

Despite its name, Greenland is not especially green and most of its huge expanse of land is hidden beneath a layer of ice several kilometres deep. During high summer there is 24 hours of sunlight and, in the depths of winter, permanent night. It gets cold, very cold.

The world's largest island is also troublesome to get to – all flights go via Copenhagen, Greenland being a Danish territory – and internal flights are the only practical way to get from town to town once you are there. With the economy's main industries being fishing, mining and hunting, its tourism industry is still in its infancy and in need of support. Indeed, tell most people you're going there 'and the reaction tends to be, "Greenland? Where the heck is that?"'. Even Thomas Rosenkrands, managing director of new Danish government initiative Branding Greenland, admits it is a seldom-visited destination.

A lot of so-called tourists to Greenland have been, Rosenkrands says, 'world leaders and a bunch of very important people', there to see first hand the visible effects of global warming. Step back though, all this can be seen in a different light. Greenland, for all of its 2.2m sq km, has a population of only 57,000; if Copenhagen had the same population density as Greenland, the city would be home to just two people, with very large gardens. This,

after all, is a place where the original and sparse settler communities had to devise the 'uaajeernej' or 'mask dance', not only in order to scare children into appreciating the dangers of the truly great outdoors, but to prevent in-breeding; anonymous, a masked dancer would select a partner for the night and, if pregnancy resulted, new blood would be introduced to the family. Eyes Wide Shut has nothing on the Greenlanders.

'You can find similar attractions elsewhere – Canada, Iceland, Norway,' says Rosenkrands (although he's not referring to the mask dance). 'But Greenland is different to the traditional tourist destination – there haven't been many tourists here yet – so it's still pure. You can still go places where nobody else, or perhaps just a very few people, have been before you. As a destination, Greenland does tend to encourage curiosity.'

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At the moment, this vast land – which was given its name by outcast Danish adventurer Erik the Red because of its verdant coastal valleys, best seen in the spring – draws only 55,000 tourists a year, 20,000 of those paying fleeting visits on cruise ship stopovers. That, and the wow factor invariably induced by saying you have been there, may be enough to encourage some

Greenland may not yet be glitzy but it is certainly grandiose. Josh Sims beats the crowds to take a snapshot of the most unspoilt of natural beauties.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE



wealthy trendsetters to visit before it becomes a fashionable vacation spot.

Glitzy Greenland may not yet be but the experiences the outdoor life offers are of the profound, life-changing variety. Astronauts speak of the transformative power of looking back on the Earth from space. As a more humble, tourist alternative, it is nevertheless a mind-altering experience to take a bumpy day trip in a 4x4 to stand on the rutted moonscape of the polar ice cap and look out over the whited-out nothingness. And so it is with most stays in Greenland: there are periods of meditative quietude. Indeed, it may not be the only place in the world to see the aurora borealis (northern lights) – a meteorological phenomenon whereby vast amounts of electrically charged particles, blown out from the sun at incredible speeds, collide with gases in the atmosphere and light the night sky with morphing swathes of colour – but here is it a nightly display. Nor is Greenland the only place to see humpback whales breaching. But watching them do so in the shadow of blue-white icebergs, natural sculptures the size of high streets, and against a crystal cloudless sky, is a spectacular experience.

Tourism may be a mixed blessing, even to the tourists. As Rosenkrands puts it, 'Greenland's capacity is not really suitable for a large numbers of tourists and that's not what we're going after anyway. Tourism will grow in Greenland, but only by about 5% a year, and only in line with what local communities want.'

As Greenland moves towards fully-fledged independence – the Danes are in a dilemma with the expense of Greenland on one hand and what,

in one of global warming's more ironic revelations, may prove to be one of the world's last vast oil-fields on the other – Greenlanders will be sure to protect their natural heritage. Life in the wilderness is a family affair, the pastel-coloured cottages that comprise most towns typically being passed down through generations, having been hand-built by forebears. The stories behind these quaint homes – into which strangers are often invited – are an apt analogy for Greenland itself: touching intimacy amid untouched wilderness. ■

Greenland has two international airports:

Kangerlussuaq (Søndrestrom) in West Greenland, which is served by Air Greenland (www.airgreenland.com) and **SAS** (www.flysas.com) from Copenhagen. **Narsarsuaq** in Southern Greenland is served by Air Greenland from Copenhagen and by Air Iceland (www.airiceland.is) from Iceland.

HOW TO GET THERE



THE EXPERIENCES THE OUTDOOR LIFE
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