

Nordur Sigling

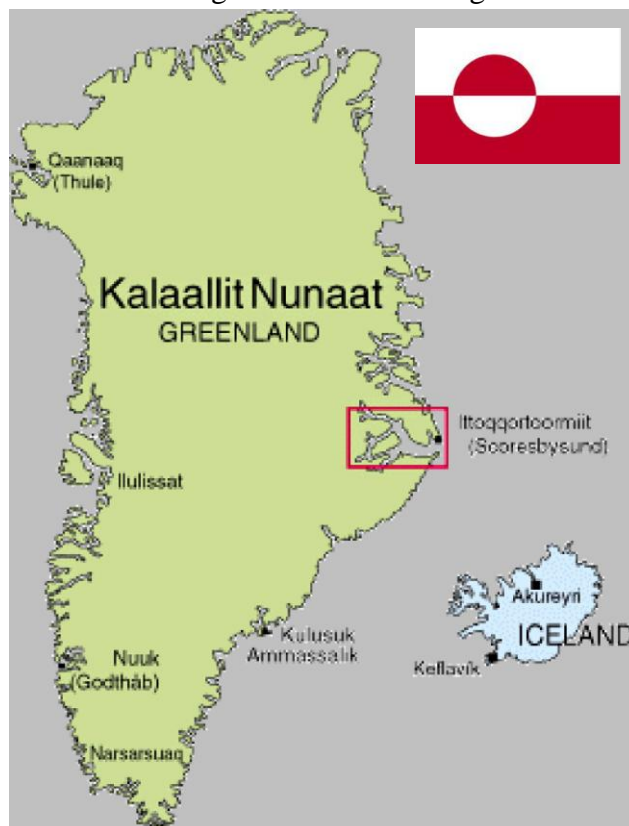
(North Sailing)

Greenland is the last item on my “Bucket List,” my last great adventure. It’s not because I’ve seen everything in this wide, wonderful world, but because (1) I’ve been fortunate to have visited every place I’ve *wanted* to see on seven continents and (2) I recognize that I’m “running out of steam.” One of my mottoes has long been to recognize physical, mental (or financial) limitations and “quit while you’re ahead.”

I’ve flown over the (80% ice-capped) white wasteland of this near-continent and been intrigued looking down on the sparsely populated towns and villages hugging its western coastline and the even fewer hints of civilization on the eastern fringes. Greenland has no roads between towns; no railroads either. To get around in Greenland you have to fly, or (sea ice permitting) to commute by boat or ferry...or overland by dogsled.

This world’s largest island is about one-third the size of Australia - the world’s smallest continent (yes, much smaller than Antarctica). In a more familiar context, it’s about four times the size of Texas and nearly 100 times the size of Vermont with a population (56,000) of less than 10% of our state. Unless his biographers, Stephen May or John Hayes, tell me otherwise, Greenland is one of the few places James A. Michener did *not* get around to visiting...aside from Charleston, South Carolina. It is decidedly not (yet) a prime tourist destination...hence its attraction to me.

There are plenty of tours to Greenland from Iceland or Copenhagen, but most are either one-day excursions to its capital Nuuk or to one of the other more populated east coast towns, to view some impressive calving glaciers in Disko Bay, or – for the more adventurous – a dog sled trek in winter. After casually browsing the Internet over a period of several months, I chanced upon the web site of North Sailing, an Iceland-based company whose whale-watching tours in that country between April and October constitute its revenue stream; between their two ocean-going schooners they had 50,000 viewers of these mighty mammals last year. This year they’ve offered something new, a schooner tour of Scoresby Sound in remote East Greenland, six degrees above the Arctic Circle. The capacity of the *Hildür*, the 59-foot long schooner they’ll be



using, is 12 passengers with a crew of six. Viewed on the web, the breathtaking scenery that we're likely to encounter looks like a combination of the fjords of Norway and the rugged majesty of Antarctica. It's pricey but so is everything in (Iceland) the country acknowledged to have the world's most expensive economy. When this land mass is the last item on one's "Bucket List" and the cruise appeals to my idea of uniqueness, there's no hesitation. In February I email my reservation with down payment to the Icelandic travel agent Birna Björnsdóttir for the August sailing date. During the intervening months, Birna patiently answers my many questions in anticipation of the trip north...weather to expect, currency needs, apparel recommendations, and other tips to help prepare me.

Thursday, August 18, 2011

Boarding for the Delta Airlines 6:20 p.m. flight to JFK is delayed over an hour due to severe thunderstorms in the New York area. We sit on the runway for another hour before receiving an announcement that the flight is canceled due to crew rest requirements. Bought ticket on Jet Blue, but then they're also delayed too long for me to be able to make the connecting Delta flight to Iceland. Retrieve luggage, get rebooked on the 10:35 Delta flight in the morning, apply for refund from Jet Blue, and call Pat to shuttle me back home to Essex. Send e-mail to Birna in Iceland explaining the situation; I may not make the connection to Greenland at all or, at best, will make it to Keflavik very late tomorrow, perhaps just in time to meet up with the other passengers at the Reykjavik domestic airport. At any rate, she should cancel tomorrow afternoon's city tour that I had signed up for and use her best judgment about cancelling the hotel reservation. Not off to an auspicious start...



Friday, August 19

There's another delay in the morning departure, but Delta has arranged for an earlier connecting flight to Keflavik via Icelandair. This requires me to retrieve my luggage at JFK, take the Skytrain to the other airline's terminal and go through security once more; fortunately there's enough layover time to also call Pat and ask her to send an e-mail to Birna advising her to keep the hotel reservation for a late arrival. Even though the Icelandair 757 sits on the runway for an agonizing hour-and-a-half, I finally arrive in Iceland at 12:30 a.m. (local time, adjusting for the four-hour zone differential) instead of the 6:30 a.m. Delta ETA and a tight connection for the hop to Greenland. As it is, by the time I retrieve my luggage, get through Customs, catch the Flybus for a 50-minute drive to my hotel, learn that - because of the uncertainty - I have been re-booked to a different hotel about two miles away (taxi fare+tip \$15; I later learn that tipping is a no-no in Iceland), dispatch email to Birna, and hit the very welcome sack...it's 3:00 a.m.

Saturday, August 20

Checking out after a short but sound sleep and a great buffet breakfast, I take a taxi to the nearby Reykjavik domestic airport and meet up with the charming, efficient and enthusiastic agent, Birna, along with some of the folks who will be my fellow passengers. (Birna has

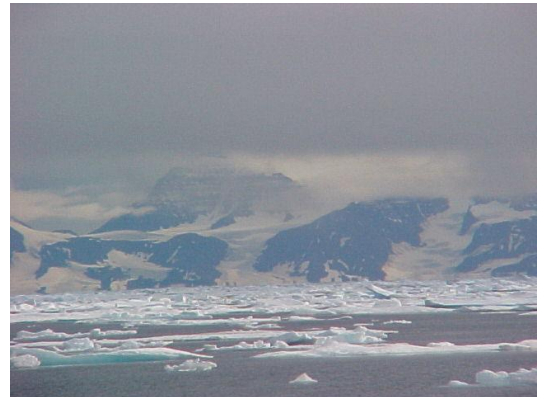


considerately already called Pat to advise her that I've arrived safely.) Others drift in from all directions until the full complement of nine passengers is assembled. Apparently, I'm the sole American as well as the oldest (by far) of the group. I meet Hanne (Norway), Martien (Holland), Ute (Germany), Carl (Denmark), Hrefna (Iceland), Marianne (Denmark), Connie (Switzerland) and Einar (Iceland). We learn that three more countries will be represented among the six crew members that are now nearing Greenland on their sail from Husavik, their base on the north coast of Iceland...Sweden,

Greenland and New Caledonia. Fortunately, all speak English; it's shameful that we're too lazy to learn other tongue.

Birna presents us with welcome kits (hat, scarf, T-shirt, brochures) and briefs us on the final version of the itinerary. Our Air Greenland 9:40 flight takes off (only an hour late) and we touch down at Constable Point, the closest airport to Ittoqqortoormiit, at noon (no time change). The airport boasts a 10' x 10' two-story operations tower, a rest room, snack bar, and some benches. Our bags go through Customs inspection eventually and we sit around on the outside benches for about an hour until the *Hildur* crew arrives. Their two-day sail from Húsavík had been delayed by heavy pack ice that blocked the approach. However, a bonus was their close encounter with a polar bear on a nearby ice floe; they later shared their video and great still shots of their curious visitor.

Some of us ride with the luggage on the bed of a trailer truck out to the dirt "wharf" where the zodiac from the schooner will ferry us out to the ship...a wise choice since the others who chose to walk realized too late that it was a l-o-n-g hike. We're welcomed aboard with a vodka toast by the red-bearded Icelandic captain, Heimir Hardarson, are assigned our "staterooms" (very tight bunks) and – without any further delay – we "sail" (motor) out of the bay. The immediate view to the north is already spectacular, snow-covered mountains, and the first of hundreds of glaciers. We start seeing small icebergs, then more dense packs, and the crew works hard to steer clear of floes and the larger and larger icebergs. One of the crew, Remy – our New Caledonian – is hoisted to the top of the foremast to serve as a lookout; two others position themselves on either side of the bow to pole away floes that come too close. Potential damage to the propeller is the main concern. Have to reverse engines every once in awhile. The captain notes that this is the general area where they encountered the bear yesterday. Later in the day there are unusual fog delays, but during openings the scenery is still breathtaking.



One of the cooks, the Swede Sebastian, serves a sweet potato soup on deck; it's flavored with leeks and coconut milk. Most pax have two helpings. It's become very cold now so we all scurry below to pull out our warmest clothes after being spoiled by the mild temperatures in Iceland. The coveralls provided for each of us are donned by most; I have my red parka from the Antarctic trip that seems warm enough for now.

Accommodations might be a problem. Only Hrefna has a bunk space that allows for her to turn around, to store luggage and to dress. The other four women are squeezed into one 6' x 6' compartment with double-decker bunks. Einar and I share a space with a double deck arrangement; we have to open the door to stand up and my luggage is scattered around the dining area. Even less luxurious are three other individual crawl spaces that are literally within the "dining room." Actually, despite the cramped quarters, the soft mattresses and down comforters are conducive to sleep and at the end of the day we're too tired to care about the niceties. The W.C. (water closet=lavatory) containing toilet, sink and rack for glasses is approximately 4' x 4,' with one side of it sloped since it's part of the ship's hull. Surprisingly, during the entire cruise, we never have to wait more than a couple of minutes for access. To help keep that waiting time minimal, it is the consensus of the men in the group to forego shaving "for the duration."

The crew quarters in the stern of the schooner are even tighter – if that can be imagined. There's another lavatory for them (even smaller) accessed via a vertical ladder and it also serves as the shower for the 15 aboard...should anyone be contortionist enough to use it. (There's no separate stall, just a curtain and a drain in the floor.) This lavatory is between the chart/radio

room and the engine room. On deck, there's plenty of room to spread out and more-than-adequate seating space.

The 35-ton ship itself was built in Iceland in 1974 as a fishing vessel and converted in 2009 (in Denmark) into a two-masted schooner with 2500 sq. ft. of sails. Its rot-resistant white oak framing and hull, pine woodwork, and spruce masts, comprise a handsome piece of workmanship. Last month, the *Hildür* won the Sail Húsavík Regatta, the first race of its kind in Iceland.



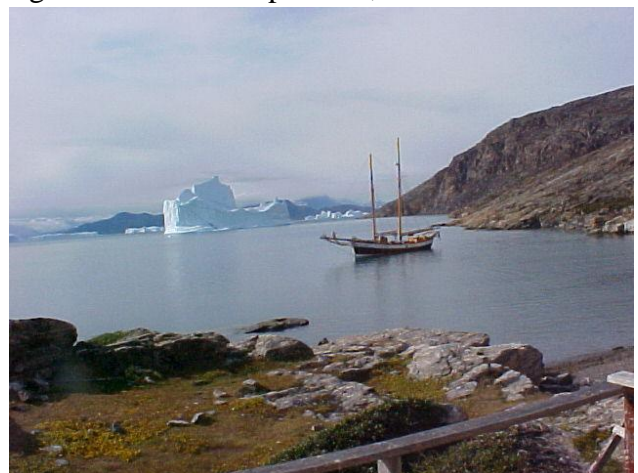
tasty sauce (I skip the broccoli), salad, pears with chocolate sauce and whipped cream, hot chocolate with a dash of liqueur. After we're finished, the crew comes down for the "second seating."

I slip into my lower bunk at 11:30 while Einar stays up a bit later talking with the captain on deck. Get up several times during the night (must be all the coffee during the day), hitting my head against the upper bunk each time and feeling my way to the W.C. with a mini-flashlight. I note that it's not completely dark at night – no moon or stars can be seen; it's perpetual twilight here at this time of the year.

Sunday, August 21

Along with me, several sleep in this morning while others have gone ashore in the zodiac to climb the mountain (Einar and Martien) or inspect the two abandoned buildings at this locale. Breakfast is available on the table all morning long – choice of apple, orange or pineapple juice; cold cereals or oatmeal; tasty bread made fresh each day; apricot preserves or strawberry jam; tomatoes; cheeses; yogurt; coffee, tea or milk. I go ashore to take pictures, search for colorful stones (plentiful), check out the huts, and find an assortment of animal bones – musk ox and reindeer. It's warm and sunny today and I get some nice photos of the *Hildür* with some colossal icebergs as a distant backdrop. Overnight the crew has set a net in the bay. Now they find four trout-size char fish as their catch.

After weighing anchor, we continue west on our cruise through the narrow Føhnfjord at a speed of 8 knots – the wind still not strong enough to make good time sailing. By mid-afternoon it becomes pretty chilly again amid a procession of gigantic bergs, past a half dozen glaciers with the monumental basalt



mountains of Gåseland on the port side and the high sheer granite cliffs of Milne Land to the starboard. (Long before this trip is over, I'll be running out of awe-inspired adjectives.)

We anchor at Ankervig late in the afternoon in a peaceful bay. The captain and a couple of crew members dive off the ship into the icy waters, with only Connie (in a bikini no less!) and Martien among the passengers following suit. (It never occurred to the rest of us to bring along bathing suits, but there are no regrets for the oversight.) A couple of minutes are quite enough for them; they hustle back aboard to be wrapped in blankets.



“Smitty” (Hrefna Smith) jokingly asks the captain if we might have a piece of an iceberg so that she and Connie can provide (contraband) Martini Bianco-on-the-rocks for all. The crew obliges by approaching a small breakaway piece of ice, lassoing it and bringing it aboard for Martien to chop up as requested. A group picture captures the merriment.

A delicious dinner is served topside at 8:30 – Icelandic lamb, the (fresh-caught) char fish, rice, potatoes, salad, tiny French fries, cheeses. We adjourn to the dining area/galley for Scotch on the rocks, hot chocolate, and Sebastian’s tasty custard/cookie/strawberry concoction. Smitty and Connie start up a weird card game that continues while the crew sits down for their meal. (Martien, Einar and Steen later learn its fine points and the games pass the time throughout the cruise.)

In a quick check topside at 11:00 p.m., just before hitting the sack, I find that it’s still light enough to snap a decent photo of a Yosemite-like iceberg nearby.

Monday, August 22

Up at 8:00 this morning – before Einar - fully rested (and from here on I’m one of the first up for the rest of the cruise). Start the day with orange juice, Cheerios, pumpernickel and cheese, hard-boiled egg and coffee.

We sail by dozens (more) of glaciers and sheer walls of snow-capped granite. Coming alongside a smooth granite cliff, with tires hanging over the side acting as buffers against damage to the hull, co-captain Alli drills a hole into the stone, hammers an eye bolt into the hole and the *Hildür* ties up alongside for lunch. Heimir decides it’s too risky an experiment so we shove off again. Soon we’re in more open water and the landscape changes dramatically. A seal is spotted on a nearby ice floe but he dives before we can catch the image. Several more are seen during the afternoon and those with more powerful zoom lenses have good results.

There was another sailing ship that started out with us at Constable Point and we spot her now at our next anchorage, Harefjord. The *Polar Bear* is a much smaller ship, but has about the same complement of passengers and crew; most of the pax are Brits and Scottish. We wonder how they have room to be comfortable above deck, much less below. We anchor nearby and some go off in the zodiac to scout the best locale for an overnight anchorage. A picture view of the zodiac through a large opening in an iceberg mirrors another great shot of the ship viewed from the inflated rubber craft. Captain



Heimir once again obliges “above and beyond the call of duty” by pushing an iceberg sliver through the water back to the ship with his bare hands; he’s more than earned his drink on the rocks tonight!



Dinner at 10:00 is lasagna, beer, apple crisp and coffee. Martien and Heimir show – on their laptops – some of the great pictures that they’ve taken just during these first few days. The captain’s video of the polar bear encounter is superb.

I’m under my comforter by midnight. Two brave souls try the showers while the crew is at dinner.

Tuesday, August 23

Up at 7:30 for an 8:30 hike. The day is overcast and chilly. Marianne, Martin and I do our roaming around the shoreline and up on the rocks overlooking this protected area while Heimir leads most of the others across hill and dale to the far side of the bay. With the three of us back aboard, Alli cranks up the anchor chain and we motor to the other side to pick up the more strenuous hikers. As we head east along the northern coast of Milne Land we see a rolling iceberg – about 30° each way – crackling as parts break off. The *Polar Bear* is sailing today although the Sound is calm and mirror-like; perhaps the sails are just up for effect and she’s really motoring...? In the crystal-clear water we’re able to see much more of the 90% of each of the icebergs that is known to lie below the surface. A seal comes close alongside the boat, but dives too fast for me to capture it digitally.

We reach an Inuit hunter settlement, a tent city at Bjørneøer. The hunters’ leaders motor out to us to request that we make as little noise as possible since their nets are still in the water at either end of the bay and they don’t want us to scare away any narwhal that they hope to add to their catch. There’s a Danish research team also tented here that has commissioned the hunters for the project to “catch-and-release” these small whales (identified by their unique “unicorns”), affixing radio beacons to them to study their migration patterns. Steen – the only Greenlander in the crew – speaks the language of the Inuit and negotiates a settlement to accommodate our anchorage here. There also seems to be a bit of “extortion” involved, the captain’s agreement to buy from them some musk ox meat from a fresh kill. The *Polar Bear* pulls in a bit later and is the beneficiary of the earlier agreement. With the approval of the captain, Steen brings four young Inuit boys out to the *Hildür* on the zodiac. They are shown the engine room and crew’s quarters, given a generous supply of chocolate treats to share with their parents, as well as pens and pencils, that Connie has thoughtfully brought along, and hoisted up - one at a time - to the top of the mast amid much hilarity. Back ashore, they hustle off to tell their parents about their adventure and now expect the same treatment from the *Polar Bear* folks.



The sun seems most brilliant at the end of the day and appears to direct a spotlight onto a huge – several mile wide – glacier that dominates the horizon. Our dinner features trout and cheese-stuffed stewed tomatoes, pork kabob, rice and beer.

Wednesday, August 24

Up at 7:00 before everyone except Martin, our breakfast chef for today. My fare is a tall glass of orange juice, bowl of Cheerios, hard-boiled egg, toast and cheese, and coffee. The Danish scientists are leaving today, gratified to have tagged seven narwhals during their 17-day encampment. A Twin Otter plane slips in among the mountains to land on a flat grassy strip barely long enough to risk a landing and take-off here. Within 15 minutes, the tents and equipment are loaded aboard and the Danes are borne aloft, heading out across the bay. Einar has been out fishing from shore this morning, but he's back empty-handed.

After crew returns from filling plastic 5-gallon water containers from a spring-fed stream ashore, we sail out passing scores of spectacular bergs of all sizes, most notably one in the shape of a perfectly formed heart. A rolling iceberg suddenly disintegrates as we glide by. Heimir



makes a practice of ringing the ship's bell to alert those who may be below decks to witness especially interesting sights...unusual berg shapes or glaciers, rolling bergs, moraine on bergs, seals on floes, the (very) occasional musk ox grazing, etc.

A light snack on deck at noon is followed by a pasta snack at 5:00. We're anchored near the *Polar Bear* again in an interesting cove, an abandoned trading post at Sydkap. We're ashore for two hours, picking up more stones (the green quartz ones are said to bring good luck), and inspecting the abandoned building.

It's quite spacious, with accommodations for about eight. The main course for dinner at 10:30 is (inevitably) thinly sliced and broiled musk ox (not bad at all), with ham, rice and a gravy of vegetable stew. Try the Thule brand beer tonight; it's indistinguishable from the Viking brew. Sebastian serves chocolate pudding for dessert. Good fellowship follows dinner, lots of stories. "Party" breaks up at midnight.

A general observation: The captain and crew work awfully hard – anchoring, cranking up and cleaning anchor chain, lowering and operating zodiacs, avoiding bergs, preparing and serving meals, washing dishes, washing down decks, checking engines, and a score of maintenance chores. For the rest of us, what a life! All this time away from TV, radio, newspapers, Internet, e-mail...compatible and interesting international companions, a sturdy ship with a dedicated captain at the helm, good food, incomparable scenery...what more could one ask for?

Quotable excerpts from some books in the ship's modest library of marine-related volumes in English:

"Fiction was invented the day Jonah arrived home and told his wife that he was three days late because he had been swallowed by a whale."

Gabriel Garcia Marquez

"If the Bible had said that Jonah swallowed the whale, I would believe it."

William Jennings Bryan

“It is of interest to note that while some dolphins are reported to have learned English – up to fifty words used in correct context – no human being has been reported to have learned dolphinese.”
Carl Sagan

Thursday, August 25

Up at 8:00, just in time to hear the captain announce that he will raise the (seven) sails this morning, another arduous task for the crew! All hands know their jobs and, in minutes, we’re gliding along noiselessly. The ship is making 9.5 knots in a stiff breeze that’s coming off the glaciers; it’s a mild 41°F today, but the wind chill factor effectively cuts that in half. The *Polar Bear* is sailing nearby. Just wish we could get photos of our ship from her vantage point...as we are doing of her. (Later in the trip, Martien visits the sailboat and exchanges snaps with his flash drive – a bonus for all of us.)



After about two hours under full sail, the wind dies down and the sails come down, too, since we have to cover 90 miles to reach Ittoqqortoormiit and will have to resort to the ship’s diesel engines which make a steady 8 knots. The late breakfast provides the usual more-than-adequate choices: orange, apple or pineapple juice; Corn Flakes, Cheerios or trail mix-type bran; yogurt; raw salmon; salami; Swiss Gruyere or Camembert cheese; tomatoes; hard-boiled eggs; strawberry or apricot preserves; ship-made bread or biscuits; bananas; coffee, tea or milk.

We get word – via radio – that the ice jam near the mouth of Scoresby Sound at Ittoqqortoormiit is opening up so we’ll be able to make port there after all; it was in doubt. (The entire fjord freezes over in October.) It takes nearly ten hours to reach the large bay at “Ittoqq” and the scenery along the route is still breathtaking. We learn that only four of us are manifested to stay at the guest house (its capacity) in the village for two nights, but two of the four elect to stay aboard and receive a refund for that “extra.” Carl and I look forward to the shower, spreading out, and getting our luggage organized. (Apparently none of the others were even offered this option when booking the trip with Birna.)



Jennifer, who manages one of two guest houses for the absentee owner, a Dane, meets Carl and me at the rocky landing where the zodiac has transported us and she lugs my heavy duffel luggage up the steep incline to her auto to take us to our lodging. She’s a Canadian who has been here for three years and loves it; her boyfriend is from England and he runs the local tourist office, also serving as a hiking and hunting guide. The only other non-Inuits in this town of 450 souls are some

Danish doctors and a nurse, along with a German teacher. (Schooling here ends at age 15; ongoing education is provided in West Greenland, Iceland or Denmark.) There's no fishing industry here anymore, just hunting – musk ox, seals, Arctic fox, Arctic hare, polar bears.

Jen's battered old vehicle is one of just a handful of autos in town; the locals rely on ATVs (all terrain vehicles) to cope with the bumpy (unpaved) streets and steep hills. We drive up one of the hills to deposit our luggage at the guest house, then down to the "restaurant" where we will meet up with our shipmates, a private home overlooking the bay where a young woman and her cousin prepare meals for visiting tourists as needed. The meal consists of salmon, musk ox "beef," saffron rice, potato chips, coffee or tea with two types of delicious cakes, one of which is a tasty pound cake with pineapple bits embedded. The two Inuits both speak English and understand Danish, Icelandic and German as well as Greenland's language.

Common to a good many homes in the village, Greenland Dogs come with this house. It's a large husky-type breed kept as a sled dog and for hunting polar bears and seals. This is an ancient breed, thought to be directly descended from dogs brought to Greenland by the first Inuit settlers. Because there are now restrictions on both dog imports and exports, it's one of the most pure-bred dogs in the world. Females and their puppies run loose; they are docile and very friendly. Pet one and they become hard to shake loose from as some of our shipmates learn despite being pre-warned; they're underfoot as we walk away. The males seen chained up at many homes – awaiting workouts in winter – are heard snarling and barking at one another all around town.



Carl and I walk back up to the guest house and take turns at showering...just about the best ever! Jen stops by with groceries for tomorrow's breakfast and lunch snacks – juice, cereal, milk, bread, cold cuts. Coffee and tea and a few other staples are already stocked. We have the house all to ourselves, two clean rooms about 8' x 10,' a spacious living room/dining room/kitchen, W.C., large bathroom and shower room, mud room at the entrance, and TV with one channel – Danish. Delightful! Hit the (comfortable) sack around midnight, but still can't get used to it being twilight through the night. Trivia...this happens to be the only community in the world in GMT (Greenwich Mean Time) zone -1.

While I had never mentioned my age to anyone (although Birna could have noted it on my reservation form), everyone on the ship seems to be aware of it and I find them deferring to me although I haven't needed any special treatment. Coincidentally, this village of Ittoqqortoormiit (meaning Big House Dwellers) – also known as Scoresbysund - was first settled in my birth year of 1925 by 70 "immigrants" led by Einar Mikkelsen, an attempt to create better conditions of life for inhabitants from Tasiilaq (aka Ammassalik) – a settlement far to the south - by moving them to a new and, in general, better area for hunting. The Sound itself (the world's largest fjord) borders on the National Park of Northeast Greenland – the world's largest national park - covering the entire region of the northeast quadrant of Greenland, 375,000 square miles. People without residence in East Greenland's two remote towns have to apply for government permission to enter the uninhabited park with its unique wildlife and rich history of expeditions.

Friday, August 26

Awake at 7:30, but close my eyes for a second and it's 10:30. Carl has left for a hike. Fix orange juice, toast w. jelly, and coffee for breakfast. The hikers drop by to inspect our quarters. Martien leaves a note advising that he has arranged for a helicopter flight back to Constable Point tomorrow and invites me to join him by signing up for it at the travel office in the village. It's a gorgeous day outside. After organizing my luggage I "go out on the town."

First stop is Nanu Travel to buy a couple of souvenirs and some postcards. I've also decided on the helicopter ride and firm up a reservation here while I'm at it. I've never flown on one and this seems like a perfect place to take such a hop; besides I won't have to hustle down to the ship at 5:00 in the morning for the final leg of the cruise. Next stops are the post office and the general store, then climb a hill atop the village to the Mikkelsen statue, a vantage point for a



great view of the whole town and out across the bay. I can't help but make a mental note that this town needs someone to start a recycling program before it's completely inundated with waste. Back at the guest house later in the afternoon I'm reading when Jen stops by with detailed instructions for tomorrow's checkout routine coordinated with the flight service. I later walk down to the pier where the *Hildür* is taking on fuel and supplies to get ready for its second and final cruise for the summer – which shoves off from Constable Point tomorrow shortly after our group disembarks. Hunters have

brought in some seals which are afloat and tied up below the pier to keep them fresh before butchering. After walking to the same "restaurant" where we had dinner last night, I find that I'm a bit early so I lie out on the rocks along the shore and watch the *Hildür* glide by heading back to its regular anchorage. (The *Polar Bear* sailed this afternoon, not simply back to Iceland, but that little sailing vessel was then going on to England!)

The other passengers from the ship arrive for dinner. We learn that the young woman who prepares it has three young children and lives several doors away; this is the home of her helper, her cousin, whom we had thought was her husband. Ox soup with noodles and rice, musk ox meat (good) and seal meat (greasy, chewy, thumbs down), peas, carrots, cauliflower, coffee and tea with cake. Very nice. The cook kindly offers to have her cousin drive me around the village sightseeing in his ATV, but I regretfully decline since we'll be having a little farewell party aboard the schooner after dinner.

While at the restaurant, we've pooled some euros, krona, and dollars to present to the captain and crew as a token of our thanks for not only for their exceptional services but for their friendship. I'm "elected" as the spokesperson to present the gratuity (usually frowned on in Iceland) and to hand over a special card with a calligraphic inscription signed by all of us. "Skols" all around! Everyone is toasted; some are "roasted."

Remy ferries me back ashore in the zodiac at 10:30 – it's still light – and I hike back to the guest house by 11:00.

Saturday, August 28

Martien had gotten clearance from Jen to use Carl's room after he left (at 5:00 a.m. to take his luggage down to the ship) since Carl is taking the schooner back to Constable Point tomorrow. Martien traded places with him and is now in that room. Jennifer picks up our check-

in luggage to take down to the air service warehouse even before I'm awake and, even though I'm up fairly early, Martien has already laid out our breakfast. Jen returns at 9:30 to take us down to the warehouse (for luggage and personal weigh-in) and then drives us on to the police station to have our passports stamped to attest our presence in Greenland, not a requirement. We knock, but no one is responding so we hike up a steep (!) road where we meet up with other helicopter hoppers...Marie, an Inuit caregiver who lives in Denmark; Victoria, a medical student; two nurses; Steve, an adventurous kayaker from Ontario; a German who flew here and found nothing to do and nowhere to go for a week, and an Icelandic headed home. The helicopter arrives about a half-hour later than scheduled but there's no need to rush. Martien shrewdly commandeers two side seats that will give us a good view and we take off at 11:00 for the 20-minute flight to Constable Point. This saves us a four-hour sail, weighing anchor at dawn. We need the earmuffs to drown out the incredibly noisy propeller blades. The flight path is low and takes us through mountain passes and over some icy ridges but is otherwise not particularly scenic. As we come in for the landing at Constable Point, we hover directly over the *Hildür* and the *Polar Bear* that have already arrived at the airport landing. We meet up with our fellow passengers and with Capt. Heimir who is heading back to Iceland, too. (Alli will captain the second cruise.).



Air Iceland's Twin Otter arrives at noon for the hop to Reykjavik, but the plane and its 21 pax are detoured to make a stop at Kulusuk Airport, about 500 miles southwest along the east coast. It's pouring at Kulusuk and the passenger terminal is wall-to-wall people waiting for flights north, east, and west. There's a frustrating two-hour layover before the plane – now with about 50 pax – is off and up through the clouds above the rain. We're in Reykjavik in an hour-and-a half and travel agent Birna is on hand to greet us and check to see that all heads are accounted for. I

say goodbye to the others, most of whom are headed back to Europe. Ute has a Hertz auto rental and is staying overnight for an Icelandair conference at the same hotel where I'm going, the "Natura," so she saves me the (exorbitant) taxi fare. We first learn about Hurricane Irene and the cancellation of all flights to JFK since it's due to hit New York City tomorrow. I send an e-mail to daughter Pat to pass the word to Julie "not to worry" since I'm comfortable here and have nothing else on my calendar this week in case of a day or two delay. (She's exchanged several e-mails with Birna since the aborted start of this tour.)

Sunday, August 28

Up at 6:30 for a "full course" breakfast and check out of the hotel by 7:30 to take the Flybus to the Keflavik International Airport. Between the city and the airport we pass the "glorious" mossy lava fields of Reykjanes Peninsula; I'd have to question the guide book's adjective. There's not a tree in sight. At Keflavik, I learn from the single Delta agent that there's

neither possibility of a flight out today nor any flight to an alternate destination along the east coast.

I'm given a voucher for accommodations at the Grand Hotel, including meals and transportation "for the duration," i.e. until they can arrange some way to get back to JFK – or Boston, Washington, or Montreal – perhaps via Icelandair. Delta will get word to the hotel as soon as there's an opening of any kind. Run into Martien at the bus station this morning; he's stranded, too, even though he's headed for Holland. It's overcast and there's some light rain as I check into the hotel at 11:30 and lunch with other stranded Americans at noon.

Despite the poor weather, I decide to head out to the foremost Iceland attraction, the **Blue Lagoon**. The bus to the remote geothermal site runs every hour and takes just 40 minutes. What a great place! Of course, I didn't bring a bathing suit never expecting to have the opportunity for a dip in Iceland any more than in Greenland. Lots of folks here but they must be cold when they get out of the 98° – 102° "bath." The lagoon holds six million gallons of geothermal seawater which is renewed every 40 hours, recirculated by pump from over a mile beneath the ground where it is heated by the earth's natural forces. The rising geothermal seawater comes into contact with cooling silica and other mineral inclusions in the magma (molten lava), resulting in this unique natural bathing source known for its healing power.



Back to the hotel for "Happy Hour" – 50% off, but still double the prices in the States; it's followed by a good roast beef dinner. Meet up with many others trying to get out to Seattle, Vancouver, Memphis, Atlanta, Charlotte and other points west. Tom Ellington, a Wesleyan political science prof who once interviewed for a position at UVM, tries to help me by using his Skype connection to Delta Customer Service in New York, but to no avail for either of us. Later in the evening, an e-mail from Delta gives me my new itinerary...for Friday! Are they crazy? Hurricane Irene has been downgraded to a tropical storm so I'm hoping that there will be some improvement in scheduling long before then, otherwise Delta will be spending more on my hotel bills than they would if they could simply pay Icelandair to take my ticket, more than the total cost of my round trip from Burlington. I now learn that approximately 13,000 flights have been cancelled world-wide because of this disruption since the problem in NY affected five other continents as well. I'll just have to be patient and take advantage of the opportunity for more sightseeing. The shower is soothing anyway.

Monday, August 29

Up late since the first day of the cruise – and one other – since I know my fate for today. It's still overcast as I take a hike down Kringlumyrarbraut (Road) to the waterfront and then along a harbor path to view the Höfði House (officially the Höfði Reception House of the Reykjavik Council), site of the 1986 summit meeting between President Reagan and USSR General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev, a meeting heralded as the beginning of the end of the Cold War. (Winston Churchill and Marlene Dietrich were also guests at this house, not together.)

Walk toward downtown along Laugavegur (Road) and to the shopping district with its clothing stores, gift shops, boutiques, restaurants and bars, bookstores, video shops, cafes, and art galleries. Back uphill on a parallel street, the imposing Hallgrímskirkja towers above all the buildings, the Lutheran church completed just 25 years ago that serves as Reykjavík's most prominent landmark: the church is visible throughout the city. (Church and state are not separated here; 85% of Icelanders belong to the National Church of Iceland, a Lutheran body.)



In front of and dominating the entrance plaza is a statue of native-born Leif Ericson, discoverer of America nearly 500 years before Columbus. The statue, by Alexander Calder of mobile sculpture fame, was a gift from America in 1930 on the 1,000th anniversary of the founding - in Iceland - of the world's first parliament. The Althingi is still the governing legislature.

The afternoon turns out to be sunny and mild. "Today it's Niceland, no?" - the greeting of a friendly Icelandic gent welcomes me to rest on a bench along the way. Somehow I find my way back to the Grand Hotel just in time for "Happy Hour" again...with legs aching after trekking several miles afoot. Even though the hotel is indeed "grand," the bartenders

here are the slowest, most pre-occupied, most frustrating staff I've encountered anywhere. Computers have complicated their lives. While they methodically punch in dozens of characters to record the simple sale of a beer, the transaction could have been completed in seconds with an old-fashioned cash register.

Still can't access the phone system here via global card, military calling card or credit card even with the help of staff. (T.N. Vail would have networked the world by now if allowed to; the break-up of A.T. & T. was ill-advised. For better or for worse, the Internet has come along to produce such a network.) Still no new messages from Delta, but e-mails tell me about the shocking impact of the hurricane on upstate New York and Vermont with far less damage than expected in New York City. Hits in North Carolina, Virginia and New Jersey are also very bad.

While I realize that I'm recording meal menus more than necessary, the dinner at the hotel is only à la carte tonight and begs description:

Appetizer is a lobster burger with orange-chili mayonnaise, bacon crunch, artichoke chips & sesame, brioche bread.... \$21. (Thank you, Delta!)

[The burger is about the size of an Eisenhower dollar coin and the mélange is served on a piece of black slate.]

The Entrée is not noteworthy except for the \$47 tab.

Dessert: Macaroons, tea mescarpone and popcorn ice cream.....\$17.

[The ice cream is about 1/10th the size of a regular scoop with a single piece of popcorn alongside and a tiny slice of strawberry.]

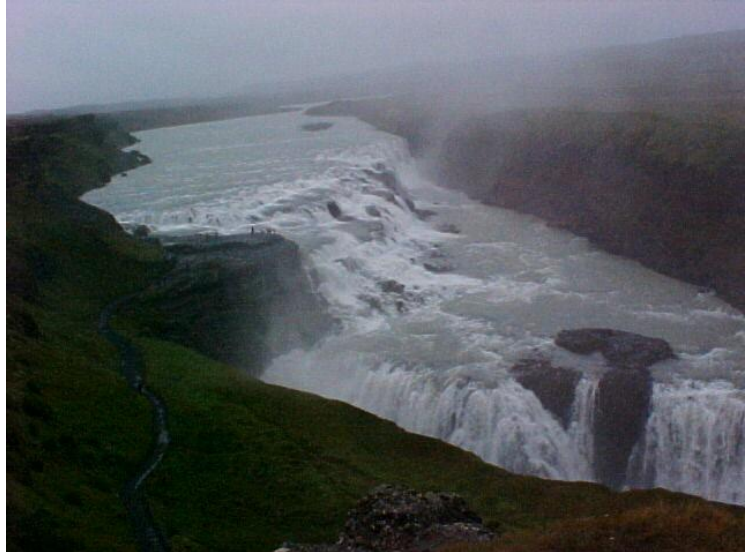
After dinner I learn that the local Rotary Club met here this afternoon, oddly at 4-6 p.m. Reading for awhile and then under the fluffy comforter by 10. I haven't yet figured out how these rooms are heated since I can't see any vents, radiators or thermostats...but it's just the right setting if there is one.

Trivia learned today...Icelanders maintain a patronymic naming system, which means that someone's first name is followed by his or her father's name and the suffix 'son' or 'dóttir.' (For example, our first two children would be Patricia Richardsdóttir and Michael Richardsson.)

Consequently, the telephone directory listings are alphabetized by *first* names...which are more unique than in our country.

Tuesday, August 30

I waste the morning waiting for the Delta agent to try to get me on an Icelandair flight since the latter airline has now resumed operations and doesn't have the backlog of pre-booked flights that Delta faces. By noon I've given up so ask my helpful desk clerk friend to book me on one of the Flybus tours. Within ten minutes the bus is at the door and it looks to be a pleasant day with sun peeking through the clouds. On the drive inland it becomes very foggy but lets up – in favor of a drizzle - by the time we arrive at the impressive Gullfoss waterfall, Europe's largest and most powerful. (I had become aware by now that most of Iceland is part of Europe while Greenland is linked to North America.) Gullfoss ("Golden Falls") is one of the country's major tourist attractions as is our next stop – in the pouring rain – at the Strokkur ("churn") Geysir. (Could have used my umbrella today, but at least I wore a raincoat.) The geyser erupts – with a booming hiss - every 4-8 minutes and is almost as impressive as Yellowstone's "Old Faithful" for which visitors have to wait anywhere between 35 and 120 minutes if they just missed the previous spouting. Power companies are building more pumping stations near the geothermal springs in this area in anticipation of eventual increased demand.



This is farming country – cattle, horses, sheep, pigs, goats and chickens abound outside the small towns along the way. Volcanic ash over the centuries has acted as a fertilizer, with recent eruptions causing the grass to be much greener this year according to our guide.

We drive through Pingvellir National Park. The Park was founded in 1930 to protect the remains of the first parliament site, established in 930 A.D., remaining there until 1789, and was later expanded to protect natural phenomena in the surrounding area. It was the first national park in Iceland and was decreed "a protected national shrine for all Icelanders, the perpetual property of the Icelandic nation under the preservation of parliament, never to be sold or mortgaged." It also embraces Iceland's largest lake. The continental drift or plate tectonic separation between the North American and Eurasian plates can be clearly seen in the cracks or faults which cut through the region as if an earthquake had created the not-so-narrow crevices, some bordering on canyons. It's a very visible divide.

Some more random facts we learn from the guide to pass the time between stops: Iceland's has a population of about 320,000, about 40% living in Reykjavik, the capital; 70% of Iceland's consumer needs have to be imported, making it the most expensive economy in the world; they are experimenting with hydrogen-fueled autos; there are two hydrogen filling stations already in the city and more are coming; there are also free charging stations for electric autos at the City Centre; Iceland is made of multiple layers of lava covered by moss and a light layer of ashy soil, the thin layer making it difficult for tree roots to penetrate the lava and consequently unable to grow very tall – there are millions of "Christmas trees;" there is no polluted water anywhere, it's all pure ice spring water; the climate is getting warmer and drier

with less snowfall during recent winters; the country has had a geothermal heating system since 1930; all buildings are heated with hot water from the springs and, even though there are still chimneys in some of the older buildings, they aren't used; Reykjavik means "smoky city"...although the "smoke" is really from the streams of steam rising from the geothermal springs around the countryside.

It's been a long afternoon and the weather has been far from ideal (unlike Greenland), but the sights have been worth seeing. Back at the hotel, no notes from Delta but the dinner fare is more filling and puts less of a dent in Delta's treasury. Early to bed tonight.

Wednesday, August 31

After another great buffet breakfast I head down Kringlumyrarbraut again, but this time in a different direction (from yesterday's hike) – to the Kringlan Shopping Center. First I stop at the nearby Hilton Hotel to purchase an all-day bus pass and at the end of the block I board a city bus bound for Kringlan. The shopping mall is as modern as any in the States, but the prices are unreal, limiting me to window shopping for an hour. Taking another bus and transferring to a third, I visit the wharf and the new Conference Center, a five-story glass wonder. Through ongoing transfers I wend my way back to the Grand Hotel - or at least the bus drops me off fairly close by - around 2:45 in the afternoon. On approaching the reception desk, my smiling clerk-friend Malli greets me with the welcome news that Delta has booked me on Icelandair on the 5:00 p.m. flight to JFK. The message was received at noon and now I've just missed the last bus that would get me to the airport in time for check-in. Not to worry; Malli, the miracle-worker, calls a friend at the Flybus terminal and they send out a special van to catch up with the airport bus at its last stop before leaving the city. I have ten minutes to pack and check out! Thanks to Malli's help – with the luggage as well as an expedited checkout – I make it, reaching the last hotel pickup point a few minutes before that last bus pulls in.

After a bit of confusion over my authorized transfer from Delta to Icelandair, I'm given a boarding pass – with an upgrade to Business Class...Nice! In the Saga Lounge, I have time to get off an e-mail to Pat advising her of the revised itinerary and the Delta connecting flight from JFK to Burlington slated to arrive there at just after 11:00 p.m. Take off 15 is minutes late, but arrive at BTV a half-hour early, a very serendipitous final course of events!

Home sweet home...and Greenland can be checked off my "Bucket List."

