Travel

A WARM WELCOME AWAITS CANADIANS IN GREENLAND

A trip to the Far North reveals an unspoken bond that's more pronounced than ever as annexation threats loom, says.

Ottawa Citizen

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14 Feb 2026

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In Greenland, making eye contact and lifting your eyebrows is as good as saying “hi there.” Just beware; wiggling your arches is considered flirting.

The useful tip came from

Aleqa Hammond, a former prime minister of Greenland and one of the cultural educators on my Into the Northwest Passage expedition trip with Adventure Canada last August.

Another thing I learned from Hammond: the land in Greenland belongs to all. It can't be purchased by foreigners.

There's probably no better time for Canadians to visit Greenland. While United States President Donald Trump seems to have pulled back on his vow to forcibly annex the territory, he's still making noises about making Canada the 51st state. Geopolitics makes Greenlanders and Canadians, already close through their shared Inuit ties, feel their kinship even stronger, said Johannes Ostermann, a law student in Greenland's capital of Nuuk and Hammond's son.

In that spirit, I packed my own personal icebreaker for the trip: A tuque with the Canadian flag and the words “Not for Sale.”

As in Canada, an elbows-up sentiment applies in self-governing Greenland, an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark that is working toward independence. From Hammond to the ground staff at the airport in Kangerlussuaq, in western Greenland, to people I met in the small port of Qeqertarsuaq on Disko Island, “I like your hat” sparked smiles and conversation.

Nearly 80 per cent of the land mass on the world's largest island that's not a continent is covered by a two-kilometre-thick ice sheet. Water, air or dogsled teams are the only ways to travel long distances here. Cruise ships are an increasingly popular way for tourists to visit.

I was among 174 passengers bound for the small Canadian expedition ship Ocean Endeavour who arrived in Greenland on a charter flight from Toronto.

After five days in Greenland, we sailed to Canada across Davis Straight to Nunavut and the Northwest Passage. For that part of the voyage, we followed in the wake of Sir John Franklin's doomed 19th-century expedition to find the Northwest Passage.

Humans have lived in Greenland for more than 4,500 years. With a population of about 56,000, nearly 90 per cent of the territory is made up of Greenlandic Inuit, known as Kalaallit. The official language is Kalaallisut or Greenlandic and a good portion of people also speak Danish, English, or both.

Greenlanders call their own country Inuit Nunaat or Kalaallit Nunaat, which fittingly means “Land of the People” or “Land of the Greenlanders.”

Hammond, Greenland's first female prime minister, was one of nine Inuit cultural educators on the 36-member expedition crew.

“People want to know how we live here. That's something you can't Google,” said Hammond.

We started the lesson with a half-day visit to Sisimiut, shuttled by Zodiacs from the ship. The second-largest city in Greenland, with a population of about 5,500, reminded me a bit of St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador, with steep streets leading up from the harbour, green hillsides and buildings painted in cheery shades.

The local guide explained the colours on the timber buildings signified their use in the 18th century. Red is for churches, yellow for health care, black for police and blue for fishing.

At a Taste of Place buffet at the Taseralik Culture Center, we sampled the cornerstones of the Kalaallit diet.

I tried muskox soup and stew and chewy muktuk (beluga whale skin and blubber). Pungent chunks of purple-red raw seal meat, valued as a belly-warming source of protein and minerals, was an acquired taste.

A group of heritage buildings tell the community's story from the past century at the outdoor Sisimiut Museum. Inside Bethelkirken church, built in 1775, there was a display of colourful traditional dress including intricate glass-beaded collars and sealskin leggings. Being beautifully adorned is important to Greenlandic people, Hammond explained, especially when they are hunting. They believe the animals are attracted to their outfits and will come closer.

The next morning, the ship was well into Western Greenland's Iceberg Alley. It was astonishing to see massive hunks of ice in a slow-moving parade, shining in the sun.

Thanks to long stretches of daylight above the Arctic Circle, we took an after-dinner Zodiac cruise among the icebergs to get a close look at the towering Eqip Sermia glacier. Onboard geologist and professor Marc St-onge told us we were at the "edge of that large white blob on every map of the Arctic." The glacier advances three metres a day, he said, and the massive chunks that break off, or calve, float off as icebergs.

The next day, we dropped anchor in a bay and took Zodiacs to shore to hike on spongy, colourful tundra that released the rich cedar smell of Labrador tea with every step. Polar bear guards stood watch at the perimeter, but we didn't see the apex predator of the Arctic until we reached Nunavut. You have to adjust your expectations about wildlife sightings on an expedition cruise.

That also goes for all travel in the Arctic. We were supposed to visit Ilulissat, a UNESCO World Heritage Site famous for iceberg-producing Ilulissat Icefjord. Our captain decided the ice around the North Atlantic's most prolific iceberg nursery was too unpredictable. We ended up at what turned out to be one of my favourite stops, Qeqertarsuaq on Disko Island. It was called Godhavn when Franklin's crew posted their last known letters home from here in 1845.

Later, I clumsily kicked a soccer ball around with a kid on the Gatorade-green artificial turf of the town's football pitch. I gave him my Canada ball cap in thanks for the experience. But I kept my Not for Sale tuque.

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