

Travel



Tasting Room: Barbera meets bocce at Suncé N6

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GREENLAND

An island of ice, full of warmth

Sparsely populated, but with welcoming folks

By Margo Pfeiff

Larseraq Broberg steers our tiny boat around bobbing blue “berg bits,” remnants of once-grand icebergs that have drifted to the head of a long fjord in South Greenland, where he drops me at the sheep farm of Lars and Makkak Nielsen. I follow the couple and their feisty border collie across a grassy field, kicking up wafts of wild thyme en route to their red farmhouse.

“The sheep eat the thyme and it flavors the meat,” says Makkak, setting a

platter laden with one of their crispy-skinned, slow-roasted lambs on the dining room table alongside a pot of reindeer stew, the prize of a local hunt. There are potatoes, turnips and carrots from the garden and herbs like subarctic angelica harvested from the wild. Desert is tundra blueberry cheesecake. It’s a meal similar to the one Makkak recently created for the television series “A Taste of Greenland” that is broadcast internationally and a hit in Europe.

The Niensens’ daughter, Maria, just

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Above, the view of Qooroq Glacier after a 5-mile hike from the village of Igaliku through lush meadows and past mossy waterfalls. Left, a colorful house with a nautical theme in Qaqortoq, South Greenland’s largest town.

Photos by Margo Pfeiff / Special to The Chronicle

READY, SET, GO By Christine Delsol

Gold Country festival honors historic farm’s diverse caretakers

Gold Country’s history isn’t only about gold. The Wakamatsu Farm Festival honors the Nisenan tribe, the first Japanese colony in America, the gold seekers and the Veerkamp family, all of whom made their lives on the Wakamatsu Tea and Silk Colony Farm in the foothills of Placerville. Performers and exhibits include American Indian dancers and artists, Gold Rush living history, Japanese artists and martial arts, organic farm tours, a petting zoo, live music and an interactive art exhibit inspired by the farm’s history.

Vitals: Saturday, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. adults \$20, youths \$7, younger than 10 free. 941 Cold Springs Road, Placerville. (530) 621-1224, www.arconservancy.org/wakamatsu.



Wakamatsu Farm Festival 2012

» **San Diego showcases Mission Trails park:** San Diego’s Mission Trails Regional Park, one of the country’s largest urban parks, puts its varied offerings on display during Explore Mission Trails Day, whose theme this year is “Connecting Children With Nature.” Free guided nature walks and talks throughout the park, a special coyote program and lots of live animals will appeal to children. The visitor center will keep children’s crafts and activities such as free pony rides and a climbing wall going all day. Saturday, 9 a.m.-2 p.m. Free. (619) 668-3281, www.mtrp.org/emtday.asp.

» **Tahoe Rim Trail Challenge:** Six of Lake Tahoe’s most scenic sites beckon all comers to complete the inaugural Tahoe Rim Trail Challenge: Hike, bike, snowshoe or ride a horse to each destination by the end of the year. Registration opens Wednesday. Participants will be invited to special events created just for Trail Challenge members and have access to the members-only website where they can access the six destinations’ GPS waypoints, track their progress and share pictures. June 1 challenge kickoff. \$55 general (includes Trail Challenge membership), \$20 current members. (775) 298-0012, www.tahoerimtrail.org.

FROM THE COVER



Photos by Margo Pfeiff / Special to The Chronicle

The town of Qaqortoq, population 3,200, is a charming cluster of colorful houses perched on a steep hillside overlooking a harbor.

Land of ice and warm hearts

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back from university in Calgary, Alberta, chats excitedly in English and Danish about planning her wedding costume, explaining that her outfit will feature the same colorful traditional beaded collar she wore on her first day of school and at her confirmation, but atop white fabric.

"And, of course, I'll be wearing white sealskin pants and kamiks," or boots, she says.

Then the 27-year-old Nordic beauty leans across the table and speaks to her father in her native tongue, Greenlandic, an Eskimo-Aleut language. Maria may look as if she walked off a street in Copenhagen, but she can trace her Inuit ancestry for generations.

Even after a week of touring the remote toe of Greenland, the world's biggest island hasn't eased up on delivering unexpected cultural, culinary and wilderness punches. I may be at the end of a roadless fjord trafficked by polar bears and walrus, where the nearest sign of neighbors is a smattering of 10th century Norse ruins, but there is nothing backward about this intriguing part of the world. It is at once rural and fiercely local, yet also sophisticated and world-savvy: traditional, yet stylish.

Land of low density

Greenland is a unique home-ruled Inuit nation within the Kingdom of Denmark. The least populated country in the world is more than three



Makkak Nielsen with a tundra blueberry cheesecake to end a home-cooked meal.

times the size of Texas, yet with a scant 57,000 folks — about 90 percent of them Inuit, once known as Eskimo. As it hurtles toward independence from Denmark, it faces a slew of 20th century issues, like the world's fastest rate of climate warming and Chinese mining conglomerates eyeing the rare earths and other minerals emerging from beneath the vast ice cap that covers three-quarters of the island. Yet, in many ways it is still wired to its hunter-gatherer past.

Most of the population perches on the ice-free west coast fringe. While the tourist mecca is north of the capital of Nuuk at Disko Bay, where parades of giant icebergs calve from the ice cap, I headed south to a region less traveled. South Greenland is the coun-



Greenlandic boots and cooking supplies at the Ipiutaq guest farm of Agathe and Kalista Devisme-Poulsen.

try's warmest area, where summer temperatures reach into the 60s, a lush landscape that inspired Eric the Red to bring hundreds of settlers to farm cattle, sheep and horses around A.D. 950.

South Greenland is still the country's agricultural hub — its tender lamb is a sought-after commodity in Europe. That makes it an off-the-beaten track foodie destination for those who also like to hike, kayak, get to know unpretentious locals or just cruise spectacular waterways beneath glacier-topped fjords.

I land at Narsarsuaq (population 158), South Greenland's gateway, on one of this mountainous country's few runways. Most were built during World War II by the U.S. military as part of an aircraft

supply route to Europe. Narsarsuaq was Blue West One air base from 1941-58. After prowling the well-stocked little military museum, I dined on musk ox sliced and seared on a blisteringly hot black rock, delivered to my table in the town's only hotel, once the military barracks, where I spend the night.

Scenic villages

In the morning I head for coffee to the cheery Blue Ice cafe-shop-outfitter to meet the owner, Frenchman Jacky Simoud, who operates the scheduled small boat shuttles and charters up and down the fjords. These boats are the only way besides commercial helicopters to reach South Greenland's handful of small towns, ruins, sheep farms,

glaciers and trailheads. I hop onto the little wooden boat Puttut, chugging through waters dotted with ice alongside hillsides dotted with sheep en route to my first stop, the village of Igaliku.

On board, two archaeologists are heading to Igaliku for a dig. "It was the seat of the Norwegian bishop during the rural era of the Norse — they were not Vikings, who were warriors," says the Danish National Museum's Jette Arneborg. "They traded back to Europe luxury items like walrus ivory tusks." Then they suddenly and mysteriously vanished in the 15th century.

Once ashore, it's an hour's easy hike up and over a slope toward Igaliku (population 30), considered one of Greenland's most scenic villages. It appears suddenly over the rise, an idyllic smattering of red, turquoise and yellow houses on the shore of a fjord. Laundry flaps in the breeze, chickens are herded by enthusiastic sheepdogs, and a schoolhouse accommodates three students. Dinner at the eight-room Igaliku Hotel is a lively crowd of archaeologists and their field workers, as well as several Danes on school break hiking a multiday trail.

"It's called *allemandsret*, meaning we can camp free on private land as long as we avoid cultivated fields and grazing sheep," says one of students.

A German couple is also trekking, but staying at some

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Photos by Margo Pfeiff / Special to The Chronicle

A distinctive bright blue iceberg that calved off the Greenlandic ice cap floats in a fjord. The Qooroq glacier calves about 200,000 tons of ice daily.



The fjord view from the remote guest farm of Agathe and Kalista Devisme-Poulsen. They bought Ipiutaq in 2005 and turned it into a working guest farm.

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of the dozen hospitable sheep farms in the area while their luggage is transferred by boat.

I stroll through the impressive 12th century ruins of Norse Greenland's religious heart, then hike in morning sunshine through buttercups and lupins for 5 miles with the smell of the sea and wild lavender, through lush meadows and past mossy waterfalls to a lunchtime lookout over Qooroq Glacier. Far below, kayaks from Jacky's Blue Ice base camp navigate around icebergs in the indigo water.

Stairmaster streets

By late afternoon I have been shuttled to Qaqortoq ("Ha-hor-talk"), South Greenland's largest town (population 3,200). It's a charming cluster of colorful houses perched on a steep hillside overlooking a harbor, my base for a few days of day tripping. I stroll the steep Stairmaster streets, poking into shops selling Danish pastries and whale blubber, then grab a kayak for a few hours of paddling.

In the morning, I beeline for the daily "country food" market, where fresh reindeer, caribou, musk ox, Arctic char and halibut are sold on the waterfront. Lunch at the hotel's gourmet restaurant is an open-faced Danish sandwich buried in fresh Greenlandic shrimp and washed down with Eric the Red Ale from Nuuk's Godthaab Bryghus microbrewery.

Qaqortoq is the headquarters for a Great Greenland Furhouse, a modern tannery and processing company that produces haute couture and other products made from Greenland fur

and sealskin. That's where I catch up with Kenneth Høegh, the country's representative to Vietnam, who also owns the local tourist outfitter. We walk to the pink house of 71-year-old Kaaleeraq "Little Karl" Ottosen, a full-time seal hunter whose generations-old livelihood is threatened by the European Union's sealskin ban.

"Despite the fact that Greenland meets the requirements for a ban exemption due to our documented sustainable seal harvesting, visitors are afraid to take sealskin products back home," Høegh translates from Greenlandic as we drink Labrador tea and munch delicious seal carpaccio.

That, combined with ocean warming that has sent cod northward and out of reach, is affecting South Greenland's economy, making mining inevitable despite its environmental and cultural disadvantages.

I see Ottosen later that evening, a figure from centuries ago in his traditional white Greenlandic costume, with the town choir assembled for a concert in the town's wooden 1832 Lutheran church, performing for passengers from a cruise ship anchored offshore.

International love story

A moody sky and drizzle feel like an appropriate atmosphere in which to visit the stone ruins of a Norse farmstead at Hvalsey, including a feasting hall, dairy and stables. The church is the most spectacular ruin, more than 50 feet long. Mentioned in medieval writings, the last reference to the Norse settlement in Greenland before it vanished was the wedding of an Icelandic couple at this church in September 1408.

Afterward, I step off the

boat for afternoon tea and into the plot of an international love story, that of Agathe Devisme and Kalista Poulsen — not exactly what I expected at a sheep farm. But then again, that's not what the French architect Devisme expected when she came to visit her sister studying agriculture at an experimental farm nearby at Upernaviarsuk, where Poulsen was also a student. The two fell in love and she abandoned her career, working as the farm school chef for two years until Poulsen graduated.

Then they bought Ipiutaq in 2005 and turned it into a working guest farm. Devisme is a rural activist trying to persuade local farms to recycle, and she has won an entrepreneurial award for their solar-powered eco guest lodge and the unique snacks and meals she serves visitors.

"I mix Greenlandic food and French tradition," she says in a charming French accent, serving cookies and finger cakes like rhubarb angelica using blue harebells and crowberries and pouring tea into her grandmother's china. "Dinners can include dried and smoked reindeer with wild Greenlandic sorrel, or traditional muk-tuk (whale skin) with my angelica-garlic-rosemary pickles."

Ancient ice and air

Heading back to the airstrip at Narsarsuaq, the boat stops in the tiny settlement of Qassarsuk, where a replica has been reconstructed from the ruins of the tiny Christian church that Eric the Red built for his wife, who converted to Christianity. We pass the foot of Qooroq glacier, which calves about 200,000 tons of ice daily.

We drift a while with the



A church at Hvalsey, Greenland's largest, best preserved Norse ruins, was originally built in the late 10th century.

If you go

GETTING THERE

The main travel season is mid-June through September. English is widely spoken. **Scandinavian Airlines**, www.flysas.com/en/us, recently launched San Francisco-Copenhagen flights. Spend the night in Copenhagen, then connect to Narsarsuaq (the only airport in South Greenland) on Air Greenland, www.airgreenland.com. Or connect with Icelandair, www.icelandair.com, in Seattle to Reykjavik. From there you can transfer to domestic carrier Air Iceland, www.airiceland.is, for a direct flight to Narsarsuaq.

WHERE TO STAY AND EAT

Hotel Hans Egede: +299 32 42 22. <http://engelsk.hhe.gl>. Double rooms from \$340. A modern hotel in the capital of Nuuk. There is a rooftop bar with a view, as well as two restaurants, including a steakhouse, and one of the best Greenlandic cuisine restaurants in the country, Sarfalik. Dinner for two: \$160.

The Godthaab Bryghus: +299 34 80 60. www.bryggeriet.gl. A microbrewery in Nuuk that has a range of beers on tap and serves burgers, steaks, musk ox, reindeer and lamb. Dinner for two: \$45.

Hotel Qaqortoq: +299 64 22 82. www.hotel-qaqortoq.gl. A contemporary hotel in Qaqortoq. Double rooms \$295. Its **Nanoq Steakhouse** serves excellent local Greenlandic cuisine. Dinner for two: \$140.

Igaliku Country Hotel: A simple, comfortable village inn with a dining room. Book through **Blue Ice:** www.blueice.gl/igaliku_accommodation.html. \$190 double, including full breakfast.

Stay at the head of a remote fjord in rustic but comfortable accommodations on a sheep farm at **Kangerluarsorujuk** (+299 19 92 07, e-mail: kang27@greenet.gl) and share a home-cooked local meal with owners Makkak and Lars Nielsen. Per person with a full breakfast \$45. Dinner is \$34 per person. Boat shuttle is extra.

Drop in for a French-Greenlandic gourmet meal or stay in a simple, chic cottage with a view at **Ipiutaq Guest Farm** with Agathe and Kalista. The farm is also the site of some of Greenland's best Arctic char fishing. Open June 15-Sept. 30. www.ipiutaq.gl. Rate: minimum two-night stay in a guest room \$160 per person per night, all meals included. A self-catered six-to-eight-person cottage starts at \$290 per night for longer stays. Dinners \$60 per person.

GETTING AROUND

No roads connect South Greenland towns and farms, so transfers throughout the fjords are by small boats operated by Narsarsuaq-based **Blue Ice Explorer**.

They also offer custom tours and cruises to Viking ruins, glaciers and other points of interest. Licensed outdoor adventure operators, they can arrange kayaking and hiking trips. Tel: +299 49 73 71; www.blueice.gl.

Air Greenland also offers scheduled helicopter services between South Greenland towns. www.airgreenland.com.

MORE INFORMATION

Greenland Tourism www.greenland.com/en, or e-mail sanfrancisco@greenland.com with questions.

For more foodie information, check out A Taste of South Greenland: www.mamartut.gl/english/index.htm.

current, the silence broken only by the sound of ice cracking, rolling and splashing into the fjord.

A few chunks are hauled on board and chipped into glasses. Cocktails are poured and mini-explosions erupt in our

glasses as 10,000-year-old air bubbles escape from the ice — amid our civilized drinks, tiny echoes of the formation of an ancient, rough-hewn land.

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