

Lindblad sets sail for Arctic adventures

By ANNE Z. COOKE
TRIBUNE NEWS SERVICE

TRAVEL

ILULISSAT, Greenland — “Shuussh!” 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.

“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, not five, but 13 Lindblad trips, she’d given the matter some thought.

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.

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.

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 it-

self 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.



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BRING TO BEAR: Passengers aboard the Lindblad Expedition National Geographic Explorer look for and ultimately spot a group of polar bears in Prince Regent Inlet.





NORTHERN EXPOSURE: High arctic winds spin cloud formations into fan shapes. Below, the Lindblad Expedition National Geographic Explorer weaves among icebergs.

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