

## GREENLAND ORIENTEERING 2005

It may seem strange to many that we should spend our summer holiday orienteering in Greenland. But there were many reasons, not least of which was a recommendation from a 'friend of a friend' that the event and area were well worth the effort of getting there. And so they proved.

To get there requires going via Copenhagen (worth a visit in its own right), and then two flights taking you to Ilulissat (a fishing town half way up the west coast of the landmass). The final leg, in a Dash 7, gives you the first real views of the ice cap and bare coastline. The flights are not cheap (except the EasyJet leg to Copenhagen), but Air Greenland give heavy reductions for those lucky enough to be 60+.

Our first sight of Ilulissat was from the air as we came in to land, flying low over the Ice Ford, recently created a UNESCO World Heritage site. Here were Wrekin-sized icebergs grounded on a rock ledge at the mouth of the fjord, and behind them the 50 mile inlet full of ice floes, and bergs large and small. Then we were over the town – with its buildings brightly painted in red, yellow, blue and green (apparently to provide colour during the endless black-and-white winter months).

Ilulissat is home to about 6,000 people, both Greenlanders and Danes. It has a busy harbour and its economy is heavily dependent on the fish-processing factory, and increasingly on a nascent tourist industry. It is also home to some 5,000 huskies. These are of course working dogs, providing essential transport and haulage in the winter (seven dogs per sledge, harnessed in a line, or fan, to spread the load when travelling over ice). The huskies were on their summer holidays, enjoying a rest, eating a rich diet of seal and halibut, and rearing their puppies.

We stayed in a pleasant hotel, with a view over this extraordinary ice ford, and the open sea to the west, into which the icebergs periodically escaped, causing much swirling, eddying and noise. This view changed constantly depending on the currents and the direction of the wind. And because during any 24 hours the sun shone out of the east, the south, the west *and* the north (remember we're 400 miles north of the Arctic circle here) the quality of the ever-changing light was a photographer's dream.

People say – "wasn't it cold up there?" (clearly thinking about igloos, polar bears and fishing through holes in the ice...). Yes, when there was a wind it was a bit brisk, but when the sun shone (which, after all, was most of the time) it was perfectly OK to go out in T shirt and shorts. We enjoyed the clear, clean, dry air. Unfortunately the two main orienteering events we attended took place in a steady drizzle, but nobody seemed to mind, (except those competitors wearing glasses).

For orienteers used to the terrain of SE England, we had to make some major adjustments to cope with the area around Ilulissat. Not a tree in sight. In fact the vegetation consisted of lichens and mosses, marsh vegetation, and an artist's palette of minute arctic flowers, all blooming furiously to make the most of the short summer months. But the terrain was incredibly challenging – a mostly trackless area of rock, bog, cliff, and boulder field with lakes large and small – remnants of the winter snow and ice. And because there were so many features, the mapper had left off the smaller ones: cliffs were only marked if 5m+ and boulders if 2m+. This made for confusion until you got the feel for it. Basically, if the slope was 'scramblable' it was mapped white (no need for yellow here) with one or two contours; if a cliff was marked it was unclimbable. So the best way to plan a route was to look ahead for the large mapped features (perhaps 1 km ahead), and use them as attack points. It was sometimes possible to take a fix on a distinctive iceberg and aim for it!

We had plenty of chance to check the terrain before the big 'midnight event'. There was a club training evening (30/60 of the club turned up- Chigs please take note!) which got us used to the mosquitoes as well as the map; a score event; and the Greenland Champs (Carol and I both won our courses). (Photo 7). But the big event was held at midnight on one of the longest days. With the midnight sun there was no need for a torch (despite the drizzle). These courses were advertised as 'having a touch of the extreme', and for those fit enough to do the longest it certainly proved to be so. There were 5 courses altogether – the 3 km and 5 km ones were technical and tough enough, but not unlike courses on our fells. Carol was 2<sup>nd</sup> on the 5 km in 72 mins, beaten by a local W21.

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The 10 km, 15 km and 20 km courses however had considerable climb and went well into the wilderness. John chose to do 10 km, which officially had 520m of climb but he reckoned it was nearer 600m! The winner took 2 hrs 50 mins with John 2<sup>nd</sup> in 3 hrs 2 mins, (with only 5 mins of mistakes!). The longest 20 km course was won by a Dane in 3 hours 15 mins. The last competitor took 5 hrs 30 mins - so if you come to do this event, be prepared to be out a long time. But you will experience orienteering in a rare form – just you against the natural terrain with no significant human influences. And once clear of the other competitors you might not see a soul, just mountains and icebergs. So you need to be confident in your own abilities.

Was it worth it? YES. Not only were the club members and people in the town extraordinarily friendly, but the challenge of the terrain and the spectacular scenery made this one of our best holidays. It is certainly one to be recommended to anyone with a sense of adventure and a taste for tough orienteering. But do remember to take an effective mossie repellent, and be ready to eat plenty of fish.

John and Carol