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PROWLING FOR ICEBERGS

By Anne Z. Cooke; Images courtesy of Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

Listening for an unmistakable crunch of ice on hull, the half-dozen passengers on the bridge of the Lindblad Explorer held their breath as Captain Oliver Kreuss nudged the ship through the ice-choked fiord blocking the approach to Ilulissat, on Greenland's ragged west coast, "Shuushh!" said the usually congenial captain training his binoculars on the bergs ahead. "I can't talk now," he barked, pivoting the Explorer between each hulking giant like a dancer whirling his partner across a crowded floor.



The Lindblad Expedition National Geographic Explorer, anchors among the icebergs at Ilulissat, Greenland.

"Sorry about that," confessed Kreuss, smiling apologetically as the Ilulissat anchorage finally came into view. "The ship is always my first duty. You were asking about the notches in the rail? Guess. You can't guess? That's our annual polar bear count. There's one for every bear we see and a red notch if it's a bear with a kill. After yesterday, we're adding six more."

Though polar bears sightings kept us on alert, it is Arctic ice that lies at the heart of Lindblad National Geographic's cruise to Greenland and Baffin Island, the ice that the bears need to survive and which plays a major role in global climate change.

A mammoth berg floating past your stateroom window carries a double message: a towering shard of ice, intricately sculpted by wind and water, is a sight to behold. But its very presence is evidence that the world's glaciers are melting into the ocean at a faster rate than in any other period in recent history. A bit of a downer, thinking about sea levels rising 20 feet. But that didn't mean that our 12-day cruise wasn't a vacation, an adventure filled with absorbing activities and the daily expectation of entertainment and predictably fine cuisine. And it didn't take long to see why Lindblad's expedition-style voyages are so successful blending scientific inquiry with deluxe cruising.

In Lindblad's early years, its ships were considerably more Spartan. But a 2004 partnership with National Geographic brought changes that include booking historians, naturalists and climatologists, and ramped up onboard comfort. As a result, most of Lindblad's cruises are booked months or even years in advance. Thus when a cancellation on the Greenland-Baffin Island cruise opened a space, we jumped on it.

Within a couple of days we had our first look at the way the company handled an emergency. We were



Looking for polar bears in Prince Regent Inlet, passengers scout for bear sightings. Onboard Lindblad Expedition National Geographic Explorer.

supposed to board the Explorer in Iqaluit, on Canada's Baffin Island, then sail north, touring Baffin's fiords and villages. But when floating ice blocked most of the coast, everything changed overnight.

Another cruise company might have cancelled the trip. But Lindblad's staff performed instant triage, booking new flights for every passenger (at no extra cost) and rescheduling every day: Inuit village visits, tundra hikes, pre-tour talks, zodiac fiord tours, naturalist and guest lectures (including several by Peter Hillary, son of Sir Edmund Hillary, first to summit Mt. Everest), photo clinics, bus rides and glacier flight-seeing trips.

"They're successful because they're organized," said Iowa traveler Martha Tinker, a former investment banker, who confessed (with an embarrassed chuckle) that having traveled with Lindblad often – not just one, but 13 trips – she'd had plenty of chances to analyze their operation.

"By that I mean they're prepared," she said as we boarded the launch for a ride into Pond Inlet, on north Baffin Island. "They research the destinations so thoroughly that they're never caught by surprise. If something's canceled they have a backup already identified. It happens so smoothly, the passengers don't even notice."

With a rearranged itinerary, we headed for Sisimiut, a prosperous Inuit fishing village where a walk around the harbor led to a history museum, craft shop and the local market. Another couple of miles climbed the hills to the high school, pond, houses and yards where sled dogs, chained to their houses, snoozed in the summer sun, next to snow machines and ATVs. As a Danish territory (but with self-rule) Greenland's economy and schools are heavily supported.



Greenland's coasts really are green in August, in Sisimiut, pop. 5,560, Greenland.

In contrast, a stop at Pond Inlet, pop. 1560, at Baffin Island's northern tip, a modern town created by Canada to centralize the region's Inuit inhabitants, revealed the hazards of moving people off traditional hunting lands and forcing them to live together. But a heart-warming song and drum dance show by the Tununiq-miut Dance group, performed for the passengers at the Community Center was encouraging evidence that a genuine effort to preserve the best of the pre-European Inuit culture is underway.

Between village tours we boarded the ship's inflatable landing crafts for birding tours of the fiords, signed up for "talk" walks and "no talk walks over the tundra, and joined photography tours led by National Geographic photographer Ralph Lee Hopkins. We hiked with Viking Historian Vinnie Butler over rocks identified as the world's oldest, searching and finding thousand-year-old burial sites.

We found flowers so tiny you had to kneel to appreciate their intricate shapes, and silky-fine strands of "qiviut," musk ox fur shed during the summer molt and blown onto three-inch high willow branches. The musk ox were there, too, but remained elusive.

The "day of the polar bears" began when the crew spotted three bears napping on an ice floe and the ship, slowing to a crawl, inched in close. Ever curious, the mother bear and her two annual cubs ambled over to investigate, posing for hundreds of photos as they played within inches of the ship's bow, cuffing each other and stretching out to cool.

Comparing experiences over dinner, we listened to our shipmates compare cruises, often remembering each other from previous trips. The waiters, long-time employees who seemed to know everyone, remembered each person's preferences. Those who'd sailed on Lindblad for years were delighted with the Explorer's huge cabins, ample closets and the quality of the food. The afternoon tea and pastries were a favorite, as was the casual dress code. And the open-bridge policy meant you could visit the bridge at any time and at any hour. But what is Lindblad's real secret?



Polar bears frequently lie on their backs to cool their internal temperature. Onboard Lindblad Expedition National Geographic Explorer.



Multi-colored prefab buildings shipped from Denmark echo that country's color choices, Sisimiut, Greenland.

For me it's the naturalists," said Laurie Goldberg, from Connecticut, traveling with her husband Hank. "These people aren't just biologists, geologists or historians, interested in their own specialty. They're educated and they're friendly, always around if you want to talk. The lectures are educational and they're entertaining. I never missed a talk."

Nor did we.

The secret was right under our noses. It was the Lounge, in fact, the place where passengers attend lectures, meet pre-dinner for announcements and next-day previews, and gather after dinner for a nightcap. A work of genius, it was a circular space, a theater-in-the-round shape with chairs, sofas and cocktail tables also arranged in circles. No matter where you sat in the Lounge, other people were seated across from you, next to you, and around you. In a standard lecture room you'd sit in rows, never becoming acquainted with those in front or behind. But in the Explorer's Lounge it's impossible not to make friends. And the lectures are better, too.

From any place in that room you could see at least two of the seven, over-sized, wall-mounted TV screens, each computer-controlled from the lectern. The speakers – universally well-prepared – illustrated their points with photos and were never interrupted by videos that didn't play or photos that popped up out of order. The talks, consequently, were faster-paced, more spontaneous and often funnier.



Theater-in-the-round seating in the Lounge encourages passengers to meet each other. Onboard Lindblad Expedition National Geographic Explorer.

As for the icebergs, it wasn't long before we were in among the hunks calved off of the Jakobshavn Glacier, near Ilulissat, at the west edge of the vast Greenland ice sheet. The proverbial canaries in the coal mine, they were proof that Jakobshavn, said to be the world's most productive glacier, is melting faster than ever, so fast that many scientists predict the entire ice sheet will eventually slide into the ocean.

That is the doomsday message. But the good news was that we were there to see it, and to hope that that the next cruise passengers will care as much.

THE NITTY GRITTY:

Cruises to the eastern High Arctic fly through Ottawa, Canada, and include airport transfers and an overnight and dinner there. Flights the next morning continue to Iqaluit, or to Kangerlussuaq, in Greenland. For other Lindblad Expeditions National Geographic cruises go to www.expeditions.com