

Go with the Floe

Sam Wollaston

Would I like the fried whale or the home-smoked whale? Hmm, so many difficult choices in life. Neither, just a salad - that's probably the correct answer. But there doesn't seem to be a salad option. And when in Greenland ... etc.

I've decided to throw myself into this trip, culturally speaking. Get involved. Since stepping off the plane I've been rubbing noses with everyone I meet. With mixed reactions, it has to be said. Generally a slap round the face, though one guy threatened me with his harpoon. That's the famous Greenlandic sense of humour, Inuit? I think they appreciate me making the effort really.

I go for both then - fried and smoked. Well, if it had been smoked off the premises, I would probably have stuck to fried; but it's hard to resist home-smoked anything, even whale. It's very thinly sliced, and leathery, with something of the ocean about it - carpaccio of old sea-boot. The fried is more like liver, also chewy and very meaty, again unmistakably from the sea. Both are absolutely delicious. With a bellyful of whale (this is like the opposite of the Jonah story), I retire to my igloo.

I've always wanted to come to Greenland. It's a bit special on an atlas for a start - a huge icicle hanging down from the arctic, and beautiful unpronounceable names round the outside - Illoqqortoormiut and Kangerluarsoruseq. And then, on a clear day, looking down from the right hand side of a plane to America there's this empty, vast, frozen whiteness. There's something very reassuring about Greenland's existence.

It turns out it's not all ice. There's a thin inhabitable crust round the outside; where the unpronounceable names are, and the people - all 56,000 of them. The population of a country nine times the size of the United Kingdom could comfortably fit into the Emirates stadium. Not that they'd want to - they all seem to be Manchester United supporters in Ilulissat, which is where I am.

About half way up at the west coast, at 69 degrees north, comfortably inside the Arctic circle, Ilulissat is an honest-looking (scruffy) little town, with a busy prawn processing factory. It is also one of the main centres of Greenland's fledgling tourist industry. It's not easy to get to - it took me two days, with a night in Reykjavik, and another plane change in Nuuk (the capital, but you knew that). But if you're searching for your inner Shackleton, it's a brilliant place to come to.