

Under the midnight **SUN**

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Early in our six-week, 360-mile expedition into the fjords and ice fields of Greenland's northwest coast, Thomas Truninger, Rafic Mecattaf, my brother Sylvain and I paddled into the Uvkusigssat Fjord. We didn't know then whether our planned 25-mile land crossing at the far end was even possible, nor could we be certain the 60 mile-long fjord was ice-free. The Inuit would often answer our questions with the word 'imaqa', meaning maybe.





The low arctic sun illuminated this lost iceberg's strange cell formation. In summer the icebergs become vast floating sculptures, setting off on a long and uncertain voyage with only the wind and the current to steer them. It's from our sea kayaks that we got a true demonstration of their size as they towered high above us, and when the sun shone on these icy behemoths, their beauty was breathtaking.



Being so close to the inland ice was a powerful feeling, tinged with danger. From these deceptively calm glaciers, huge blocks of ice could crash into the sea, creating breaking waves full of jagged ice. When the ice became too thick, the four-person team took turns to break a thin trail through the pack, with the others following behind.



On several walks we had to ford rivers. Here Sylvain charges through a 36°F (2°C) stream after throwing his clothes to the other side. On some occasions the stream was so strong that we had to swim for some seconds to reach the other shore. After such forced fresh swims we felt reborn.



For two days pack ice kept us from reaching the small village of Nuqatsiaq. This photo was taken on the third day, after a storm had dispersed the ice blockade just enough so that we could paddle through it, becoming the first people that summer to reach Nuqatsiaq from the sea.



Sylvain with the biggest cod of the trip, about 11lb. The first thing we would do after setting camp each evening was to go fishing. We sometimes covered the fillets in herbs and kept them in plastic bags in the bottom of our kayaks. It's like a fridge down there, and the technique gave a good consistency and taste to the fish. We ate like kings, often cooking mussels for starters, or snacked on raw sea urchins.



The Inuit also live on the sea's bounty. Here Rafic had the honour of cutting into the belly of a seal after it had been skinned. The villagers then offered us raw blubber and still-warm pieces of the liver. In the three small villages we visited, seal meat is still the basic food for the Inuit people. They also hunt whale, walrus and polar bear for food, but there is a quota on these species. Only the seal has no quota.



The Inuit love to laugh, talk and play games. Here Thomas arm-wrestles with Peter, who took us across the Upernavik Fjord by motorboat to the small village of Tussaqa, of which he is the sole remaining inhabitant. After restocking in the village's only store, we took our leave. The real warmth in this icy landscape, we decided, resides in the friendliness of the locals.



We had paddled about 25 miles through a steep-sided fjord, battling a cold, relentless headwind and dangerous conditions. There was nowhere to land, and from our kayaks we watched massive rocks tumbling down the mountainsides and crashing into the water like meteors. Ice blocked our exit from the fjord, and twice we had to get out of the kayaks and drag them over the pack ice. Finally a small sheltered bay appeared in front of us, and we could rest.



We slept well in spite of the 24-hour sunlight. We found a rhythm, and realised we prefer to paddle under the midnight sun. At that hour the light becomes magical. The sea turns crimson blue and so glassy that everything is reflected as in a mirror. Mountainsides lighten into powerful reds, shadows lengthen, and the icebergs seem to be illuminated by a giant spotlight. This spectacle lasts for several hours until the sun, slowly but unquestionably, once again starts its ascent into the sky.



I took this photo of Sylvain at the end of our first portage, which was a 12-hour, 2.5-mile shakedown. Our loaded kayaks weighed more than 200lb, and our next portage would be for 25 miles over rocky and sometimes steep terrain. We pulled 12 hours a day for five days to finish that portage, and we walked every mile five times – once to scout the route, and then two round trips with two guys on each kayak. Altogether we hiked and dragged kayaks for 125 miles in five days.



The light was perfect, and I wanted a photo that shows the immensity of the landscape. We all felt very small and stood there for an hour, just contemplating the scene. Our Saga maps, dating from 1970, showed the whole sea in front of us covered by glaciers. We were shocked to see how far the glaciers have retreated in less than 40 years. In some places it is more than six miles. ←

MORE INFO

Sponsors: greenland.com, Prijon, Exped, MSR, SealLine, Platypus, Artistic Sportswear

On the web: For more info and photos, please check the expedition website: www.photopulse.ch/greenland2007_new

TRAVEL INFO

When to go: End of June/July/August

How to get there: By plane from Copenhagen to Kangerlussuaq. Areas further north are serviced by Air Greenland: www.airgreenland.com

Weather: From June to July the sun never goes down. Temperatures can be 15–20°C in the afternoon, and around 0°C at midnight. The weather is subject to fast changes!

For detailed information on Greenland, visit the National Tourist Board of Greenland's website: www.greenland.com