

# THE SOUND OF SILENCE

KAYAKING THROUGH EAST GREENLAND'S SCORESBY SOUND OFFERS UP PURE ARCTIC ADVENTURE

WORDS AND PHOTOS BY DOUG WALLACE

With the first sighting of rocky shoreline through the plane windows came the sounds of a dozen cameras being switched on. What looked like ships were actually icebergs. I could sense my seatmate itching to get the shot. "Please! Lean in," I said. Passengers checked their watches every minute, drinking in the bird's-eye view, eager to take their first step on Kalaallit Nunaat—

land of the Greenlanders—the largest island in the world. From the tiny airport of Constable Point, we walked to a flotilla of Zodiac boats that swept us out to the Ocean Nova for a Quark Expeditions East Greenland cruise, where I would kayak the ice-filled waters of the Scoresby Sound fjords for 12 extraordinary days.



KAYAKING THE WATERS OF GOOSE FJORD, NEAR THE MAGGA DAN GLACIER





FLOATING IN A COCKTAIL OF ICE

## GETTING OUR BEARINGS

Arctic expedition travel is the ultimate adventure, an experience more than a vacation, and one you can barely believe is real at points. "Greenland has a long history of inhabitation and when you see what's come before you, it makes you feel tiny in space and time," said expedition leader Hadleigh Measham, summing up the draw of the region. "It has a special beauty—a scale and ruggedness to it—that is addictive."

I knew what he was talking about, having been on an Antarctic expedition four years earlier. It was there that I saw how much fun the sea kayakers were having, almost like a vacation within a vacation. I promised myself that if the opportunity ever arose again, I would learn how to kayak and get in on that excitement. And while paddling in Toronto Harbour is fun and all, nothing could have prepared me for the breathtaking experience I was about to have.

For one thing, the variety of kayaking conditions in the different bays and fjords and the experiences that went with them was amazing: hugging a rocky shoreline one day, digging our way through ice the next, paddling past glacial faces and blue icebergs, bobbing along in "bergy bits," mist, fog, sunshine, the works. As I was the relative newbie, I was watched like

a hawk from the first paddle stroke, happy to have the supervision of Scott Caspell, a very experienced polar-region kayak guide from Ottawa. When I caught sight of a seal swimming just off to my left, obviously trying to ditch us, I knew this was going to be a great week.

A safety zodiac driver attended each kayak session, ferrying us to and from these mini adventures, kayaks in tow. The drivers hovered just far enough away to make us feel alone in the icescape. The logistics of getting nine kayaks off the ship and into the water 11 times in six days were considerable, involving many very patient people, particularly Scott. Safety was always the top priority, and it showed.

The Ocean Nova is very nimble and efficient, able to reach places larger ships can't, yet still comfortable enough to pamper with snug cabins and fine dining. Informal presentations and end-of-day briefings by staff members and onboard experts filled us in with all the back story—flora, fauna, history and geology—and brought everyone together in the panoramic lounge. The top deck made for picture-perfect Northern Lights viewing more than a few times during our trip: an event well worth staying up late for.



KAYAK GUIDE  
SCOTT CASPELL



THE SYDKAP AREA AT IMMIKKEERTIKAJIK



ICEBERG WORKS OF ART IN NORTHWEST FJORD



# AT ONE WITH LAND AND SEA

Happily, the wildlife sightings continued. Before an afternoon paddle in Eskimo Bay, while we were still in the Zodiac, we suddenly spotted two muskoxen in full gallop quite close to shore. They stopped abruptly when they spotted us; one retreated while the other stared for several minutes before trotting off. It was a moment that took awhile to sink in. What just happened? We carried on, got in our kayaks and poked around between the rocks along the shoreline seeing where the sea bed had erupted and been pushed up, sediment layers settling in crazy formations.

The next afternoon in Flyer Fjord, a veritable iceberg graveyard, we had to kayak single file through the ice, crunching and cracking, getting stuck, getting free, getting stuck again. So noisy! We stopped in open water for a few minutes to take it all in, bergs calving like thunderclaps, no wind, no birds, no fog, just us.

More ice was in store the next day as our kayaks hugged the shore of Little Island, before finding shelter near the shore excursion landing site in a bay chock-a-block with brash ice. It was like we were floating around in a giant cocktail.

Following our sessions in the water, we often caught up with the rest of the passengers who had gone ashore, taking a short hike to get the lay of the land, careful to stay behind Scott's rifle—this was polar bear country, after all. On a couple of occasions, we wandered through untouched ruins of indigenous settlements, most used by more than one culture over the centuries. We found hand tools made out of bone and actual human graves. Meat caches were made evident by small piles of lichen-covered stones; decades-old wooden fox traps still sat atop hillside rocks. If only the rocks could talk.



ROCK FORMATIONS ALONG THE SHORELINE AT ESKIMO BAY



A SHORE EXCURSION AT HARE FJORD





# BREAKING NEW ICE

GOOSE FJORD

A couple of days later, the Ocean Nova captain impressed even himself, taking us on an insanely wonderful sail through uncharted waters into ice-filled Goose Fjord, home of the Magga Dan Glacier. The ice cracked and calved, falling into the bay in slow motion. The crew was incredibly excited to get so close to the glacier given the amount of ice in the fjord. This was the kind of thing that turns a trip into an expedition: taking what you're faced with and running with it.

Afterward and in more open water, there were Zodiac cruises, and more kayaking, as my group set out to weave through mini icebergs under blue skies in the late afternoon sun. Scott blew soap bubbles, part of his onboard kit for testing the direction of the wind, but really more for fun, I thought. We played baseball with our paddles, collecting snow off the bobbing ice to make snowballs. Before heading back to the ship, we took a few moments to let the environment imprint itself on our memories. "It's deafening silence," Hadleigh said later on. "It's terrifyingly loud in how quiet it is."

As we neared the end of the expedition, the strong sense of accomplishment amongst fellow passengers was almost palpable. There were big smiles all around. "Our guests all have different objectives for travelling here," said Hadleigh. "They might like hiking or want to see the Northern Lights, or a bear; something in particular has grabbed them. But everyone walks away from Greenland feeling as though they've achieved the same goal. Again, it's that tiny feeling—everyone goes away feeling that. That's what I enjoy about bringing people here."

## ONE LAST PHOTO OP

A polar bear was spotted on the morning of our last full day of Scoresby Sound adventure, in Viking Bay, making everyone eager for more of the same. We had a slow and steady kayak along a dirty glacier face, looking for arctic hares, but seeing only black guillemots diving for their lunch and an iceberg that looked like a whale. The waterfalls we spotted springing out of the rock face had carved deep gullies over time, some not reaching the open water, but disappearing into the moraine, making more noise than seemed reasonable.

In the afternoon, we were out again watching for bears along the quiet eastern coastline of Viking Bay, before landing on a small island made out of octagonal basalt columns, where we joined the other passengers for a chat on the rocks and one very large group shot. My gloves were wet and my hands cold, but they warmed up considerably when the Irish whisky came out for a toast to an incredible journey. Measham was right about the addiction: I was—and am still—hooked. The only bear I saw was a sun-bleached bear skull, but he looks good in my pictures all the same.



WALKING ALONG THE CONSTABLE POINT SHORELINE

## WHEN YOU GO

Quark Expeditions ([QuarkExpeditions.com](http://QuarkExpeditions.com)) has three different itineraries that take you into the fjords of East Greenland, with six departures August through September, from 10 to 14 days. Kayak groups paddle multiple times per voyage, weather permitting.

## SCORESBY THE MAN

English explorer William Scoresby (1789 to 1857) always professed to have named Greenland's Scoresby Sound fjord system after his father, a successful whaler who invented the barrel crow's nest for ships. Scoresby the younger was hooked on expedition life very early, being only 10 when he stowed away on his father's ship while it was docked in Whitby, England. (He had pretended he lost his cap onboard, then snuck back to retrieve it.) Discovered upon reaching the Shetland Islands, the boy was put ashore, only to then hire a local boatman to chase after the ship. Thus began Scoresby's first journey to the Arctic. He was an apprentice of his father's at 13, spending every summer thereafter sailing to the Arctic, before taking command of the ship at 21. Scoresby maintained a lifelong interest in science, theology and geography, surveying and charting 400 miles of Greenland's east coast.



EXPLORER WILLIAM SCORESBY, SKETCHED BY J. S. COBMAN

IMAGE BY J.S. COBMAN