

Arctic Midnight Orienteering

By Ann and Frank Ingwersen

To celebrate our 70th birthdays in 2012, and as a warm-up for the World Masters Orienteering, we headed to Greenland for the Arctic Midnight Orienteering festival. We were based in Ilulissat, a town of 4,500, 300 km (69 degrees) north of the Arctic circle. Orienteering worldwide is the same (maps, compasses, E-sticks, tricky terrain and friendly people), but different.



Map challenges before the start box

The challenges here are that the white on the maps was rock - rounded sheets of granite in ridges and ledges. Between are small marshy areas, many with tarns; magnetic N. is about 34 deg. off geographic N, so to save confusion (!) the N lines are on an angle across the map.

There were 3 events, a long distance, a sprint, then their signature event, the mid-summer night Arctic Midnight Orienteering Challenge. This began with a massed start at 11pm with a choice of 4 courses - 20, 15, 10, and 5.8km (our choice).

Running under a midnight sun

With the midnight sun warming our backs and millions of mozzies encouraging us to run quickly, we squelched across marshes from one rocky outcrop to the next. Then we were faced with a 125m climb up to the ridges on top of the surrounding hills. We both

chose to scramble up a narrow mozzie-infested rocky gorge in preference to the steep, smooth and slippery granite sheets. We arrived almost together and while regaining our breaths, noted that it was midnight.

Serious distraction - apricot glow over floating icebergs

Here the seriousness of the competition was tested. We stopped and looked back to the sun (now due N. and well above the horizon) and gazed in awe at the golden orb at its nadir, casting a pale apricot glow over the icebergs floating in the smooth golden sea. Time for a few quick photos (phone carried in the back pocket), punch the control, then over the ridges like mountain goats. Now the huge bergs in the Icefjord were audible and visible, glistening brilliant white and gold. Then Ann spotted a group of 4 younger competitors well ahead - time to be serious again. Keeping high to be able to see the tarns (invisible from lower down when they are often above you), she leapt up and down ledges and rock sheets, to the last control, in town.

Big cheers from the onlookers - "you're my hero" said one orienteering mother. Frank, meanwhile, continued at a steady pace and, with accurate navigation, spiked every control and came 2nd in the Mens.

Feast of whale blubber and seal soup

After the race followed the Greenlandic feast for the finishers - different fish in all guises (raw, smoked, baked, dried), seal soup thickened with whale blubber, pale pink jelly-like seal blubber to be eaten with the dried fish (if Greenlanders can eat it so can we!), whale and reindeer meats and salads, followed by pastries and cakes. Wonderful.

We finally arrived back at the hostel in broad daylight about 3.30am exhausted but exhilarated after such an unforgettable experience.

Orienteering is not just about running, but enjoying the whole atmosphere, the environment and the wonderful people.

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