

# Going Nowhere Slowly

## Greenland

### July, 1998

Going nowhere slowly – not what was supposed to happen, but hardly an unprecedented surprise, in fact quite common in polar travel (not to put on airs for a difficult but hardly extreme trip deep into charted territory).

Getting here had not been half the fun, three days of connecting flights from Boston to Uummannaq, and alone, to boot. The two others who had planned to come had finked out at the last minute, to be sure for compelling personal reasons. Not my first choice, solo hiking way in the back of beyond, but I'd always wanted to see the country (and the tickets were toilet-paper if not used). The kids successfully insisted that I add an EPIRB<sup>1</sup> to my already heavy pack.

The pack – that part had gone well. I had sent the loaded pack to the hotel in Uummannaq by FedEx or UPS, so the airlines couldn't send it to China instead of Greenland. Mind you, whichever shipper it was didn't seem to understand tracking a package that had left the country, which made for a nervous month until the big box did indeed arrive in Greenland, via Copenhagen, finally confirmed after a few phone calls. It was waiting for me at the hotel.

I had arranged with the Danish college student who was the summer-time clerk/factotum at the hotel for a boat to go the 45 miles southeast to Kûssûp nûa, the valley near the head of the fjord that was the only break in the steep mountain wall forming the north side of the Nûssuaq Peninsula. From there, a route (no trails) led through gorgeous mountain scenery to the long lake filling the center of the peninsula and from there to Saqqaq<sup>2</sup>, the small settlement on the south side, where I could get the coastal steamer back to the airport. That was the plan, a hard but do-able trip, even alone, if careful. Here I was, ready to go, surprisingly free of last minute jitters.

An early breakfast and down to the harbor with the hotel clerk, another Danish college student working here for the summer, and two Greenlanders, also college-age, one with the boat – a cabin cruiser with two huge outboard motors – I had hired to go up the fjord. It should have been a 3 hour trip, but twenty minutes out of the harbor we starting winding our way ever more slowly through increasingly thick ice. An occasional small berg<sup>3</sup> but mostly ice floes, some only a few inches thick, but many of multi-year ice a foot or more thick. And quite close-packed.

No cruising steadily up the fjord. More like a drunkard's walk as fast as a drunk might crawl. No new ice was forming but amid the floes it was easy to pretend we were with Shackleton on the Endurance. Two of us stood on the bow with boat hooks to fend off chunks of ice small enough to care about boat hooks, but there was a still lot of bumping

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<sup>1</sup> Emergency Position Indicating Rescue Beacon

<sup>2</sup> Population 200, on the south side of the peninsula that forms the north shore of Disko Bay

<sup>3</sup> The glacier at the head of Uummannaq Fjord is pretty small, nothing like the Ice Fjord at Ilulissat, that produces the great majority of bergs that make it to the North Atlantic (Ilulissat claims "credit" for the berg that sank the Titanic).

and scraping; quite different from getting into the harbor at Broughton Island<sup>4</sup> in 1982. Then, faced with similar conditions, the two Inuit taking us back to civilization after a trip on Baffin Island went so slowly and carefully, that I don't think ice ever touched the boat.

Going nowhere slowly indeed. An hour and a half later, we still hadn't made half the distance good. At one point we were several hundred clear yards from a large grassy shelf at the foot of the sheer wall of the peninsula. One of the kids suggested I go ashore there. The wall was unclimbable (certainly by me, with – or without – a whacking great pack), but maybe I could find a way (15 miles?!) along the shore. A quick look with binoculars standing atop the cabin quickly put paid to that. The shelf disappeared in both directions in sheer rock right into the water (“Iv narssuaq” is a common place-name in Greenland, meaning just that). I could have camped on the shelf until my food ran out and then used the EPIRB to get a ride back to town.

Four and a half hours out of Uummannaq, and we were faced with broken but dense pack, still about 8 miles from the first plausible landing place. Time to turn around and head home. Going back, those not busy steering or fending off floes took turns shooting the rifle at nearby icebergs. Maybe to encourage one to turn over or calve, or maybe just for the hell of it. They were far enough off that we (probably) wouldn't get swamped in the waves, but just as well nothing happened. Presumably there weren't any other boats downrange. I confess I took a turn (and managed to hit the side of an iceberg), swallowing any misgivings. Halfway back, we passed not far off Ikerasak, a settlement of 200-250 people, and the guys now suggested dropping me off there. I could camp and try to find a fisherman with better local knowledge; maybe he could get me to the head of the fjord. I passed on this too, not sure what greater knowledge would do in the face of all but solid pack, not to speak of the problem that English-speakers would be rare on the ground in the village. It would have been interesting, but my head was wrapped around hiking.



**Uummannaq Island**

I could do the trip a bit faster than planned, without heroic daily mileages, so I could stay in Uummannaq a few days, waiting: a strong southeast wind would blow the ice

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<sup>4</sup> A small island off Baffin Island, Nunavut, in the easternmost part of the Canadian Arctic.

(mostly) out of the fjord or at least open it up. Back to the hotel. Uummannaq isn't a big town, maybe 1500 people, but like other towns in Greenland, there's at least one somewhat fancy hotel and a very good restaurant, often at the airport.

The next morning, coming down to breakfast, I saw the clerk and an older Greenlander, who turned out to be the manager, huddled over a loose-leaf notebook and discussing something very seriously. As I walked past, I couldn't help but sneak a look at the book and much to my surprise I recognized my own letter to them, arranging for reservations, shipping the pack, and the boat trip up the fjord. What was worrying them? Fear of litigious Americans, apparently. It took a bit of back and forth to figure out that they were afraid I would claim they'd promised to get me to the head of the fjord, not merely to try, and that we could try again for what I'd already paid. I assured them that if conditions did improve, I'd pay for another trip, and went in to breakfast.

Idle in Uummannaq – I walked all over town, mostly along the horseshoe-shaped harbor (there wasn't much more to the town), watching the boats, chatting with passers-by who spoke at least some English. The weather changed a lot, mostly sunny and warm (50 °F), one day drizzly and dank (35-40 °F), but it never got very windy, nothing at all strong or steady from the southeast. Waiting, waiting, waiting, oh, the humanity! Actually, not so bad, except for not having much to read. I had a “smaller Dickens” stowed away in the pack, but that was “for the trip”, and superstitiously I didn't want to start it. So all I had was a mediocre airplane-book, which I think I read three or four times. All the indigenous reading matter was in Danish or Greenlandic.

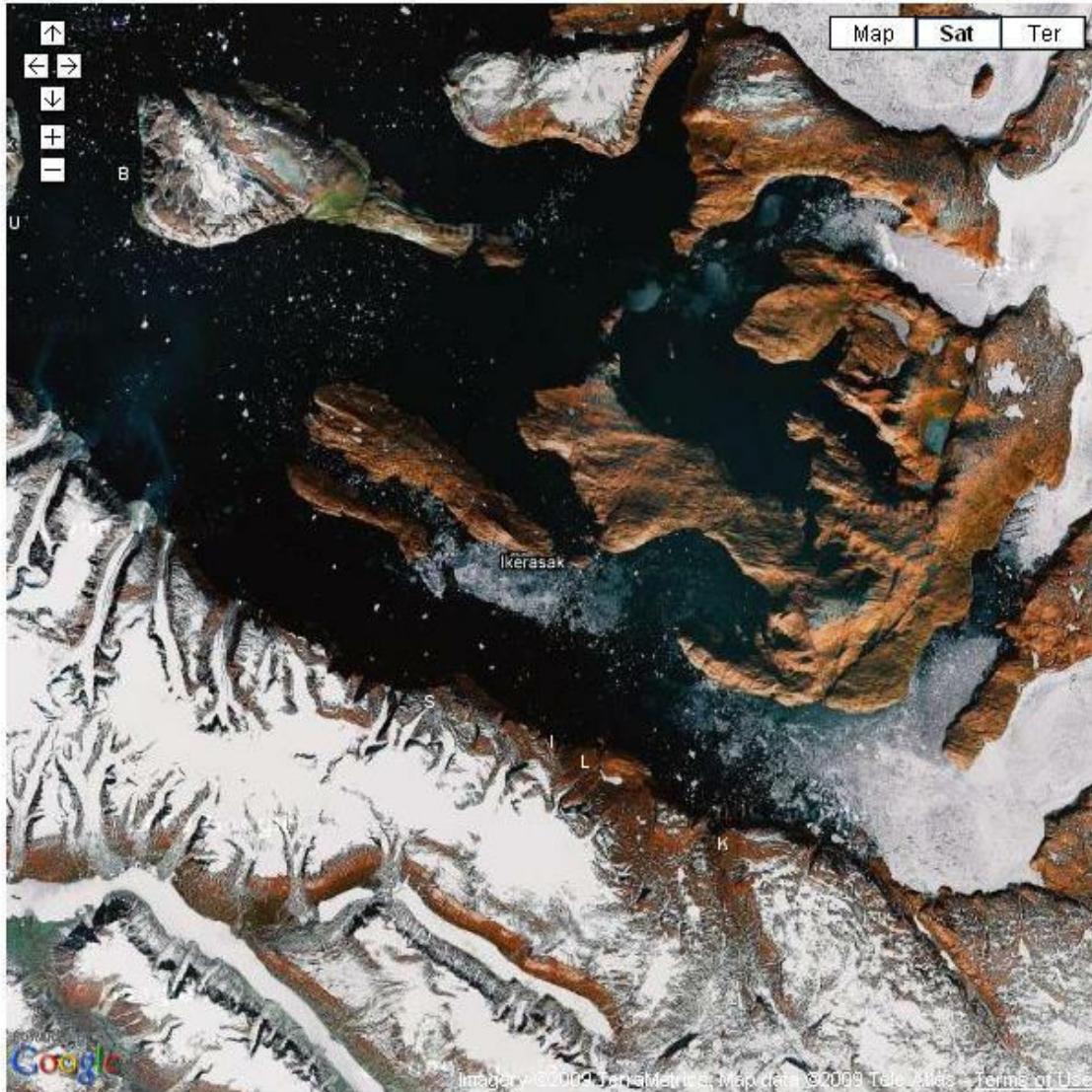
I gave up after four days and bought a plane ticket – actually a helicopter ticket – to Ilulissat<sup>5</sup>, where I'd find something to do. The helicopter route crossed the peninsula right where I'd wanted to be. An enormous cruise ship was in the harbor and chatting with a purser from the ship, he said I could get a cabin (“bowels class”, let's call it), on the ship around the peninsula to Saqqaq, where my walk was supposed to end. I could do most of the walk as a loop from there, so I rushed around moving my gear, cashing in the plane ticket, and finally getting myself aboard the ship.

I wasn't supposed to tell anyone that I was just on the ship for just the short hop to Saqqaq, said the purser<sup>6</sup>, which was a bit foolish, since everyone else already knew everyone else, and I was dressed in (still clean) camping clothes. For two days and a night, it was quite posh, traveling effortlessly and comfortably past gorgeous scenery amid icebergs of every shape. This story of the endeavor thus far got me a drink or two, and I realized I was tired of being on my own.

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<sup>5</sup> Third largest city in Greenland, population 5000. Nuuk (the capital) and Sisimiut are larger.

<sup>6</sup> Which made me think the cruise line might be the loser by my passage.



### **Ummannaq Fjord, free of ice**

Ikerasak is labeled at the center. The glacier at the right, Store Gletscher (Danish for “Big Glacier”), is the source of the icebergs in the fjord. The ice at the time of this photo (near the glacier and south of Ikerasak) is mostly floes, frozen sea ice.

U (left edge, about 1¼” down): Just at the edge of the photo, the town and island of Ummannaq  
 B (the western face of the large island (Storøen – The Big Island – , or Sagdliaruseq) at the upper left): one of the two places in this area called Ivnarssuaq (“suaq” is a suffix meaning “very big”; the whole thing means, I think, “huge cliff falling steeply into the water”); this one, just “around the corner” from the town, is a bird cliff, with thousands of little auks and other sea birds nesting, flying about in clouds, shrieking wildly – it’s wonderful.

S, I, L, K are along the south shore of the fjord, in that order left to right:

S: The grassy shelf

I: The other Ivnarssuaq

L: The westernmost possible landing place

K: Kûgssûp nûa, the foot of the valley where the hike begins, going upstream, east of south to the interior of the Nûgssuaq Peninsula

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