

The cliffs of Canada's Sam Ford Fjord, as seen from the deck of the Silver Cloud, a Silversea Cruises expedition ship. Opposite: An iceberg in the Ilulissat Icefjord, in Greenland.



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S P S P I R R I T T

O F F

T T H E E

Sailing above the Arctic Circle is like discovering an entirely new world: a place where narwhals swim between fjords, the sky flickers with dancing lights, and centuries-old Inuit communities have learned to thrive.

N O N O R R T H H



▲
The Lutheran church in Qaanaaq, Greenland—one of the northernmost towns in the world.



◀
A resident of Pond Inlet, in Arctic Canada, wears traditional bone snow goggles.



▲
The candy-colored houses of Kangaamiut, Greenland, are home to about 350 people.

I'M NOT SURE I've ever experienced sharper regret than in the fraction of a second between leaping from a boat platform and hitting the surface of the Arctic Ocean. The drop was only six feet or so, but that was long enough for my brain to respond to the sight of dark, ice-strewn water flying up to meet me by shrieking, "You should not have done this!" Too late. I was doing a polar plunge.

I was on the *Silver Cloud*, a Silversea Cruises expedition ship that carries 254 passengers—though for polar sailings, it's capped at 200, in an effort to prevent overcrowding during shore

excursions. We were anchored in Markison Fjord, an inlet on the eastern coast of Ellesmere Island in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. This was midway through a 16-day voyage hopscothing up the western coast of Greenland and into the northeastern extremes of Canada in pursuit of starkly spectacular, rapidly changing landscapes, rare wildlife, glimpses into local cultures, and, apparently, freezing cold water. Thin membranes of new ice floated like transparent lily pads between the white bits and bergs calved from a nearby glacier. When I hit, the cold seized me like a full-body ice cream headache. I was wearing a safety harness, and as soon as I surfaced, a crew member started hauling me in like a big, cold, sputtering fish. Above, more prudent passengers hung over their balconies, taking pictures.

Once I was out, I felt fiery and supercharged. My friend Nicholas, who was traveling with me, had also jumped. The two of us were handed shots of bourbon as we hustled upstairs to the outdoor pool, which was moderately heated but suddenly felt like a hot tub. Other exhilarated plungers were bobbing around, talking about how cold their toes were. The whole idea is to experience the wild physiological ride of a near-death experience in a controlled setting. Water that frigid would rob you of the use of almost all dexterity within two minutes; within 15, you'd be unconscious, and within 45...well. "I guess I'm glad I did it once," a guide told me about his plunge, "just for safety reasons, so you understand you're almost dead as soon as you go in." Therein lies at least part of the appeal of cruising in the

polar regions: you go to realize just how out of your depth you'd be without a warm, cozy ship waiting nearby. You go to have thrilling encounters with an inhospitable environment while under the vigilant supervision of experienced guides. You go to appreciate your own vulnerabilities, while also enjoying butler service and bottomless champagne.

OUR VOYAGE HAD begun with a charter flight from Reykjavik to Kangerlussuaq, a settlement at the end of a 120-mile fjord of the same name in western Greenland where a small and scrappy international airport has evolved out of a U.S. base built during World War II. Greenland's ice sheet is the second-largest in the world after Antarctica's. From above, it was almost indistinguishable from the clouds, were it not for the occasional bright blue pool or river of meltwater. The plane passed over the edge of the ice sheet and circled down over glacier-scraped rock and rust-colored tundra, banking over the *Silver Cloud* at anchor out in the fjord. Greenland had been in the news less than a month before we arrived because a heat wave had caused a massive five-day melt that sent approximately 55 billion tons of ice rushing into the sea. But to me, as a visitor, the magnitude of that loss was difficult to grasp. This, too, was a theme of the trip: the way the Arctic reveals itself in glimpses, its scale remaining elusive even when you're in the middle of it.

Once on the ground, we were ferried to the ship in Zodiacs, the nimble inflatable boats that would take us to shore each time we landed. The *Silver Cloud*, a sleek navy and white vessel, was the first ship in Silversea Cruises' fleet when it launched in 1994. In 2017, it underwent a \$40 million refurbishment to upgrade its structure and systems for safe cruising in icy seas—and to breathe new life into the passenger experience. Champagne and chocolates were waiting in our suite, which was spacious by ship standards, with a walk-in closet and a balcony, a sitting area, and two twin beds adorably close together, as though Nicholas and I had formed a splinter duo from Snow White's other dwarves. Our butler, Joselyn Dias, swung by in his natty black bow tie and waistcoat to say hello.

That evening, as the anchor chain clanked up, we rushed giddily onto our balcony, pressing our cheeks together for selfies as the setting sun and rocky mountainsides passed behind us. That mysterious white shape hovering enormously at



ONE OF THE DEFINING DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE FAR NORTH OF OUR PLANET AND THE FAR FAR SOUTH IS THE PRESENCE OF HUMANS. THE INUIT AND THEIR PREDECESSORS HAVE LIVED IN THE NORTH FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS.



◀ Colonies of seabirds nest on Coburg Island, in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago.

▲ Sisters in Qanaaq pose in traditional pants made from polar-bear skin.



the top of every unfurled Mercator map in our childhood classrooms? We were there. Greenland! The Arctic! We were heading to the far north, and, in my opinion, almost nothing is more exciting.

One of the defining differences between the far north of our planet and the far south is the presence of humans. Other than the transient residents of Antarctica's scientific stations, no group of people has ever colonized the frozen far southern latitudes, but the Inuit and their predecessors have lived in Arctic parts of Canada and Greenland for thousands of years. "They are the most adaptable people on earth," said Canadian archaeologist Jane Thompson in a lecture. "They've lived in this extremely harsh place for a heck of a long time without damaging their environment, which is more than any of us can say." Thompson and her husband, Callum, also an archaeologist, were

two of 31 expedition guides onboard who gave formal talks, but were also happy to hang out over meals and share their stories.

Discussion of humans in the Arctic too frequently centers around the exploits of 18th- and 19th-century European explorers—tales of bravery and discovery, but also often of hardship and death. The famously doomed Franklin Expedition, for example, set out from England in 1845 in search of the last portion of the Northwest Passage. Its two ships were lost and all 129 men eventually succumbed to illness and exposure as, somewhere nearby, the local Inuit carried on with their lives. An extravagant succession of expeditions were sent to look for the remains and had limited success. In 2014 and 2016, both ships were finally found, thanks to melting ice—pretty much exactly where Inuit oral tradition, long ignored, had said they would be.

▲ *Passengers stand on the bow of the Silver Cloud as it sails through the icy water near Qaanaaq.*

ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY

All this is to say that visiting the Arctic isn't just about magnificent vistas and rare wildlife. It's also about the people whose subsistence and culture are bound to the environment. Almost 90 percent of the 57,000 residents of Greenland are Inuit (though because Denmark claimed it as a colony some 300 years ago, most also have some European ancestry). Sisimiut, Greenland's second-largest town, which has a population of 5,600, was our first stop. Sisimiut literally translates to "people living in a place where there are fox dens." I didn't see any foxes, but I did see all the elements of Greenlandic settlements that would become familiar on this trip: colorful houses; vast colonies of chained sled dogs that we were sternly instructed not to touch; reindeer and musk ox hides hung up to dry next to laundry; local artisans selling totems and trinkets carved from reindeer antlers or the tusks of walrus and narwhals; Lutheran churches; fishing boats and fish-processing facilities; smaller boats from which hunters were unloading reindeer and seal carcasses.

Our next stop, Uummannaq, about 260 miles north of Sisimiut, was similar, though smaller and dramatically situated on a rocky island loomed over by a sheer mountain shaped like a craggy heart. Huge icebergs drifted in the surrounding waters, white and electric blue, some flat and slablike, others carved by water and wind into peaks and spires. Since almost 90 percent of an iceberg's mass is underwater, and the melting process is destabilizing, the Zodiacs zipping us to shore gave the bergs a wide berth, just in case one unexpectedly cracked apart or rolled over. Silversea Cruises provides its Arctic expedition passengers with warm red parkas, and we made a visually arresting invasion, swarming through the residential streets like King George's troops. Some of us hiked around the heart mountain under the watchful eye of an armed guard patrolling for polar bears; others investigated the church and museum. The locals generally regarded us with bemused good humor: a temporary influx of 200 outsiders bringing income and novelty that, I hope, balanced out the annoying way we drifted into traffic and photographed everyone's houses.

Our red parkas were even more conspicuous in our next port, Pond Inlet, a community of 1,600 on Baffin Island in the Canadian territory of Nunavut. The colors were more muted than in Sisimiut, the streets quieter and unpaved. We'd

spent a day at sea crossing the Davis Strait to get there, arriving in the early morning, when Baffin's peaks were still shrouded in clouds. A local guide, accompanied by a merrily AWOL dog trailing a broken rope behind her, led a group of us out to a coastal archaeological site beside a creek: low stone rings that were once sod-roofed winter houses belonging to the Thule people, the ancestors of the modern Inuit.

Later, in the town's cultural center, a multigenerational group of locals, perhaps directly descended from the residents of those stone houses, gave a performance about Inuit culture. Their drum dancing and throat singing were haunting, their games and sports intriguing, but what really got me was the woman who sang "O Canada" in the Inuktitut language. What a delicate, complex thing it must be, the



relationship between an ancient people and the modern nation that subsumed them, laden with betrayals and failures but also, I could see, considerable pride. “Nunavut became our own land from the Northwest Territories in 1999,” the singer said, her voice building to a shout, “and changed the map of Canada and of the world!” The performers raised their arms, holding Nunavut’s red, yellow, and white flag aloft.

After Pond Inlet, we shifted fully into the natural-splendor portion of the voyage by hitting two Baffin Island fjords—the delightfully named Sam Ford Fjord and, the following day, Gibbs Fjord. Sam Ford Fjord looks like Yosemite on steroids, cleared of all the RVs and people. It is stunning, magnificent, blow-your-mind impressive. Glaciers undulate down valleys. Sheer cliffs rise up everywhere. Mountains carved by prehistoric ice sheets into fantastical, Seussian shapes created otherworldly horizons.

Sometimes, high among the peaks, we could see floating bands of white. These were the edges of ice caps in Baffin’s interior that date back tens of thousands of years to the last ice age, remnants of the huge prehistoric ice sheet that once covered almost all of Canada but that are now disappearing at an accelerating rate. Nicholas and I took it all in, trying not to think about the enormous carbon cost of polar travel, the mind-boggling quantity of fuel expended to bring a ship and hundreds of people and all their champagne and steak and breakfast bananas to the planet’s farthest reaches. The hope is that experiencing the Arctic will inspire visitors to advocate for the region and seek new ways to



mitigate energy consumption, perhaps through carbon offsets (I donate to reforestation projects). For its part, Silversea Cruises is a member of the Association of Arctic Expedition Cruise Operators, whose affiliates adhere to a set of sustainability guidelines that include limiting the number of guests going ashore and restricting the overall capacity of ships to the region.

THE NEXT DAY at Gibbs Fjord, we heard the announcement every Arctic cruiser hopes for. “The team has spotted polar bears onshore,” said an expedition leader over the PA, “just off the bow.” We hadn’t even made it out on deck when a follow-up announcement I’d barely dared wish for rang out—a large group of narwhals was also nearby. I scanned the shoreline through my binoculars (bring binoculars!). Big rock, big rock, big rock—big bear. Two bears, in fact, one sitting on the beach and one standing in the water, both dingy with summer dust. I scanned the water and caught puffs of the narwhals’ exhalations hanging above the surface, then arcing speckled bodies, and brief glimpses of tusks spiraling up to 10 feet out of their heads like flashing sabers. Dozens of them, maybe a hundred. Narwhals are so fantastical it seems they shouldn’t be real, but they are. I’ve seen them.

Here’s the thing about wildlife in the Arctic: seeing it takes patience and persistence. Many passengers on the *Silver Cloud* had been to the Antarctic Peninsula, where marine mammals congregate to feed and penguin colonies offer reliable encounters with hundreds or thousands of birds at a time. But on this voyage, we would go days without seeing anything but seabirds (no offense to seabirds). Then when we had this miraculous bout of fjordly abundance, some people complained that we didn’t get close enough to the animals. “We kind of saw them,” a woman murmured at that night’s recap, when a guide mentioned the bears we’d spotted. Thing is, it’s manifestly impossible, not to mention invasive and against international regulations, to get 200 cruise-ship passengers anywhere near a dangerous predator like a polar bear. And though we went out in Zodiacs to see the narwhals, the animals are accustomed to being hunted from small boats so, understandably, they moved away from us. Most of the images we see of wild animals are taken through powerful telephoto lenses or filmed by nature documentarians who spend months in pursuit



▲ An iceberg in the Markison Fjord, on the coast of Ellesmere Island, Canada.

◀ Near Ilulissat, a humpback whale breaks the surface.



▲ La Dame, the French fine-dining restaurant on the Silver Cloud.

of the perfect shot, and it’s easy to forget they’re not replicable with an iPhone. The beauty of seeing Arctic animals in nature is witnessing their very wildness, their mastery of the landscape. As we watched, one polar bear slid into the water and vanished, as if by magic. The other effortlessly climbed up the mountain behind it, disappearing over a ridge.

Over the following days, we continued north, visiting the Ellesmere Islands. Eventually, before we could reach our planned northernmost stop at Pim Island, drifting sea ice cut us off, and we turned east for Qaanaaq, Greenland. Itinerary changes are common on polar cruises, as conditions are unpredictable, but we were hardly deprived. We walked on a beach among pieces of glacial ice that made a sort of Modernist sculpture garden. We kayaked along rocky shores among harp seals and glaucous gulls. From Zodiacs, we saw a heap of fat brown walrus, perfectly camouflaged among fat brown boulders. In Greenland, we stopped in the town of Ilulissat, a neighbor to one of the most active glaciers in the world. Local boats took us out among the icebergs, the biggest we’d seen—so big they made entire topographies: rolling white hillsides and

rippling dunes, cliffs and mesas and arches to rival the Western landscapes of cowboy films.

On a less majestic note, we drank mai tais in the hot tub while the chill wind froze our hair, and we shook our tailfeathers at late-night dance parties led by cruise director Moss Hills.

POLAR BEARS, narwhals, walrus, whales—what else could remain on an Arctic traveler’s wish list? There was that one thing. On our second-to-last night, just before midnight, a green glow appeared in the sky. We crowded the ship’s upper deck, craning our necks as the northern lights flickered and pulsed, appeared and disappeared and appeared again. On the horizon, the moon was Aperol orange. The Milky Way spanned the dome. Meteorites streaked overhead.

Auroras are caused by charged particles from the sun traveling 93 million miles through space and interacting with atmospheric gases as they are pulled inexorably to Earth’s magnetic poles. It’s a journey that makes the mind reel and hints, like so much else we encountered on our voyage, at our own smallness, at how little we comprehend of the scale of space and time. The hidden bulk of icebergs, the ancient, unseen ice sheets cradled high among the mountain peaks, the animals moving soundlessly over the mountains and through the sea—we can never fully see these things. But we can glimpse, and we can marvel, and we can be humbled by the wonder of it. ✦

Plan an Arctic Adventure

The Journey

Silversea Cruises, one of the first luxury lines to offer expedition trips, now has a fleet of three ships for this purpose. There will be a variety of nine- to 27-day voyages above the Arctic Circle this year, though the closest itinerary that matches the one taken by the writer departs from Reykjavik in August 2021. silversea.com; this itinerary in 2021 from \$17,910, all-inclusive; shorter Arctic sailings from \$9,990, all-inclusive.

Getting There

Icelandair (icelandair.com) flies nonstop to Reykjavik’s Keflavik International Airport from several major U.S. cities.