Retirees Go on a Greenland Expedition

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In early 2020, three County retirees - Merni Fitzgerald, Sara Simmons, and me, Susan Mittereder- had gone to Antarctica. Two years later, along with Karen Harwood and several other County retirees, we ventured to the opposite end of the earth by circling the Svalbard archipelago and sailing in the ice floes to 82 degrees north latitude. The following year, we contemplated the wilds of eastern and Arctic Canada or maybe Greenland. Or, Iceland, too; perhaps the whole "fire and ice" island this time. We had come to love the stark beauty of the icy portions of our earth's wilderness areas.

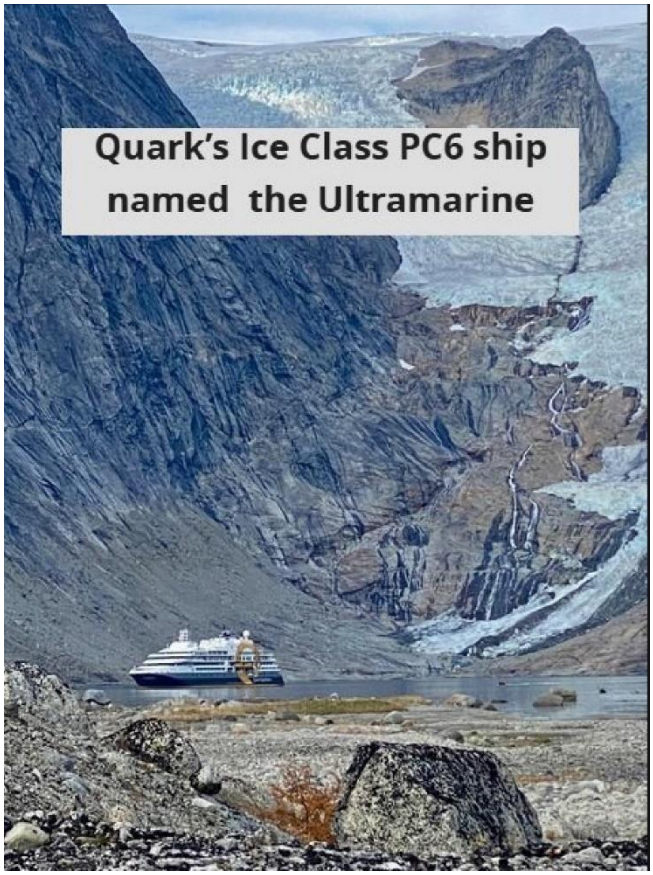


So, it started again with a dream—and then a plan. By June 2023, the four of us—Sue, Karen, Merni, and Sara—had signed up with Quark, a polar expedition company that had a brand new Ice Class PC6 ship, the *Ultramarine*. It also had two twin-engine helicopters that could venture further into the polar wilds. We would be exploring the remote areas of southern Greenland.

We flew first from Dulles to Reykjavik, Iceland, spending one night and then flying the next day by charter to Narsarsuaq, the site of an old U.S. military air base from World War II. As we arrived, we saw the *Ultramarine* awaiting us in a deep blue sea, looking like a "speck' next to a majestic Greenland mountainside—a hint of things to come. We quickly embarked on what would become our home for the

next ten days, where we had already been matched with our three-part polar expedition jacket, muck boots, and safety gear.

We immediately set sail to visit three areas of southern Greenland: the wild east, the place of dramatic icescapes from the cold ocean current flowing south from the Arctic; the “Arctic Patagonia” side of south Greenland with its stunning fjords, majestic mountain peaks, and very remote settlements; and the Westland, next to a warmer Labrador Sea current and the fertile area of the country, home of the storied early Viking settlements.



An experienced team with expertise in history, marine biology, glaciology, ornithology, and photography would lead our expedition cruise. Our expedition leader was Jake, who worked with our Ukrainian ship captain to establish our best-case scenario of where, when, and what we would visit daily based on constantly updated weather analyses. We had our lifesaving and expedition briefings and were set to go!

As “veterans” of two previous polar expeditions, we knew that ALL daily and hourly activities were weather-dependent. We would start with Plan A and move on to Plan B, C, D, or further, if need be. How prophetic! Our clear weather landing and embarkation in Narsarsuaq changed dramatically as we sailed into the open waters and navigated our way to the “wild east” of southern Greenland. We had fog-sun-fog in rapid succession; sometimes, we could not see the edge of our balcony due to the ghostly, foggy morass that enveloped us. The captain and Jake would reposition the ship; if the helicopters could not fly and we could not safely land our zodiacs, we could go cruising in the zodiacs in a safe cove. So we did! Our photos from that

first zodiac cruise show the changing drama of a moving landscape of fog, white ice floes, deeper blue ice chunks, hidden mountain tops that suddenly appeared, and a lone seal that popped its head up and quickly disappeared.

Over the next few days, we adapted daily to the weather and experienced a full panoply of activities. The ship hosted a polar plunge off the back side decks; most of us watched from the warmth and safety of balconies or any other warm spot on the ship. Merni and I had previously done two polar plunges in Antarctica and Svalbard by walking into the icy chill, but this plunge required a jump or dive from the ship. The lack of good swimming skills daunted me. It was a lost opportunity for me; maybe I would have to return to Greenland and find another way to experience those chilly waters.



Over the next week, the weather cleared, and we managed to do helicopter "flight-seeing" over Greenland's dramatic mountains and glaciers, glancing at the ice sheet in the distance. It was a thrill to see the tiny *Ultramarine* from a distance and then land safely on the ship. We also managed several zodiac landings and hikes on Greenland's fjords' rocky and pristine terrain. The fall flora of Greenland in late September was stunning, with a surprising mixture of reds, oranges, russets, purples, and greens in this sub-Arctic climate. The beauty and magnitude of the scenery made up for the dearth of critters and birds this time of year, with winter around the corner. The birds had mostly migrated elsewhere, as had the whales. Another reason to return, perhaps? And I am pleased to report that, yes, we did manage to see the Northern Lights from our ship several times. We would receive a low-key "wake-up" call from Jake over the PA system, and we would scramble to throw on our expedition jackets over our pajamas and run to the closest outdoor deck! It was very chilly outside, but worth the effort and a colorful bonus to the beauty we had already seen that day.

We also managed to visit several villages in the sparsely populated south Greenland. We spent a half-day in the scenic trading village of Aappilattoq, perched on Prins Christian Sound's shores (Ikerasassuag). As we arrived in our zodiacs, some of the fishermen were finishing the clean-up from the killing of a whale the previous day; the meat had been divided among the villagers for their use in the coming year. This is culturally part of their heritage; they are permitted one per year by the laws of the Danish government, which owns Greenland.

At the end of the trip, we took ferries from the *Ultramarine to* the Kujataa UNESCO World Heritage site, where we walked among the remains and replicas of Brattahlio, the estate of Erik the Red. The microclimates in the fjords of this southwestern Greenland area allow farming and the raising of sheep ~ this was the area of Greenland that attracted the Vikings hundreds of years ago. It is important to know that Greenland to this day is very sparsely populated, with a population of only slightly over 55,000; of that, about a third of the people live in the capital city of Nuuk, which is a bit further north than we traveled, on the western fjord side of Greenland. The city is also considered “sub-Arctic,” located below the Arctic Circle, at about 64 degrees north latitude.



Finally, a highlight of this special trip was our helicopter ride to Greenland's ice sheet or ice cap. It is massive ~ 1500 miles from north to south and over 700 miles east to west. And it is melting. Each passenger had the option of this excursion; we traveled together on this adventure (see the picture). We were possibly on an area of ice where no other human had ever traveled; Greenland is one of this planet's most remote and least settled wilderness areas. We felt awe to see and experience this; we also worried about the dark pollution and sediment we saw and the increasing melting of this

ice. I felt like I did when I first traveled to Africa as if I had left a piece of my heart in this vast, remote area of our fragile earth, where we are all just visitors.

We all felt like we had now become ambassadors of Greenland. We have seen and experienced what few have done, and we feel very blessed to have had the opportunity to be there. And we have not ruled out a return. Time marches on. Stay healthy and active out there, retirees!

Sidenote ~ immediately after our trip to Greenland, the four of us piggybacked a seven-day trip to Iceland, where we traveled counterclockwise on the circle of road that encompasses the island. We were a group of twelve women and spent one night each in guesthouses and inns along the way. It was an active trip with several hikes, walks, and visits to waterfalls, lagoons, beaches, icebergs, volcanic lakes, geothermal areas, and glaciers. It is truly a land of fire and ice and a very doable trip from northern Virginia via Dulles. We were thrilled to see the Northern Lights several times while visiting this friendly island. I know many County retirees have been to Iceland, so I focused on writing about Greenland, as I thought it would be of greater interest to most readers. Travel on, retirees!!