

Upernavik 2010 A Sea Kayak supported climbing expedition;

The requirements for our trip, were a wilderness experience, a self contained 3 week trip and to attempt first ascents of new climbing routes. The obvious choice would be Greenland one of the last great wilderness and a pilgrimage back to the roots of sea kayaking. As Olly had visited the East coast of Greenland before he was tempted by the West Coast. The exact location was to be the Upernavik region which also gave the opportunity to attempt to circumnavigate 2 islands, Qaersorsuaq and Nutarmiut, depending on ice conditions a total distance of 260km. The rock in this area was also determined to be suitable for climbing. Not to mention almost 24 hours of daylight, darkness would not restrict our plans.

The first major hurdle would be how to fund the trip the logistics involved in transporting 3 sea kayaks food for 3 weeks and 3 people with all their kit are considerable. Fortunately through using all our contacts, presentations and e mail writing we received flights courtesy of Air Greenland through Greenland Tourism. Grant aid from The Sports Council for Wales, and The Gino Watkins Fund. Equipment from Palm, Mountain Equipment and P&H Sea kayaks.

So it began, our kayaks and food barrels left at the end of May care of Royal Arctic Line and we followed 6 weeks later with knowledge that the sea ice had cleared by the end of June. Flights are via Copenhagen with an overnight stop in Illulissat. Indeed "an area, so beautiful and unique, that UNESCO has accepted it on The World Heritage List". The Illulissat Glacier moves about 40 mts. per day and about 40 million tons of ice breaks off into the ice fiord every 24 hrs. Because of the shallow entrance to the Fiord larger icebergs ground and cause the ice to back up!

Then on to Upernavik here we were met by Nikolaj a local who was helping us with logistics and accommodation and giving us the welcome news that our kit had arrived intact!

Any group visiting Greenland has to accept that there is a risk of becoming a dish on a polar bear menu after all they are further up the food chain than us.

It is advisable to carry a gun to warn off and hopefully not kill the bear, not really fair on the bear, so we had chosen an area with minimal chance of bear encounters!

Sledge dogs outnumber people by about 2:1 and are largely redundant for the summer so they are either chained up in the settlements or left to roam on small islands . As their owners are un able to afford dog food more than twice a week they get a bit hungry unless they nab a passing Gore-Tex clad morsel.

The style of the expedition was important to us. We had debated the issue of emergency communication; thankfully mobile phones do not work beyond the settlement. Sat phones are an option but expensive and may encourage sneaky conversations with the outside world. The 3 of us wanted to maintain the wilderness experience and the essence of self sufficiency but equally felt that in a dire emergency it would be prudent that help could be reached. Therefore we decided on a VHF radio and Emergency Position Indicator Radio Beacon (EPIRB).

The kayaking was excellent except for the days spent climbing; we kayaked for 16 days app. 5/6 hours per day. The conditions were mostly calm and sunny we were only forced off the water on one occasion after encountering force 6/7 winds on an exposed headland. The highlights must be; two days paddling through pack ice near the glacier in Upernavik Isfjord

the peace and quiet were deafening. The outer coast of Qaersorssuaq was exceptional paddling under 900 meter cliffs broken with waterfalls and westward nothing until Baffin Island.

We knew that climbing would be interesting as trying to find new routes, without too many loose boulders, the necessity not to have to weed the crag to find hand holds and benefitting from some features to receive valued protective hard wear, can often be tricky. However we never envisaged that the hardest aspect would be to find a crag small enough. Some of the cliffs were 1000mts high (height of Snowdon) straight from the sea we met one climbing group that had spent 11 days scaling one cliff sleeping on porta ledges. With our small amount of kit we were looking for crags up to 300mts high, but we succeeded with names like; Fiord Fiesta, Smear or Disappear, More tea vicar and Get the shooters George ranging from VS-E2 on excellent granite they will be queuing up for second ascents?

Unfortunately or fortunately we encountered no polar bears, but for flora and fauna in Greenland you have to look a little closer; arctic foxes, who are very good at coming in gangs at night and stealing Olly's socks they must be desperate! large cod, Shags, Cormorants, Kittiwake, Fulmar, my favourite skilled flyer, Tern, Eider Duck, Snow Bunting, Grey and Black Guillemot and numerous. According to the Saga of Erik the Red, when he landed in Greenland in 982 "he called Greenland, as he said people would be attracted there if it had a favourable name." Whilst definitely not green the land does host many small flowers and shrubs.

Did I mention the ubiquitous ice bergs never really taken for granted the range of shapes is equal to snowflakes. Enchanting until large pieces fall off or they decide to roll over showing there is really 2 thirds more of them.

The weather was kind to us unlike the reports from the East coast we only had to move the tent once and get off the water for a few hours due to the wind the rain spared us for most but a few days. Temperatures ranged from hot to cold but nothing a dry suit or a thick down sleeping bag can't sort out.

Good well maintained gear is important on a committing expedition we were given for the trip P&H Scorpio kayaks which proved excellent. We chose plastic as most landings were tricky with heavily laden kayaks, they were big enough to take all the kit whilst remaining manoeuvrable and fast, the rudder system proved very robust and reliable.

Palm equipment provided excellent dry suits, surviving intact being worn almost continuously for 15 days, PFD's and spray decks. Their range of dry bags, in a range of sizes, meant that gear could be packed in all the nooks and crannies and stayed dry.

Mountain Equipment provided a range of warm and windproof shells which stood up to the range of weather and temperatures and the all important sleeping bag which was always welcome at the end of a hard day.

So was it a success, 2 circumnavigations, 6 new mountain climbing routes, my furthest north campsite 72° 50' N overlooking the spectacular Greenland Ice Cap. Exceptional kayaking scenery, we stayed mates and I think we are alive although it might take a while to engage our brains back into life back home, many thanks to all who made it possible.

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