

If you want to hire a helicopter in Greenland you need to book well in advance. The only way get around this vast, dream-like land is through the clear polar air. Greenland has no road networks connecting the sparse settlements that are often 100 miles apart.

This year helicopters have been particularly hard to come by as mining firms from around the world flock to the tundra to find their fortune. Meanwhile, up in Lluissat, thousands of huskies wait idly for a winter that comes later every year and the once enormous ice sheets that provide the dogs and their owners with a frozen hunting ground continue shrinking. Today only 500 of the population of 57,000 live by hunting alone.

Greenland is changing. The world's largest island, taking up an area the size of Europe, is in the midst of a physical and cultural thawing, the impact of which could extend across the world.

'Many people regard Greenland as a place where people still live in igloos,' says Professor Minik Rosing of the University of Copenhagen, a geologist born to parents from Greenland and Denmark. Rosing made his name for the discovery of the world's earliest known traces of life at Isua and knows Greenland better than anyone. 'There is so much land that we know so little about already that we are overwhelmed by what is already exposed,' he says. Greenland's interior is covered by an immense ice cap. Life is harsh for the people, the majority of whom live in the big towns like the

capital Nuuk, home to over a quarter of the population. The remainder are in settlements that dot the jagged coastline.

The belief that Greenland holds the promise of vast mineral wealth under the icecap stems from the fact that the geology is identical to that found in Canada's north west passage, which has led to large opencast mining in the Arctic region. The US Geological Survey estimates that there were 31.4 billion barrels of oil off the north east coast alone. 'It's a great unknown how much mineral wealth is beneath the surface,' he says. 'If large amounts of oil are found, the way Denmark perceives Greenland, the way Greenland perceives the world, and the way the world perceives Greenland is going to change rapidly.'

Greenland is currently a hive of prospecting activity that has drawn comparisons to the Klondike Gold Rush. In 2007 the Nuuk government awarded 40 exploration licences. Exxon, Chevron, Canada's Husky and Danish group DONG are all exploring for oil in the ocean beyond Disko Island in Baffin Bay off the west coast of Greenland. What was once the haunt of whalers is now an area divided into grids by state-of-the-art exploration vessels.

On land gold and rubies have also been discovered, as well as deposits of platinum, zinc and diamonds.

The emergence of this Arctic country as the 21st century's biggest frontier has its roots in the baking deserts of the Middle East. 'There is an increasing

Christopher Kanal looks at the changing face of a land-mass feeling the effects of global warming and finds that the world's largest island has also become a speculator's paradise.

NEW FRONTIER



concern in many places that we are getting more and more dependent on trade partners that we don't trust very much,' explains Rosing. 'Greenland is a place where governments and countries feel a bit more comfortable.'

Supply and demand

'It's a question of supply and demand, especially from the emerging economies of India and China,' says Inuuteq Holm Olsen, Greenland's Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and an advocate for independence. 'We don't want to remain dependent on contributions from the Danish taxpayers,' he says.

Up until quite recently the ruling Danes wanted to keep the modern world out of Greenland. It was only during the Second World War that things started to change. 'People didn't even have kerosene lamps then because it was considered too dangerous to have these natives fumbling around with them,' says Rosing. 'Of course the Americans didn't know that and so when they supplied Greenland in order to get access to the country's cryolite, suddenly light came to people's homes.'

Since what Rosing jokes as the age of 'enlightenment' heralded by the Americans, Greenland has opened up to the outside world. However it is the hunger for resources in the last century that has brought the world to Greenland's ice door, bringing with it a 21st century frontier fever.

Rosing believes that what will most define Greenland's future is not what happens on land but what happens at sea. 'Greenlanders have always lived with their back towards the land, looking towards the sea,' says Rosing. Over the

next 100 years, global warming will have a dramatic effect on the country's marine resources as the temperature rises. Not all the effects will be negative. Some, such as increased numbers of cod and halibut, will bring prosperity.

What Rosing is most excited by are not the minerals below the surface but in the vast lakes and melting ice caps which provide enormous hydro-electric potential for electricity that can be exported to energy hungry neighbours. However, Greenland needs to invest heavily in its infrastructure if these or any of its other resources are to be successfully exploited, and it will take time. 'In the North Sea it took 50 years to get established,' says Rosing of the opening up of the oil fields, which he compares to Greenland. 'I think that it will be on a similar timescale here.'

Greed for speed

However there are growing concerns that change is coming too quickly. Locals are particularly worried that they could soon be a minority in their own land. 'Mineral exploitation requires a lot of people to do it, which Greenland doesn't have,' says Rosing. Olsen says the government is working to mobilise the rest of the population to be in control of their future. 'We have experience from the Seventies where Denmark brought in lots of Danish workers to modernise our society, with us as spectators, which caused frustration and social problems,' says Olsen.

As new sea lanes, previously the stuff of legend, now turn from myth into reality, there is a new scramble for the North Pole. Last year, Russia sent a submarine 13,000 feet beneath the ice to plant a titanium flag on



the sea bed. Under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas, Arctic countries can lay claim to the seabed beyond 200 nautical miles if it is an extension of their continental shelf. Denmark is currently spending millions studying the undersea mountain range known as the Lomonosov Ridge.

However the big powers are on the move and there is the prospect of a militarisation of the Arctic. The US has already started updating its airbase in Thule in northwest Greenland that during the Cold War was a staging post for Strategic Air Command's nuclear bombers.

At a time when the Arctic has become the object of strategic ambitions as never before, Rosing thinks it would be a disaster if his country had a big oil find and used the revenue to buy independence. 'My personal opinion is that it would be very unpractical and unsafe to be a very, very small, very independent nation living in the middle of all this.' In November there will be a referendum where Greenlanders can vote on expanding their level of self-rule.

Since 982 AD when Eirik the Red first claimed he had found a 'green land' to attract others to join him, the world has had misconceptions about Greenland. Only time will tell whether the great Greenland bonanza becomes a reality, but either way this restless, extraordinary Arctic country is a 21st century frontier. ■

The Wealth Collection's Josh Sims heads to Greenland for some Arctic R&R.

Read the full story at www.wealthcollection.com

BRIEFING

Since 1979, Greenland has been a self governing division of Denmark. The Danish government in Copenhagen retains responsibility for Greenland's foreign policy, defence, policing and judiciary. Greenland receives large subsidies from the Denmark and has co-determination and veto rights on key issues, such as the use of natural resources.

President
Hans Enoksen

GDP
€1.4 billion

Population
57,564 (2007), 88% Inuit and Inuit-Danish mixed, 12% Europeans, mostly Danish

Area
2,166,086 km²

Industries
Mining, fishing, hides and skins, small shipyards

Capital
Nuuk: population 15,000. Most settlements are along the fjords in the south west of the main island where there is a relatively mild climate.

Airports
12 in addition to five heliports and 41 helistops

Best hotel
Hans Egede Hotel, Nuuk, www.hhe.gl



'GREENLAND IS A HIVE OF PROSPECTING ACTIVITY THAT HAS DRAWN COMPARISONS TO THE KLONDIKE GOLD RUSH.'



Kangerlussuaq airport: the world is coming to Greenland.