



On the other hand, amid a global subprime hangover, Greenland is the perfect pilgrimage. Erik the Red was the world's first real estate scammer, arriving in 982 after Iceland tossed him out for murdering a bunch of folks. To try and attract some company, he named the place *Grænland* ("Greenland").

This plan does not appear to have met with much success. Greenland is as big as the entire western USA, but has fewer people than Santa Cruz. The East Coast, where we went, has less than 3,000 inhabitants. None of them appear to be surfers. Good hunters, though.

Actually, there are a couple of very good reasons Greenland is not a major surfing destination. For one thing, polar water, in its liquid form, is a reluctant and minority substance. The Greenland ice cap is over two miles thick. It is so heavy, the land underneath has been pushed 1,000 feet below sea level. There is so much ice in Greenland that if it melted, all the oceans in the world would rise by 23 feet.

Judging from the size and quantity of the icebergs, Greenland is warming to this plan. And that leads to the second obstacle to quality surf: 90 percent of an iceberg sits below the surface. Accordingly, every shallow spot that might feature a breaking wave has a big ass iceberg parked on top of it. You can try and surf the edge of the berg, but as our Captain Siggi told us, "Then you will die."

In spite of all this, our Greenland expedition was one of the great surf trips of all time. It is epic and staggeringly beautiful.

You land in Kulusuk, a dirt airstrip pretending to be an airport on the mid-section of the East Greenland coast.

It has little equipment and requires a visual approach. The weather changes every few minutes, so the flight takes off from Reykjavik and goes three hours across the Denmark Strait. If the pilot can see the runway, he lands. If not, he'll circle around the island and try again. After three tries, it's back to Iceland until the next day. And don't count on making a connection. Kulusuk can get socked in for more than three months.

The only other plane in the airport, a U.S. Coast Guard transport, was not a reassuring fallback. They were in Kulusuk to look for the wreckage of a plane that went down in WWII over the Greenland ice sheet. With global warming and improved technology, they were hoping to finally find it and bring back the bodies of the soldiers still buried in the ice.

Greenland has long been on the surf radar as the last large landmass that "should" have great surf. Information in advance of our trip was hard to come by. Wave model Web sites show frequent lows just below Iceland that spin easterly swells right into the coast between Kulusuk and the southern tip of Cap Farvel (meaning "farewell" in Danish). Maps and satellite photo sites show endless fjords and points. Even figuring out the likely water temperature proved difficult. There are no buoys to provide readings and, frankly, why should there be? There are not enough people sailing around to care.

The polar current runs down the coast of Greenland, counter to the relatively warm Gulf Stream that comes up the U.S. East Coast and past Iceland before finally dying in the waters of Svalbard, near the 80th parallel. This current carries icebergs southward from innumerable glaciers connecting the inland ice sheet to the ocean.

ICEBERGOLOGY

Words by Michael Rowbotham and Chris Tellis
Photography by the Crew

Visibility: zero feet. Air temperature: zero centigrade. Water temperature: zero tolerance. Icebergs the size of super tankers, and, after calving, there are billions of little ice cubes floating around that don't ever seem to melt. This is not the Jan & Dean surf fantasy.





Nevertheless, we hoped that in late August there might be some mixing or warmer areas near shore.

Only one guy runs charters in Eastern Greenland: Sigurdur "Siggi" Jonsson (www.boreaadventures.com). Siggi and his boat, the *Aurora*, are out of Iceland. This is good, because Greenland is unlike any waterscape you have ever sailed. When confronted with violent storms, zero visibility, and thousands of sharp, floating hull-rippers, an experienced Nordic boatman is your best insurance. But Siggi was also that perfect combination of calm, cheer, and competence that makes for a great captain. He also makes great fresh bread in the morning. And, needless to say, Siggi was deeply amused by the lunatic nature of our quest to find waves.

The *Aurora* is a 62-foot sloop, recently retired from Sir Robin Knox-Johnston's fleet of around-the-world racing boats. Spartan but comfortable, *Aurora* is well-equipped and has a reinforced hull. Our group of eight was an eclectic one, mostly from the San Francisco (California) area. The most hardcore surf explorer was Mark Renneker, big-wave aficionado and long into the game of finding waves in cold and remote areas of Alaska, Antarctica, Iceland, and Svalbard. Artist Jessica Dunne, a veteran of many surf explorations herself, brought a well-honed sense of humor and a wetsuit. Kevin Starr, a surfer and mountain climber who spends most of his time working with health and poverty projects. Jean Oelwang manages Richard Branson's many philanthropic efforts. Kevin and Jean have projects in so many countries they practically need a new passport each year. Audio producer, financier, and recovering museum educator Chris Tellis was ready for more after a trip to the Aleutians in 2008. Another veteran of the surf exploration circuit, pain researcher Michael Rowbotham, was accompanied by his 20-year-old son, Ian Rowbotham, and Danish father-in-law Christian Petersen. Nicknamed "Captain Emeritus," the 76-year-old Christian had the most ocean experience and was the only one to have spent a prolonged period in Greenland. A merchant marine since age 16, he retired with an "unlimited captain's license," meaning he was considered qualified to pilot any size vessel, no matter how big.

The plan was simple: For 14 days, we would follow the coast from the Kulusuk/Angmassalik area as far down as we could, maybe even to the tip of Cape Farvel. A high-pressure system sits over the great inland ice sheet all summer, keeping the skies clear except for dense low fogs that constantly dance in and out along the coast. The wave models were promising for the last half of August 2009, with two likely

swells coming our way from Iceland. Cruising south along the Greenland coast was mindboggling, a vast panorama of deep blues and shimmering white. Sailing under clear skies and over calm seas, we wove our way through a waterscape of impossible icebergs. The great sculpture gardens at the Hirshhorn or the Nasher are insignificant debris fields compared to what you find floating off the coast of Greenland.

The land here is a series of deep fjords and vertical peaks. There is simply nothing in-between, no sandy rivermouths or cobblestone points. Every mile we pored over charts and peered through binoculars looking for rock reefs of surfable depth. Nansen's Fjord, one of many that looked promising on the nautical maps, is the termination of three big fingers of the inland ice sheet. It was impenetrable due to a traffic jam of huge icebergs. A no-name bay we tried to check provided the next lesson in surf icebergology. Icebergs perfectly reflect swells back from whence they came. The clean, six-foot groundswell, apparent when sailing a half mile off the coast, became a jumbled mess after hitting a dozen icebergs near shore at all different angles.

Finally, about a mile off the coast we saw some whitewater that had potential. It is too risky to sail in close enough to see and photograph the breaking faces. A quick rescue should the *Aurora* go down is an impossibility. We were already out of helicopter range. It was a sparkling sunny afternoon, so we pulled on the wetsuits and paddled over. The water was probably about 36°F, tolerable with a 6mm wetsuit with an extra hood, 5mm gloves, and 7mm booties. The wave turned out to be no more than a hole in the ocean. When the swell came out of deep water it hit the rock and then swallowed into a double-overhead, gaping mouth. Chris peered over the edge and saw a "granite fist" that emerged as the wave sucked out. Even trying to shoulder hop was out of the question, because the wave was shaped like a semicircle that drew in from both sides and promised to pitch you onto the rock. Renneker got caught inside and was absolutely drilled, deep and cold. Here we were in the middle of the ocean, oblivious to any chart or warning. We named it "Kraken" after the Norwegian sea monster of ancient legends whose whirlpools sent mariners to their death should they wander close to the creature on a dark night.

It took nearly a week to find a similar but slightly more forgiving slab reef with potentially surfable waves. Although still concave, this one had





enough edge that you could find an occasional face. Chris paddled into one on a Boogie board and air-dropped over two, six-foot ledges before finding a face that shot him into the flats like a watermelon seed. Mark did better, catching four waves, getting drilled on six and duck diving a dozen. This was plenty of entertainment for the rest of us. Modern wetsuit technology has made this frontier inhabitable, and just being in the ocean was exhilarating. It was an incredible scene, a mile to sea in the deepest blue water you can imagine, with a backdrop of massive icebergs. When the wave pitched it spit out a huge explosion of foam and whitewater. We named it "White Fang."

That was the end of the surf. A storm forced a two-day trip up Skjoldungen Fjord to find anchorage. The scenery on the fjord was absolutely spectacular – the dozens of vertical, 3,000-foot granite faces plunging directly into water the color of jade were a mountaineer's dream, like nothing any of us had ever seen. You could park all of Yosemite Valley in one little corner of the fjord. Between the peaks, huge

glaciers with waterfalls and avalanches spilling off the ends surrounded us. Kevin and first mate Robert Thor took the opportunity to climb one of the peaks with ropes and crampons, while the rest of us hiked glacial valleys.

With the strong polar current now slowing *Aurora* to four knots under full power, we needed all our remaining time to cover the nearly 300 miles of coast back to Kulusuk. The sail back provided the final lessons about surfing Greenland. Icebergs move surprisingly fast. A safe anchorage is one where the shore provides at least two opposing rock walls to tie on to and icebergs can't drift right into the hull. Summers are short, and just one very cold night was all it took to turn the ocean to slush by the next morning. There are also no guarantees that the fjord mouth will not close overnight with a berg traffic jam, which nearly happened to us.

The awe-inspiring scenery masks the harshness and foreboding of East Greenland. The inhabitants of the one and only settlement on Skjoldungen Fjord finally gave up and petitioned the

Danish government to remove them. Even if we found a first-rate reef to surf on the trip down, it likely would suffer the fate of "Kraken." A huge iceberg drifted into the reef after we left and set up long-term residence. Who knows how many other surfable reefs were similarly invisible to us?

But like any surf trip, the success depends on the company you bring and the attitude you leave behind. It was great traveling with three generations, exquisite adventure women and world-class Boggle players. The days were full of incomparable adventures, hiking up glacier-carved valleys few humans had visited. At night the waters around our anchorage lit up with the reflections of dazzling northern lights shimmering over our heads. We hiked and swam and fished and swapped tales and assembled an epic stash of lifelong memories that linger in that sweet spot where you park the best of times. ☑

(Thanks to Siggie and the *Aurora*.)