

Danish Explorer Peter Freuchen

Navigates the Cultural Divide

By John Bechtel
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Peter Freuchen was a child of privilege from the village of Nykøbing, on the Danish island of Falster. His father, Lorentz Freuchen, was a Danish Jewish businessman who spent a lot of time in South America. When he came home it was an event. He wanted his son to continue the family tradition of learning, stability, and financial success. By the time he was eight years old, Peter knew he loved the sea and had his own small boat. In adolescence he was expected to go to university, perhaps business or medicine or another of the professions held in high esteem in his society. Unfortunately Peter found the stories of sailors coming off their ships to be of far more interest, stories of faraway places, strange people and unimaginable customs.

Peter started college, but at the first opportunity he bolted. When he didn't show up for breakfast one morning, his mother found an empty bedroom. Peter was on his way to Greenland as a

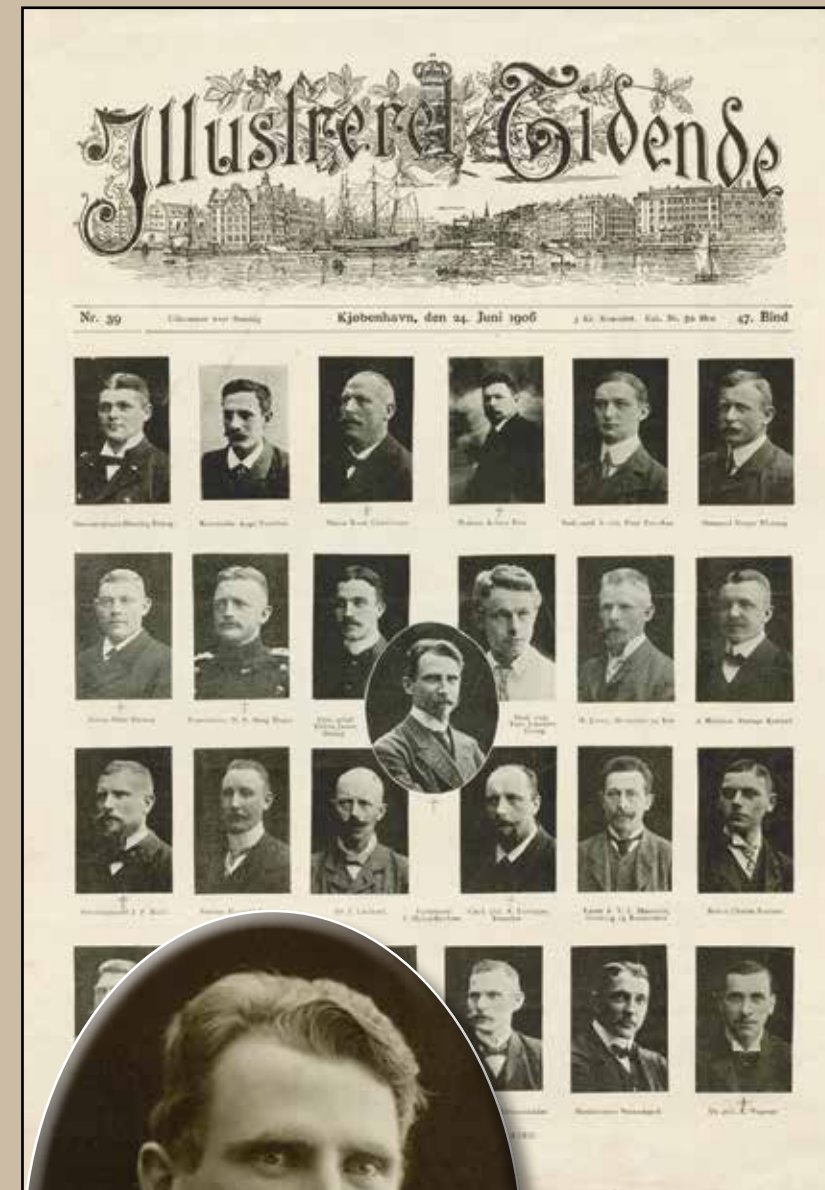
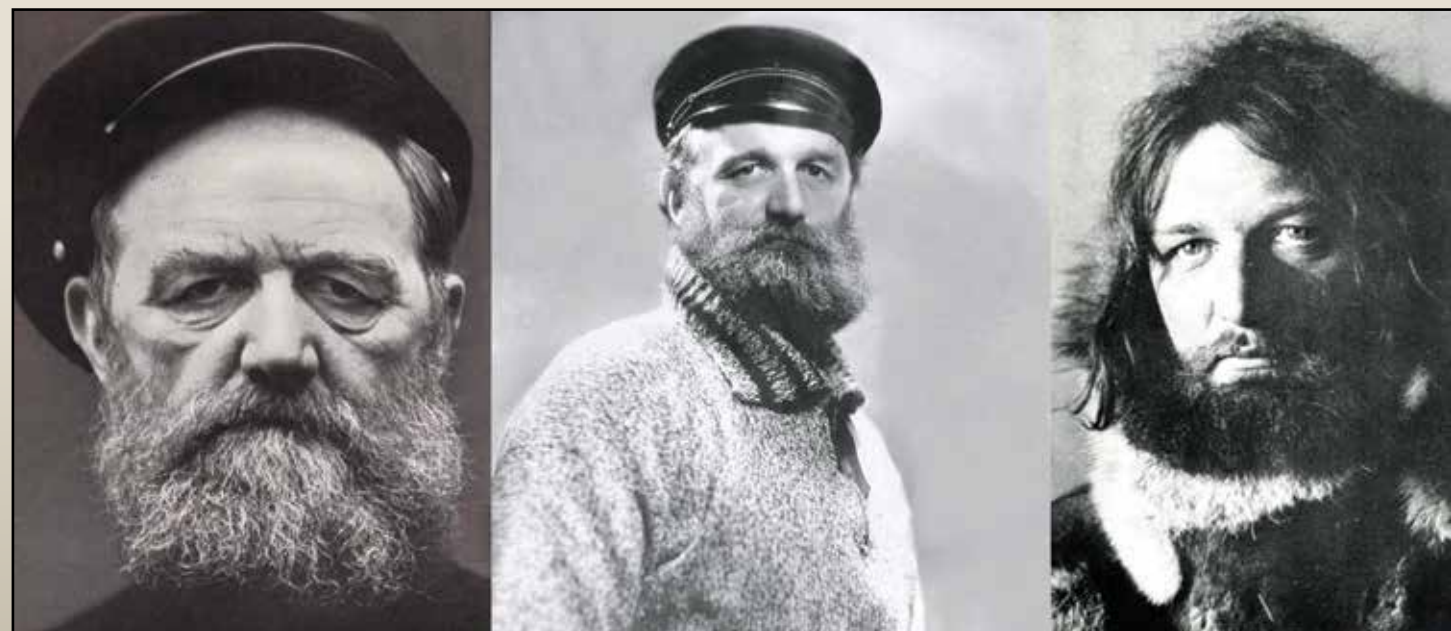


Village of Nykøbing, Freuchen's boyhood home on Falster Island. Below: Peter Freuchen at various seasons of his adventurous life.



stoker on a whaling ship. He arrived just in time to be accepted as an assistant meteorologist on the ill-fated **Mylius-Erichsen expedition** to northeast Greenland. It was 1907, and for two

years Peter's solitary assignment was to man a tiny weather station 113 kilometers (70 miles) distant from his closest neighbor. The weather ranged from blinding whiteness and high winds



Copenhagen's June 24, 1906 "Illustreret Tidende" [Illustrated Journal] displaying members of the upcoming Mylius-Erichsen expedition.

Left: Arctic expedition leader Mylius-Erichsen, who died in Greenland.

Photo of young Peter Freuchen, on top row, second from right.

to dense darkness with only the sounds of the wolves pacing outside his door.

Later Peter learned a number of the others on the expedition, including the leader Mylius, had not survived. Nor could he have known at the time that the loss of life was unnecessary and could have been prevented with better judgment and preparation. Peter was learning how fragile life was in the Arctic; one moment you were talking to someone and the next moment they were gone—forever.

Back to school

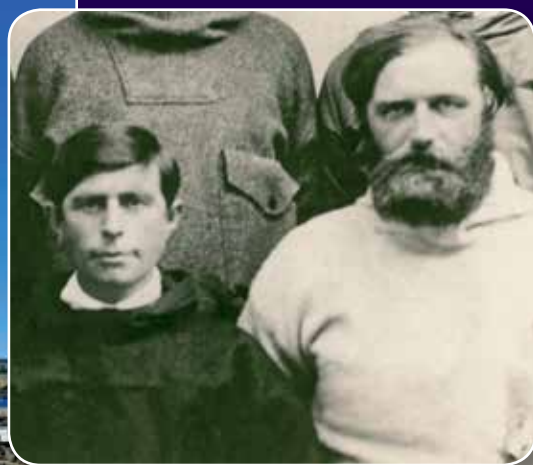
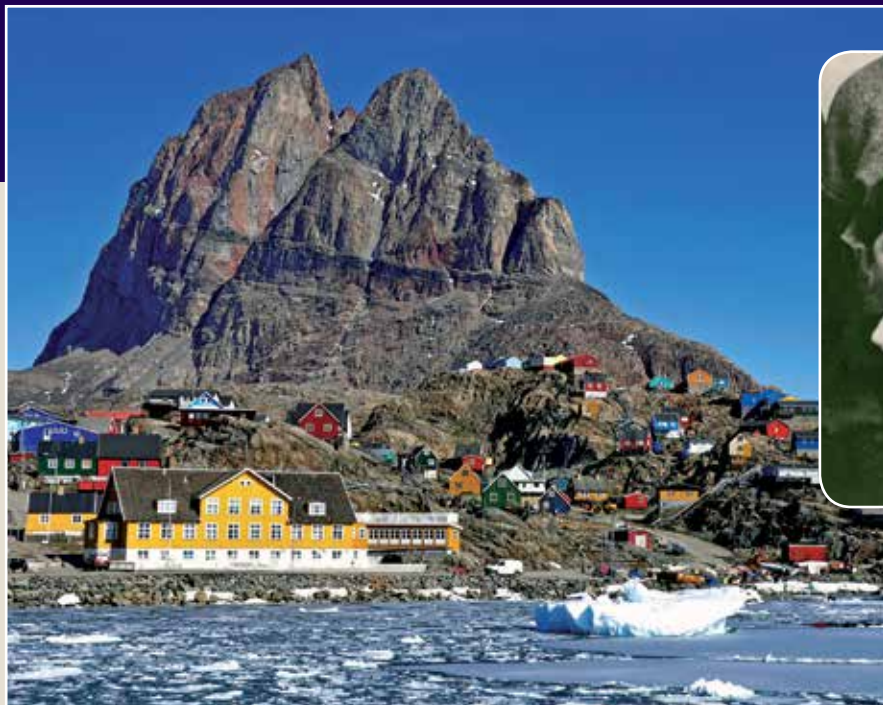
Peter's father was waiting for him, and back to medical school he went, to follow the career path expected of him. But it was no use; the dean advised his father that Peter needed to look in different directions. With his head full of recent memories of the uncharted frozen deserts of Greenland, Peter went to London to study surveying, a skill he knew he would need when he returned to Greenland.

This time he hooked up with **Knud Rasmussen**, and the two of them became fast and lifelong friends. At 6 ft. 7 in. (2.04 meters) tall, Peter was a full foot taller than Rasmussen.

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Arctic explorer Knud Rasmussen.



Left: Umannaq, Greenland, home of the Thule Trading Station where Rasmussen and Fruechen were business partners. Peter, above right, managed the station from 1910 to 1919.

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They became business partners in the Thule Trading Station (today called Umannaq), the northernmost human habitation on the planet. The word Thule derives from “ultima thule”, which means north of everywhere and everybody. Peter managed that station until 1919, collecting items for Danish museums back home.

From 1910 to 1924, Peter Fruechen went on a series of expeditions, some of them lasting for years. Peter was well along in his education about crossing the cultural divide. He had learned from Knud Rasmussen, who was half Danish and half Inuit himself, and from the other Inuit, how to survive in the harsh environment, and the tough choices that would make softer men cringe. He had learned how to hunt and eat seal meat, how to clothe himself with animal skins to survive the sub-zero climate, and how to outwit fellow predators trying to survive. You loved your dogs but you would eat your dog if survival depended on it.

Staying young

One day when he was in mixed company in a small boat, a 14-year old boy pulled alongside in his kayak, and leaned toward his mother in Peter’s boat. She immediately pulled up her anorak and began breast feeding him.



Knud explained to Peter that mothers would nurse their sons until they got married because to do so proves the mothers are still young and vigorous. The moment she can no longer nurse her son she is considered old.

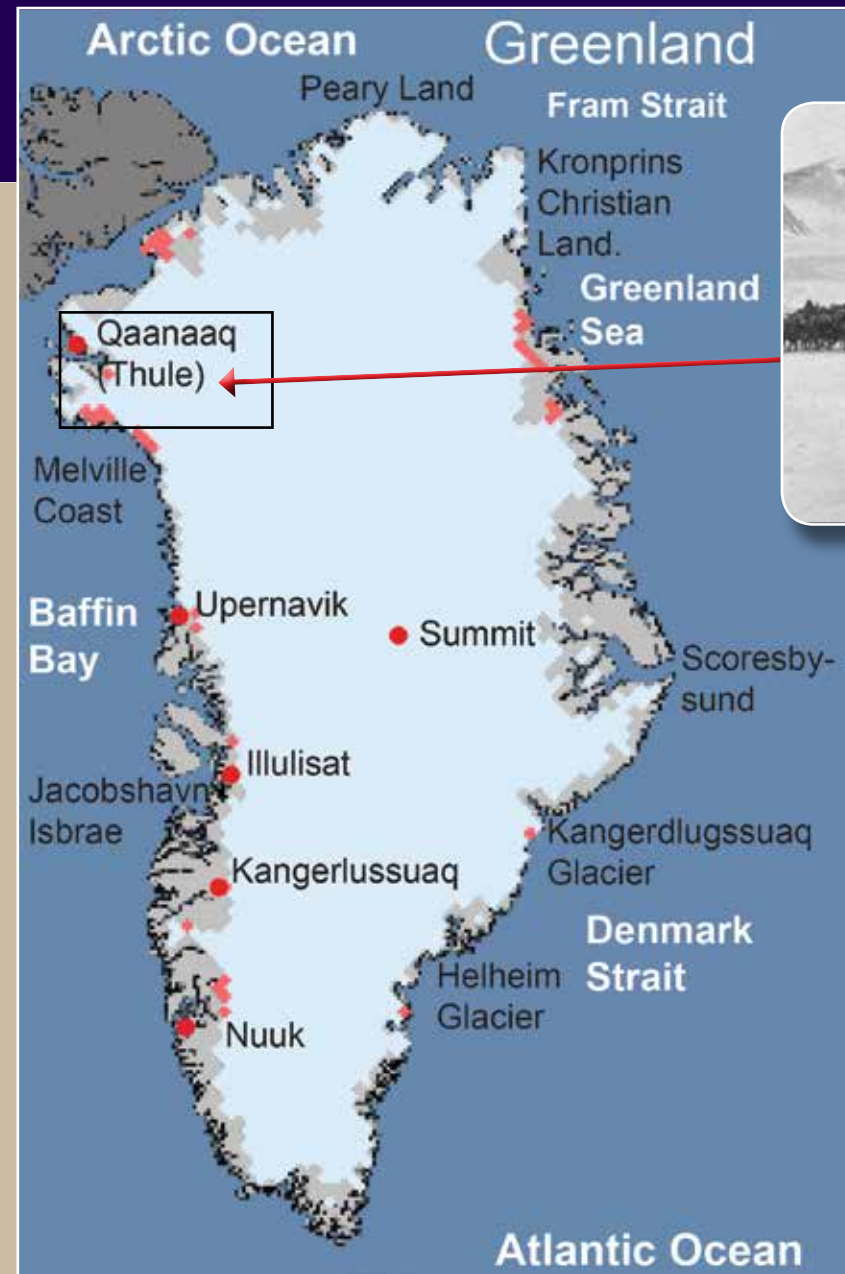
An obsession with maintaining a youthful appearance is certainly not limited to the Inuit. We simply have different ways of expressing similar desires.

Everything gets cleaner with ammonia

In time, Peter gained great acceptance with the Inuit, even being given the respect of a medicine man. Like his friend Knud, he had a great sense of humor and an openness to the Inuit culture that often got him special treatment. In his autobiography, *Vagrant Viking*, he describes this

gorgeous Inuit woman named Arnarak, so beautiful she had been painted by a famous Danish artist, and her portrait has since graced the walls of a German museum. Arnarak had finally accepted to go dancing with Peter, and she invited him to her hut while she got ready. He describes how she removed the ribbon that held her long black hair in place, and how it fell down around her shoulder, and she told him in sign language that she wanted to do a special job on her hair to go out with a man such as him. His words: “She bent forward and let her marvelous black hair fall to the floor. I felt weak from love and my sailor’s heart was bursting with pride—all this beauty was for me.”

Arnarak then followed an old Greenland custom, went to her bed and pulled out from under it a pail filled to the brim with human urine, which the Inuit use for tanning hides and for cleaning. She carefully let her dark long hair into the pail and gave it a good shampooing, and then wrung it out, “with my love ebbing faster than the tide in the English Channel. All that was left, as we set off for the dance, were my self-control, my good manners, and the odors from her proud coiffure.” He then phlegmatically concluded “In the end the ammonia proved stronger than love.”



In 1910, Rasmussen and friend Peter Fruechen established the Thule Trading Station at Cape York (Umannaq), Greenland, as a trading base. From there, they launched a series of seven expeditions, known as the Thule Expeditions, beginning in 1912.

The First Expedition aimed to test Robert Peary’s claim that a channel divided Peary Land from Greenland. Fruechen and Rasmussen proved this was not the case.

Clements Markham, president of the Royal Geographic Society, called the journey the “finest ever performed by dogs”.

Fruechen wrote personal accounts of this journey (and others) in *Vagrant Viking* (1953) and *I Sailed with Rasmussen* (1958).

Sex or sewing?

A hundred years ago, there was a strict sexual code among the Inuit; but there was no moral offense in a man letting his wife give sexual pleasure to other men, as long as the husband grants permission. In fact it was considered flattering if others found a wife desirable. But sewing a man’s shoes or socks—well that was entirely different. It was considered worse for a woman to sew for another man than to sleep with him without her husband’s consent. A man

rarely gave permission for his wife to sew for another man. Sex was to give pleasure, but footwear in the Arctic was closely tied to survival.

Peter learned to first ask permission of the husband for his wife to sew his kamik, and when granted, to reward him. The husband would always respond indirectly, in a passive voice: “A straight piece of wood might be used for a harpoon.”

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Polygamy, sharing, and jealousy

On one of Peter's expeditions, he came across an Eskimo friend who was just returning from a hunt with his two wives. He asked Peter and his group to stay overnight in his igloo, and he generously offered Peter one of his women for the night. That was a gesture of hospitality that could not be turned down, but it did cause trouble. During the night the man woke Peter up and said the other wife was insulted because she had not also been offered, and so Peter was obliged to extend his stay another night.

Cuisine

Gestures of gratitude and friendship were not to be taken lightly, and small things could make survival differences. An Inuit guide named Kratalik was so grateful that Peter accepted his pleading to turn back from a trek he feared because of his superstitions, that he insisted on creating a culinary specialty for Peter. It consisted of caribou meat which Kratalik chewed and spit out into a cup and then mixed with ptarmigan dung and seal oil. Peter said it tasted a bit like 'Roquefort cheese and wasn't bad at all'. Sounds a little like a line out of the movie *Crocodile Dundee*. Except this isn't fiction.

Marriage and children

In 1911, at the age of 25, Peter married an Inuit woman, Mekupaluk, who later went by Navarana. They had a boy and a girl. Navarana sometimes joined Peter on his expeditions. The next decade was filled with excitement, discovery, and danger.

On the first Thule Expedition, Peter and Rasmussen corrected some of Peary's cartography, who had been to the North Pole the year before.



Greenland Inuit family relax during a reindeer hunt.

They began this expedition on April 19, 1912, with 54 dogs to return 5 months later with only 8 dogs. Their 1,000 kilometer (621 mile) journey across the Greenland ice cap almost killed both of them. Besides checking on Peary the two Danes were also looking for a lost Danish expedition led by Einar Mikkelsen, who in turn was looking to recover the bodies of two Danish explorers of Independence Fjord, Ludvig Mylius-Erichsen and Niels Peter Hoegen-Hagen, referred to above, who had died nearby in 1907.

Peter had a gift for languages, spoke a number of European languages including English, and quickly picked up the Inuit dialects, which made him a favorite with them. Possibly because of this, he was appointed the Resident Governor of the Thule colony for seven years, from 1913-1920. During WWI there was a German blockade and the usual supply ships no longer came to the Far North, so Peter quickly adapted and learned survival the Inuit way.

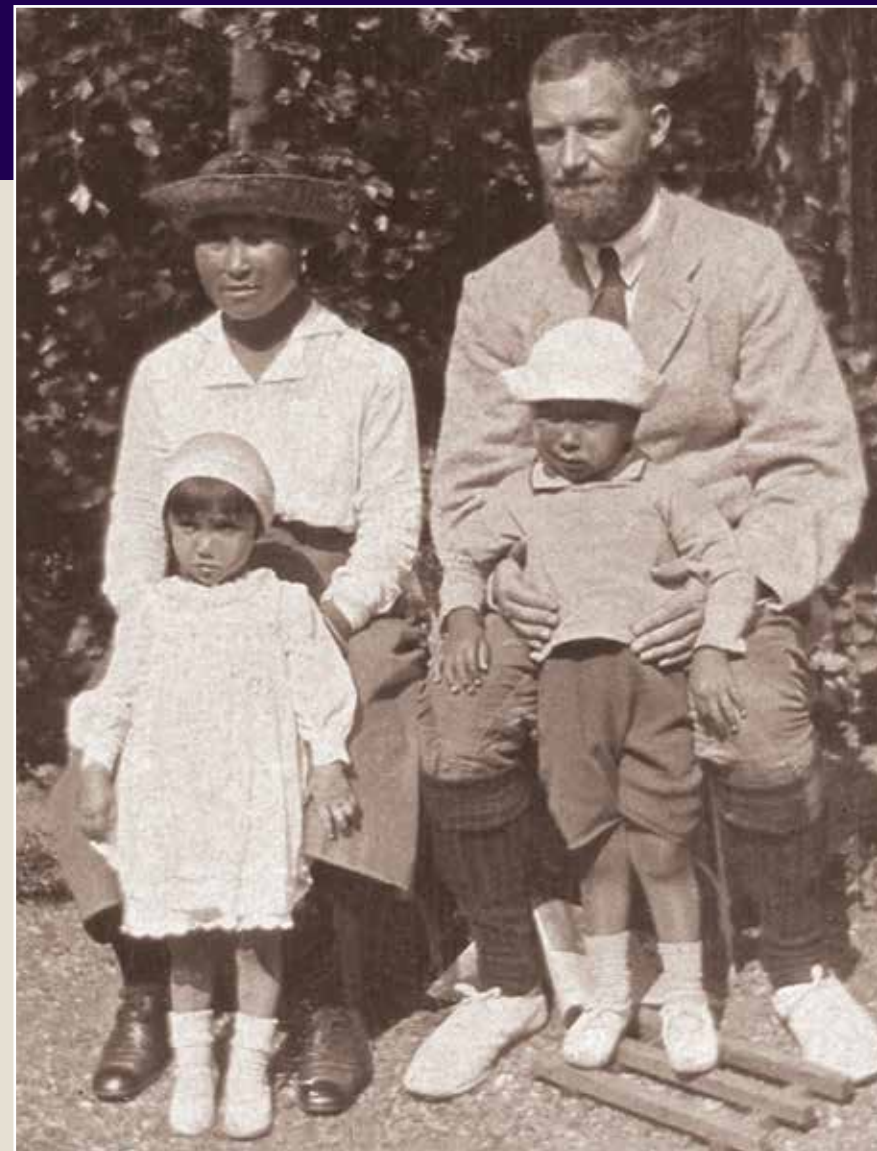
Navarana

After WWI Peter and Navarana and their two children went to visit Copenhagen and Peter's roots. Peter was afflicted with the influenza and spent four months in a hospital, and more weeks in a wheelchair. Knud said Peter was too sick to ever return to Greenland, and Peter began to think about settling down with the family in Denmark. He bought a farm and almost immediately was sued by a couple of his new neighbors, and Peter backed out of his contract and fled back to his spiritual home, Greenland. When they got back to Thule, Peter couldn't help but notice how much happier Navarana was, 'laughing and dancing and singing' all day.

Then Navarana got sick with the influenza and in three days she was gone,



Navarana, Pipaluk, Peter and Mequsaq.



Navarana and Peter's family (daughter Pipaluk and son Mequsaq) in Denmark, 1920.

with Peter by her bedside. They had been in a whispered conversation, and she slipped away so quietly and quickly Peter didn't even realize it. He felt incredible remorse at having taken her away from her people; she was often separated from her own children, and she had lived a restless, unhappy life for the previous few years. She had not been able to cross the cultural divide, and had never really understood the whites. For Peter, she was a finer and better person than he had ever known, but the white people with few exceptions had looked at her with condescension, as the poor little Eskimo girl.

Navarana had died a pagan, with both a Christian crucifix and an amulet

around her neck. She had never been baptized into the church, and the minister told Peter she could not be buried in the church graveyard, and she would be denied any tolling of bells, or a sermon. Peter was outraged, not by the denied rituals but concern about where to bury her where her grave would be safe from wild animals. Peter had to pay for pallbearers, because none of the villagers dared to challenge the church, and one of the pallbearers smoked a cigar while carrying her coffin, perhaps to demonstrate to all onlookers that this was a paid gig and he was not participating in the interment of a pagan. Peter with the help of a few others built a mausoleum on top of a cliff overlooking the colony,



There is a semi-celebrity buried at Upernavik Cemetery in Greenland. Peter Freuchen's wife Navarana, as she was called, became ill and died here. Since she was Inuit and not baptized in the Christian church the local priest would not perform the funeral service or bury her. Peter then created his own funeral service for his beloved wife, and she has a beautiful tomb at the top of the cemetery.

and where there was no earth that could be disturbed by wildlife.

Peter was a strong critic of the church sending out missionaries who were insensitive or ignorant of the traditions, history, and culture of the Inuit.

The deadly Arctic

Peter Freuchen learned the importance of footwear in a very painful way. On one of their expeditions, his team got caught, and separated, in a blizzard with zero visibility. Peter attempted to take cover under his dogsled, but his refuge quickly turned into a cave of ice. It was 54 degrees below zero in a howling

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“Perhaps one could get used to cutting off toes, but there were not enough of them to get sufficient practice.” — Peter Freuchen

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storm. With the ice roof of his shelter-turned-coffin just a few inches above his head and chest, he took a piece of frozen bear skin, chewed the edges of it smooth, let it freeze again, and began to scrape a small window above his face. He repeated this process over and over, freezing his lips and his tongue, but in the end survival trumps pain, just like animals that gnaw off a foot to free themselves from a trap. Agonizingly, Peter freed an opening in the snow and ice and saw sunlight.

He knew he had fallen asleep, and he knew his legs were frozen, because he couldn't feel pain in them anymore. But in his haste, he made a tragic miscalculation. He shoved his head into the hole he had made, and he got his head out far enough to expose his face to the drifting snow. His long beard was moist from his breathing and from saliva that had drooled, and when his beard came in contact with the runners of the sled above him, they instantly froze to them. Now he couldn't get out, and he couldn't get his head and face to retreat back into his coffin again. He made repeated desperate efforts to free his head, and his beard and shreds of skin ripped from his face. Hours passed without him making another move.

Then he got new inspiration. He had often noticed dog dung in the tracks of the sled, where it froze hard as a rock. What if . . . ? Would the cold have the same effect on his own waste? He moved his bowels and fashioned his excrement into the form of a chisel and waited for it to freeze. He knew if he tried his new tool prematurely and it broke, he was dead. So he waited some more. Hours of scraping, and emerging from his frozen grave an inch at a time, he got out, only to find he could not walk. The snow had stopped, and he crawled three hours back to the camp.

Back in shelter, Peter stayed alive by keeping the toes frozen where gangrene had already set in. His foot



Pincers used by Peter Freuchen to amputate his gangrenous toes—without anesthesia or any other kind of assistance.

was horrible to look at, and smelled worse if it thawed. He was going to have to go a considerable distance, to Hudson Bay, to get a surgeon, and he couldn't walk even with assistance. So a few days later he amputated the toes of his left foot with a pair of pincers and a heavy hammer. Without anesthesia, not even whisky. Peter was a teetotaler. He distinctly remembered that amputating the second toe did not hurt as much as the first, and he drily added “Perhaps one could get used to cutting off toes, but there were not enough of them to get sufficient practice.” Later Peter's leg was amputated and he got a wooden replacement. He had yet to celebrate his 38th birthday.

Second marriage to childhood sweetheart

When Navarana died, the grief-stricken Peter was quite certain that his place and future were in Greenland, his spiritual home. It was, and it wasn't. In the Arctic there was a short and direct connection between his efforts and good judgment and his own survival. He lived off the land and the sea, and survived with the assistance and collaboration of the Inuit, his new tribe. He had learned from them how to survive in their world, their side of the cultural divide. But Peter also jumped back and forth repeatedly between cultures and he was loved on both sides. Because of the depth of

his knowledge of the Arctic and the indigenous people, he was already drawing the attention of the nascent Danish film industry, and getting requests for his consulting.

After two decades mostly spent in the Arctic, Peter Freuchen married his childhood sweetheart, the Danish Jewish actress Magdalene (Magda) Vang Lauridsen. Magda was the daughter of Johannes Lauridsen, the founder of the Alfa margarine empire in Denmark, who also became the Director of *Danmarks Nationalbank*. Magda had been in two silent films.

Back in modernity, Peter encountered new and different challenges. He didn't have to hunt his food anymore, or incessantly fight the elements, but in a modern world with a specialization of labor, he had to figure out what to do about money. In the beginning the Lauridsens had doubts about whether Peter would be able to support their daughter in the manner to which she was accustomed, and they wanted Peter to enter the family margarine business.

But the Arctic was a hot topic and everyone was curious, so Peter



Peter and Pipaluk, age 6, on trip to Denmark in 1924.



Peter with son Mequsaq (on shoulder) and Danish wife.

got himself agents and started on the lecture circuit, all over Europe and North America. He was the world expert on the Eskimo. He had to get used to chasing his money, and people didn't always do what they promised to do. He went back to the university and finished his degree, and he wrote for a couple newspapers and magazines. He got a job as Editor-in-Chief of *Ude og Hjemme* magazine, owned by his new wife's family.

Eskimo—the movie

In 1926, Peter bought a small island Enehoje in Nakskov Fjord, where he wrote books, articles, and entertained and networked. He went to Hollywood with two novels he had written, based on his Arctic experiences, and asked MGM if they'd like to make a movie out of it. The movie was named at various times *Mala the Magnificent* and *Eskimo Wife-Traders* but ended up as simply *Eskimo*. It was filmed in 1932-1933, in Alaska, and the crew included

42 cameramen and technicians, six airplane pilots, and Emil Ottinger — a chef from the Roosevelt Hotel. Peter worked as a consultant on the set, but he also played a character in the story. *Eskimo* won the first ever Academy Award for Best Film Editing. *Eskimo* is the first feature film shot in a Native American language and does such a good job portraying Eskimo hunting and cultural practices that the movie seems to be a hybrid documentary. The wolf attack is real and not staged! This movie is unrated, with English intertitles, and is entertaining, educational, and available on DVD.

In 1933, Peter's lifelong friend Knud Rasmussen died at the age of 54.

Freuchen and the Nazis

In 1934, Peter was temporarily arrested by the Nazis when he was traveling from Denmark to the Balkans for a lecture engagement. In 1935, he visited South Africa, and in 1936, he was publicly calling



Poster for movie Eskimo, filmed in 1932-1933 in Alaska.

for Denmark to boycott the 1936 Olympics to be held in Berlin. In 1938, he visited Siberia. His books were banned by the Nazis which affected his income, and he joined the Danish underground resistance. He got into a public argument with a German media official about whether there were concentration camps in Germany.

At Hitler's insistence, there was a warrant for his arrest and he was captured and sentenced to death. He escaped over a barbed wire fence and with the help of friends made his way to Sweden in a fishing boat, and from there to the U.S. All this with a wooden leg.

In 1944, his marriage to Magdalene Vang Lauridsen was dissolved.

The last decade

In 1945, Peter married his third wife, Dagmar Cohn, a Danish-Jewish
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*Journalist, novelist, explorer,
anthropologist, actor, lecturer, with
about 30 books to his name.*

or watch the documentaries and movies made from their exploits and to marvel at tales of people so different from themselves. These explorers gave immense gifts to posterity by documenting lifestyles, cultures, and beliefs of disappearing civilizations.

Back in the Arctic, the indigenous Inuit for hundreds of years gathered around their fires to talk about the strange ways of the white man, so helpless without his toys and guns, always getting lost or losing their ships or dying of starvation. And from the Inuit perspective, often so driven and unhappy. These people developed strong bonds of affection and respect for the few like Peter Freuchen and Knud Rasmussen, who came with genuine interest, and totally without condescension or airs of superiority. The Inuit did not think these explorers were so different from themselves in their willingness to endure long separations from their loved ones, because for the Inuit it often took months or years to travel anywhere. Hardship was the norm and they had heroes of their own.

Whenever we cross a cultural divide with curiosity and openness, and not a desire for control or submission or barely concealed superiority, we are enriched by the travel experience. It is noteworthy that the explorers known for their sense of humor and acceptance of differences were wildly popular wherever they went. They had a capacity for joy in the immersion experience that muted the impact of the hardships endured.

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Peter dwarfs third wife, fashion illustrator Dagmar Cohn.

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fashion illustrator based in New York City. Ten years later, in 1955, he visited Thule for the last time. So much had changed; the streets were paved and the igloos had been replaced with regular housing. The following year, 1956, Peter became the fifth person to win \$64,000 in the show by that name. Peter was a favorite of Hollywood celebrities, including Mae West and Jean Harlow. He was known on occasion to pick up a pretty woman and twirl her above his head. Jean Harlow for one, loved the attention.

Peter was a journalist, novelist, explorer, anthropologist, actor, lecturer, with about 30 books to his name. In September 1957, he was invited by a production company to join a group of polar explorers who were to be filmed in a staged reunion in Anchorage, Alaska. He died of a heart attack carrying heavy luggage to his plane. He was 71 years old. His ashes were scattered over Thule, Greenland.

We are all storytellers

The motivations of explorers can be complicated, and they include curiosity about the unknown, a desire for fame and record-setting, scientific inquiry, ego or restlessness. Some of them were in the paid service of distant monarchs who sought control of peoples and resources for personal enrichment. But for the fortunate, like anthropologist Peter Freuchen and ethnologist Knud Rasmussen and Roald Amundsen, when they returned “home” they achieved celebrity status because of their stories. They funded their expeditions, and achieved sometimes envious lifestyles because their publics paid to hear their lectures