

# Arctic-O 2007, Greenland

by Nick Howlett LOC

The Compass Sport 'O' holidays abroad section earlier in the year tempted me out to Greenland in late June. Somewhere I'd always wanted to go and what better excuse than some orienteering. I was initially put off by the costs involved, but then decided the opportunity was too good to miss.

Greenland is a pretty amazing country. Well in fact it is not even a country, technically being part of Denmark. A colony essentially. It is huge – the world's biggest non-continental island. About 2500 by 1000km in size, it has only 56,000 population. Australia is 100 times more densely populated. It has hardly any roads, and a grand total of 4 traffic lights.

Working out how to get there is the first challenge. You can get there via Iceland. Sounds good in principle, but would require a bank loan! So the only practicable route, albeit still not cheap, is via Denmark. So a late Sunday flight from Manchester to Copenhagen, a night in the Zleep Airport Hotel, then an Air Greenland flight to Kangerlussuaq on the west coast of Greenland. Nothing much there but previously an American military base, so has Greenland's best airstrip. Then a great flight up the west coast to Ilulissat, the home of Greenland's only orienteering club. The first flight I'd been on for a good few years where you could still go into the cockpit to chat to the pilots and admire the view.

The flights give you a real sense of Greenland. A huge icecap, which makes up 85% of Greenland's land area. A thin strip of land around the edge, cut by numerous radiating glaciers and the valleys they have left behind. Lakes, big and small, everywhere. And apart from Kangerlussuaq and Ilulissat not a single trace of habitation.

Ilulissat is the 3<sup>rd</sup> biggest town in Greenland – home to 4500 people and 2000 huskies, and Greenland's only orienteering club. The club, IOG, was formed in 1999 by an expatriate Danish orienteer [Olav] who was working in Ilulissat at the time. Considering the population, and the lack of a surrounding catchment area, the club's 30-40 active members is a pretty good effort. They have weekly training events through the 4 month summer, and the 3 races of the Arctic Midnight Orienteering Festival are their only competitive races. Olav still comes out every year to plan these, and his friend Flemming does the race organisation. Flemming was in charge of the World Champs races in Denmark last year, so aside from the lack of electronic timing, the races were of top quality.

The training event on the hill immediately behind the town gives a great taster of the terrain. The majority is bare rock, with crags and boulders everywhere. Vegetation consists of not a lot more than a few patches of mosses and lichens, and the odd very low shrub. And water everywhere – generally small tarns of a few metres in size upwards. The map is excellent [courtesy of the visiting Danes], though the rock mapping is tricky, with boulders and crags being huge before they make it on to the map. There is also a great view of Ilulissat with the iceberg studded harbour beyond. The town is somewhat ramshackle, but very colourful, as all the houses are painted in primary colours, and having a house the same colour as your neighbour seemingly being outlawed. The only bad thing are the mosquitoes which are plentiful and brutal. Should provide incentive to keep running.

The first event proper is a score event. The location is about as spectacular as you can get for a race. The controls are on a hillside to the south of the town, overlooking the outlet channel of Ilulissat Kangia glacier. This is the most productive glacier anywhere outside Antarctica – in terms of how much ice it produces. The glacier itself is way out of sight, but the channel is a vast collection of icebergs, jammed into a solid slow-moving mass. The statistics are staggering. The glacier produces 20 million tonnes of ice every day, creating a 40km channel of ice, which is so jammed that it takes bergs 2 years to reach the ocean.

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And some of the controls are 100 metres away from this groaning mass of ice. Not easy to concentrate on the task at hand.

The field is pretty small. Just 11 intrepid foreigners. One other Brit [David Bennett from DVO]. A handful of Danes, a French couple, 2 Dutch lads, and an intrepid W60 from Tasmania. We are started off by 2 of the locals in their fab traditional costumes. The race itself is fast and furious. 34 controls to get in 50 minutes, with the distraction of the views. I manage 31, and one local lad and one of the Danes get them all.

The following day we run in the Greenland Orienteering Championships – just to the north of Ilulissat. Up until now the weather has been perfect. Blue skies and pleasantly warm in the sun. But as we wait at the start we can see an impressive bank of sea fog rolling in. And with impeccable timing it rolls across the area just as the first starters head off. The first half of my course [the charmingly named “Old Boy’s Class” which is for 35 to 50 year olds] is through a very marshy area with scattered low rocky outcrops. We then cross the airport road [in fact the only road in the area] and out onto a series of steep bouldery headlands overlooking Disko Bay [which we can’t see in the fog]. A cracking race with difficulty magnified by the conditions. I’m chuffed to get round pretty unscathed.

Greenland is of course one of the big research areas for climate scientists. A huge volume of water is locked up in the Greenland Icecap. The glaciers are receding apace. The sea-ice is disappearing. The icecap itself is 3km thick, and current estimates put sea levels rising 7 metres if it were to melt. Though the contradiction of flying to Greenland and contributing to these changes is not lost on me.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> and final race is the big one of the event. A long mountain orienteering race starting at the unsociable hour of midnight [when of course it is entirely light being in the Arctic Circle and just after the summer solstice]. I run the B race for the “old boys” and teenagers [16km]. It is fantastic. Again there is low cloud and limited visibility. The A and B races start with the field split round 2 short butterfly loops. My group make a mass bodge of the first control but sort ourselves out, and I’m first back after the butterflies from our group. I’m just behind 2 of the local youngsters from the other group. Ulrik and Minik are both 14. Ulrik is frighteningly quick, and is doing the race with no kit at all. Not even a compass. Must have an amazing sense of direction. We then head into the mountains for some highly technical orienteering amidst huge crags, myriads of lakes and a fair bit of snow. I can hear the youngsters chatting away ahead in the clag. I’m still close behind them at a manned control on the highest peak in the area. The locals later tell me that most of them had never been up here before. Then it’s down and through the marshy area to run through town to the Leisure Centre and finish. I’ve managed to pass the youngsters somewhere, so am thrilled to be first back. The post-race food is a little unusual. A big bowl of seal soup, another of reindeer soup, and a huge reindeer haunch to hack bits off.

The prizegiving is the following evening, and it is lovely to be at an event small enough that we can all have a big meal in a local hotel. Rather oddly we are all seated according to when our birthdays are! Great for mixing the foreigners up. Some of the locals perform their party pieces, including one brave lass who paints herself as a local traditional evil spirit and goes round scaring everyone, and we make a feeble effort to join in with some Greenlandic songs.

So a lovely event with some great orienteering, amidst some pretty unparalleled scenery. Highly recommended, though obviously more expensive than other orienteering holidays.