundred people.

I walked along the road that led away from the terminal building. I had the airport to my left and a forbidding black slope, partially covered
with snow, rising to my right. A pair of teenage girls walked in front of me with the assurance of people who know where they are going. I could not see the houses of Qaarsut; it was clear that a visit to that settlement was not practical during my short stopover. However, a few minutes later I passed a large and well-maintained V-shaped building, which I took to be accommodation for the airport workers. I then came to a desert-like area that led down to the sea. No plants at all grew in the barren black sand. A pair of pipelines ran alongside the track, supported by concrete sleepers.

At the shore I stood and admired the view over the islands, icebergs and the deep blue of the sea. The sky over the water was clear, contrasting with the sinister landward view of mist, black rock and snow. A pair of storage tanks stood on the coast. They were clearly in current use, unlike the derelict stone hut nearby. This was a remnant from the days when Qaarsut had Greenland’s first coal mine, which was active from 1778 until 1924.

Back at the airport I found that the terminal was almost empty. I looked around it as I waited for my helicopter. The room was surprisingly well-appointed for such a remote place. It had a food kiosk and the seats were covered with sealskin rather than the usual plastic. A display stand offered free promotional postcards for Air Greenland; they depicted scenes that emphasised the co-existence of traditional and modern life in the country.

I examined a map of Greenland’s airports and noted with satisfaction that I was about to fly to Greenland’s third most northerly out of a total of twenty-one. The second most northerly airport is at Upernavik, 170 miles from Uummannaq and the farthest north is at Qaanaaq. Qaanaaq lies in the far north of Greenland, 570 miles from Uummannaq at a latitude that sees continuous daylight from late April to late August.

I had seen the helicopter shuttling between Qaarsut and Uummannaq during my stopover. It was a Bell 212 with seats for nine people. Apparently in winter it is possible to drive to Uummannaq over the ice but in summer those without a boat must fly. When my turn came, I clambered in and chose a window seat. I donned a pair of the ear defenders that
hung next to me. This was the first time I had ever travelled in a helicopter and I found it a thrilling experience. The aircraft only ascended a few hundred metres and seemed to fly quite slowly. With the fjord now clear of cloud it made for a fine scenic flight as well as transport.

To start with, the lone pilot flew us along the arid grey-brown coast. We passed over Qaarsut, which was little more than a clutch of brightly-coloured wooden buildings. We then flew out over the fjord and within five minutes we were approaching Uummannaq. The island was solid rock with no discernible greenery. Cloud shrouded the mountain but I could see the houses scattered around its base. We landed at the tiny heliport where local workers used a modified construction vehicle to unload luggage from the helicopter.

Uummannaq means ‘heart-shaped mountain’. A Westerner might be puzzled by this translation of the name because the mountain that dominates the island bears little resemblance to a Valentine’s heart. The reason for this is simple: with the knowledge of phocine anatomy that comes from a life of Arctic hunting the Inuit had identified that the island’s mountain resembles the blood-pumping organ of a seal. Surely there cannot be many other towns in the world named after an internal organ. For this alone Uummannaq can be proud.

The area of Greenland where Uummannaq now stands has been used by traditional hunters for thousands of years. Europeans set up whaling stations in the area during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. They were followed by traders and missionaries and Uummannaq was founded in 1763. In Greenland food comes from the sea more than the land, so the rocky landscape was presumably no deterrent. Uummannaq is now Greenland’s eleventh-largest town with more than 1,200 inhabitants. It has a sports centre, a hospital, an Arctic research centre and a canning factory.

As I left the heliport I saw a graveyard, where white crosses stood on a patch of scanty grass growing over broken rocks. I climbed a steep track and walked into the town. It was quite unlike any other place I have ever seen. Rather than attempt to blast flat spaces in the granite, people anchored their houses to the rock wherever they could; typically
a concrete platform provided a level base for the structure. Service pipes ran over the surface of the rock. Numerous wooden walkways and staircases connected the houses to the roads and each other. Boats, dog sleds and general clutter littered the open spaces. Despite Uummannaq’s small population, the town seemed fairly large and it took me about half an hour to walk to my homestay. In this time I passed many of the town’s landmarks, including the stone church, the harbour and the museum.

The house where I was to stay was painted dark green and stood high up at the top of a flight of steps. Like all houses in Uummannaq, it was detached; there is not enough level space in Uummannaq to build apartment blocks. My hosts, an elderly Greenlandic couple, greeted me warmly when I rang the bell and I was pleased to find that they had family visiting. I was fortunate enough to meet their daughter, with whom I had arranged the room by email via an introduction by Greenland’s tourist office. I also met their grandson, who spoke remarkably good English. He shared the Greenlandic passion for football so I chatted with him on the subject as well as my ignorance of the sport would allow.

The house was spacious and just as spick and span as Dorthe’s place had been. My room was small but clean and comfortable, with an impressive view out over Uummannaq Fjord to the Nuussuaq Peninsula. The family was watching television on a large screen and kindly invited me to join them. As I sat with them my hostess served me with small bread rolls and coffee. A Danish news programme was showing footage of floods in central Europe. The events felt a long way away both geographically and culturally: although Greenland has close links with Denmark I felt that the flavour of the nation was far more Inuit than European. Greenland had even less of a North American feel, even though Canada’s Ellesmere Island lies just fifteen miles away over the Kennedy Channel. The Inuit of Greenland and other Arctic nations seem to have their own especially distinct culture.

Far more engaging than the television was the view from the sitting room window. From where I sat I could look out east over the fjord to the soaring cliffs of Salliaruseq Island, its walls of black granite rising nearly a mile out of the Assorput Strait to a plateau of rock and ice. With
the icebergs and reflecting still water beneath it was one of the most spectacular sights I have ever seen; it was one of those rare instances where the word ‘awesome’ was genuinely apt.

I headed out to explore. I bought some food at the town’s main supermarket, which had something of a frontier feel but was nevertheless well stocked given its remote location. I ate my picnic supper while sitting on a bench outside one of the three traditional Inuit turf huts that stand on Uummannaq’s equivalent to a village green. These are now part of the town’s museum but one of them was inhabited by a Greenlandic family until 1982.

I continued my walk through the town. Around the port I passed piles of nets, buoys and other nautical equipment. Farther on, I was a little surprised to see an abandoned freezer with the name of an ice-cream brand emblazoned upon it; perhaps a shopkeeper had made an unsuccessful attempt at the proverbial ‘selling ice to Eskimos’*. I also saw a boat named Illorsuit, which is the name of a nearby settlement where the American painter Rockwell Kent lived and worked for a few years from 1931; Kent’s descendants continue to live in Illorsuit today. Sled dogs were chained up wherever space allowed and I saw many sleds lying around.

I passed the heliport again. From here the road started to climb steeply as it followed the steep eastern shore of the island. I came to Uummannaq’s football pitch, which is the town’s largest expanse of flat ground. As in Ilulissat, it was not a turf pitch and the small children who were having a kick-around played with dust underfoot. A ramshackle wooden hut provided some shelter for spectators.

Next to the football pitch stood another cemetery. This one had no grass, just rocky graves marked with the same austere Lutheran crosses. Most of the crosses were decorated with artificial flowers. This makes for an interesting comparison to the burial practices of the Inuit in Greenlanders dislike the word ‘Eskimo’ and prefer the word ‘Inuk’, the plural of which is ‘Inuit’. A questionable folk etymology of Eskimo claims that it is a Cree word meaning ‘eater of raw meat’.
fifteenth-century Greenland. We have some insight into these because of the mummies that a pair of ptarmigan hunters found in 1972. They made this remarkable archeological find at a place called Qilakitsoq, which lies on the coast of the Nuussuaq Peninsula directly over the water from Uummannaq. The best preserved mummy was of a six-month-old baby, whose well-dressed body made the cover of *National Geographic*.

I continued along the road until it came to an abrupt halt at the point where the relatively flat ground ended and the coast turned into steep cliffs. The cliffs were formed of a striped gneiss rock in fetching shades of orange and blue-grey, falling away to a cold turquoise sea beneath. I clambered up on to some rocks, found myself a comfy spot and sat to admire the view. Today I had achieved a life-long ambition.

**Tuesday 4 June 2013**

I awoke to light blazing over the fjord through the thin curtains. I ate breakfast with my hostess, who then showed me the family album. She spoke about as much English as I do Danish or Greenlandic so we communicated using a mixture of pantomime and her Greenlandic–English phrasebook. One set of photographs showed her husband on a dog sledding trip from Uummannaq to Qaanaaq. Such epic journeys are part of traditional Greenlandic life; they are easier to understand if one remembers that within living memory the Greenlanders were semi-nomadic hunters who did not lead a settled existence at all.

Despite being well into her eighth decade, my hostess worked at home making traditional Greenlandic handicrafts and clothing. She operated a sewing machine in her workroom and produced goods of the sort I had seen people wearing at the Zion Church. She took me down to the basement, where I saw a seal pelt hanging up ready to be crafted into something. Traditional kamik boots hung from a rope. They were decorated with colourful embroidery, lined with fur and showed a high standard of workmanship. I wondered how well the soft soles of these boots fared on the sharp broken rock of Uummannaq Island.

I noticed a piece of hide sat on top of a pile of foam mattresses. It had long white fur so I asked ‘*Hund*?’, taking a guess at the Danish word for
dog. ‘Nej’ replied my hostess, ‘Isbjørn’. I was stroking a polar bear pelt, an act unlikely to ingratiate me with London’s environmentally-aware liberal intelligentsia. Greenlanders prize polar bear skins for the making of sledging trousers. Indeed, I had noticed that a neighbour’s house had a whole polar bear skin hanging outside to cure.

Although polar bears are a threatened species, Greenlandic law allows indigenous people to hunt them subject to strict quota and reporting requirements; Alaska and Canada have similar arrangements. In recent years more polar bears have been found wandering into human settlements, which generally leads to the death of the bear by shooting because of the danger that this most carnivorous of bears will attack a human. The reason for these more frequent visits is thought to be the shrinking of the sea ice caused by the rising temperatures in the Arctic; the ice is the polar bears’ preferred habitat and as that shrinks they are driven to find food on land.

From the basement my hostess took me to a small storage shed on their balcony. She opened it to reveal a full set of dog-sledging equipment, which she indicated belonged to her husband. There were trousers made from polar bear skin, dog harnesses (known as ‘traces’), several pairs of well-used soft-soled boots, whips and a collection of harpoons. These weapons were no doubt supplemented by the collection of hunting rifles I had seen in the basement, the only security being a lock on the wooden door. The sled itself sat outside on the rock, next to the wooden walkway that led to the house.

I departed my digs to explore Uummannaq. I was minded to walk out of town into the rocky wilderness. I explored the streets, looking for a way out of town. On my way I passed an unmarked building that turned out to be a convenience store; presumably there was no need to even advertise the building’s function because everyone in town knew it was there. A little exploration brought me to a waymarked footpath. The day was fairly sunny; Uummannaq is known as Greenland’s sunniest town and receives less than half the precipitation of London. However, Uummannaq Mountain was shrouded in shifting cloud. I struck out to see what I could see.
The footpath led me to the coast over a landscape of rock with some tufts of grass growing in hollows and cracks. There was some snow on the ground, thawing in the warmth of the day. An hour’s leisurely walking brought me to Spraglebugten Bay. Here I found a flatter and less harsh area of land where there was more grass than rock. Icebergs sat in the calm sea, perhaps having run aground in the shallow water. A green turf hut stood at the northern end of the bay; this was Santa Claus’s Castle. Greenlanders and Danes hold that Father Christmas has his summer residence in Uummannaq. Indeed, the people of Uummannaq appeared to be especially keen on Christmas in general. I inferred this from the Christmas lights affixed permanently to many of the houses. Yule could be seen as a coping strategy for the winter darkness; this can only be more important in a place that sees no daylight at all for two months of the year.

The turf hut was built for a Danish children’s television programme and was left in place after filming was completed. The door was unlocked so I pushed it open and entered. Inside I found a room furnished with a large bed, a table, a dresser, some wooden chairs, a rough stone fireplace and some old-fashioned pots and pans. A cast-iron stove sat in the corner. Stills from the television programme hung on the wall. Overall it looked like a children’s television rendering of an old-world house, which of course is exactly what it was. The place was well-maintained, or at least well-preserved by the cold; the windows were intact, there was no mould and little dust. I spent a few minutes absorbing the atmosphere of the hut and I inscribed my name in the visitors’ book. Close to the book was a shelf filled with babies’ dummies. Their significance was unclear to me; I guessed that they may have been left by women hoping for children.

From the hut I returned to the trail I had been following. It took me up a steep cleft in a low cliff. From here I found myself ascending a slope of flaky rock, grass and moss. The landscape became more eerie as I climbed higher and the usual dead silence was replaced by the continuous distant clattering of rocks falling off Uummannaq Mountain. The twin peaks, each rising more than a kilometre high out of the sea, were entwined with cloud but I could see the vertical expanses of their lower flanks.
Climbing them is the preserve of skilled mountaineers, although it is said that some locals climb them without equipment. Indeed, my host told me he had once scaled one of the peaks. I had no such ambitions and was feeling brave enough just trekking around the base. A local legend tells of a group of mountaineers who climbed Uummannaq Mountain and left a bottle of whisky at the summit for the next party to reach it. Hearing of this, the next day a native of Uummannaq climbed the mountain alone and retrieved the bottle.

The slope brought me to a cave known as the Troll’s Grotto. This cave was not set into a cliff but rather was formed by the way a large boulder sat on the rubble beneath it. This boulder was by far the largest loose rock I saw on Uummannaq and it is clearly visible in Google Earth at 70°41’57.8”N 52°08’28.5”W.

The cloud became thicker as I ascended. At the top of the slope I found myself on a snowy plateau, the extent of which was difficult to discern through the murk. I was acutely conscious of the combined risks of snowy ground and poor visibility, so found myself torn between continuing and turning back. Reluctantly, I chose the safer option and started to retrace my steps through the sinister landscape.

My route took me to the edge of Uummannaq’s reservoir where I sat on a patch of gravel to admire the scene. I was utterly alone; there did not seem to be any other visiting tourists at all – Uummannaq has a building marked Hotel Uummannaq but it has been closed for years. As I continued on my way the trail took me alongside the water pipe that led from the reservoir to the town. Further careful scrambling brought me to the football pitch. I felt a bit of a jolt emerging from pure wilderness into an urban landscape. The afternoon sun warmed a pile of boulders that stood by the touchline, overlooking the sea. I sat down on one of them to admire the view. Despite the cloud around the mountain, the rest of the sky was clear and the cliffs of Salliaruseq Island rose dramatically from the smooth water. It was no exaggeration to say I had never seen anything like it, not even in Ilulissat.

My desire to view the wondrous scene around me gave way to hunger, so I wandered into the town to visit its sole eatery, a café-bar by the
harbour called Cafémma. As I entered I noticed a row of fruit machines and a few locals sitting around chatting. I ordered a large portion of chips and a mug of coffee. I chose to sit inside to eat so that I could observe the local goings on.

Suitably fortified with an enormous portion of *pomfret*, I set out to explore more of the town. I stopped off at a convenience store to buy some chocolate. It was staffed by a pair of giggling teenage girls; I was surprised that a town of only 1,200 could sustain three supermarkets, modest though they were.

I continued to the western fringe of the town, making my way up and down wooden walkways and along dusty roads. The air was so still that every sound carried and brightly-coloured houses glowed in the low sunlight. I noticed a row of houses perched on the edge of a sheer cliff. Some had wooden balconies extending perilously over the void. They looked as though a puff of wind would send them over the edge and onto the road below.

I returned to my homestay. With the clear sky and golden sunlight the view of Salliaruseq Island from their sitting room was even more heartbreakingly beautiful than it had been the day before. I said *mamapok* to mean ‘good’. My host chuckled at my attempt on his language, which is known locally as Kalaallisut. When I returned to Ilulissat, my hostess Dorthe explained to me that *mamapok* refers exclusively to food and that there is another word for attractive scenery. It would appear that there is no generic Greenlandic word for ‘good’, which could be seen as a positive characteristic of the language because ‘good’ is perhaps the vaguest of adjectives. Greenlandic is an especially nuanced language, making fine distinctions that are absent in English. However, the story of the Inuit having a hundred or more words for snow is an urban legend. There are a similar number of words for snow in Greenlandic as in English. However, Kalaallisut is a polysynthetic language, which means that it glues together smaller words to form longer words in a manner similar to German. That there could be said to be many words for snow in Greenlandic is more a consequence of the nature of the language than the environment.
My hostess didn’t join me at breakfast; she was busy working away on her sewing machine. However, she did bring me a napkin ring, which depicted Greenland’s flag in the same sort of beadwork as is used in the elaborate necklaces of Greenlandic traditional costume. With her usual kindness and generosity she indicated that it was a gift for my mother.

My hostess also showed me some more photographs. One was of her husband helping to flense a 25-metre blåval (blue whale) in 1948; she had already told me that he was born in 1938 so he would have been ten years old at the time. Before retiring, he had worked as a policeman; being well over two metres tall, his formidable stature was certainly commensurate with the job. My favourite picture showed my hostess flensing a whole seal on the floor of the kitchen where I was eating. The captured moment showed her younger self just as she had sliced open the belly of the seal using a flensing knife that she held in her right hand. In Greenlandic this knife is called a sakkeq. Traditionally the men would hunt seals and the women would flense them; the photograph suggested that this division of labour continues today.

I left the house at about 8AM and wandered down into the centre of Uummannaq. I visited the upper floor of the main Pilersuisoq supermarket, where household goods and clothing, most of it warm, were on display. I continued to the post office, from where I sent some postcards. Despite Uummannaq’s small population, the post office operated a ticketed queueing system; I imagine they did so because it is standard Danish practice rather than because of need to handle large volumes of customers. The office was small but well-maintained and modern-looking. I later found that each postcard had arrived at its destination with a hand-stamped postmark over the charming stamp, which bore a cartoonish picture of an Inuit man driving a dogsled carrying Tele-Post packages.

By now the town museum was open. I was the sole visitor to an exhibition that was the equal of its peer in Ilulissat. I admired a display of traditional Inuit winter clothing (as opposed to national costume). The
clothes were made of animal furs and skilfully tailored for a combination of warmth and practicality for hunting. Indeed, an environment where substandard clothing leads swiftly to death by hypothermia will naturally drive high standards of tailoring. However, it perhaps makes more sense to view the situation in reverse: only people capable of manufacturing clothes warm and robust enough to allow them to survive in the Arctic would be able to benefit from the region’s hunting opportunities and freedom from tropical diseases. With today’s emphasis on the aesthetic aspects of clothing, it is easy to forget that humans are tropical mammals and therefore the invention of sewing was crucial to mankind’s dispersal around the globe.

The attendant spoke English and directed me to an annexe of the museum which, like the main building, was located in a colonial wooden house rather than a modern prefabricated structure. This second building seemed to double as a community centre. The most impressive exhibit was a full-sized hunting kayak (spelt qajaq in contemporary Greenlandic) complete with harpoons, waterproof kayaking clothes and a float to keep track of the kill.

The house also contained an exhibit that told the story of the settlement of Qullissat on Disko Island. Qullissat was established in 1924 to provide accommodation for workers at a nearby coal mine. By 1966 the population had swelled to 1,400, which made it the sixth biggest settlement in Greenland. Around this time the authorities decided that the mines were no longer economical and decided to relocate the population and put them to work in the cod industry. The last remaining 500 inhabitants were forcibly evicted in 1972, by which time cod prices had collapsed. This incident was the cause of no little ill-feeling, exacerbated by suspicions that the real motivation for closing Qullissat involved the strong labour movement there. Twenty-eight years later, in November 2000, a rock slide into the sea caused a tsunami that travelled down the Sullorsuaq Strait (which separates Disko Island from the Nuussuaq Peninsula) and devastated the abandoned buildings of Qullissat. If the town had still been populated this would have been a major disaster. As
Erik commented when he told me this story in Ilulissat, it is difficult to know what to conclude about this sequence of events. Qullissat is also notable as the birthplace of Greenland’s fourth president, Kuupik Kleist, who served between 2009 and 2013.

The attendant led me outside and unlocked the turf huts on the village green so that I could look around them. Despite having small windows, the huts were light inside. Traditionally the Inuit used translucent seal gut to glaze the windows of their turf residences. As I entered I noted the wooden latrine bucket located in the porch in accordance with Greenlandic custom. The walls of the interior were lined with wood, so the stones and turf were not visible. The museum had stocked the rooms with artefacts that indicated how the huts might have looked in the 1950s or 1960s; as well as traditional kamik hanging from a line and an iron stove in one corner, there were more modern items such as a radio, newspapers and photographs. Instead of a bed there was a sleeping platform, where all the occupants of the hut (typically a family) would kip down together.

When I went back into the museum to tell the attendant that he could lock up the turf huts he instead took me to yet another sight. In the middle of the village green stood a large warehouse building of traditional Danish construction. Its base was of rocks painted yellow and the upper parts were made of wood that had been stained the traditional Danish red-brown. This was the whale-oil warehouse, erected in 1860. The process of rendering whale blubber into oil is a smelly one, so this had taken place in a location close to the current-day heliport, away from the centre of Uummannaq. In the nineteenth century whale oil was widely in demand for use in oil lamps and soap; this is the trade described by Herman Melville in his novel *Moby Dick*. Whale oil continued to be used as an ingredient of automatic transmission fluid for automobiles until the early 1970s.

The inside of the warehouse was dark but I could make out an exhibition about a French expedition to the region and, more remarkably, the hides of three polar bears laid out on the floor. In just one day I
had seen polar bear skins representing 0.01% of the remaining world population of these magnificent animals.

Having exhausted the considerable attractions of the museum, I spent some time exploring the streets and walkways of the town. I then ascended to the football pitch and made my way up the gully to the reservoir. The day was clear and cloud no longer obscured any of Uummannaq Mountain, providing views even more breathtaking than the day before. I ascended a gentle slope to the east of the lake. The landscape was of rock and sparse tundra. Without great effort I reached an idyllic pool at the base of a cliff that gave way to the peaks of the mountain. It was plain that ascending further was out of the question so I lay down. There was no wind and the sun was shining so I felt warm enough to take off my down jacket. The surface of the water was like a mirror and from a suitable angle looked like one of the infinity pools beloved of luxury hotels. However, even the world’s fanciest hotels would struggle to match the view I had here over the Uummannaq Fjord and the Nuussuaq Peninsula.

I descended back to the soccer pitch over loose scree. As I watched some locals kick a ball around, I was distracted by a distant rumbling crashing sound. The noise was coming from the direction of Salliaruseq Island so I turned to see what was happening. I watched in astonishment as an avalanche cascaded down a portion of the mile-high cliff face. Not content to render me awestruck with static beauty, Nature had put on a dynamic display to further demonstrate the raw power of Uummannaq’s landscape.

I walked on to the supermarket to buy some supper. As I walked the sled dogs around town started to howl in unison. I had witnessed this phenomenon in Ilulissat; it seemed to start with one dog howling and if others felt inclined they would join in too. As the group howl became more popular, the more restrained dogs would add their voices until the whole town was immersed in a mournful chorus. To my ears it sounded decidedly apocalyptic but for dogs howling is just a form of long-range pack communication.
I walked to the opposite end of town and sat on a rock to eat my meal of ‘curry salad’. Although I had spent two days looking at little else other than Uummannaq Mountain and the surrounding scenery, I was still eager to see more and sat and watched the sun as it lowered in the sky and shifting shades of yellow and orange played on the rock. Had I known Uummannaq was so beautiful and awe-inspiring I would have planned my itinerary to stay for longer. After an hour or two I managed to tear myself away. With no sunset there was no natural end to the admiration of the scene.

As I returned to my homestay I noticed a local man feeding meat to his sled dogs. The Inuit deliberately do not feed their dogs every day so that they learn to cope with the erratic food supply of sledging expeditions. When sledging the dogs are fed with hunting kills made along the way rather than food carried on the sled.

My hostess greeted me graciously on my return. She was working in the kitchen, cutting up a whale flipper into bite-sized chunks. She offered me a piece but I declined her kindness for fear word of my whale-eating might reach Islington. The outside of the hunk of whale meat was black, smooth and shiny. This black skin was about half a centimetre thick and inside was pure white blubber. I gathered that the whale in question was a narwhal that a local of Uummannaq had killed on a hunting expedition. Not only was I witnessing the preparation of traditional Greenlandic food but also an example of the Inuit custom of sharing kills.

As with polar bears, local laws allow the Inuit to hunt narwhal according to defined quotas. It would seem that the waters around Uummannaq are rich in these creatures; the house where I was staying had a magnificent narwhal tusk propped up in the corner of the sitting room, longer than the room was high. Inuit folklore has it that the narwhal’s tusk originates from an incident where a woman was hunting while wearing her hair in a twisted knot. The woman struck a large narwhal with her harpoon. Unfortunately, the harpoon’s rope was tied around her waist so she was dragged into the sea. There she became a narwhal and her hair became the narwhal’s spiral tusk. At two metres long or more, these
lengthy canine teeth are still highly prized by the Inuit today. There is also a small legal (but not in the UK or USA) market in narwhal tusks from Arctic Canada; at over ten thousand US dollars each they provide useful income for the Canadian Inuit, albeit at the expense of the narwhals.

My hostess asked me to take a photograph of Uummannaq Mountain from her kitchen window and send her a print. Even after seventy years this beguiling mountain continued to fascinate her.

**THURSDAY 6 JUNE 2013**

My hostess knocked on my door at six o’clock. I had an early flight back to Ilulissat and the previous evening I had tried to indicate that it would be too early for breakfast. Heedless, she had prepared me a good spread, which I ate gratefully. As I ate she showed me a handwritten recipe, which I took to be for the buns that she had served me during my stay. However, on translation I found it to be a recipe for a delicious Danish pastry:

*Fødselsdagskringle* (Birthday Pastry)

**Ingredients**

**Dough**

- 200g butter or margarine
- 300g flour
- 3g yeast
- 1 tablespoon water
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- 2 eggs

**Filling**

- 75g butter or margarine
- 75g sugar
- 50g raisins
- 25g chopped candied citrus peel

**Topping**

Sugar crystals
Crumble the butter into the flour. Stir the yeast into the lukewarm water and add to the eggs and the other rich ingredients. Knead the dough with a light touch as it is very rich. Roll the dough into an oblong. Mix the ingredients for the filling together and place them in a strip along the centre of the dough. Fold the dough. [Allow to rise for 30 minutes and then bake at 200°C for 20 minutes.]

Baking is entirely alien to traditional Inuit culture so the seal flensing and fødselsdagskringle together illustrated Greenland’s blending of Inuit and Danish culture.

We hugged each other goodbye. I reinforced my promise to send postcards and photographs and then departed to walk to the heliport. The morning presented a perfect clear blue sky with the sun casting sharp shadows. On my way I noticed a Royal Danish Navy patrol ship in the fjord. This was the HDMS Knud Rasmussen (p570), which is a relatively modest military vessel with a length of 61 metres. I saw the same ship a few days later near Ilulissat. The Inuit have never been a bellicose people; it is even said that before the arrival of European legalism they would settle their quarrels by means of a singing competition.

At the entrance to the heliport I encountered my hostess’s daughter; as she puffed on a cigarette she told me that she was flying south for two weeks to visit friends. I elected to wait outside the terminal to further admire the scenery and to soak up the sunshine. I struck up conversation with a French fellow who had lived in Uummannaq since 2004; he had travelled all over Greenland before deciding to settle here. He told me that Uummannaq has a tightly-knit social life, with all the joys and trials that this brings. He also told me that Uummannaq suffers badly from social problems, to the extent that the town has its own children’s home. When the Danes think of Greenland they think of alcoholism and domestic violence as much as spectacular scenery. To a Westerner it is somewhat baffling that a region that benefits from limitless space, abundant resources, hospitals, sports facilities and Denmark’s famous social welfare (including a block grant equivalent to well over £6,000
per person per year) should experience so much in the way of social difficulties. The people are given everything they need, how can they not be happy? I only began to grasp what might be going on when I considered how we in Britain might fare if the Inuit were to impose their way of life on us, even with generous help. Were we required to live a semi-nomadic existence, hunting our own food and building our own turf houses, I suspect that no matter how many hunting lessons we were provided with and how many free harpoons the Inuit Authorities dished out, we would mostly perish. Those that did not perish would hardly thrive. This is not a caricature; the upheavals and dislocation that the Inuit have experienced in the past century are just this great.

The clear sky meant that the helicopter ride to Qaarsut was, if anything, even more spectacular than the outward journey to Uummannaq. I only had twenty minutes at Qaarsut airport before my flight to Ilulissat, so I was not able to go exploring. When I boarded the plane I managed to secure a window seat, which was fortunate because as well as having clear weather, the pilot chose to fly at an altitude of just 1,300 metres. This made for a scenic flight that was so spectacular that I could barely believe what I was seeing. The sun gleamed on the snow that dusted the mighty black mountains of the Nuussuaq Peninsula and a frozen river snaked out of a landscape that even today remains largely unexplored.

There was no sign of a lift into town when I arrived at Ilulissat’s airport so I started to walk. I had covered some distance by the time Lars appeared in the minibus. I climbed in and we headed towards Dorthe’s house. On the way Lars told me about Ilulissat’s fishing industry; the high price of halibut means that a fisherman can earn nine thousand Kroner (about a thousand pounds sterling) in just two days of fishing.

I decided to go hiking in the wilderness to the east of the airport road. I left the road at the town’s reservoir, which was still frozen over with thick ice. As I sat on a rock to don my gaiters and admire the view, a fellow-tourist came into sight. He was walking through the snow and when he came within earshot I hailed him and asked about conditions farther out into the tundra. He replied that it was a little boggy and that he was looking for birds; it seemed that he was a ‘twitcher’, an especially
enthusiastic bird-watcher. This was the only time that I heard a British accent in Greenland.

Suitably shod in gaiters and Gore-Tex boots, I continued my walk. As I had been warned, the ground was quite soggy but the rocky patches were reassuringly firm. The trail soon took me back to the road, which I followed for a short way until I reached the track that led towards the area of lakes I was hoping to explore. It was less of a track and more of a wide expanse of boggy ground that had been churned up by dog-sleds. I picked my way along the sodden route until I came to the rocky shore of a frozen lake. I had reached Lake Vandsø 4. The day was warm and I had no need of my down jacket so I sat down to admire the view. To the south I could see the cleft that I had walked through a few days earlier. Once again, even though I was only a couple of miles away from the town and could even see some of its buildings, I felt as though I was in deepest wilderness.

My guidebook told me that it was possible to climb up to the plateau that lay to the east by means of a stone gully near the lake. I started to walk up the gully, with the rock providing a good grip. It was of the classic glacial u-shape so the sides became steeper as I ascended; soon I was climbing rather than walking. Looking back through the pellucid Arctic air I could see the white frozen lake from which I had ascended and another icy lake beyond. Khaki tundra surrounded the ice and in turn black rocky hills surrounded the tundra. In the distance was the blue sea where white icebergs floated. As in Uummannaq, the sky was cloudless. I came close enough to the plateau to see that it would have been an eerie and fascinating area to explore. However, I turned back before setting foot on it because meltwater was making the way slippery and dangerous underfoot.

I walked and waded back to the road and continued towards the airport. At the perimeter fence I headed east to follow the trail towards Oqaatsut. I certainly wasn’t intending to walk the full fourteen miles that afternoon but it seemed a good area to explore. The ground near the airport was especially boggy but it soon firmed up and provided me with an exhilarating walk through an idyllic Arctic landscape with
rust-coloured lichen on the rocks and white icebergs floating on the vivid blue of the sea to my left. I saw a few locals running over the landscape, which added to the sense of freedom. They were running with what I took to be pet dogs; this was one of the few times I saw dogs unchained during my visit. The runners must have been familiar with the terrain because I had to pick my way carefully in many places.

An hour or two of walking brought me to a gully that was filled with snow, ice and meltwater. I had seen the runners heading back towards me and I imagined that they had turned around when they had reached this obstacle. I didn’t fancy risking a crossing, especially given that I was alone, so I also turned around to head back the way I had come.

As I walked back to Ilulissat along the airport road I noticed that the fjord looked different compared to a few days earlier. As if to match the transformation of the sky from an overcast grey to brilliant blue, the blue sea had become white with floating ice. I had certainly been impressed with the icebergs in Ilulissat a few days earlier but I had not yet seen the fjord clogged with ice in the scenes of astonishing natural beauty that I had been led to expect. During my trip to Uummannaq some millions of tonnes of ice had appeared in the fjord around Ilulissat, perhaps because of a change in the direction of the wind. I was soon to witness vistas whose beauty far exceeded anything I had ever imagined.

I dined at Hong Kong Café. The interior was basic and customers placed their orders at a counter in front of the kitchen. Above the counter was a matrix of photographs, each of which depicted one of the dishes on offer. This is a little unusual in Western countries but is standard practice in East Asia at all dining levels. The woman who served me looked East Asian, so I asked if she was from Hong Kong. She replied that she was from Thailand. ‘How did you end up in Greenland?’ I asked with genuine incredulity. I could barely imagine the wrench of moving from the warmth and fecundity of Indochina to a cold wilderness that is dark for half the year. She replied succinctly, ‘I don’t know’ with a look of slight bemusement on her face that suggested a chain of random encounters with the caprices of life. The menu reflected her nation of origin: there was a long Thai section, a Fast Food section and a Vegetarian section.
It was the latter that had attracted my attention and I ordered some
spring rolls. I ate the enormous portion outside on the weather-beaten
terrace. The café’s decor may have been basic but the panorama of the
icefjord was outstanding and quite the best view I have had from any
eatery anywhere in the word.

The evening was so calm and clear and the icefjord so magical that I
could barely tear myself away from the scene. I walked down to the bay
by Zion Church and then wandered over to the power station where I
climbed the wooden staircase for a more elevated view. I am normally
far too restless to simply sit and look at something but from this vantage
point I found myself transfixed by the beauty of the scene. I decided to
walk to Sermermiut and here the view was, if anything, even better. Such
was the beauty of the icefjord as I approached it along the boardwalk that
for the first time in my life tears of pure joy pricked my eyes. I passed
a blissful hour watching the light and shade change slowly as the sun
lowered itself towards the horizon. The cold icebergs glowed white like
burning magnesium, incandescent yet frozen, the mirrored sea a crucible
of ice.

**Friday 7 June 2013**

I awoke late to the sound of people speaking French. I dozed for a while,
vaguely pondering the preponderance of French people here: the previous
day I had met two French people on my way back from Uummannaq
and I had encountered a pair of French people on the airport road near
Hotel Arctic. I had not been following the news. Had a diplomatic spat
resulted in France occupying Denmark and its dependent territories?
Was the Danish navy patrolling Uummannaq in an attempt to oust the
Gallic occupiers? The real reason was probably coincidence: in 2012 there
were 2,022 nights spent at hotels in Greenland by visitors originating in
France and 3,014 by visitors originating in the UK. Denmark sends by far
the most tourists to Greenland, with 53,496 hotel stays that year.*

* Figures from *Greenland in Figures 2013*, Statistics Greenland,
When I emerged for breakfast, a French couple nearing retirement age were sitting at the table. They were friendly and delighted that I could converse in French, so we chatted at length. Rather than flying to Greenland by way of Copenhagen as I had done, they had come via Iceland, where a budget airline operates a summer service to a few of Greenland’s towns.

I strolled along the coast beneath a cloudless sky. The Arctic air can be so clear as to interfere with the judgement of distance; I certainly found that faraway landmarks sometimes appeared to be closer than they really were because there was no cue from the thickening of haze with distance. As I approached the Old Heliport, I saw a youngish woman sitting on a rock. I sat down nearby and we started chatting. She was Dutch and worked on the cruise ship that was currently in port at Ilulissat. She explained that she was on her lunch break and was using the opportunity to admire the view. She had quit an office job to go and work on Arctic cruise ships, taking a master’s degree in Arctic nature in the interim in order to become suitably qualified. In the northern summer her job took her between Svalbard, Iceland, Jan Mayen Island and Greenland. When winter came to the Arctic she would switch hemispheres and work on cruise ships that plied Antarctic waters. When I commented that she must rarely see night she agreed and added that when visiting her Norwegian boyfriend in winter she found it difficult to adjust to the long hours of darkness. As we chatted she identified two birds as snow buntings. In some ways she seemed to be living the dream, although I imagine the job presents its own challenges.

I wandered down into the town and encountered a flea market operating on the patch of flat ground between the sports hall and the Pissifik supermarket. I looked around the modest stalls and found that they were mostly selling European-style household bric-a-brac. Sacks of sled dog food were stacked up at the entrance to the supermarket, which was busy, even by British standards. Pissifik seemed to act as a focal point for the town; Ilulissat does not have a natural town square or village green.
I set off to hike along the coast. At Sermermiut I saw a party that clearly belonged to the cruise ship. They all wore identity tags, blue jackets and hats with built-in mosquito face nets. I envied them slightly for the ease with which they were able to visit multiple destinations on Greenland’s coast.

The day was still sunny, much of the snow had melted and the sea was now filled with ice. This meant that hiking east along the coast was a somewhat different experience compared to just a week earlier. The good conditions gave me the confidence to strike out further into the wilderness than I had before. As I followed the track, I saw a group of people in the distance carrying backpacks. They turned out to be members of the local hiking club; I learned this from a local man whom I encountered on the top of a hill. He professed to speak no English but I deduced from the clipboard he held that he was manning a checkpoint. A few moments later a lithe middle-aged woman appeared beside him. She was clad in Lycra running gear and started chatting with the man in Greenlandic. So much for striking out into the wilderness; this hill was busier than The City of London on a Sunday.

I saw another group of backpackers approach so continued walking before they reached the checkpoint. However, when I came to a lip of thawing ice above a patch of meltwater I waited for them to pass me because I knew they would have more experience in negotiating such hazards. The ice held and I followed them at a short distance for a while. I noticed that all the members of the group appeared to be of Danish descent, with not an Inuit face among them. When the path turned inland and so became less scenic, I turned back towards Ilulissat. As I followed the coast I noticed that the sea was so still that every iceberg had a perfect reflection of itself in the water. It was an extravagantly beautiful scene in shades of cold blue and white, far exceeding even the highest expectations I had entertained for this remote nation.

I dined at Hong Kong Café again. This time I sat indoors, selecting a window seat so that I could admire the world-class view of the icefjord. After I had eaten I continued viewing the icebergs from a viewpoint above Sermermiut. Nearby a family with a pet dog were eating at a picnic
bench installed on the rocky headland. I remained transfixed by the shifting light on the ice and water for over two hours until I left at well after eleven o’clock go to bed.

S A T U R D A Y  8  J U N E  2 0 1 3

Four of us sat down to breakfast this morning. I chatted with the French couple while Dorthe read her magazine; she left us to ourselves other than to point out that the temperature outside was a balmy 13°C, which is indeed warm for Greenland. Dorthe kept a digital thermometer on the window ledge by the breakfast table and it appeared to have an outdoor sensor, so each morning I could see what to expect when I went outdoors. Naturally, I had been expecting Greenland to be cold, especially given that I was visiting early in the tourist season. However, the dry Arctic air means that 7°C in Ilulissat is considerably more comfortable than 7°C in Clacton-on-Sea; this combined with the warm clothing I had brought with me meant that I had not become chilled throughout my entire stay.

I left the house to walk into the centre of town. On the way I stopped off at Hong Kong Café not for food but to use their payphone to telephone my wife. We were able to speak for long enough on a ten Kroner coin that I could reassure her that I had not suffered any mishaps. Modern telecommunications allow travellers to be in frequent contact with their family and friends while on the road. This contrasts with the isolation of travel in the days when there was no e-mail or social media and inter-continental telephone calls were ruinously expensive.

As I walked up the hill from Hong Kong Café a friendly Greenlandic woman of advanced years hailed me. She bore a wide and sincere smile, which said far more than we could communicate to one another in any language; it seemed that I knew more Greenlandic than she English. I said Tuluk, which means ‘British’, and listed the places in Greenland I had visited. It was all we could say to one another but it was a gratifying encounter all the same.

The sun was again shining brightly from a cloudless sky. I walked to a clifftop viewpoint and sat to stare in wonderment at the icefjord. With the glorious weather I could have sat all day and for much of the
night marvelling at the view. I had a boat tour of the icefjord booked for that afternoon and it was this that eventually dislodged me. Although the day was warm, I had heard that the icebergs have their own chilly microclimate. Therefore I collected a pile of warm clothes from my room as I walked to the travel agency. On the same journey I noticed a severely drunk Inuit man staggering by the side of the road. Despite Greenland’s reputation for alcoholism, this was the only time I saw a drunkard in the street.

Lars drove our tour group down to the tourist boat tender on the far side of the harbour. On the way we stopped at Hotel Arctic to collect some well-heeled participants. The tender was a rocky ledge at the base of a cliff and here Lars handed us over to the captain of a motorboat, who welcomed us on to his vessel and immediately served us with hot coffee. The captain also pointed out the location of the life jackets. In the Arctic life jackets are less useful than in warmer climes because the primary danger is not of drowning but of hypothermia and ‘cold shock’. Cold shock is a physiological reaction that happens when someone falls into freezing water. The victim gasps and then starts to hyperventilate; if the victim’s head is under water when this happens the consequences may be fatal. For this reason, cold water fishermen and the like favour an insulated coverall called an immersion suit, which is waterproof and provides insulation against the cold. Of course these were entirely unnecessary on a modest excursion such as ours, especially with the sea maintaining its mirror-like surface.

The captain took us out into the icefjord and, as I had been warned, the temperature dropped and I was glad to be swathed in layers of down, wool and polypropylene. We soon came to an otherworldly seascape of towering icebergs, fragments that had broken off the Sermeq Kujalleq glacier and were slowly melting as they floated out to sea. Wind and water had eroded the bergs into such a range of shapes that had an abstract sculptor been on our boat, I am sure he would have thrown his hammer and chisel overboard in despair of ever being able to approach the diversity of form that nature had created without sentience. The cliché for scenes such as this is ‘cathedrals of ice’ and I can see why people
use the expression: both cathedrals and icebergs exhibit great beauty on a monumental scale. However, inasmuch as there is any comparison between buildings and natural phenomena, the icebergs moved me even more than the great cathedrals of Durham and Amiens had. This could be because icebergs look like nothing else on earth and are constantly changing as they melt and erode. Indeed, I struggled to appreciate that what I was seeing was real.

The icescape was exceedingly photogenic and I could not help but take many dozens of pictures. I noticed two people on the boat using film cameras: one was a friendly retired American woman who was content with her basic old-school compact, the other was a hard-core enthusiast whose formidable stash of equipment included a large device with bellows that I took to be a medium format camera. We did not see any sea mammals to capture to memory card or film but there were plenty of Arctic seabirds swooping around. The tour commentary was given in Danish, so while it was no doubt interesting I couldn’t understand a word of it.

Back on dry land I walked up to the viewpoint near Sermermiut. I settled down on a rock and drank a bottle of low-alcohol beer that I had bought at the supermarket. The beer appeared to have been brewed in Nuuk and had a sweet, toffee-like flavour. For the next few hours I did nothing but admire the icefjord; with such a spectacle before me I felt no desire to do anything else. Although I was glad of my fingerless gloves, the evening was warm enough for me to nod off for a short while on my bed of granite.

Late in the evening, I dragged myself away from the view and walked back into town. Perhaps because it was Saturday night, there was some activity so I decided to explore. A man sitting with a group of older Greenlanders hailed me as I walked past a picnic bench on Fredericiaq Aqqutaa at Ilulissat’s central crossroads. He wore a sparkly silver cowboy hat of the sort one might expect to see at a fancy dress party. Among his group was the woman I had met earlier in the day; she had told him I was English, which proved that the word Tuluk really did work. My new friend was keen to converse with me and he spoke excellent English. He
reeled off a list of facts he had learned about Britain from encyclopaedias in Ilulissat’s library. He knew of Tower Bridge, London taxis, Buckingham Palace, St. Paul’s Cathedral, the Royal Family and so forth. He told me that he possessed over three thousand model cars and asked me to send him one from London. I agreed and took his address, which he wrote slowly in shaky handwriting; I followed through with my promise when I returned home. I also learned that he enjoyed painting and that his works included pictures of London’s taxis and buses. This friendly fellow invited me to his birthday party the next day. I explained that I would have been delighted to join him but had already arranged to visit Aasiaat. Going to a local kaffemik would have been a pleasant and interesting experience, so I was genuinely disappointed to have to decline his offer.

As I walked back to my digs some teenage boys saluted me. This was not out of mock respect but a reference to the camouflage combat trousers I was wearing. While combat trousers are not unusual casual attire in Britain, the friendly banter from local teenagers suggested that they were distinctly unusual in Greenland. Locals in Greenland mostly wear practical outdoor gear, such as fleeces and insulated trousers. The only subculture attire I saw in Greenland was worn by a few teenagers who had adopted the American ‘gangsta rapper’ look, with baseball caps and low-slung baggy jeans.

SUNDAY 9 JUNE 2013
I had explained to Dorthe that I was leaving early this morning to catch a ferry and so there was no need to prepare breakfast for me. Nevertheless, at 5.30am I heard coffee brewing and I left the house with a pleasingly full stomach less than half an hour later. Dust blew around me as I walked along the quiet, empty streets to the tourist tender. Here I noticed a boxy grey building that bore the name Halibut Greenland and is one of Greenland’s many fish processing plants. I boarded the boat but a man with a clipboard told me it was the wrong one and pointed me at a smaller vessel nearby. When I clambered in I found that it had seats for about twenty passengers. I sat down and waited while a few more people arrived.
When we departed I went outside and stood at the stern so that I could better admire the icebergs as we navigated through them. At one point the boat needed to back up to find a passage. The experience was almost as good as the boat tour the day before. When we had cleared the icefjord the boat sped up and added a stiff wind to the thrill of the experience. I was joined by a Danish man who had stood on the foredeck to watch the icebergs but moved to the back when we started travelling at full speed. He told me that he was in Greenland as part of his work on an examination board. Chilly though it was to stand outside, the cloudless sky, calm reflecting sea and occasional drifting iceberg made the endurance well worthwhile.

At one point another passenger came outside for a smoke. He was bearded and travelling with his wife and small child. He told me that he had been working in Greenland for a year and commented that he had seen less of the place than I had in just over a week. Such is the nature of working in a place; it is all too easy to see little of where one is based.

Two hours or so of sailing brought us to Qasigiannguit, which means ‘Small Spotted Seals’ in Greenlandic. This town was founded by the Danish merchant Jacob Severin in 1734 as Christianshåb. The harbour was crowded with fishing boats and the dockside was crammed with refrigerated shipping containers. Both the people I had chatted with alighted here, leaving me to enjoy the icebergs alone. To reach Qasigiannguit we had sailed south from Ilulissat. Now the journey to Aasiaat was taking us west, in the direction of Canada’s Baffin Island. It took another hour and a half to reach our destination.

Aasiaat means ‘The Spiders’ in Greenlandic and the town’s coat of arms depicts a spider’s web, although the spiders that do manage to survive here actually live in burrows. With a population of 3,142 Aasiaat is Greenland’s fourth biggest town after Nuuk, Sisimiut and Ilulissat. As the Catalan mountain guide had related to me, Aasiaat is decidedly flat by Greenlandic standards but is nonetheless attractive, especially with the surrounding archipelago of similarly flat islands.

I alighted at the broad quay and set out to explore. I passed Aasiaat’s colonial old town and a little farther on I came to a large Pissifik
supermarket. Locals were selling household knick-knacks outside, forming a small flea market similar to the one I had seen in Ilulissat. The objects on sale at these flea markets were of the sort one might find at any flea market: there were no harpoons or walrus tusks on offer. Even though the day was Sunday the supermarket was open but had few customers. Indeed the whole town seemed rather quiet, perhaps because of the day of the week; even the much smaller Uummannaq had been busier.

The longest road on the island followed the coast out to the airport. I followed it, luxuriating in the sunshine and cool air. The airport was closed, so when I reached it I wandered into the tundra and sat down to eat my packed lunch by a frozen lake surrounded by rock and rust-coloured bog plants. Nearby stood a wooden structure called an *inussuk*. This is a traditional Inuit construction that is seen throughout the Arctic. In Arctic Canada they are called *inuksuit*, or ᐆᓄᒃᓱᐃᑦ in aboriginal script; one even appears on the flag of the Canadian province of Nunavut. They are used as a sort of waymark to say ‘you are on the right route’, which is important in a landscape that is often devoid of natural landmarks. They are also used as markers to mean ‘people were here’, to identify sacred spots and hunting grounds. They are normally made of stone but this example was made of wood and stood about three metres high.

I wandered back into the town, taking the inland road and passing a relatively large cemetery located in a boggy depression that was clearly unsuitable for building. It was filled with modest white wooden crosses and was delimited by the customary white picket fence. I climbed up to a ridge that overlooked the town and admired the view. I could see rows of two-storey apartment buildings and in front of them a children’s playground and an upmarket clothes shop called Anuni.

I returned to the clutch of quaint colonial buildings in the old town to explore more thoroughly. My first stop was the museum so that I could view it while it was still open. The museum was housed fittingly in one of the historical buildings, specifically the residence of the former colonial administrator. A row of three old cannon stood outside in the garden. The exhibits were interesting and well-presented. Unusually for
a museum visit, I was not alone; some locals were also looking around the exhibition space.

Back outside I looked at the colonial houses more closely. They were all wooden clapboard constructions, in an excellent state of repair and painted the same red-brown colour as I had seen in Uummannaq. My favourite was the house of a whaling station commander, built on the nearby island of Kronprinsens Ejlande in 1778 and moved to Aasiaat in 1826. This building was unusual in having two storeys and being built around a small courtyard. The whaling theme continued in the form of a harpoon gun that stood on display by the house. While the competition between a whale and an Inuit hunter armed with hand-made weapons may be a fair one, this murderous device looked as though it would spell doom for any hapless cetacean that came within its range.

A large wooden church stood nearby, elevated on a rocky outcrop. The jawbone of a whale had been erected outside to form an arch marking the entrance to the surrounding area of tundra that formed the churchyard. A separate wooden campanile held two bells. In front of the church there stood a traditional turf hut. The overall effect of the colonial area was quite charming and it gave me a better feel for the days of Danish colonialism even than the older buildings that stood in Ilulissat.

The colonial name for Aasiaat was Egedesminde, in honour of Hans Egede; the name literally means ‘Memory of Egede’. Hans Egede was a Lutheran missionary who travelled to Greenland in 1721 to save the souls of the descendants of the Norse colonists who had settled in Greenland several hundred years earlier. He was concerned that the colonists would not have heard of the Reformation and so would have retained Catholicism instead of converting to Lutheranism. Of even greater concern to Egede was the possibility that the colonists might have abandoned Christianity altogether. Despite a thorough search, he found no Norse-Greenlanders and so preached to the Inuit instead. This posed some cross-cultural challenges, for example Egede found that the Inuit had no concept of bread so his translation of the Lord’s Prayer into Greenlandic used the phrase ‘Give us this day our daily seal’. Egede went
on to found the city now known as Nuuk and is still highly revered in Greenland.

I continued my perambulations by following a street along the coast. I passed several rows of basic apartment blocks. The side of each block bore a mural depicting scenes from traditional Inuit life. The idyllic paintings of rainbows, seals, seabirds, whales, kayaks and igloos stood in stark contrast to the utilitarian concrete of the social housing that acted as a canvas. Beyond these blocks I came to a large wooden building, its clapboards freshly painted in the same deep red as the Danish colonial buildings near the harbour. It seemed to be some sort of community centre but the only sign of activity was a pair of local women sitting in the sun nearby.

A wooden pedestrian bridge took me over a swampy gap in the bedrock. Beyond it I found a clutch of prefabricated houses and a group of small children playing on a swing. I soon found myself back on Aasiaat’s main road. All of a sudden the town came to life as I watched dozens of people walking along the road towards me. They appeared to be on their way back from some sort of event, although it was too late for church so I could only guess at what it might have been. The flurry of activity ended quickly and I was soon alone again.

I had not yet explored the western end of the town, so I headed in that direction. The area proved to be something of a disappointment because it was dominated by the island’s rubbish dump. Household refuse, white goods and discarded items of machinery were strewn around the ground, providing a sharp contrast to the beauty of the steep-banked strait that separated the island of Aasiaat from its rocky and uninhabited neighbour.

As I headed back to the quayside I noticed a house with a sort of garden. Three bones that I took to be whale ribs had been erected to form a sort of tripod and a few sculptures made of bone and wood stood around it. There was even a plant-pot and a green garden swing hanging from the balcony. For better or for worse, there is no private land at all in Greenland; all Greenlanders rent their homes from the government.

The time had come for me to take the ferry back to Ilulissat. On the way I stopped at a convenience store and bought a bottle of low-alcohol
beer. Perhaps because of the problems Greenland suffers with alcoholism, licensing laws are strict. However, it is legal to buy low-alcohol beer even on Sundays when stronger brews must remain on the shelves.

When I arrived at the pier I found the ferry that was to take me away from Aasiaat was much larger and ship-like than the smaller vessel that had brought me here. Before boarding I chatted with a couple of locals for a while. One gave me his address and asked me to send him a postcard of Big Ben, a promise I fulfilled on my return home. I also met a man who told me he was a musician; music is important in both traditional and modern Greenlandic life, with the country’s inhabitants releasing 10–15 CDs a year between them. While this number is small in absolute terms, it is the highest in the world per head of population.

I remained on the outside deck for almost the entire four-hour ferry journey. The icebergs and scenery captivated me so much that the journey passed quickly. The sea was calm and blue, providing a serene backdrop for the vast hunks of ice. The temperature dropped once we were out at sea so I was forced to spend about forty minutes inside warming up. The density of icebergs reached its peak just as we crossed the icefjord on the final approach to Ilulissat. By this time the sun was low in the sky, casting an especially rich light over the floating formations.

It was 10.30pm when we docked. As I walked up through the town I passed a group of teenage boys sitting on a bench. They greeted me with a round of applause. They had been doing this for all passers-by as a youthful prank. I greeted them in Danish. I should have liked to have understood how they felt about living in such a remote part of the world when television made it so easy for them to see the lifestyles available elsewhere. Did they envy those who lived in big cities in lower latitudes or pity them? Did the warm beaches of the Caribbean look like a paradise or a torment?

I stopped off at the Spar convenience store to stock up on food. The young woman working as a cashier danced gently to the music playing in the shop as she sold sweets to the pair of similarly young women ahead of me in the queue. Despite the daylight it was now bedtime but the light on the icefjord was simply too beguiling to ignore. I climbed
up to a vantage point and munched on some biscuits while staring at the icebergs reflected in the millpond-still blue water with the yellow sun grazing Disko Island on the horizon. Would I ever see anything as beautiful as this again?

MONDAY 10 JUNE 2013
My plan for today was to take a boat tour to the nearby settlement of Oqaatsut and then walk back to Ilulissat by means of the marked route. I prepared for my excursion with the usual breakfast of bread, cheese and jam while chatting with my fellow guests. The weather outside was gloriously sunny and so it promised to be a hike of a lifetime. And so it proved to be.

When I arrived at the travel agency, Silver greeted me by shaking his head. He told me that one of his guides had attempted the walk from the Ilulissat end and had been forced to turn back by high water covering the bridge that carries walkers over a river that crosses the route. Perhaps because of my look of disappointment or perhaps simply to avoid losing my business, Silver went on to explain that further upstream there was an area where the river spreads out and that it should be possible to cross there. I decided to take the risk; this was my last full day in Greenland and this hike was something I was especially keen to undertake. Silver asked me to pay for my passage to Oqaatsut before my departure, explaining his desire for advance payment by cupping my cheeks in his hands and saying, ‘If you die…’. He then sent me outside to meet the minibus.

Our group was a multi-national one. There were two Russians, our guide was Lithuanian and we collected two Americans from the Hotel Arctic as we approached the tourist tender. The boat appeared to be a smallish fishing vessel. As we boarded the pilot issued us with blankets and hot coffee. I admired the icebergs as we chugged through the icefjord. They continued to mesmerize me despite their abundance and the hours I had spent gazing at them over the previous two weeks.

Oqaatsut lies about ten miles away from Ilulissat by sea, with the journey taking about an hour. As we sailed I chatted with the Lithuanian
guide; it was he who had attempted the Ilulissat–Oqaatsut walk and reported the swollen river to Silver. He repeated Silver’s advice about walking upstream to cross at the shallows, which reassured me about my plan.

A river swollen with meltwater was not the only obstacle that day. As we approached Oqaatsut the boat found its way blocked by ice. The pilot attempted to push through it for a few minutes but eventually gave up and steered around the headland to the other side of the neck of land that Oqaatsut sits on. Here the boat docked without hindrance and we walked past the piles of abandoned equipment at the waterside to a restaurant called H8. There was little doubt as to the identity of the building because its name was painted in large yellow letters on the roof. The rest of the people on the tour trooped inside for a gourmet meal of polar specialities. I was happy to leave them to their carnivorous fare of musk ox and whale meat as I set off to tramp around the settlement to see what I could see.

Oqaatsut originated in the 18th century as a Dutch whaling station and in 1877 it became a trading station. The Dutch called it Rodebay, meaning ‘Red Bay’, and it is still sometimes known by this name. The settlement has some colonial buildings; H8 is located in a former storehouse and an erstwhile cooperage stands nearby. The fishing company Royal Greenland once had a processing plant here and was the primary local employer. When the plant closed the local people started to move away but Oqaatsut avoided becoming a ghost town when local fishermen started their own fish company using the former Royal Greenland premises in 2000. Today Rodebay Fish employs ten people, a quarter of the settlement’s population.

The village was bathed in brilliant sunlight as I explored. I was pleased to find that there were no cars or skidoos, or even roads. The wooden houses stood with nothing but rocky tundra between them. However, there were some street lights (despite the absence of streets) and a children’s playground. The primary forms of land transport appeared to be walking and dog sleds; here was a village where children could play without any risk of being squashed by a fast-moving hunk of metal. I sat down to admire the view over the iceberg-strewn sea and counted
around fifty buildings. Several of them were derelict, acting as a reminder that in 1980 Oqaatsut’s population was more than double what it is today.

I joined the tour group as the guide led them on an after-lunch walking tour of the town. We learned that Oqaatsut has two football teams despite its tiny population. Badminton and handball are also popular in Greenland but other sports do not attract much interest. The guide showed us the local community hall, which was little bigger than one of the houses; it was locked so we could only peer in through the windows to where the inhabitants held their kaffemiks. We saw some skins and fish drying on a wooden rack with a musk-ox head sitting nearby. Outside a private house we saw a decorative sealskin stretched out on a frame.

We rounded off our walking tour by visiting a building that acted as both a church and a school; no children were present so it must have been a holiday. The schoolroom was well-equipped, perhaps because of Denmark’s munificence towards its former colony. On the shelves I noticed three copies of a translation into Greenlandic of an Agatha Christie novel. It was titled Akunnitsinni Arlarput Inuartuuvog, which I later determined corresponded to And Then There Were None. A literal translation of the Greenlandic title would be ‘Several Murdered People Among Us’.

As the tour group boarded the boat, I turned on my GPS unit and embarked on my walk back to Ilulissat. The route was marked by dabs of paint, the ground underfoot was firm and there were no hills to climb. This made for easy hiking through the splendid scenery. Icebergs floated under the bright sun in a blue sea to my right and hills rose to my left. The snow was thawing rapidly, with little of it left along the route. I ate my lunch next to a tall cairn at the edge of a patch of solid rock. The air was perfectly still and there were no birds; the soundless environment enhanced the sense of solitude.

Seven miles of joyful striding over the tundra brought me to a river. It was plain that this was the river that Silver and the Lithuanian guide had warned me about. I could see a flat wooden bridge but it was beneath at least a foot of fast-flowing meltwater and appeared to have been knocked out of place. The bridge was equipped with a rope for walkers to steady
themselves but it was clear that this would be of little use with the river so high. I followed the advice they had given me and walked upstream a short way. I had the feeling of being one of very few people who had walked on this ground. Sure enough, I soon came to an area where the river broadened and divided into rivulets. I made my way over a series of stony islands almost to the far side of the river. However, here I found my way blocked by a torrent that, although fairly narrow, was still wider than I felt confident jumping. The water was fast-moving and I knew it would be barely above freezing. Furthermore, on the far side of the water was a slippery-looking snow-covered slope; it was a poor landing spot for a desperate leap by a solitary hiker. I surveyed upstream and downstream but could see only inaccessible steep black canyons. There was nothing for it: I would have to return to Oqaatsut.

It was only as I hiked northwards that I realised a serious flaw in my plans for that day. I was due to fly from Ilulissat the next morning; if I was unable to secure transport from Oqaatsut to Ilulissat in short order then I would miss my flight. By now it was late afternoon. Would a fistful of Kroner be enough to induce one of the forty inhabitants of Oqaatsut to make an impromptu trip to Ilulissat? The beauty of my surroundings did little to assuage my anxiety, although I was able to take a little comfort from the fact that it was astronomically impossible for me to become benighted.

My luck changed dramatically for the better as suddenly as it had changed for the worse. I spotted a group of locals by a hut near the shore and walked down to greet them. The low sun was illuminating the sea so as I approached I could only see them in a dream-like silhouette. When I reached the group I saw that it was an extended family on a picnic outing. I asked in simple English if they were going to Ilulissat. One of them replied in perfect English, ‘Yes, but not yet’. ‘Can I go with you?’ I asked, trying to keep the desperation out of my voice. ‘Yes’, he replied casually, as though I had asked to borrow a paperclip. I felt a surge of great relief combined with boundless gratitude.

I sat to one side of the family picnic, not wishing to disturb them and being in no hurry to return to Ilulissat now I had secured my passage.
However, my new friend wanted to chat so I reciprocated willingly. He was in his late thirties and spoke English far better than any other Greenlander I had met; he spoke not with the precise grammar of a language student but with the natural ease of a native speaker. He told me that he had learned English while working as a minibus driver for Hotel Arctic; he must have been a truly gifted linguist to have become so proficient in this way.

When I told him about my route being blocked by the swollen river he told me that he had once experienced the same problem while staying in the family’s hut here on the shore where we sat. ‘I ran out of smokes’, he said, ‘So I tried to walk back to Ilulissat. But the river was too high so I had to go without.’ He introduced me to his wife and young son and told me about his boat. I was delighted to have an opportunity to meet and interact with some locals; I learned that Greenlanders sleep for only six hours a night in summer but for ten to twelve hours in winter. I asked which season was his favourite and he replied astutely that they all have their advantages.

We boarded the motorboat by way of a small dingy. As we travelled back to Ilulissat in the evening sun I once again marvelled at the natural beauty all around us. Icebergs towered out of the water, reflected in the smooth sea and bathed in yellow sunlight. When we arrived at the harbour I pressed a few banknotes into my host’s hand. From our conversation I knew that his family was not well off and that I would never have an opportunity to repay his considerable favour in kind. However, at the same time I didn’t want to look like a flashy tourist.

From the harbour I walked up to the nearby supermarket. Here a cleaner asked me why I was wearing combat trousers. I also encountered the friendly fellow I had met at the picnic bench the previous Saturday. He was wearing a leather cowboy hat this time and again reeled off a volley of facts about Scotland and England. He went on to tell me that he was on his way to a party that was being held nearby, which was celebrating the confirmation of a local into the Lutheran faith.

It was about ten o’clock in the evening by now and the sun hung low in the clear sky. I could not bear to neglect the views in this beautiful light so
I made my way gradually around the coast, stopping frequently to admire the sea and the icebergs. It was well after midnight as I walked down the hill to my homestay, although the sky was still quite light. Somewhat to my surprise, Silver pulled up beside me in a car. He asked me about my walk so I told him about the impassable river and my hitching a ride back to Ilulissat. He was a little apologetic about his advice but I responded that I had been fully aware of the risk I was taking. Indeed, I was more pleased that Silver showed no surprise about my sharing a boat journey with some locals; I would have been mortified had I inadvertently committed some grave Greenlandic faux pas.

**TUESDAY 11 JUNE 2013**

I awoke to the sound of French being spoken in the kitchen so I dressed and went to join my fellow guests. The husband presented me with a jar of honey from his own beehive. His wife showed me that she was soaking the label off a wine bottle to use as part of a montage about their trip to Greenland. The significance of this wine was that it had come from her home town of Maçon; it must have been pleasing to have found ones local produce on the shelf of a supermarket in such a remote place.

It was with no little reluctance that I packed for my departure. I would have gladly stayed in Ilulissat until the onset of winter. Once I had crammed all my belongings into my over-stuffed rucksack I headed out for a last stroll around the town. The sky was cloudless and the sun relatively warm as I explored some corners of Ilulissat that I had not previously seen. I passed the police station, which is the only building in Ilulissat that is built of brick. As I returned to my homestay for the last time I encountered my cowboy-hat-wearing friend once again. He was patrolling outside the sports centre clearing up litter with a litter-picking tool and a plastic bag. He explained that in the mornings he was employed by the government as a street cleaner and was on the job. I said goodbye and reinforced my promise to send him a model car.

I would have gladly walked from my homestay to the airport but Silver had insisted that I be collected. The driver was one I had not met before.
He spoke English and told me that his main job involved working with sled dogs in the winter; I learned that he kept ten dogs of his own along with some recently-arrived pups. Sled dogs are as central to life in Ilulissat as cars are in Los Angeles. On Greenland’s west coast they are permitted in towns that lie above the Arctic Circle and on the east coast they are allowed everywhere, although the entire population of Greenland’s east coast is smaller than that of Ilulissat alone.

The scenery on the flight from Ilulissat to Kangerlussuaq enraptured me from the window seat that I had made strenuous efforts to secure. The sky was perfectly clear and the plane flew low over the empty and unexplored expanses of icy peaks and frozen valleys. My flight had departed late and my connection to Copenhagen was in jeopardy but the vista beneath me pushed these concerns to the back of my mind. At Kangerlussuaq I hurried through the security check where an officer confiscated the jar of homemade French honey from my luggage.

I had been lucky with my neighbour on the plane from Copenhagen to Kangerlussuaq and I was equally lucky on my return, albeit by meeting an entirely different character. My companion was a Danish boy; he was thirteen years old and was so thin and slightly built that I wondered at first whether he was able to walk unaided and perhaps had been in Greenland for some sort of rest cure. However, I soon learned that far from being a sickly waif this boy was a character of admirable strength and purpose. In conversation he told me that he was keen to travel the world and was returning alone from a stay of a few weeks with some distant relatives in Sisimiut. He travelled with a confidence matched only by his remarkable command of English; he conversed fluently for almost the whole flight. He showed me a book he was reading about the Hunza region of Pakistan. It was a cloth-bound hardback, several decades old; the boy explained that he liked old books.

Shortly before we landed the boy told me, ‘I just want to travel’. Rather than the usual grown-up admonishments to see how he felt when he was older or needing to take responsibility in life, I replied simply ‘Don’t let anyone tell you any different’. He was glad of the encouragement but was clearly motivated enough not to need a travel mentor.
The sun had set by the time I reached Valentina’s apartment; it had been a fortnight since I had seen darkness. Valentina and I chatted for a while and she invited me to mark Greenland on the world map in her hallway. When I mentioned the small size of Greenland’s population she remarked that they should all be moved to a single town to simplify the administration of the nation. Tragically, the partial fulfilment of this seemingly obvious reorganisation is responsible for many of Greenland’s woes.

I was awoken by the sound of traffic. Although there are cars in Greenland, traffic as such is not a phenomenon outside the capital of Nuuk; unlike city-dwellers, Greenlanders live a life free from the pervasive background rumble of engines. I emerged from my room and chatted with my hostess in the apartment’s compact kitchen before she left for work.

My trip to Greenland was over but I was determined to find whatever I could of Greenland in the capital of their former colonial rulers in the course of the full day I was to spend there. The day outside was gloriously sunny so I left the apartment promptly and took the Metro to the centre of the city. I took a walk through the busy and charming pedestrianised old town (known as Strøget). On this short stroll I must have seen more people than in the whole of my two weeks in Greenland. Fortunately the beautiful and well maintained streets along with the glorious sunshine cushioned the blow of my return to urban life.

I asked about Greenland-related sights at the tourist information centre, which was located on a wide and busy road near the Tivoli pleasure gardens. The helpful assistant directed me to a centre dedicated to the North Atlantic and also to two Greenlandic shops. I spent the day exploring Copenhagen’s streets and parks, visiting all three places while doing so.

The North Atlantic Centre sounded the most promising of the three. I found it housed in an impressive and beautifully restored dockside warehouse by the Greenlandic Trading Square (Grønlandske Handelsplads in Danish). Years ago this square formed the centre of trade between
Denmark and its colonies of Faroe, Iceland and Greenland; ships docked here to unload cargoes of whale oil, seal skins and dried fish. Today the centre provides a venue for commercial and cultural exchange between Denmark and these nations. The centre has three galleries for cultural exhibitions; at the time of my visit they were showing a selection of abstract Faroese art. Perhaps the most remarkable part of the centre is the restaurant Noma. This establishment serves food inspired by the Nordic region made using ingredients foraged locally. It is widely considered to be one of the very best restaurants in the world.

I found more of interest outside the building. A large plaque bearing the polar bear emblem of Greenland advertised Greenland’s diplomatic mission with the words Gronlands Hjemmestyre (Danish) and Namminersornerullutik Oqartussat (Greenlandic). The flags of Iceland, Denmark, Faroe and Greenland flew from a row of flagpoles, fluttering in the breeze. Nearby two women were working away at crochet; their colourful creations covered two benches and decorated other bits of street furniture.

The Greenlandic shop was situated in a modest hut close by. Here I encountered a Japanese woman with whom I had briefly chatted at Ilulissat airport the day before; it appeared that, like me, she was searching Copenhagen for Greenland-related sights before the next leg of her journey. The shop offered frozen seal and whale meat along with some Greenland-related video recordings and trinkets. The second Greenland-related shop was more upmarket. It was located on a side street in Copenhagen’s old town and specialised in clothes made of seal pelts along with Greenlandic artworks and handicrafts.

I had one more Greenlandic encounter in Copenhagen. Outside a discount supermarket I saw a group of men of Asiatic appearance sitting on benches while drinking cans of premium strength lager. I guessed that they were Inuit whose struggles with life in Denmark had driven them to drink. If I had been able to summon the courage it may have been interesting to talk with them; I imagine they would have been pleased to hear about their mother country. As it was I just walked past them.
Perhaps because of its tiny population, Greenland had made little impact on modern-day Denmark. However, the influence of Denmark on Greenland was and continues to be overwhelming. Greenland today is a mixture of Danish and Inuit, much as Mexico is a Mestizo nation in which a large proportion of the population identify themselves as neither fully indigenous nor fully European. As I boarded my budget flight back to London and normality I was delighted to have seen such astonishing natural beauty, to have seen something of a little-understood culture and to have fulfilled a long-held travel ambition. I know I shall return.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


