

Will the world's first sovereign Inuit nation be created by global warming?

How climate change may make more accessible natural resources the key to financial independence.

by John Bechtel, Freelance writer



Sarah Woodall

Greenland's got buzz. Greenlanders are well along on the road to self-determination politically. Their culture is gaining global recognition, and just this year Greenland was named a Lonely Planet Top 10 Best in Travel Destination! It may

one day be the first nation-state with an Inuit majority, and if so, it may also have achieved that status because of climate change.

So who, or what, exactly, are these Greenlanders?

The answer to that question is hotly debated in Greenland. For some, it is more about the language than the land. Some Greenlanders are dark-skinned with dark eyes, the classic Inuit look, and they speak Greenlandic. There are others who have the same coloring but who don't speak Greenlandic. There are some who are 100% Inuit, but who were born in Denmark.

There are some who look Danish, but who speak Greenlandic.

And there are a few anomalies like Sarah Woodall, featured here, who was born in Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay in South America, adopted by American parents, grew up in Washington, D.C., earned a Masters Degree in Tourism at George Washington University, got an opportunity to intern in Greenland, fell in love with it and made it her home.

She is a Greenlander by choice—not by an accident of birth. Today, Sarah represents Visit Greenland, promoting travel by coordinating travel professionals around

the world with local business operators, and no one could speak more passionately or convincingly about the joys of life in Greenland than she does. She loves the land, the outdoors, the people, prefers the cold to the sticky hot, and says it's all a matter of knowing how to dress in layers using the right materials. And Sarah's hair is on fire about all things Greenland! She wants you to visit her and her friends at www.greenland.com and whet your appetite for the big five attractions: dog sleds, ice and snow, northern lights, whales, and pioneering people.

(Continued on page 10)

The world's largest island and a coastline longer than the circumference of the earth

With the largest ice sheet outside of Antarctica, it should have been named Iceland, but that name was already taken. Instead the Vikings named it Greenland in the hopes others would come. The world's largest island, about the size of Mexico, Greenland has a population of only 56,000. On the northwestern corner, Greenland is only 30 kilometers (18 miles) from Canada's Ellesmere Island, and the smallest distance between Greenland and Iceland at the narrowest part of the Greenland Strait is about 320 kilometers (199 miles), small enough that conceivably a polar bear could swim the distance—although polar bears that occasionally show up in Iceland usually make most of the trip traveling on ice floes. Why swim when you can catch a ride?

Greenland is one of the cleanest, most pristine and unspoiled environments left on this planet. Its landscapes are breathtaking, ethereal, and otherworldly. We do not seek here to romanticize Greenland, or yearn for a Rousseauian return to pure nature, but to see Greenland as it is, a land and people undergoing a rapid rite of passage on their way to possibly becoming the youngest nation-state on the planet.

The world's largest national park

Greenland has the world's largest national park, almost a million square kilometers (386,102 square miles), which is larger than all but 29 countries in the world. The interior of this park is mostly part of the Greenland Ice Sheet, some parts of which are almost two miles thick. Despite that fact, the tip of this national park known as Peary Land, by precipitation measurement,



PHOTO: EXTEFUNNET

An inviting view—a beautiful summer day in Greenland National Park.

qualifies as a desert. The park is the world's northernmost protected landmass, about the same size as France and Spain combined, and is uninhabited except by members of the famed Sirius Patrol. Comprised of six-dog sled teams, two men and 11-to-15 dogs per sled, they reinforce Danish sovereignty over Greenland and patrol 16,000 kilometers (9,942 miles) of coastline along the northeastern corner of the national park. There are about 50 supply depots scattered around, but the teams practically live on their sleds.

Eighty percent of Greenland is covered by ice sheets, and 89% of Greenland's population is indigenous Inuit. Technology has made rapid modernization possible, and in all but the most remote areas phone and internet are available, although there

are still no highways, and travel is done by boat on water and small planes and helicopters on land. But for a price, the comforts and conveniences of modern life are in evidence everywhere. Apart from the Sirius Patrol and a few other areas, dog sledding is largely reserved for tourism, as are "native" dress performances.

Because of its geographical isolation, sparse population, extreme climate, and lack of easily accessible and exploitable resources, Greenland and its people have evolved at a leisurely pace at the edge of history. It just didn't seem to be much good for anything other than subsistence hunting and fishing for a hardy few who followed their prey. Even today only 1% of Greenland's land is arable and it cannot grow enough food to feed its miniscule population,



PHOTO: EXTEFUNNET

Hiking is a popular activity in Greenland National Park—the world's largest.



PHOTO: REDDIT

Greenland's elite Sirius Dog Sled Patrol team, stationed in northeast Greenland.

which survives and thrives by means of imports. What does Greenland produce and have to trade in exchange for all the goods they import? In 2014, Greenland sent 79.89% of all its exports to Denmark, valued at US \$432 million, but it also receives an annual subsidy from Denmark of about \$650 million. With a Gross Domestic Product in 2014 of \$2.44 billion, how long could Greenland survive without that subsidy?

Developmental issues

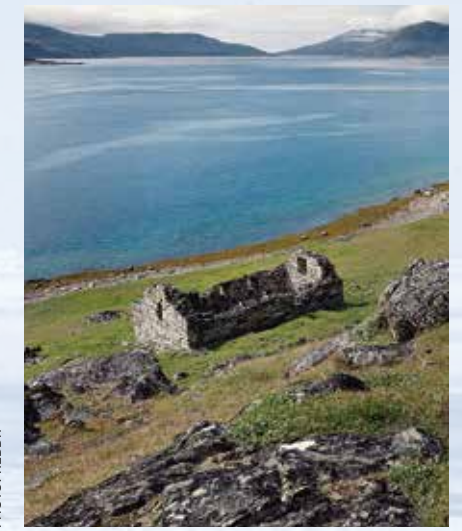
Greenland has been steadily achieving greater autonomy, with the aid and collaboration of the Danish government, and there is a vigorous independence movement among the Inuit population. There is no question that under all that ice and bedrock and submerged under the icy Arctic waters lie extensive and valuable mineral resources that could conceivably make Greenland a miniature Norway with an enviable sovereign wealth fund instead of being a financial drain on its parent country. As climate change makes extraction of these resources more attainable and potentially profitable on world markets, the prospect of Greenland becoming financially viable also makes nationhood more than fantasy thinking. The economic requirements are the final barrier to Greenlanders' self-ownership.

As exciting and tantalizing as this prospect is, Greenland is faced with some tough trade-offs in the race to

prosperity and self-determination. Extraction of natural resources is an expensive and dirty process, and environmental damage is almost a certainty. There is also the resource curse, the dubious benefit of the "devil's excrement"—becoming overly reliant on a few dominant industries/commodities which then decline on world markets taking the country down with it. What Faustian bargain is Greenland willing to make for nationhood?

Wikipedia lists 74 cities, towns, and settlements in Greenland. Almost a third of the island's population lives in the capital city of Nuuk, and there are only 12 other communities with a population over 1,000 people. 86% of the population lives in the few larger towns, and the other 14% live in tiny and very rural settlements.

Greenland went from the lowest suicide rate in the world to the highest in just half a century. The current suicide rate at 100 per 100,000 is 24 times the suicide rate of the United States, and it is mostly their young people who are killing themselves. No one knows the cause for sure, but social problems of high alcoholism, poverty, and incest all contribute. In Greenland almost every teenager knows someone who has committed suicide.



Hvalsø Church, built around 1300, was a church in the abandoned Greenlandic Norse settlement of Hvalsey, in southern Greenland. The best preserved Norse ruins in the country, the church was the location of the last written record of the Greenlandic Norse—a wedding in September 1408. Today, the church appears much as it did when abandoned in the 1400s.

In spite of the fact that contraceptives are free to women in Greenland, the island has the highest abortion rate in the world at 50.45% of all pregnancies. These social issues are not unique to Greenland, but are pervasive in all parts of the Far North, and like falling dominoes derive from the harsh climate and remote existence of tiny populations.

Early history

Greenland is geographically part of North America, but is geopolitically part of Europe because of its Viking history. An early population of indigenous Arctic people called the Dorset had died off before the Vikings arrived, but about midway through the Viking tenure in Greenland, a tribe of proto-Inuit migrated to northern Greenland from Canada (probably Ellesmere Island) following prey animals. Today, we refer to them as the Thule civilization.

The Vikings settled Greenland during a warming period from about 800 A.D. to about 1300. Being farmers, (Continued on page 12)



PHOTO: WWW.MIXEDMARTIALARTS.COM

Young Inuit women proudly display their Greenland national costumes.

(Continued from page 11)
they attempted to transplant their livestock culture along the warmest and greenest coasts of southeastern and western Greenland. They liked their beef, dairy milk and cheese, but did not understand the thin soil, inadequate arable land, and large amounts of fodder their cows, sheep, and goats were going to require. They further degraded the terrain by stripping it of what trees it had to increase the available pasture and for timber. They stripped more of the precious topsoil for sod for their houses.

The Thule people are still in Greenland, now known as the Inuit. To remain grammatically correct, Inuit is the plural noun; the singular noun is Inuk. One Inuk, many Inuit.

They began their migration from Alaska, and it took them about 300 years to make the trip. They are apparently not from the same gene pool as the Paleo-Eskimos of Alaska. They brought with them the use of kayaks, dog sleds and toggling harpoons, an innovation that prevented the head of a harpoon, once imbedded into a whale,

from working its way loose and falling out while the prey was being towed back to shore.

Greenland goes Danish

About a hundred years after the Vikings disappeared from Greenland, King Christian IV of Denmark in 1605-07, sent expeditions to find out what had happened to them and to reassert sovereignty over Greenland, something the Danes had inherited from Norway. While it seems today that things moved incredibly slowly back then, it must be borne in mind that much of sovereignty in the days of colonialism was established by the mere act of planting a flag and claiming everything in sight as your own, and if no one argued the point for a sufficient length of time, it became established as legal ownership. Similar rules of ownership passing by *fait accompli*, or uncontested trespassing, still apply in some U.S. real estate law. The Danish expeditions failed in their intended purpose. The Vikings had vanished.

In 1721, the Danish/Norwegian coalition again remembered Greenland and they sent a missionary, Hans Egede, on a mercantile/church expedition, and 15 years later Hans



Hans Egede, 1686-1758

returned to Denmark and left the business and church interests in the hands of his son. In time the locals were forbidden to trade with anyone but Danish merchants.

Almost a hundred years after that, the Danish/Norwegian union was dissolved, and Greenland went to Denmark in the 1814 divorce settlement (Treaty of Kiel).

Once again, a century passes before Norway belatedly decides to occupy a small part of eastern Greenland, planted the Norwegian flag there on July 10, 1931, and named it Eric the Red Land. They based their claim on the principle of *terra nullius*; that the land had no permanent inhabitants and the only people using that section of coast were Norwegian whalers. Denmark objected, and The Permanent Court of International Justice ruled against Norway.

Greenland during World War II

Greenland severed its relationship with Denmark when Denmark was occupied by the Nazis a few years later in 1940. Greenland was occupied by the United States in 1941, to prevent an invasion by the Nazis. For the next four years the U.S. occupied Greenland, but left local government pretty much to the locals. The U.S. military built two major bases called Bluie West-1 at Narsarsuaq and Bluie



Above: A massive iceberg floats buoyantly in Disco Bay. Below right: 1st USAF Arctic Search & Rescue Squad pin belonged to a young man stationed in Greenland during World War II.

West-8 at Kangerlussuaq, both of which are still used as Greenland's major international airports. Bluie was the military code name for Greenland. The Sirius Patrol began during the war and discovered several secret Nazi weather stations. Even then Greenland was the weather factory for Europe, and the Nazis wanted early weather reports for their U-boat assaults on North Atlantic shipping and for land-based theater of operations. The U.S. Air Force subsequently destroyed the Nazi weather stations.

A cultural change occurred in Greenland during the war. As a tiny and isolated community, it had been tightly controlled by Denmark's monopolistic trade practices. However during the war, and while it was under the benign but preoccupied protection of the U.S., it was opened up to wider influences; Greenlanders developed some self-confidence and self-reliance and a habit of independent communication they had not enjoyed before. Once that genie gets out of the bottle, it is hard to put it back in again.

In 1946, the U.S. offered Denmark \$100 million for Greenland. No one seems to know if the offer was refused or simply ignored. It was early Cold War days and perhaps the U.S. wanted to make Greenland the world's largest stationary aircraft carrier.

In 1953, Greenland was made an equal part of the Danish Kingdom, and in 1979, it was granted Home Rule. Greenland became part of Denmark's welfare state and Denmark had total control. It was then and in the early '80s that Denmark began closing small, remote villages and moving the inhabitants into towns. In 2009, Greenland acquired Self Rule, which meant that their subsidies from Denmark could remain the same or get smaller, but never be increased. Not surprisingly they voted by a large margin for local rule, but as with a teenager that longs to be free of parents, Greenland is learning that with freedom from rules imposed by others, comes the responsibility to become self-sustaining.

As the Thule people learned and the Vikings failed to learn, survival is all about adaptability and the willingness to innovate, and to leave behind failed policies.

(Continued on page 14)

Indigenous Greenlanders believed that the Northern Lights were dancing spirits of children who had died at birth.





Picturesque Tasiilaq, in East Greenland

(Continued from page 13)

Is Tourism the Solution?

Tourism in Greenland would seem to be the ideal solution to Greenland's financial challenges: It has some of the world's most exotic landscapes and terrain, and it has unusual offerings for every type of traveler, from the extreme sports adventurer to the nature appreciator, culture lover, globetrotter, and sightseer.

Unfortunately, its appeal is also its problem. Greenland is unspoiled because it is remote and expensive to get to. Because of the ice, the travel season by ship is short. Many of those on cruises do not spend much money in Greenland because they take most of their meals and their lodging on board. There are no highways in Greenland and for most of the year the only way to travel is by dog sled (some locations), small plane or helicopter.

When there are not a lot of tourists, the temptation is for the locals to try to make up the difference with higher prices, and of course that creates a reputation that discourages more tourists. Much of Greenland's business structure seems to be driven by top-down regulation and direct government ownership, which blunts market pressures to lower costs. One way to reduce costs of traveling to Greenland is to bundle it with travel to its close neighbor, Iceland.



Here's a map of the six sections of Greenland and some photos of what you can expect to see and do in them!

Capital Region



Beautifully-carved walrus tusk ivory is only one of a "treasure-trove" of Inuit arts and crafts on display in the Art Museum of Nuuk.



Icons like the Northern Lights-inspired Katuaq Cultural Center located in NUUK, serve as a reminder of the nature that is an ever-present part of life in Greenland. "Katuaq" means drumstick in Greenlandic, but it is an apt name for the cultural center as well. The structure houses concerts of all sizes, film performances, conferences, theater and large public events—and, of course, art! The center is a popular place for artists from all over the world—mostly, however, from the Nordic countries and Greenland—to showcase their creative work. Every year, about 10 to 12 exhibitions are on display at the center.

Greenland's capital, Nuuk, is an Arctic metropolis with a small town feel, shaped by nature and known for its cultural diversity. As a city break in Greenland, it mixes shopping, whale watching, skiing, and fine dining into a cosmopolitan experience with a backcountry twist where innovative, adaptive people, and trendsetting artists meet office workers, fishermen and hunters.

Left: For photography buffs, there's no better way to experience Greenland than by going on a photography tour—enhancing those extraordinary memories when you are home. Photo tours are a well-established part of adventure travel in the global travel market. This strong and growing

(Continued on page 16)



(Continued from page 15)

special interest segment is populated with a host of both, large well-known companies such as National Geographic and Intrepid Travel and small independent local tour leaders and industry specialists.



An amazing sight—a cruise ship passes under the Nuuk airport runway as a passenger plane (far right) prepares to go airborne in this futuristic architect's proposal for Nuuk's combined airfield and shipping port. The transportation system in Greenland is unusual in that the island has no railways, no inland waterways, and virtually no roads between towns. Historically, the major means of transportation has been by boat in summer and by dog sled in winter. It's a good idea for first-time visitors to book a cruise line tour to get around unencumbered, to develop a sense of what this inviting Island is all about.



Sarah Woodall (in yellow) with friends at top of Ukkusissat, overlooking Nuuk. Hiking is a popular activity in Greenland, with plenty of trails to make each hike a unique and interesting experience. Biking is also a popular sport enjoyed by many throughout the area. In addition, kayaking, fishing, and whale-watching are exciting ways to experience this vibrant island—something for everybody!

Paamiut, Capital Region



PHOTO: ANGU WOTZFELD / VISIT GREENLAND

Two young companions in Paamiut. PAAMIUT is a well-kept secret of the Capital Region. While bigger towns are for tourists who prefer itineraries filled with all the famous sights, Paamiut attracts the travelers who want to go off the beaten path and gain a different perspective than the rest.

Just like the numerous white-tailed eagles in the area, Paamiut stands independently as a distinct town. It is known for its pleasant mix of old and new culture at the cusp of great nature.



PHOTO: VISIT GREENLAND

In winter, an uncanny amount of snow makes the Paamiut backcountry a snow-sport lover's dream! Whether randonnée skiing or cross-country skiing is your passion, there is enough untouched mountainside for everyone to have their own piece of Greenland.

Destination Arctic Circle

SISIMIUT is 40 kilometers (25 miles) north of the Arctic Circle. The community was founded in 1756, and has approximately 5,600 residents. It is the second-largest town in Greenland.

Two other significant communities in the region are MANITSOQ, situated in an archipelago, intersected by small natural canals, and dubbed the "Venice of Greenland" by the locals, and KANGERLUSSUAQ, "The Gateway to Greenland".

Arctic adventures in Sisimiut are the perfect answer to cultural discovery and pure natural settings.



A rainbow in Sisimiut near the Arctic Circle enhances the already-colorful community with its brightly-colored homes.



Spending an afternoon riding along with Greenlandic sled dogs is something you won't soon forget. They have a commanding presence and thick winter coats that allow them to endure winter's wrath.



Greenland Arctic char fishing is for those who want a wilderness experience in remote mountain valleys with pristine fast-flowing rivers and clear-water fishing.



Sisimiut is an important cruise destination for both expedition vessels and medium-sized cruise ships, linking Nuuk and Kangerlussuaq with the Disko Bay area and Ilulissat further north. DESTINATION ARCTIC CIRCLE PHOTOS: MADS PIHL / VISITGREENLAND.COM

North Greenland



PHOTO: GITS-ICELAND.COM

ILULISSAT: Where the iceberg that sank Titanic was born...

Icebergs are calved out of glaciers and each one is unique; a work of art fashioned by the hand of nature.

"Ilulissat" is the Greenlandic word for icebergs—no wonder the town was given the name when you know that Sermeq Kujalleq calves off about 35 billion tons of ice every year. The town, with a population of 4,866, is situated at the mouth of the Kangia Icefjord, and as of 2004, this area is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Ice and icebergs are part of the town's life. It's also the place where the sled dogs outnumber the local population.



PHOTO: VISIT GREENLAND

Disko Bay is famous as a sea of ice, but in summer, the whales might outnumber the icebergs. These intelligent animals must realize that the silhouette of their tail flukes against mammoth icebergs makes for the perfect photograph!

Whale watching is possible, yet less common, in winter. There are 3 winter species in Greenland—the beluga whale, bowhead whale, and narwhal. They are usually seen in North Greenland around Disko Bay and Qaanaaq or in Northeast Greenland.

(Continued on page 18)

(Continued from page 17)

Northeast Greenland

Covering an area of 972,000 square kilometers (375,291 square miles), **GREENLAND NATIONAL PARK** is the world's largest. The area is nearly the combined size of France and Spain and includes the entire northeastern part of Greenland north of Ittoqqortoormiit (Scoresby Sound) and stretches from Knud Rasmussen's Land in the north to Mestersvig in the east.

The coastline is 18,000 kilometers (11,185 miles) in total and includes both the highest parts of the Northern Hemisphere's largest ice cap and the world's northernmost area of land. For thousands of years, various Inuit cultures have lived and survived here thanks to the high Arctic species of animal.

Today, the only people who live permanently in the vast area are a small group of 40 people over five settlements—the staff at weather and monitoring stations.

Hunters from Ittoqqortoormiit are the only ones who have regular access to the area.



PHOTO: MADIS PIHL



PHOTO: EXCITEFUN.COM



PHOTO: MADIS PIHL



PHOTO: MADIS PIHL / VISITGREENLAND.COM

East Greenland



PHOTO: VISITGREENLAND.COM

Colorful homes dot the **TASIILAQ** landscape. With a population of just over 2,000, it is the most populous community on Greenland's eastern coast. East Greenland is viewed as the "face towards the world" by many visitors. The regular flight connections to Reykjavik via the airport in Kulusuk ensure Tasiilaq's accessibility to the outside world.



PHOTO: MADIS PIHL / VISITGREENLAND.COM

Football fans in Tasiilaq encourage their team at the annual East Greenland football championships.



PHOTO: MADIS PIHL / VISITGREENLAND.COM

Water-travel is a familiar activity in all areas of Greenland.

South Greenland

QAQORTOQ, with a population of 3,229—the most populated town in South Greenland, rises quite steeply over the fjord system around the city. On hot summer days you may be tricked into thinking that there is a sub-arctic Riviera, a special Greenlandic version with icebergs in the bay and frolicking whales in the fjord, instead of sandy beaches and palm trees.



PHOTO: ACE & AGE / VISITGREENLAND.COM

Qaqortoq is known for its many natural ingredients that go into the Greenlandic cuisine.



PHOTO: MADIS PIHL / VISITGREENLAND.COM

Basking in the warm water with a marvelous iceberg view in **UUNARTOQ HOT SPRINGS** in South Greenland.



PHOTO: CAMILLA HEY / VISIT GREENLAND.COM

Sculptures by Aka Høegh, carved directly into the rock in Qaqortoq.

Eighty percent of Greenland's land area—more than 1.7 million square kilometers (656,373 square miles), is covered by glacier, called the Greenland Ice Cap, or more accurately, the Greenland Ice Sheet. It is one of only two ice sheets in the world, and it has been present for 18 million years. If it were to melt, the oceans of the world would rise by 7.9 meters (26 feet) flooding most coastlines of the world.

The Ilulissat Icefjord is filled with icebergs that calve from Sermeq Kujalleq, the fastest moving glacier in the world—40 meters (131 feet) daily. The Ilulissat Icefjord is the same area as 66,000 football fields. It reaches 6 kilometers (3, 281 feet) wide and approximately 55 kilometers (34 miles) long, but it is growing longer as glacier retreat occurs due to climate change.

As a country, Greenland is yet unborn. It has great promise, especially as it gains strength collaborating closely with those who share its values, culture, and history. At 3,688 meters (12,100 feet) Greenland's highest mountain (and also the highest peak above the Arctic Circle), Gunnbjørn Fjeld, doesn't look

like much. That's because, as a nunatak, the first two miles of Gunnbjørn Fjeld's elevation is buried in ice, and only the jagged summit juts out from the ice field.

For thousands of years Greenland, like Gunnbjørn Fjeld, has been buried in ice, hidden in plain sight. The land of the Midnight Sun and Northern Lights is finally coming into clearer focus.

Because of climate change and modern technology, it is now possible for you to experience with all of your senses a surreal landscape that, in some ways, hasn't changed during vast swaths of geologic time; and in other ways it changes under your feet as you stand there. Experience the sounds and the silence of a last spectral frontier. Meet some Greenlanders. Learn a few words in their language. Make some friends. Talk with your travel professional about designing the most memorable trip of a lifetime. Greenland is part of the Nordic story, and as such, your heritage.

Be a part of history. Visit Greenland



John Bechtel is a professional freelance writer for the food, wine, and tourism industries; ghostwriting non-fiction books; and web content strategist for businesses.

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PHOTO: DAVID TROOD / VISITGREENLAND.COM

Ultimately, it's the people who define a place...