

Dispatch from Greenland

August 23, 2008



Narsarsuaq Valley

Onward to the Past

After a week away from the open road, spent at a summer home on Finland's Baltic coast, I arrived in Copenhagen last Saturday to catch the weekly flight to Narsarsuaq Airport in south Greenland – a spot that was yet one more link in the former chain of American airbases flanking the North Atlantic, this one built after Denmark fell to the Nazis, leaving its long-time colony to fend for itself. Codenamed Blue West One, the base was not as well known as most others, but at its height had a population of 12,000. Its hospital gained some notoriety during the 1950s due to rumours

by the conspiracy-minded that it was the secret destination for the US forces' most seriously wounded during the Korean War. Whether or not the rumours were true, the only remaining evidence of the infamous hospital is a stone chimney standing in an otherwise empty meadow in Narsarsuaq Valley, its massive hearth used for campfires by occasional hikers.

Today's hamlet of Narsarsuaq (population 150) is scattered about the coastal plain next to the air strip, on the only ground in south Greenland with sufficient purchase for jets to land. Even then, the descent to the runway is a knuckle-clenching experience, as I found as our plane skimmed within grazing distance of several summits during its final approach. The pilot then negotiated a quick tumble to solid ground and slowed the plane with alarming dispatch to avoid the rocky beach just feet from the runway's edge. His efforts earned our loud applause.

Outside on the tarmac, there was no sign of the Atlantic, the ocean 40 km distant through a network of channels – an important factor in the choice of a nearby site as the New World's first European settlement. Its ruins are just a short boat ride across the fjord from the airport, and I was there within hours of my arrival.



Church Ruins at Brattahlid



The Dock at Qassiarsuk

Knocking on Thjodhilde's Door

I admit that my fascination with Greenland's Norse colony is – as even charitably minded friends put it – an acquired taste. For me, the appeal is obvious. A tiny outpost at the edge of the New World, which lasted for close to five centuries (almost as long as the span of European involvement in the New World from the time of Columbus to the present), its colonists' initiation of contact between Europe and North America is today seen, thanks to a host of recent findings, in ever more prominent light. There is also the matter of the colony's mysterious disappearance, whose exact causes are the subject of heated debate among historians.

You'd never guess all this from a glance at the Brattahlid ruins, which occupy a pleasant water-side meadow in the hamlet of Qassiarsuk. The reason my trip across the fjord had been so quickly timed was that the weather on my arrival in Narsarsuaq was perfectly clear. On such a sun-filled day, late enough in August that virtually all the insects had vanished, the boat crossing was a pure delight, with just a few icebergs from a nearby glacier dotting the aquamarine water. My only companions on deck, besides the boat's owner, were a group of Danes kitted out for serious hiking – giddy, as I was, at their luck in seeing this empyreal scene at its sun-soaked best, as we glanced up at the surrounding hills, bathed in light as crystalline as any Renaissance painting. I couldn't help but wonder whether Greenland's Norse founder, Eric the Red, had come across these shores in similar favoured conditions. He'd planned his colonial venture during his first visit in the 980s, choosing this site as his own. It was at the inland edge of what was to be the so-called Eastern Settlement of farms, with a second Western Settlement about 500 km to the north, where Greenland's capital Nuuk is located today.



Leif Eriksson

Once I'd stepped out of the boat at Qassiarsuk dock, it was a short climb to a statue that commands the heights above the hamlet. One would expect to see Eric the Red here, but instead it is his son Leif Eriksson. To understand why, one must remember a few pages from one's history schoolbooks. Eric invariably gets a bad rap as an ill-mannered rube prone to bouts of barbaric rage, calculated deceit, and family quarrels. His penchant for allowing revenge killings to get out of hand (even by the extremely easy-going standards of the day) resulted in his exile from two lands – first his native Norway, then Iceland – thus forcing

his travels westward. On his return to Iceland to draft volunteers for his planned colonial venture, his deceit came to the fore with the name he chose for his discovered Eden.

As for the conflicts that Eric had with his family, these flared up once he and his retinue had settled in their new homes. A surviving Icelandic saga reports that Leif converted to Christianity after a visit to Norway's king, who asked him to evangelize among his fellow Greenlanders. Leif's most conspicuous failure was his own father's refusal of salvation. But Leif's mother Thjodhilde was so enthusiastic a convert she announced she would lock up her sleeping box (the era's preferred bedroom furniture) until her husband saw the Christian light. Eric never did, though Thjodhilde's ultimatum, in the words of the saga, "vexed him greatly." It's not hard to imagine that Leif decided to put some open sea between himself and his spurned father. The result was that he stumbled upon North America. Thereafter dubbed Leif the Lucky, posterity views him as having explorer credentials equal to Eric's, but with a far more winsome character.

Once I'd finished my solitary clamber to Leif's statue, I could see that my Danish boat mates were nearing the ruins. To my astonishment, they passed by with hardly a glance, making instead for a tacky reconstructed church and Norse turf house built on a nearby rise of land. There they stayed, soon joined by a tour guide wearing ludicrous-looking medieval garb, who led them through each structure with an animated lecture. For me, it was a godsend. I strolled alone through the grass-covered ruins, conjuring dramas of Eric's and Thjodhilde's bedroom bickering just as they are interrupted by their too-pious-by-half son announcing his plans for escape. Hardly authentic, but a pleasant diversion that also occupied me the next morning, during a hike to near the inland ice.



Foundation of Brattahlid's Great Hall



The Inland Trail from Narsarsuaq

It would be sacrilege to leave the story of the Greenland Norse with my own comic imaginings, though, given the colony's ultimate fate. Despite the colonists' successes over the centuries – a long-running ability to stay current with European fashion, continued westward exploration, trade with indigenous people – it is their enigmatic disappearance which historians now focus on. During the 1400s, Greenland was becoming cooler, while a wave of Inuit newcomers had gained a formidable presence. No one knows for certain what happened to the Norse, except that the larger Eastern Settlement managed to survive several decades longer than the more marginal Western Settlement. Some of the colonists may have escaped on visiting Icelandic and Norwegian boats; others may have encountered the Basque and English fishermen journeying to the Grand Banks; but many must have died from privation, utterly forgotten by the outside world.

Questionable Qaqortoqian Comforts

Greenland's modern history has been much less fraught. The Danes returned, first to claim it in the early 1600s, then to settle a century later. Except in wartime, Greenland has stayed under Danish rule ever since. Its native inhabitants' language is close to the Inuktitut spoken across Baffin Bay, here called Greenlandic. Because of centuries of intermarriage between Inuk and Dane, Greenlanders are a unique people (something easily seen in their appearance), while they enjoy self-government in everything but international affairs. Not surprisingly, their economic viability depends on a raft of government subsidies from Copenhagen.

If all this sounds familiar, there's a good reason: Greenland was very much a model at the time of



“Hello Again. It’s Been a While.”

Nunavut’s establishment as a separate territory in 1999. Comparing the two places may be invidious, but is an unavoidable pastime for Canadian visitors. I stopped myself from doing so while at Narsarsuaq, but let my impressions run loose after arriving in Qaqortoq. South Greenland’s informal capital, and just 20 minutes away from Narsarsuaq by helicopter, the town is a centre of native Greenlandic culture.

The contrasts with Nunavut begin the moment Qaqortoq comes into view. With a physical setting similar to Iqaluit’s, perched on a natural amphitheatre of rock surrounding a small harbour, it is distinguished by being picturesque and litter-free – its houses painted a spectrum of bright colours, and tightly packed against the slopes. As for the residents whom I met in succeeding days, they seemed notably comfortable with their lives, and proud of their town and homeland, which they prefer to call a country. Certainly there is much to be proud of – especially this society’s innovative mix of cultural values – but there is a deadening sense of lethargy about the place that I found off-putting. Perhaps this is nothing more than a North American reacting to the Danish paternalism visible everywhere. Still, Greenland seems to have little of Nunavut’s dynamism. Its visual art is clearly substandard. Rarely did I see a Greenlandic sculpture or painting that matched even the bargain-basement inventory I was shown by the hawkers in Iqaluit’s bars, let alone the masterpieces found at the serious end of Canada’s Inuit art market. Other aspects of life seemed equally muted. There might be a fascinating political culture here; if so, it certainly escaped this visitor’s notice. Unlike Nunavut, with its outspoken local media that

does so much to fuel the territory’s hothouse politics, in Narsarsuaq and Qaqortoq I saw no-one bothering with a newspaper or paying attention to the drab local broadcasters. Maybe that’s a good thing – a sign of widespread contentment. If so, there are drawbacks. My guess is that Greenlanders will choose to remain in their pleasant Danish cocoon, their political concerns ignored by outsiders, as they are today, while it is left to others – Nunavummiut in particular – to take the lead in global Inuit activism. Besides, Greenlanders



Qaqortoq Old and New



Looking Towards Hvalsey Fjord

will soon have a major tourist industry to contend with. Visitors aren't swarming here yet, thanks to the caricatured view of Greenland as all snow and ice, but misconceptions are bound to change.

On my second last day before returning home, I took advantage of another glorious day to walk beyond the hills that surround the town. I met not a single person along the path. The only sign of life was a Qaqortoq trio searching for berries on a distant slope. As with so much of what I saw in Greenland, it is not just the scenery I'll remember, but the evocative stories that cling to it. For example, the shores of the inlet I hiked to were the setting of one of the more notable events in the Norse colony's history. In 1408, in Hvalsey Fjord church, whose ruins lie just beyond the mountain framing the iceberg in the photo above, a group of Icelanders blown off course on a trip from Norway witnessed the wedding of one of their party. The groom, Thorstein Olafsson, was well known in Hvalsey Fjord. The storm-tossed ship he captained had landed in 1406, and so scant was communication with the outside world that it would take until 1410 for him to return with his new wife Sigrid Bjørnsdottir to Iceland. This wedding was the last recorded event in the Norse settlements before contact slipped beyond reach. Interestingly, the congregation that day was reported to have been large. All those in the church must have known what Greenland's worsening climate boded for Hvalsey Fjord and its neighbouring settlements. Yet, unlike the Icelandic visitors and Sigrid, lucky enough to escape, many of the Greenlanders in the church probably stayed on, unable or unwilling to act in time. It's an anecdote likely to be told and retold by future generations of tour guides, as first hundreds and then thousands join them at this spot, doing what tourists always do: reading the concerns of the present into the legacy of the past.