

A Summer of Ice

Reaching Greenland at the second attempt

Mike Jaques

For reasons we are all too aware of this trip took a while to get going. We had planned, after our trip to east Greenland in 2018, to return in 2020 to visit one area in greater depth. Specifically to head further inland, camp and climb from the ice cap. It didn't quite pan out. With two years of stalling, we inevitably had team changes; ailments, jobs and impending fatherhood all impacting. I had two crews, one to deliver *Umiak*, a Bestewind 50, to Greenland. The second crew would then head into the area between 66°30'N to 67°30'N on the east coast of Greenland. Once there we would climb and ski as many peaks as time allowed. This is a very remote area, requiring permission from the Greenland Government to enter, with numerous unclimbed mountains.



With the extra two years of planning, we were well prepared as we headed out from Ardfern on midsummer's day, having sadly cut short our involvement in the RCC Scottish meet.

On board as we headed to Iceland were Gareth Thomas (RCC), against whom I had raced double handed, many times, John Tewson a skiing pal and Neil Donaldson, currently the chandlery



Gareth Thomas

manager at Ardfern whom I had known for many years. I think I could describe it as a spritely sail, with ample use of the reefing lines.

In fact, by the time, we made landfall in the Vestmannaeyjar (Westman Islands) it was a very spritely 40 knots as we entered the harbour. I was not best pleased when the harbour master directed us to a downwind pontoon, with no run off. Quite a challenging situation but the crew stepped up and we were soon filling in multiple forms for the customs. Quite why they wanted to know how much butter we had on board defeats me.

Vesterman, on the island of Heimaey (famed for it's volcano), is a great transit stop and now home to the bulk of Iceland's fishing fleet. Onward to Keflavik, straightforward. Except when we awoke, we realised we were in the wrong harbour. In our defence the chart is unclear, but the notice board wasn't. A quick move ready for some new crew. Neil had to head back, to get married, and Paul, Derek and Jim jumped aboard. Jim Searight and I worked together for 25 years and have enjoyed many adventures, Paul Kutarski, a retired surgeon had sailed with Jim and me to the Antarctic, Derek Poate with plenty of sailing experience, lives in the same village, and mentioned that he fancied a sail.

At this stage I was quite concerned by the large amount of sea ice still showing on the ice charts. It was considerably heavier than the last few years of records. We decided we would give the ice a few more days and headed north to Olafsvik, slightly nearer to Kulusk, our landfall destination. At this stage Gareth was starting to feel unwell and headed to his bunk.

The ice looked to have improved, so we set sail to Greenland. By this time Gareth, who is a doctor, tested positive for Covid, followed by Paul, then John and finally Derek. Generally, apart from being tired it was relatively mild. Of course, it was unclear if the tiredness was from watchkeeping or the virus.

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Making landfall on the east coast of Greenland has two challenges, fog and ice, often together. We were surprised when we started getting into ice 100nm off the coast as there was no indication of this on the ice charts. I should mention that the ice charts tend to be a little historic by the time they are received and are not very regularly updated. I imagine that the fog precludes regular satellite observations.

4 July was a tough day, poor visibility and a lot of sea ice. We followed lead after lead often having to about turn our way out. Come what may we couldn't find a route through.



Sea ice as we approached Greenland

After 24 hours and 100 nm of struggling we sadly made the decision that we had to head back to Iceland. It was a big disappointment especially as the fog had lifted and we could see the fine looking peaks on the coast. There was a French yacht near us and we motored over to talk to them. As we spoke we were delighted that a humpback breached between the two of us. Small consolation. Our alternative was to head for the northwest fjords of Iceland. The return, which took three days, was a blend of calm, lots of wind, poor visibility and whenever you thought the ice was gone some more would arrive.

We had a pleasant cruise in the northwest fjords and the weather was better than my previous visit. Caught some cod, Paul had a dive, we saw lots of whales, mostly humpbacks and some very close to the yacht.

We had spied SY *Henry* (RCC) on the AIS and we caught up with them when we returned to Reykjavik. In fact, it was something of a RCC mini meet with Will Whatley, Will Eaton and Michael Skidmore.

Also in Reykjavik was *Nanuq*, built by KM in Holland. *Umiak* was also built by KM and I had met the owner Bart at the yard, when she was being scoped. She had been designed to winter in the ice and Bart had just spent the last two winters in the arctic pack on his own. She is quite some vessel, Google her.

It was handover time and from a crew with almost as many false hips as members, all retired, it was time for some younger blood. The new crew of Tim, Olly, Graham, Chris and Alistair made up a compliment of multiskilled mountaineers

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and sailors for this phase. Tim Blakemore is a mountain guide based in Chamonix who also keeps a 30 footer by the Skye Bridge. Olly Young was on his third arctic trip with me and is a full time yacht racer and project manager who has taken up mountaineering. For Graham Tourell, or Gringo as he is called in the professional sailing world, it was quite a change from the French SailGP team. Chris Gnieser is a ski and mountain guide based in Austria, with a PhD in Arctic Ecology. Alistair Miller who I climb with regularly is a physician originally with the Royal Navy, where he had been involved in a couple of Joint Service Everest expeditions. I was pleased that we had gathered such a strong team for the expedition.

We could see from the AIS that a few yachts were trying to get into Kulusuk and so, optimistically we set sail. As we neared the Greenland coast, it soon became apparent that despite the ice charts looking more optimistic it was going to be very difficult to make landfall in Kulusuk. So we headed south searching for routes in. As mentioned the ice charts tend to be quite irregular and therefore most ice navigation is rather trial and error. You can head down plenty of false leads looking for a passage. It can be slow and becomes quite challenging if there is any wind or fog. Eventually we made landfall about 100nm south of Kulusuk in Peder Oxe Bugt. It looked as if we may be able to make progress north along the coast and, after an ascent of the peak near the anchorage, we pushed north.

We called this ice berg alley. The sea ice was offshore of us but the density of ice bergs in our inshore passage was considerable. This became something of a theme and clearly there had been considerable calving of glaciers in recent times. Making good progress we anchored at an old Loran station for the night. The following day was foggy, which meant radar navigation. The GPS positions do not tally with the charts and can be several miles adrift. This is not consistent, so radar becomes a very useful navigation tool even when it is not foggy. The majority of the area has not been surveyed, unless there has previously been a specific requirement for shipping. Obviously running aground is a constant concern. It becomes a case of reading the coastline features and studying the echo sounder for changes in pattern. We found a new uncharted rock when Tim thought he heard the sound of breaking waves. He did indeed and we altered course just in time as it appeared through the fog.

We made the village of Tasiilaq, primarily to refuel before continuing to push north to our climbing destination. Tasiilaq is the main settlement in the area with a population of about 1500. Kulusuk about 10 miles away has the airport and a small settlement. As it was Tim's birthday, we stayed in Tasiilaq for the night. We were able to pick up some local knowledge on the ice conditions which suggested it would be difficult to make our destination. The locals reckoned that it was the heaviest ice year for some time. By morning, the fjord that Tasiilaq is in was beginning to fill with drifting sea ice, so we squeezed ourselves out. After a few hours, as we neared the open water, we lost power from the engine. Initial thoughts were that the propeller was damaged, and a discussion followed as to who was

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going to dive. In fact, it was sheared bolts on the Aqua drive that disconnected the prop shaft. As we were in thick ice a sense of urgency prevailed and we towed *Umiak* out using the rib and 8hp outboard. Tim, who had once been a diesel fitter and Gringo set to work. We had some bolts that were cut to size and a temporary repair was fashioned. It should be noted that, like most yachts, it is in a difficult place to reach. Ideally, we needed a couple more bolts and Tasilaq would be our only chance to buy some. However, the ice had blocked access so we headed to the small village of Kulusk where Tim had a friend, also a guide and hoped he might have access to some.

Kulusuk was also rammed with ice, but we got in and sure enough Matt and Helen Spenley and their engineering supplies saved the day. As Kulusuk was so full of ice and there was a noticeable tidal stream we headed off into the fjord system having noticed that there was less ice cover. It was a glorious night sail, although at this latitude it isn't dark for very long. We anchored in Sermiligap Qingetiva, a large fjord a fair way inland from the coast. It was here that the retreating glaciers really struck a chord. At first, we couldn't orientate the map in relation to the side glaciers until we realised that we were anchored 3nm inland! Our map, a very small scale of 1:500,000, had a survey date of 2007.



Anchorage at Sermiligap Qingetiva

We also noted the lines on the scree slopes where the glacier once was. We were all quite moved by how much retreat of the glacier had occurred. Global warming was well and truly impacting east Greenland.

After a couple of good ascents, both previously climbed, and a long glacier tour we upped anchor. The ice charts were indicating a chance of heading north. North



Gringo on a high traversie, Sermiligap Qingetiva in the background. (Below) *Umiak* a Bestewind 50 was in the National Park where the permit was required. The application process is not onerous but does require substantial insurance cover. It is not frequently visited, and we hoped to find some unclimbed peaks.

Heading out from Sermiligap Qingetiva went well but as we tried to push back in to the shore it became quite tricky with pack ice. Eventually we anchored further north than we had expected in Tuglitik fjord. A little polar history – this was where the infamous Gino Watkins drowned in the thirties whilst hunting for seal from



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At anchor, north arm Tuglitik fjord. Note bamboo poles for pushing away from ice that goes bump his kayak. Previously he had led the British Arctic Air Route Expedition which was written up as *Northern Lights*, worth a read.

Anchoring in these places has its moments. Generally, the fjords are deep sided so finding a spot requires patience. We would aim for stream outlets or glacier moraine where it shallows and provides better holding. Of course, heading into the shallows heightens the chance of a grounding and it was in this fjord that we got to 0.2m before going hard a starboard. We later discovered that Gino and co



had marked the bar with a cairn on the shore. This was in the book *Gino's Last Expedition* which we read avidly, in awe. Their original hut had long since collapsed but they had chosen a wonderful spot. They had supplemented their rations by living off the land, on a diet of seals and fish. We too tried our luck at fishing and hooked 16 Arctic char, very tasty indeed.

Tim with catch of the day



Poulsen fjord from summit ridge

When at anchor we worked a system of two on boat duties whilst the other four went climbing. The duty team stocked up with water, cleaned, ferried ashore, repaired boat bits, cooked and generally recovered from the previous day. As the trip progressed, so did the number of volunteers for boat days. We rarely undertook anchor watches, as generally, being in a polar high pressure system meant fairly calm conditions. We did however have a problem virtually every night with things that go bump. Often the culprits were detected when the nightly calls of nature coincide with an ice watch. As expected, the older members did more of this. We would then push the boat away using long bamboo poles. Occasionally we had to up anchor and move.

At last, we made it to the summit of an unclimbed peak when Olly and I climbed a 1100m mountain opposite the anchorage. A long snow gully culminated in a rocky ridge. We descended the other side to gain the golden prize of a traverse. Meanwhile Tim and Gringo skied up the glacier towards our descent and summited 30 minutes after, to be teased with taunts of I bet you wish you had set off earlier. It was all a baptism of fire for Gringo as he had only previously skied for four weeks. A rocky peak and a ski peak were also climbed before we left the fjord.

We hoped Poulsen fjord would provide some sport and we were able, with some weaving to get into it. We were not to be disappointed. We anchored in moraine at the head of the fjord. There were plenty of targets including a wall by the anchorage

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that Tim and Gringo climbed at Hard Very Severe (HVS).

An early excursion caused what was to become known as 'Wellygate'. The previous night Tim had spied a route and we attempted it with two parties. Generally when we went ashore we wore wellies and changed into our boots on the beach. We then deposited the wellies with the lifejackets, rifle bag and shore barrel. This included a tent, sleeping bags and food, in the event that we were unable to pick up the shore party due to ice. Tim and



Umiak anchored in Poulsen fjord



Gringo arrived on the beach first and duly left their kit, in our view a long way up the beach. Bear in mind we had no tide data. We left ours in the same pile and set off up the mountain. Al and I didn't do so well as the others on route finding and returned short of the summit, being concerned about seracs and rockfall. As we descended and looked down to the fjord, we noticed some objects floating amongst the ice. We thought they looked like wellies and so they were. It must have been three metres of tide. Olly came in the dinghy and collected the floating objects from around the fjord whilst we directed him from the mountain. Gringo, who is a commercial yacht master, got the blame for not working out the tides.



The head of Poulsen fjord (above and at sunset below)

We then had several excursions to the other side of the fjord, where there was a ramp amongst the boulders making it possible to ski up to the main glacier. From here several ascents, initially on skis, were made, a couple of them being



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fine alpine routes. We were very conservative on our routes given our remoteness and how loose the rock can be on new routes. The fjord attracted a rolling fog and we had a few occasions when we had to use a compass bearing to get the dinghy in to pick up the shore teams. On one occasion we thought the shore barrel was going to be useful.

Despite the midday heat the start of the autumn was on us and the fjords were freezing during the night, soon to thaw, but the decks were a little slippery for an hour or two. It was time to weather route home and we could see that there was a depression heading for the Denmark Strait, so we decide to push out through the ice again to ensure we weren't stuck. This worked well from an anchorage perspective as our final drop was an idyllic cove, sadly without any climbing prospects but nice to walk ashore for the last time.

There is an aura about this place that

Our last night in Greenland



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everyone gets. We saw no other person or vessel, not even on AIS for three weeks. You view the land and know that no one has set foot on most of it. This truly is one of the last great wildernesses.

Our crossing was a motor for two days. The following day tied up soundly in Reykjavik, as we tidied up, we got the expected gale. My companions were now all sorting their air flights out as, unlike my first crew, they all had jobs to go back to. For the return sail to Scotland, I was to be joined by Colin Rawlings, with whom I have raced thousand and thousands of miles and my nephew, Richard.

This crossing is in something of a depression route. But, with modern weather software and spare time it is possible to skip past them. For this reason, we routed to pass to the north of Stornoway and had an easy crossing. From landfall we continued into the moonlight in calm conditions past Rona to catch the tide at the Kyle in the morning. After a breezy time at Ardnamurchan and a night in Tobermory we made it back to our berth at Ardfarn on the 25 August.

It was an interesting summer. Significantly tougher than could have been reasonably expected and we didn't quite achieve the plan. We still sailed 1500nm in largely uncharted water, found several new anchorages, climbed some new peaks, but best of all everyone who stepped foot on the boat had a great time and a meaningful experience. Tim summarised it by describing it as an 'old school adventure'. It was.