

Greenland | Beside a remote

iceberg-filled fjord, a new camp is pioneering a very different version of luxury.

By Tom Robbins

In a remote reach of Nuuk fjord, Anders Lykke Laursen killed the engines of our boat and announced it was time to start fishing for our supper. The water was glassy-calm — no need to throw an anchor — and we drifted slowly on the tide. To one side of us a granite cliff, rising smooth and straight from the water, its summit lost in clouds. To the other, the still fjord dotted with icebergs the size of cars or houses, some bigger still. Most were white, as you'd expect, but some were grey and a few, newly minted after centuries compressed deep within a glacier, were a startling electric blue. "Watching icebergs is like watching clouds," said Anika Krogh, our Greenlandic host, as our minds stretched to find familiar shapes in the ancient ice.

In truth, though, I was mostly watching the clock. It was already 6pm which, given that we had two toddlers in tow, seemed perilously close to tea time to start messing around with fishing hooks. Laursen smiled, told me not to worry and passed me a square wooden frame coiled in fishing line and with a handle at one side, like an old-fashioned football rattle.

I gingerly dropped the weight over the side and the line unfurled into the fjord, the frame spinning in my hand. Finally it stopped, then immediately jerked; Laursen told me to wind it back in. I pulled and pulled, my four-year-old daughter tugging beside me, and with mounting disbelief saw a succession of huge fish rising from far below, shafts of sunlight darting off their dappled backs, suddenly revealing the dark-blue water to be so deep and clear that I felt a rush of vertigo. There were three cod on that first line. In five minutes we had nine fish, the smallest weighing three kilograms. We didn't even use bait.

Greenland requires you to reset your expectations, your sense of scale. The usual norms don't apply, the insulating cocoon of a lifetime's acquired wisdom is stripped away. Those cod amazed me more than they did my daughter.

For the Danes, both the legends and reality of Greenland are deeply woven into the national psyche; for most of the rest of the world, it is the blank space at the top of the map, a glimpse of bright white as you break from your in-flight movie — startling, but impossible to get any perspective and so swiftly ignored.

We had come in the middle of Europe's summer heatwave. As London pushed past 30C, it was becoming hard to sleep or think, and deep ugly cracks were opening in our parched lawn. We flew to Reykjavik, changed planes — our mood brightening at the sight of drizzle — then onwards in a 37-seat turboprop to Nuuk, Greenland's capital, sitting alongside trawlermen from Newfoundland and Alaska. Walking across the apron from plane to terminal, breathing the cold, bright air and looking up at the snow-streaked mountain tops, I felt more awake than I had in weeks.

We were here to see a bold new experiment in Greenlandic tourism — a luxury camp set up deep in the wilderness that would vanish without trace at the end of a season barely four months long. On paper it seemed a mad idea: tourism here is in its infancy, thwarted by lack of infrastructure. Greenland's small towns are scattered around its rocky fringe, the only land not covered by the ice cap, and none of them is joined by road to any other. Ferries are slow and infrequent; internal flights are expensive.

Last year, including arrivals by both air and cruise ship, the entire country received just under 85,000 tourists, significantly fewer than the British Museum gets in a week. It currently has no five-star hotels, no Michelin stars; Greenland's airports can offer only two overseas destinations, Copenhagen or Reykjavik. So can it really support a new operation charging hundreds of pounds per night to stay in a tent?

Fish stowed on deck, we pressed on in Laursen's little yellow taxi boat, finally



Greenland, life can feel pretty paradisaical. Nuuk, where we spent a few nights either side of our stay at the camp, is lavishly equipped for a town of just 17,000. There is a new cultural centre with a state-of-the-art cinema showing the latest Hollywood releases, a brilliant art gallery, a shopping mall, a huge swimming pool looking out over the bay, a gleaming central library and a modern hospital (to which, in emergencies, patients in remote communities are brought by helicopter). There is a university (where tuition is free), but if they don't like the courses, Greenlanders can choose to study in Denmark instead. There is a decent skate park, a thriving music and arts scene and a new literary star in Niviaq Korneliussen, a 28-year-old recently profiled in *The New Yorker*, whose novel about LGBT lifestyles in Nuuk has been published in Greenlandic, Danish and English.

And yet the wilderness is never far away. The snowy saddle of the Sermitsiaq mountain is a constant presence, just above the rooftops, and the links to



Cold comfort



catching sight of the camp two hours after we had left Nuuk — two hours during which we'd seen no other evidence of humanity. Five canvas tepees poked up on a bluff, a curl of blue smoke rising from the top of the largest. Behind them, a stream, a waterfall, a barren valley climbing to high grey cliffs. No trees — apart from a handful of sheltered spots in the far south, Greenland is entirely treeless. To make boats, the Inuit traditionally used driftwood lashed together with whale tendons; houses had stone walls and rafters made of whale bones. Igloos, the one thing we all know for sure about Greenland, turn out to have been fairly incidental, only used for temporary shelter when out on a hunt.

Our shelter was unlike any I'd stayed in before: a tent tall enough to stand up in, built on a wooden platform and with a proper bed wide enough for our family of four. There were electric blankets, white duvets, sheepskins and furs, a gas-fired heater, bedside reading lights. Next door another tepee housed the bathroom — with a proper toilet, basin and a hot shower. A short walk away, along a winding path marked out with pebbles, was an even bigger tepee, lit by fairy lights and candles, where chef Bjorn Ulrich Moi was preparing our cod with herbs foraged from around the camp. We sat around the open fire, drinking Qajaq beer poured from stumpy brown bottles with a musk ox on the label.

Previous guests have included members of the Jordanian royal family, a space entrepreneur, a tech billionaire and a society heiress who flew in by helicopter for a single night. But this isn't about "white-glove" luxury; dressing for dinner means pulling a down jacket over your fleece and, as on any camping trip, you will go home with your clothes smelling of woodsmoke. In some ways it is analogous with an upscale African safari camp, except here there are no

Clockwise from main picture: Camp Kiattua; Anika Krogh; Anders Lykke Laursen's taxi boat; Heidi and Hamish Robbins foraging for mushrooms with chef Bjorn Ulrich Moi; the children at the 'ice fjord' and running through Kapisillit
Stanislas Fautre; Tom Robbins

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Tom Robbins was a guest of Swoop Arctic (Swoop-arctic.com), a specialist that also offers trips to Arctic Canada, Russia and Svalbard. A 10-day, tailor-made trip, including four nights at the camp, three nights in Nuuk and one night in Reykjavik, with private transfers and guides, costs from £4,500 per person. For more information see visitgreenland.com. In summer night-time lows are typically around 5C, with daytime highs of 10C to 18C. Mosquitoes can be a problem on warm, still days — take repellent and head nets

big-ticket animal encounters to drive bookings. (What, I asked Anika, were our chances of seeing polar bears? "I've seen one once," she replied, "in London Zoo.") Rather, Camp Kiattua is the zenith of a new type of luxury denoted by remoteness and isolation. On those criteria, this is the Ritz. Greenland is the world's least densely populated country, with 0.08 people per square mile; England has 1,106. The nearest people to us were in the small Inuit fishing village of Kapisillit, a day's walk away on the far side of the mountain — there are no paths — and beyond that, the ice cap.

In the morning, we woke to the sound of icebergs — not, in fact, the epitome of silent serenity after all. In reality, in summer at least, they are noisy, restless things — constantly melting bit by bit until they crack into smaller pieces, or their centre of gravity shifts enough to send them spinning over and over, pushing out waves in all directions, until they find a new equilibrium. Up close you can hear the fizz of air bubbles being released, air that may have been trapped inside the ice since before the birth of Christ.

Bjorn — as huge his name suggests, gentle with it — took the kids mushroom hunting. The landscape might look bleak at first, but up close, you find it covered in a fragrant, springy carpet of moss, Arctic willow, Labrador tea and cloudberry. Sprinkled throughout are mushrooms, golden, white and orange, so numerous as to make filling the children's wicker baskets as easy as catching cod.

After lunch Anika took us to visit Kapisillit, 45 minutes away, a sea eagle following us as we slalomed at speed through a moving maze of icebergs. As we closed in on the village, I realised that up here even my basic senses needed recalibration. The air is so clear and dry that far-off things appear closer than they are: the brightly painted houses seemed to hover before us, but though Anika was gunning the 300hp speedboat across the millpond water, we seemed only to inch towards them.

I was apprehensive. The little I had read about remote Greenlandic communities painted a grim picture of alcoholism, unemployment and poverty. Anika, whose mother had at one stage lived in the village, arranged for us to have a *kaffemilie* — a meeting over coffee and cakes that is the main pillar of Greenlandic social life — with three women from the village. Was it, I asked with furrowed brow, hard living out here? "Oh no, it's paradise," laughed Else Marie Mikkelsen, 60. "We have everything here: blackberries, fish, reindeer — and quiet."

They did speak of some problems. Everywhere we went in Greenland, people seemed furious about the price of iceberg lettuces (about £5 each). But otherwise theirs were the same concerns as countryside dwellers anywhere — young people moving to the city, house prices being pushed up by second home owners, the cost and reliability of the WiFi.

Later, we went to the village's only shop, which, given that fewer than 100 people live here, we were expecting to be some kind of charmingly primitive frontier trading post. In fact it was rather better stocked than our local supermarket in London, complete with tiny trolleys, muzak and a uniformed woman



behind the counter. True, it sells fishing tackle, guns and ammunition, but also warm muffins, fresh fruit, toys and ice cream. "Things like coffins you have to pre-order," Laursen told me later. Before giving it up to drive his boat, he had been an executive at the company that runs the shop and a chain of others across Greenland — a concession given by the government on the proviso that they sold a minimum range of products.

The benevolent hand of the state is never far away in Greenland. It won self-rule from Denmark in 2009, yet the ties remain strong. The currency is the Danish krone; Margrethe II, Queen of Denmark, is head of state; and the Danish government still controls foreign policy (more important than you might think, given the strategically placed US air bases in the far north). In return, Denmark provides an annual subsidy of about £450m, a third of Greenland's national budget. (Despite hopes for diversification into mineral mining and tourism, the economy still largely depends on fish: 90 per cent of national exports, as *The Economist* memorably put it earlier this year, taste good with butter and lemon.)

Partly as result of that subsidy, on a long luminous summer's evening in

