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Whirling through icebergs on a High Arctic cruise

BY ANNE Z. COOKE

Tribune News Service September 28, 2015



"Shuuss!" said Capt. Oliver Kreuss, standing on the bridge of the Lindblad Expedition-National Geographic ship Explorer, training his binoculars on the iceberg-choked fiord ahead. "I can't talk now," he barked, cutting the speed to 6 knots and steering the vessel left and right around each floating titan like a dancer whirling his partner across the floor.

Half-expecting a collision, the half-dozen passengers on the bridge, there to watch the approach to Ilulissat, on Greenland's ragged west coast, held their breath as the usually garrulous captain nudged the ship forward. Forty minutes later, with clear water and the anchorage ahead, all was forgiven.

"Sorry about that," said Kreuss, smiling apologetically. "The ship is always my first duty. You were asking about the notches in the rail? Guess. You can't guess? The notches in the rail represent the number of bear sightings we have in a year. For every bear we see we cut one notch. If the bear has killed and is eating a seal, we color the notch red. After yesterday, we're adding six more."

But the Explorer wasn't the only witness to calving icebergs. While we were exploring the eastern High Arctic, President Barack Obama was in Alaska, in the western High Arctic, highlighting the same issues: shrinking glaciers, rising sea levels, warmer winters and hungry polar bears.

After 10 days on the Explorer, we had a pretty good idea why Lindblad Expeditions has been so successful leading expedition-style voyages to distant regions. In Lindblad's early days, its ships were considerably more spartan. But after partnering with National Geographic (in 2004), changes included booking more university-trained naturalist-guides and ramping up the comfort index - the Explorer, for example. The result has been a growing coterie of steadfastly devoted fans.

Most of Lindblad's cruises are booked a year in advance, according to Lindblad's reservation desk. But when a last-minute cancellation opened up space on the 13-day cruise to Greenland and north Baffin Island, we jumped on it. And it didn't take long to see that even the best-planned expedition can't account for nature.

We were supposed to board the Explorer in Iqaluit on south Baffin Island, then sail north through the Davis Strait. But when ice blocked Frobisher Bay, the Explorer couldn't dock. Did Lindblad cancel? Never. With the departure day looming, Kreuss, the "hotel" staff and the crew got to work, booking additional flights for all 140 passengers - at Lindblad's expense - and rescheduling Inuit village visits, tundra hikes, lectures, zodiac fiord tours, naturalist talks, guest lectures, photo clinics, bus rides and glacier over-flies. And they managed it seamlessly.

"They're successful because they're organized," said former investment banker Martha Tinker, from Des Moines, Iowa, who confessed (with an embarrassed chuckle) that having taken not two, nor five, but 13 Lindblad trips, she'd given the matter some thought.

"By that I mean they're prepared," she said as we waited for a Zodiac ride to the shore at Pond Inlet, on north Baffin Island. "They research the destinations so thoroughly that they're never caught by surprise. If something's canceled they have a backup already identified. It happens so smoothly, the passengers don't even notice."

With the sun shining, we took off our coats to explore Inuit villages such as Greenland's Sisimiut, pop. 4453, and Pond Inlet, pop. 5500, at the north end of Baffin Island. The tour of Sisimiut, a quiet fishing village built on a couple of rocky ridges, meant a long walk uphill and down dale to a history museum, crafts store and a grocery. A half-dozen sled dogs, panting in the heat, snoozed at the end of their doghouse chains. But snow machines and ATVs were ubiquitous. Sisimiut looked neat and prosperous; a Danish territory, Greenland's economy and schools are heavily supported.

Pond Inlet, the Canadian government's effort to bring distant Inuits from their traditional villages to a central location, seemed both more industrial and much poorer. But the Tununiq-miut Dance group's drum dance performance, held at the Community Center, provided a rare opportunity to see a genuine effort to keep some of the old culture.

On other days, guided zodiac fiord rides, shore tours and "walks" were available (no charge for any of them) along with National Geographic photography clinics. We hiked over rocks identified as the world's oldest, searched for 1,000-year-old burial sites and contemplated the fact that before Europeans arrived, the Vikings and two groups of ancestral Inuit lived here.

Sometimes we saw flowers so tiny you had to kneel to appreciate their intricate shapes, 3-inch high willows and silky-fine clumps of musk ox fur, "qiviut" shed during the summer molt, now stuck on last spring's dead flower stalks. The musk ox were there, somewhere, but remained elusive.

The most fantastic afternoon wound up on a high note with a polar bear encounter. Spotting three bears napping on an ice flow, the ship slowed to a crawl, waiting for the ice to reach us. Meanwhile, the female stood up, stretched and ambled toward the ship, her two nearly grown cubs in tow.

In minutes the cubs were directly below the bow where they spent the next 45 minutes sniffing the air, cuffing each other playfully and stretching out to cool. The female watched it all, then called the cubs and the three ambled away.

Taking a poll at dinner, we asked why our table mates, now new friends, chose Lindblad? They liked recognizing each other from previous trips and were pleased that the waiters remembered them, too. The cabin sizes and the closets, the spacious bathrooms and the menus were universally praised, along with the open bridge policy, allowing visits any time without an appointment. The afternoon tea and pastries were a favorite, as was the casual dress code. But what was really Lindblad's secret, the thing that set it apart from its competitors?

"For me it's the naturalists," said Laurie Goldberg, from Connecticut, who was traveling with her husband, Hank. "These people aren't just biologists, geologists or historians, interested in their own specialty. They're educated and they're friendly, always around if you want to talk. The lectures are educational and they're entertaining. I never miss a talk."

But there had to be something else and we think we found it. Guess. You can't guess? No wonder.

It was the Lounge, used for day and evening lectures, next-day briefings and happy hour gatherings. A work of genius, this circular space, a theater-in-the-round design, had a central lecturn surrounded by a circle of chairs, cocktail tables and sofas.

You faced the passengers nearby and they saw you. You shared a bowl of popcorn. They said hello and you recognized them again when you saw them later. After four days together, you were talking. If you'd been attending lectures in a typical auditorium, sitting in a row facing the stage, you'd wouldn't have met anyone.

The set-up also improved the lectures. Wherever you sat in that lounge, you could see at least two of the seven, wall-mounted TV screens, computer-controlled from the lecturn. The speakers, uninterrupted by mumbling, fumbling with videos or explaining photos that popped up out of order, were more spontaneous, faster paced and often funnier.

As for the icebergs, it wasn't long before we were sailing among monstrous hunks, white giants bigger than skyscrapers. Worse, they had calved off the Jakobshavn Glacier, near Ilulissat, at the west edge of the Greenland ice cap.

They were the canary in the coal mine, evidence that Jakobshavn, said to be the world's "most productive glacier," is melting faster than ever, leaving some scientists worrying that the ice sheet itself may slide into the ocean. That was the bad news. But the good news is that we were there to see it in person, and to hope that the next decade's cruise passengers will care just as much.

THE NITTY GRITTY:

Cruises to the eastern High Arctic fly through Ottawa, Canada, and include airport transfers and an overnight and dinner there. Flights the next morning continue to Iqaluit, or to Kangerlussuaq, in Greenland. For other Lindblad Expeditions National Geographic cruises go to www.expeditions.com.

WHAT TO BRING: Your cruise material includes complete information about weather, coats, boots and clothes. Knee-high rubber boots are recommended for landing on some wet beaches or marshes, but the most expensive brands are not necessary. We packed our gardening boots and wore them with thick wool socks.

POST CRUISE NEWS: Ten days after returning home we learned that satellite images from space revealed that during our cruise, and while we were at Ilulissat, a Manhattan-size hunk of ice calved into the sea; it was the second such event to occur over the last three years.

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