

Summer 2015 Expedition



Ben Warnick

On my way out to Greenland I spent the day in Copenhagen. This gave me a great opportunity to explore the town with its beautiful architecture and fantastic people. The city is incredibly picturesque, especially with Nyhaven in the centre of town with its beautiful multi-coloured houses. Dotted around in parks there were many statues such as Poseidon and the Little Mermaid who seemed to be wishing me well on my journey. I spent most of the day walking around exploring the capital and visited some museums including the Geological Museum. Later on I retired back to the youth hostel and found that the cheapest option which I had booked was a 32 person dorm. It was a Friday night in Copenhagen, so that was quite rowdy; so much so that I believe I was the only person who wasn't part of a stag do! There I was trying to have an early night before my flight the next morning and the dorm was wonderfully empty. Unfortunately it filled up fairly quickly from about 2 o'clock in the morning onwards, with revellers coming back from a night out. In fact when I left for my flight at about five o'clock in the morning there were still people coming back. Whilst that night was an interesting experience, it was not one I would really want to repeat.



The flight the next morning went without a hitch. It was very beautiful to be flying over the azure blue of the ocean and then once we passed through a bank of cloud, the Eastern coast of Greenland emerged in a blinding white vision that stretched from horizon to horizon, with only a few melt rivers and the occasional mountain emerging from the ice cap. When I landed in Kangerlussuaq it was a little bit odd, as there was not any formal passport control, only one friendly sniffer dog. I had the best part of six hours waiting for my connection, however not terribly noteworthy. To carry on travelling north, there was a little twin propeller plane to whisk me up to Asiaat. This was rather good fun as I found that my flight companions were students from the University of Copenhagen

who were going to spend the summer and part of the winter doing fieldwork on Disko Island where they had their research base.



At Aasiaat airport I was warmly greeted by Linda. Then we realised that the University group had booked all of the taxis in town. Luckily we were able to share a lift with a friendly Inuit family despite a bit of a language barrier. Once we arrived at the Marina in Aasiaat, I was able to meet the rest of the crew (John and Ollie) and see "Suilven" for the first time. The boat was a 47 foot Oyster, lovely and spacious with a deck saloon and sufficient room that we could have a cabin each (very good for keeping us sane). It was well stocked with provisions for the next month, although there was one minor issue. This was that the sail drive on the engine had water in the gearing, so what we had to do was sail south towards Nuuk to get the bird boat lifted out and the engine repaired. This was unfortunate, especially as I was looking forward to seeing the glacier near Ilulissat.



Before sailing south we had two days in Aasiaat where I got to explore. One of the most surprising things about Aasiaat was the supermarket, as in that supermarket you are able to buy a can of Coca-Cola along with cereal etc. and there next to all that they have a rack with the largest array of guns and other hunting equipment you have ever seen. Also in the village there was the market area where fishermen and hunters bought back their catches and traded them for other produce. You could see them exchanging all manner of things. It was an incredible sight with blood absolutely

everywhere along with lumps of blubber and such like. Also in Aasiaat there was a traditional Inuit turf house that was used for residence over the winter, a small museum and also a rather quaint church facing the fish processing plant.



As we left Aasiaat, we were able to look back at the beautiful view of the brightly painted chocolate box houses perched on the hillside. Before we even reached open sea, we had already seen humpback whales and gigantic icebergs which dwarfed our boat with their formidable size: quite the first taste of Arctic sailing. On our trip down towards Nuuk, there was little wind but what there was behind us: this was good as it meant we could get the cruising chute up downwind. Unfortunately the wind strength meant we had to do a bit of motoring as well, which I'm not a huge fan of since the noise the engine rumbles through the whole boat. As we started on the final approach to Nuuk, the wind picked up, so we ended up sailing in with a reduced sail plan and were steaming along at about 8 knots. It was almost a shame to have to stop into port.



When we arrived in the port, boats were moored up three abreast, so we rafted onto the end of two large fishing boats and what turned out to be an old whaler complete with harpoon, which was being lovingly restored by the owner. We then went ashore to the fishermen's home and were delighted to find showers and laundry facilities for the first time in over a week. While there, we realised that there were two other boats we knew in Nuuk. One of which was Arctic Monkey (that Dr Lorraine Craig saw scurrying into Ilulissat behind a ferry which broke the ice for them) and also Hawk, both of which were large steel hulled boats who were planning on attempting the Northwest Passage this year.

As we were entering Nuuk, Ollie and I decided to climb the mountain we could see and the crew of the other boats (minus the little children on Arctic Monkey) were also delighted to stretch their legs. So en masse we set off by bus for the beginning the walk, not entirely sure what we were letting ourselves in for. As we arrived, the hillside looked imposingly steep with a snow-covered summit, so we set off picking our way between the boulders heading on up. It took us the best part of the day to get up and back down again. Unfortunately, when we were almost at the summit, we were passed by someone who was wandering along in his Sunday best, going out for a nice stroll which we found very amusing, if slightly disheartening. When we got to the top the view was absolutely spectacular and definitely worth the hike. Even more fun was coming down, as through the large expanses of snow you could sit down and slide a fair distance back downhill. This was incredibly fun until you had

to stop and soon span out of control in a flurry of snow.



When we returned to the boats, thoroughly worn out, we were introduced to another boat which had since arrived. This was a Polish boat “Lady Dana” who had circumnavigated the Arctic only a year or so ago. They were a very friendly bunch and quite musical as well, so later in the evening we re-joined them for selection of Polish sea shanties and the best food they had. They also showed some clips of their video from when they had sailed around the Arctic: one highlight was when one of the crew members, who was about 15 years old, was playing the keyboard while the camera panned out and you could see seven or eight walrus bobbing along in time to the music. Ollie then had the guitar forced upon him and he started playing some of the traditional English folk songs with me as a backing singer, which went down very well. When the singing finally stopped it was rather late in the evening. We wandered out from the beautiful boat and wondered where next? So we decided to explore the nightlife of the capital. At the bar that we went to, we were the only white people there. There was a band playing lots of traditional music as well as some Western classics and the bar also had some professional dancers doing traditional dance, which involved a lot of vigorous swirling and was really quite spectacular to watch. We had a go at joining in, but I think we will need a little bit more practice! As we left, despite it being the middle of the night, it was still light, which was a slightly odd feeling and we headed back to the boats ready to explore the next day.

One of the more interesting shops we found in Nuuk is a second-hand gun store where the owner is also a musician and will try and sell you a mix tape, along with Kalashnikovs and bayonets (one of the boats heading into the Northwest Passage last year purchased from them). There really is a

different culture towards guns over there! On the way back to the boat, John was also given a fresh cod for admiring a fishermen's catch and this made a very nice supper for us later on. One of the most memorable moments in the Greenlandic capital was having our boat hauled out to fix the engine. It was not a very simple operation and involved finding a local with a crane and fitting slings under the boat, which was a bit of a palaver. This involved us hauling them out from under the boat which is quite tough work and then the boat was hoisted aloft, where it swayed precariously in the breeze while they had a look at the sail drive. Luckily it was fixable and we were on our way soon.



Our next passage was from Nuuk to Nain, which meant crossing the Davis Strait. We were quite fortunate with the wind direction and made very good time. Just when I thought I would get bored of the sail, we were joined by a party of about fifty pilot whales whose frolics extended out to the horizon astern. Seeing such creatures is an absolutely beautiful sight and reminded me just how lucky I was to be out there. As we approached the Canadian coast, we entered into Iceberg Alley which led to quite a few tense night watches peering into the darkness, hoping not to see anything.

The arrival into Nain was quite an interesting one, as it is quite deep into a channel network which has vicious tides. Luckily we got the timing right and made it safely. When we arrived, we decided to tune into the local radio, which is always fun to do. We found only two radio stations, one of which was just Morse code and the other a series of numbers being called out, with occasional phone calls and applause. We had no idea what was going on with the booming voice. The next night we tuned in a bit earlier and then found out it was actually the fire station who organise bingo. Residents collected cards earlier in the day, tuned into the radio and then phoned in on their landlines when

they won (there being no infrastructure for mobile telephones in Nain).



Once we docked, we were greeted by several locals fishing off the pier and also by the only Jehovah's Witness in Nain. Luckily he was happy to have a chat with us and wasn't too fussed about converting us. While in Nain we decided to climb up the closest mountain, having been warned by the Canadian mounted police not to go up to the higher one as it was bear country. So we clambered up this hill and enjoyed the beautiful views from the top. These looked in to the bay and we could see Minkie whales playing only metres from the boats. Nain was a relatively large town; I say relatively because it had no roads going in or out of it. Despite this most locals had cars. The street names were the Upper Street, the Middle Street and the Lower Street. What was interesting to note was the hospital; there was a beat up old ambulance and a much newer skidoo with a stretcher sledge for those winter months. In the Town Hall they had Internet which was the first for a while, even though it was abysmally slow; we just managed to download a copy of a newspaper without any pictures. There is also an interesting museum about how the town been founded by Moravian missionaries, with a large number of Inuit artefacts including sledges, old dog whips and a very impressive polar bear rug.

From here we headed south through the inner channel and then out to the open sea once again. In a few days we reached Battle Harbour and an old cod fishery which has now been converted into a museum. When we arrived there we were delighted to see people on the shore ready to catch our lines and there was also another boat there which was very impressive. It was gigantic sailboat that dwarfed ours. What impressed me when we arrived was that you could hear someone hoovering;

this meant they had not only a Hoover, but also enough power to use it. We later found out that this boat also had narwhal tusks instead of handrails with gilded heads. Unfortunately I made friends with the crew of the boat instead of the owners, so couldn't quite manage to get a tour aboard. The island itself was very interesting and had a very enthusiastic manager cum tour guide who showed us around all the preserved buildings. These included one of the old sheds from which Peary made his announcement that he had reached the North Pole, as Battle Harbour used to be the first Marconi station you arrived at when heading south from the pole.



Above the old shop there was space for socialising and a musician had been brought in by boat for the week. The musician was incredibly friendly and we got taught lots of traditional Newfoundland and Nova Scotian songs. We also got taught to play the ugly stick (the Newfie version of a drum kit designed to fit in a kitchen); the rest of my crew was surprised that I was quite good at it. Everyone also had a go at playing the spoons which proved to be the source of great amusement in moments of boredom on the boat. These new percussive instruments enabled me to play along with the others, as Ollie plays guitar and Linda the violin during musical evenings on the boat. We stayed there for two nights and had a thoroughly good time, especially as Battle Harbour has exceptional geology and they had a geological guide to the area prepared on it. As such we spent a day wandering around seeing the wonderfully metamorphosed island. It was with great sadness that we sailed away once again but the sadness was short-lived, as when we exited the harbour we could see Fin whales feeding in a great seething swarm and we headed south across the Belle Isle Straights

(also known ominously as the Shipwrecking Straights) to L'Anse Aux Meadows.



One of the stories from Battle Harbour was of the Doctor who used to live on the island, who had to attend a birth over on the mainland. Bear in mind that this was towards the end of winter, so he set off by dog sledge, cutting across the cove to reach his patient. Unfortunately, as he was racing across

the ice, it starts to break up. He found himself and his dogs adrift. Being a doctor, he realised he wouldn't survive the night floating on the ice, so he was forced to kill his dogs and then slept in their still warm skins. The next morning when the sun rose, he removed all of the leg bones from his dogs and lashed them together with their sinews. After that he hoisted his makeshift blanket to the top and waved it in the hope of attracting attention. He survived like this eating the dogs for three days before he was finally rescued. On his return he wrote a song about it, commemorating his three faithful friends who'd given their lives for him.

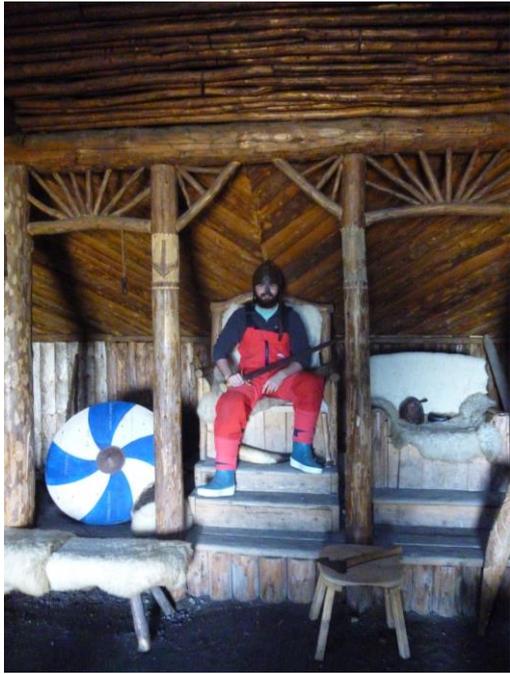


The passage down to Newfoundland wasn't all fair sailing. There was one moment that was particularly memorable in people's minds: I was on galley duty and at about midday it was blowing a force four; a bit bumpy, but nothing too uncomfortable. In light of this, I decided to make a nice dinner for everyone, including a steamed plum pudding for dessert. Unfortunately, as I started making this, the wind picked up and it ended up being about force eight and I was thrown all over the galley. I decided as I had started this, I may as well finish, so I gritted my teeth, braced myself against the stove and toiled away in the boiling seas, much to the amusement of the rest of the

crew. Fortunately it worked out well in the end, otherwise I would have been very upset.



Sailing into L'Anse Aux Meadows was absolutely incredible, as it was the place where the Vikings first landed in North America. It was amazing to be able to drop anchor into the same places as they had done and look at the reconstructed Viking town from aboard the boat. The next day when we went ashore, we went first to the recreated village, not realising it was a bit of a sham, but it was entertaining nonetheless, with actors in all of the buildings re-creating how life was and this was fairly educational. One of the highlights was the chieftain's cabin where there were Viking clothes you could dress up in and pretend that you were the chieftain of the village. We eventually found the real museum on the original architectural site and this was typically more informative and interesting, however with not quite so much visual impact, as it was mostly the outlines on the ground showing where the buildings had once stood. It was incredible to think we were doing a similar journey to the Vikings so many years ago.



From L'Anse Aux Meadows, we aimed to get down to Corner Brook. However, the wind was on our nose, making going down the channel incredibly uncomfortable. After two days of bouncing around heading up wind, slamming down over the top of the waves with very little sleep, we decided to carry on the same tack and seek refuge in Port Saunders. When in Port Saunders, some inquisitive locals come out to greet us and we were invited to join them at their campfire. As they lived just opposite where we moored up, we felt unable to turn down the invitation, despite being very tired. So we joined our host at his fire with his family and the ringleader of the group, a man by the name of Sterling, proved to be an incredible guitarist who sang some of the folk songs we'd heard first on Battle Harbour and some new ones which were equally good, if not better. As a token of friendship, he gave us a lift to the store while we restocked the boat and we gave him a few beers in return. After being appalled that we'd never tried moose, he gave us a jar of his home-made bottled moose and some frozen moose steak, which we had later.

Once the wind died down a bit and shifted direction, we are able to make a dash for the next port of call which was Rocky Harbour in the Gros Morne National Park. When we went ashore, we found we made quite a stir, as Rocky Harbour was a very touristy town and not many people had seen sailing boats coming in before. Ollie and I were warmly welcomed at the local bar which had a live musician. We were the youngest people there by probably about 50 years and a musician took great delight in inviting us up on stage to sing. With Ollie on guitar we sang a couple of sea shanties including South Australia, which had the audience singing along. After that, the musician declared us true Newfoundlanders having been 'screeched in' and with that we decided to retire back to the

boat before things got too raucous.



On leaving Rocky Harbour we crossed over to Cape Breton Island; the entry to which was quite scary as through the fog we heard the sinister toll of bell on the starboard hand marker. However, once we got through the channel, the lakes themselves were incredibly beautiful. We moored up just after channel's end in Kelly's Cove. When we awoke the next day we realised that Kelly's Cove was just in front of the Christian Bible camp and also there were some little creeks which you could paddle the tender up. We then spent the next few days travelling around the lakes including Baddeck, where we went to the Alexander Graham Bell Museum and found a supermarket that had an incredible array of fresh fruit and vegetables, much to our delight. There was also a fishmonger who had some excellent produce, which provided many good meals in the galley. Further south down the lake, when we arrived, we moored up in the marina, only to find that there was a wedding happening on the pontoon and so we were trapped in our boat until the wedding finished. Luckily the guests were very welcoming and invited us to join them later for the reception, which was very good fun. After some interesting experiences with shallow banks and mosquitos, we exited the Bras d'Or lakes and headed for Halifax.

When we arrived in Halifax we moored at the Royal Nova Scotia Yacht Squadron where there was a race happening that night. We met some very interesting people here and Ollie began his search for the next boat to take him further south (he's hitchhiking his way around the North Atlantic, aiming to get to the Caribbean by November, which I believe he has done). From the Royal Nova Scotia, we sailed on to Dartmouth to winterise the boat. This done, we spent an evening enjoying downtown Halifax, which had a wonderful array of restaurants and also a folk music festival happening, which we greatly enjoyed. On my last day, Ollie finished editing the music video he had been making over

the course of the trip which was a nice parting gift:
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kqx2Qtz3U0>).

Unfortunately at Dartmouth Yacht Club it was time for me to say goodbye. So I got on a flight and headed back home, but stopped en route for a week cycling around Iceland, but that's an entirely different story.