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FREEZE



**Brutal beauty in
polar bear country**

FRAME

Photojournalist Adrian van der Lee visits the 'Forbidden Coast' of east Greenland in search of polar bears - the largest carnivore on the land and the eighth deadliest animal on the planet.

Two days before I'm due to land in Iceland, a brief email from the skipper simply reads:

"There's a storm brewing in the Denmark Strait, the forecast from Sunday to Tuesday is crap, so to get ahead of it, we're leaving 24 hours early."

Panic! Change flights. Cancel meetings. Pack bags. Kiss wife.

Thirty hours later I land in the pretty little town of Ísafjörður in north west Iceland and within half an hour, we set sail.

Our boat 'Arktika' is a magnificent Dutch built, 25-meter, steel-hulled ketch – with a traditional gaff rig – all block and pulley, no winches other than the capstan – a solid seafaring yacht and perfect for this kind of expedition in to treacherous Arctic waters and for our mission to film and photograph Polar Bears.

We set sail from Ísafjörður on a 400km voyage northwest across the Arctic Circle, to a stretch of the east Greenland coast between Kangerdlugssuaq and Nansen Fjords.

Ten of the highest peaks in the entire Arctic can be found along this challenging piece of coastline, mountains so high that they can be seen from mid-way across the Denmark Strait. Between the peaks, huge glaciers expel vast quantities of ice in to the sea, creating mammoth icebergs of awesome proportions – this is Greenland's Forbidden Coast!

To survive here you need to be entirely self sufficient – very few adventurers in the annals of Arctic exploration have ever challenged this stretch of coast. And no wonder, in this hostile environment rescue is days away – and of course, it's the domain of the apex predator and one of the most fearsome beasts on the planet: the polar bear.

As we near the Greenland shore, the skies are leaden and the icebergs become more frequent. But our early departure has paid off. The forecasted storm we were so desperate to get ahead of has now arrived and is 200km astern where bitter 50 knot squalls roar down the Denmark Strait.

MIRROR CALM

At Kangerdlugssuaq Fjord the wind drops and the sea calms – the vast high-pressure system created by the gargantuan Greenlandic ice cap, controls the weather in these massive fjords. It's

quite possible to experience clear blue skies and mirror calm conditions inside the fjord, while twenty kilometres out to sea it's blowing old boots!

After two full days at sea, it's good to stretch the legs so we lower the Zodiac in to the water and go ashore to explore an abandoned hunters' camp. Up until maybe 20 years ago, this would have been a regular summer base for Narwhal hunters from the south. But declining numbers of Narwhal and strict new regulations on the number that can be hunted, make the 800km round trip north from Tassilaaq no longer worthwhile.

The weather is spectacular – with clear blue skies and glassy sea, the temperature soars to an incredible 16 °C – the skipper, who has been visiting these waters for over 20 years, has never before experienced such warm temperatures in Greenland. The mosquitos are loving it, but there is no evidence of Polar Bears.

So we move on towards Nansen Fjord, 120km to the north. Back out in the Denmark Strait the remnants of the storm have created a huge swell and choppy seas, making sailing conditions uncomfortable.

ELECTRIC BLUE

Every so often amongst the monstrous bergs, we spot one of vivid, electric blue – quite stunning against the grey-black sky. Most icebergs appear white as they are made from compacted snow, full of tiny air bubbles. Blue ice is essentially melt water that has been re-frozen and had all the air squeezed out of it over thousands of years under massive pressure beneath the weight of the glacier.

Arktika' is extremely well suited to this type of expedition, below decks are two four-berth cabins and two two-berth cabins. Two heads (toilets) and one shower room. In the centre of the boat is the fully fitted galley and living/eating area where all 13 members of the crew can sit and eat at the same time.

And the food is good, in fact the food is great – anything from simple pasta or chilli dishes while we're at sea, to a full leg of roast Icelandic lamb, Arctic Char, cod and more when we're at anchor.

I often get asked about the sort of people that go on these kinds of expeditions – how do you get on with them? What if you don't get on with them? How do you deal with it?





One of the countless enormous icebergs that guard the entrance to Nansen Fjord.



Truth is, adventurers tend to get along together just fine – in general they are happy in their own skin. Happy sharing a confined space with relative strangers. Happy sitting in silence together, perhaps reading/writing, perhaps not. Happy that personal hygiene is not as important as it is at home and that it could be several days between showers depending on the sea conditions and the limited availability of fresh water. Even though 'Arktika' has its own fresh water maker, it's still a gets used sparingly.

The scenery in Nansen Fjord is simply spectacular. The mirror-calm sea is dotted with a million icebergs and the last remnants of the fog is creating an ever changing light show as the evening sun hangs low in the sky above the jagged peaks. Everyone is on deck just looking in silence.

I spot a seal on an iceberg, this is a good sign – where there are seals on bergs, there are bears licking their lips!

BEAR TRACKS

Looking through binoculars from our anchorage, I spot bear tracks on the shore just above the high water line – there's a real air of excitement now that the bears are close. In the morning we'll go and investigate.

We wake up to thick fog, it could be several hours before the low Arctic sun burns it off. So after breakfast four of us take the Zodiac ashore to investigate the bear tracks. This is risky as bears could be anywhere but we need to see how fresh the tracks are. The rule is very simple; every group that goes ashore carries a firearm and stays together.

Visibility is less than 100 meters as we motor ashore. To our right the beach disappears in to the fog, we cut the engine and pull the Zodiac up out of the water. The only sound is the roar of water from a cascading river that cuts the beach in two.

We rock-hop across the raging white water, trying to keep the boots dry and continue along the beach. Suddenly, we come across enormous bear tracks in the snow – these are not the ones we saw from the boat last night, these are fresh and heading the same direction as we are.

Assuming the bear is in front of us, we turn back, but by now the Zodiac has disappeared in the fog. Just then, a loud warning hooter from 'Arktika' cuts the air which means someone has spotted something. We can only assume it's a bear!

Immediately, my heart-rate jumps and we race back along the beach. As the Zodiac looms out of the fog, we are faced with a sight none of us wanted to see - a fully-grown bear standing beside our dinghy sniffing curiously! We stop in our tracks.

This is one clever bear, cutting off our only escape route! By now my heart rate is through the roof. This could get very ugly, very quickly!

This juvenile bear is very curious about our bright red inflatable. To him, it looks like meat but doesn't smell like it. He puts two huge paws up on the air tank and bounces, for all the world like he's performing CPR!

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“This juvenile bear... puts two huge paws up on the air tank and bounces, for all the world like he’s performing CPR!”



EAR-SPLITTING GUNSHOTS

Suddenly, an ear-splitting gunshot rings out. From 'Arktika', the skipper has fired a warning shot between the bear and us. I don't know if it's the sound of the gun shot or the bullet pinging off the rocks that spooks him, but he immediately runs uphill about twenty meters – and stops. Another shot and the bear moves further up the slope, after the third or fourth shot there is enough space between us and the bear to sprint for the dinghy. This time the boots get a proper soaking as we take the direct route across the river!

Only when we get there do we realise that in his juvenile curiosity, the bear had chewed through the front air tank and punctured it, but there's just enough buoyancy in the remaining two air tanks to get the four of us off the beach and back to safety! It's mid-afternoon before my pulse returns to normal!

Safely back on 'Arktika', the fog is beginning to burn off. The full splendour of Nansen Fjord is once again on show. The jaw-dropping Greenlandic wilderness seems endless. In between the rugged peaks, cracked, scarred glaciers curve and sweep majestically to the sea, creating yet more monstrous icebergs – as they have done for millennia. It's truly humbling to witness.

Today we will find more bears - but this time from the safety of 'Arktika'! Two of the crew are up the rigging spotting, another is on the bow with binoculars. I'm on the roof of the wheelhouse with the big 600mm lens and the drone primed and ready to launch at a moments notice. Now it's a waiting game as we meander through the ice floes.

A shout from the bow, " Bear in the water, dead ahead!".

Skipper Siggie throttles back so we don't get too close, in seconds the drone is airborne and is tracking him down. I locate the bear through the big lens and... oh my God he's huge! This is fantastic!

He turns towards us with a growl of annoyance. The drone is getting fantastic

footage as I snap away. This time I can fully appreciate what a truly magnificent beast he is.

Not wanting to stress the bear, we track him for no more than 5 minutes. At one point he stops by a small iceberg and tries to haul himself out of the water, but the berg is too unstable to support him. In frustration he turns towards us, flashing his huge fangs in warning. The fang on the left side of his lower jaw is broken and only about half the size of the other, his muzzle is heavily scarred. He's a fighter and clearly been in many scrapes over the years! How amazing it is to see these magnificent beasts in their natural habitat.

That night we anchor in another small, sheltered bay and in the morning go ashore again and see what we can find.

But even before the dinghy even reaches the sand, we can see massive paw prints on the beach. Everyone is on edge. The risk is too high. So for safety, we return to the boat and send a team up along the shore to spot bears from the dinghy – they will alert us by VHF if they spot anything – we follow on board 'Arktika'.

A short time later the radio crackles – they've spotted a huge bear and this is the biggest we've seen by far. His fur has the slightly golden tinge of an older bear and he's in great condition – fat and healthy. We track him for a short while. Every so often he looks up and snorts at the drone like it's some kind of irritating mosquito. A few more minutes and that's enough, the drone returns safely on board and we start to pack up.

It's time to ready 'Arktika' for the long 400km sail home – we came to film and photograph Polar Bears and found an untouched land of breath-taking beauty – mission accomplished!

A gentle afternoon breeze has filled in and we leave Nansen Fjord in the same way the very first explorers would have, picking our way through the icebergs in silence under full sail.

With thanks to:

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