



# North of Disko

## ADVENTURES ON THE GREENLAND'S WILD WEST COAST

In early August of 2012, an email circulated among a group of friends. It was titled "Greenland Calls." The invitation was for a sailing, kayaking, climbing, and photography expedition into the wild, in the spirit of living adventure. A year later, the plan was set to go into motion. The odyssey would begin with a sailboat crossing of the North Atlantic from Ireland to Greenland. Once there, a diverse and talented crew would sea kayak remote coastlines, hike isolated wilderness and climb some of the world's wildest rock. Join this team for the trip of a lifetime on Greenland's West Coast.

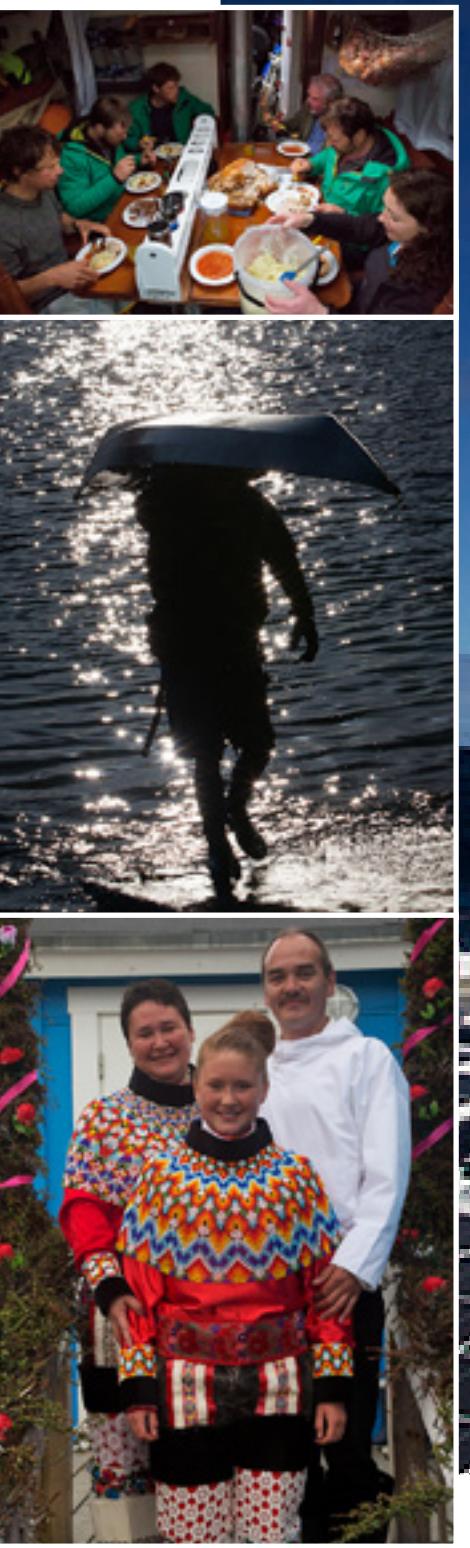
Words: Dougal Fleming - Photos: Daragh Muldowney

Our crew of seven made the outward voyage from Ireland to Greenland on board the 50-foot Killary Flyer, taking turns at having our hands frozen to the wheel for the fifteen-day crossing. In teams of two, one would steer while the other watched out for ice, boats or random objects. We were a mix of experienced and novice sailors navigating a boat stocked with 1.5 tons of food, equipment, fuel and water. The westerly ocean voyage from Galway, Ireland, brought with it three mid-Atlantic storms. At its most ferocious, 60-knot winds gusted from all directions while waves dwarfed the boat and smashed against it. We even surfed a tail wind at 9-knots on bare poles. A novice on the water, fourteen consecutive days of seasickness dropped me to a depth of anguish I've never felt before.

With only seven of us on board there was potential for sick leave from the daily duties. Each of us stood 4 two-hour watches each day, in addition to conducting boat maintenance, cooking, cleaning, and sending GPS data and blog updates. Eating and sleeping were squeezed into what little time remained.

The exhausting routine and never-ending seasickness were, however, punctuated with moments of pure magic. While weaving through ice near the long-awaited Greenland coast, a call came from the captain, "Whale breaching!" In the distance, a huge black figure launched itself out of the water and crashed back down, a mighty creature performing to an awe-filled audience.

Once we reached the southwestern tip of the world's largest island, we spent another week sailing north up the west coast towards Assiaat, Greenland's fifth largest town with a population of 3,000 people. In Assiaat, our kayak expedition leader Ali Donald learned to roll a kayak the Inuit way. His teacher sat gracefully in a boat made of canvas wrapped around a tight wooden frame. Polar bear carvings made of narwhal tusk decorated the seal skin deck lines. Donald recalls being humbled by the experience: "Despite coaching kayaking for almost twenty years, over those two hours, I found myself in the role of awkward, clumsy learner, trying to imitate Adam's every move. I had plenty of success, but never with his ease and style. With absolute composure, he ran through more than 30 different ways of rolling."



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Another 300 miles of northward sailing brought us to Upernivik. Shortly after arriving, we were invited to share a meal of seal, whale, walrus, fulmar, halibut and polar bear, all generously bathed in oil made of animal blubber. We all hoped the added fat would help keep us warm as we set out the following day for a fourteen-day self-supported sea kayak mission along the coastline to Umanak Island. Over the next two weeks we would paddle 509 kilometers through iceberg fields and below sheer cliffs, in a land devoid of people, under a sun that refused to set. Paddling up to seven hours a day, we stopped only to eat lunch and to make camp each night on spits, deltas, or beaches. We adapted to the expeditionary routine of long days on the water, and the vital tasks of packing gear, cooking and pitching tents all become automatic.

On day two we found ourselves weaving through huge icebergs, heading up a fjord toward their source. That evening we pitched our tents facing the sun and watched as it traveled through the sky, never dropping below the horizon. Hiking a rocky hill behind camp, we were greeted by the Greenland Ice Cap stretching to sky, blending with the clouds, engulfing mountains.

A couple days later we hit our first headwind and left the high density of ice, both unwelcome developments. My teammates, stronger and more

experienced than I was, kept up a pace I found difficult to maintain. I found security in their strength, but also the unfamiliar feeling of being the weakest link. With no whitewater to provide even occasional momentum, I struggled to settle into the Zen-like monotony of a continuous paddle stroke. I pushed myself to be present, stay focused, look to the next headland, next peninsula, and then reel it in: 5 miles, 3 miles, 1 mile. Landmarks could look close and still be far away. Body tired, arms hurting, I found myself wondering, "Why am I doing this?" The surprise and wonder of seeing an arctic fox at lunch demonstrated that what Greenland takes with one hand, it gives with the other.

We pitched a campsite on an island opposite the town of Proven, and it turned out we were not alone. Nearby were three packs of sled dogs left outside to toughen up; but it was clear from the start that neither party had any intention of learning more about the other. That night by the fire I made my first fishing line, and with it caught an ugly old fish, which I filleted, cooked, and ate. The sense of having hunted my own food was more satisfying than the taste. With the sun still circling in the sky, I stretched out the aches and gave in to sleep.

Surviving windy passages and mosquito-infested camps, we were compensated with stunning ice sculptures and ever changing mountain ranges. The wildness was honing our senses. We were soon able to identify camps, water sources, wind, tide and current directions, and traces of humans or animals, almost instinctively. One morning a music teacher and a fisherman stumbled upon our camp. We cooked breakfast with them before realizing why we were still so tired. It was 3:30 a.m., the ever-present sun deceiving our confused body clocks. As we packed up to leave, dolphins and seals poked heads out, a reward for our early rising. However, the force 4 headwinds and endless sea cliffs offering no refuge for a lunch stop made for the toughest day yet. The call of nature beckoned us all at some point, meaning we had to raft up in choppy seas, pop the deck, undo the dry suit, and kneel over the next man's kayak. Stage fright wasn't an option.

Day eleven brought early morning fog, making our first crossing of the day blind and complicated. It was cold and damp. We stuck close, and for the first time the GPS wasn't just a luxury but a necessity. Later, after it cleared, we continued on a 10-mile crossing in the direction of an Arc de Triomphe-style iceberg. Upon hearing a shotgun-like sound, we turned and saw a giant

of the ocean, a fin whale at least 25-meters long. Again the next day we saw the same great beast, but this time with a calf. These massive mammals, strong easterly headwinds and a baffling coastline made for an assault on the senses. Carved by ice and sun over millions of years, coves, stacks, caves, and ridgelines rose straight from the sea jutting into the heavens.

The final day brought with it the biggest open water crossing of the trip. With little wind and no current to note, we had perfect conditions. Three stops in open water for rest and refueling broke up the long paddle. When we finally arrived at Umanak Island the relief was intense. We crossed the last few waves together quietly. We had done it. The journey was over.

We happened to arrive in Umanak during the town's 250th anniversary celebration, part of which was a kayak race. There was a 25,000 Danish Krone purse split between the first five finishers and the on-shore crowd was huge, at least 1,000 people. Despite our exhaustion from the trip, we felt compelled to participate in such a lively event. Most of the racers were Inuits in traditional boats, longer, slimmer and lighter than ours. We wondered if we even stood a chance—ducks versus swans it seemed.



The gun was fired and the first two racers shot off the line. The sixteen-time Greenland champion and the local top dog paddled away into their own private battle. It was clear everyone else was racing for third, with our leader Ali in the mix the whole way. He decided to stay tight to the headland before changing course, and the tactical paddling caught the spectator's attention. Following in their boats and realizing first and second place was sown up, they turned their attention to the third-place battle. With two kilometers left Ali was closing in on the next man when the finish line suddenly arrived a kilometer too early. He wound up in fourth place by three boat lengths. The rest of us managed sixth, eighth, and tenth out of the fifteen-person field. The race made the perfect ending to an already awe-inspiring two weeks, filled with unique experiences.

While our crew had been exploring the coast through the medium of water, a team of climbers tested their skills against the rocky cliffs that towered over us as we paddled. Lead by Colin Gibbon, Stephan McCleown and Jane Gallaway completed the trio that would attempt the Impossible Wall. Despite their depth of experience, the wall proved to be just that. Undeterred, they began to explore the coast and look for routes using the sailboat. Parking at the foot of the climb, they would then venture up rock never before touched by human hands. With some nights spent bivouacked on a platform high above the water, their focus and dedication paid off with the successful completion

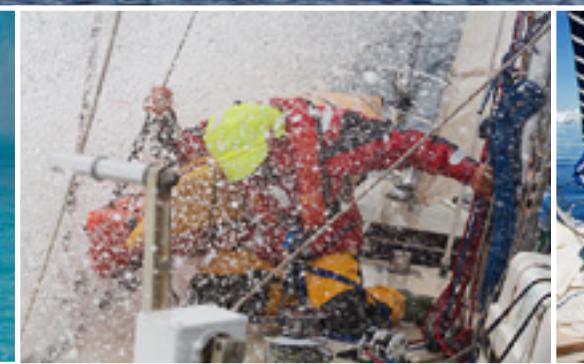
of three new routes: Waiting For Jane—HVS/5a, 450m long; Far From Killary—E2 5b, 250m long; and North Of Disko—E5 6a, 250m long.

With the sea kayaking and climbing over, much of the team headed back to Ireland, some by boat and some by plane. Shane and I left the crew in Sisumut as they started the voyage home. While they sailed toward a gale force 10 storm, the two of us began our hike of the Arctic Circle Trail—a remote 160-kilometer circuit that showcases a wild mountainous wilderness. During the five-day trek we slept in mountain huts, crossed rivers, swam in glacial lakes, and found great solace in the natural wonders.

Our expedition was a voyage of discovery and exploration, conducted in the spirit of living adventure. The team's hope is that it will encourage everyone it touches to get into the wild and explore, even if that means a walk in the woods or a climb up a tree. An expedition is more about the mindset of discovery than the distance travelled from home, and even small journeys can help us learn more about the world around us and ourselves. Adventure also teaches us that humans can achieve incredible feats, especially when we pool our skills for a common goal. I returned home with the knowledge that I can push myself harder than I previously knew possible. As T.S. Elliot said "You only know how tall you are when you're in over your head."



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## INFOBOX

To read a full day-by-day account of the trip, visit [www.northofdisko.com](http://www.northofdisko.com).

Daragh Muldowney compiled a body of photos to create an exhibition titled *Out of Thin Air*. Check out more at [www.durlaphotography.com](http://www.durlaphotography.com)

### EXPEDITION CREW

Captain and expedition leader - Jamie Young (62)

### MEDIA CREW

Claire Riordan (35) - Documentary film maker, sailed to and from Greenland.

Daragh Muldowney (41) - Photographer, sailed to and from Greenland.

### SEA KAYAK TEAM

Ali Donald (37) - Kayak expedition leader, sailed to Greenland and flew back.

Kevin O'Callaghan (45) - First mate, responsible for camping equipment. Met the team at the starting point of the kayak trip, sailed the return leg.

Shane Young (28) - Skippered the boat from Ireland to Greenland, helped with everything. Walked Arctic Circle Trail with Dougal then flew back.

Dougal Fleming (27) - Quarter master on sail to Greenland, when not being violently sick. Prepared the boat and organised the food for the trip. Walked the Arctic Circle Trail with Shane then flew back.

### CLIMBING TEAM

Colin Gibbon (44) - Climbing expedition leader. Met the team in Assiat, sailed the return leg.

Stephan McGowan (27) - Met the team in Assiat, sailed the return leg.

Jane Gallway (24) - Sea sick even in port. Flew there and back.