

📍 GREENLAND

Splendid *isolation*

The longest fjord system on the planet, Scoresby Sound, is just one highlight of a Greenland cruise with HX (previously Hurtigruten). Lori Rackl explains why now it's more important than ever to explore this isolated frontier of icebergs and glaciers.

Our kayak guide warned us to keep a healthy distance from icebergs that poked through the placid water of Greenland's Scoresby Sound.

I am about to find out why.

An ominous rumble, followed by a snap, crackle and pop rings from a hulking rectangle of frozen freshwater. The chalk-white monolith collapses like an imploding building into the fjord, sending a parade of formidable-looking waves our way.

We hear a lot that the Arctic is warming but here on the ocean it feels like our small contingent of kayakers is bearing witness to it from our wobbly boats. This singular destination feels especially important right now. I can't shake the notion that what I am seeing and

experiencing on the eastern edges of this giant isle might not exist much longer – kind of like the iceberg that practically fell into my lap.

"Paddle straight into the waves!" shouts one of the guides, while we scramble to steady our tandem kayak in the churning water.

We steer our vessel back to the mothership: the 250-passenger *MS Fram*. Built for the rigours of polar exploration, the sturdy ship underwent a full refurbishment in 2022, giving it a fresh, modern Nordic vibe.

"Without this ship's maneuverability, some of this ice wouldn't be passable," says Captain Sverre Rud, as he leans against a panel of switches, controls and blinking monitors in *Fram's* bridge.

The 46-year-old Norwegian captain has plenty of experience sailing the more popular western and southern coasts of Greenland, an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark. This trip marks his first time captaining a voyage along the less explored eastern side.

"A lot of this area is uncharted, and you have quite heavy glacial ice," he said. "It's very challenging to sail here. That's why few ships do it."

Our journey takes us into the planet's longest fjord system, Scoresby Sound, where the Greenland Sea's fingers reach far into the land. Snowcapped peaks and blankets of treeless tundra add to the stark beauty of the inlet, whose waters brim with icebergs of all shapes and sizes.



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HX

Hurtigruten Expeditions rebranded in December 2023 with a new name, HX. The London-based cruise company has a fleet of six vessels and offers several Greenland cruises in 2024. The 13-day Ultimate Fjord Expedition in East Greenland departs Iceland on 11 August 2024 aboard *MS Fram*.



ABOVE, FROM LEFT: The Greenland township of Ittoqqortoormiit is the most isolated in the country; kayaking amongst the volatile ice of the Arctic; spotting local wildlife is one of the thrills of a HX cruise.

Along the way, we see almost no other humans – the happy exception being an afternoon port call at Ittoqqortoormiit. Billed as the most isolated town in Greenland, this Inuit settlement clinging to the rocky landscape can only be reached by cruise ship for a short time in summer.

Our visit coincides with the twice-yearly arrival of a cargo vessel delivering boxcars full of tinned fish, clothing, Carlsberg lager and other supplies. Children cluster around the sole grocery store, their hands buried deep in fresh-off-the-boat bags of chips.

As I walk Ittoqqortoormiit's gravel roads that lead to nowhere, I relish the unfamiliar scenery of brightly colored houses with the

World's largest national park

Under the tireless Arctic summer sun, I spend hours sitting on the balcony of my suite at the back of the ship, admiring Mother Nature's sculpture garden as we slowly thread our way through what one passenger aptly dubs Iceberg Alley.

Another perk of having a suite: You get to dine on reindeer carpaccio and other elevated dishes in Restaurant Lindstrøm, a more intimate venue than the main eatery,

Restaurant Aune. (Passengers in non-suite cabins can reserve a table at Lindstrøm for an extra charge.)

The ship boasts a spacious observation lounge with panoramic views, as well as a small gym, saunas and a pair of outdoor hot tubs. The Science Center is stocked with microscopes, animal skeletons and expedition leaders eager to answer nature-related questions about everything from sea creatures to clouds.

Most days involve a morning and afternoon excursion away from our floating hotel. We file into Zodiacs for a closer look at calving glaciers and photogenic icebergs. Wearing ship-issued muck boots, we head ashore for hikes on spongy terrain sprinkled with delicate wildflowers. We explore a tiny fraction of the Northeast Greenland National Park, the world's largest national park, an undulating expanse of mountains and ice more than three times the size of New Zealand.



hides of polar bears and musk oxen draped outside. A curious kid rides his bicycle alongside me, eager to practice his English.

Ittoqqortoormiit's population hovers around 300 people – less than half of what it used to be.

"We're like the polar bears; our numbers are going down," said Niels Sanimuinaq Rasmussen, an Ittoqqortoormiit native and Hurtigruten Expeditions team member who shows passengers around his hometown.

The best chance to see a polar bear is along the east coast, according to Greenland tourism authorities. Every time we go ashore, we hope for a sighting but the bears, whose population has decreased along with the sea

ice that's vital to their survival, remain elusive. Until our penultimate day at sea. That's when a sharp-eyed passenger spots white fur in the distance. Word gets back to the captain. He promptly turns the ship around for a closer look. Passengers grab their binoculars and telephoto lenses and flock to the bow.

Expedition team member Jenna Silk, a marine biologist, sets up a spotting scope so we can get a better view of the mother polar bear and her two cubs roaming near the shore.

"Polar bears may very well be extinct in the wild in 30 years," Silk said, making this rare sighting seem even more special.