

SundayTravel

WITH: NEW ENGLAND DESTINATIONS

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CRUISES

Cruise-curious? Your cruise questions answered

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

As veterans of more than two dozen cruises, for work and for pleasure, we've learned a few things about the art of cruising. We've experienced the bad (sailing in circles off the coast of Spain since it was too rough to land in Mallorca) and the good (cruising past sparkling Paris after dark on the Seine). If you're a never-ever who's leaning toward the maybe-wannabe camp, or simply cruise-curious, you've got questions. We've got answers, thanks to Colleen McDaniel, editor in chief of Cruise Critic (www.cruisecritic.com), the online cruise reviews website. Here's what to know before booking a cruise, and things we wish we'd known before we sailed.

Not long ago, a cruise arrived in Boston instead of the Bahamas. Amazingly, some folks were miffed. **CRUISES, Page N14**



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Expedition voyages are more adventure than entertainment

By Diane Bair and Pamela Wright

GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS

Blue- and red-footed boobies, marine iguanas, lava lizards, giant tortoises — we saw them all in the Galapagos islands. We marveled at the polka-dot patterns of spotted eagle rays, and the colorful, rock-hopping Sally Lightfoot crabs, supposedly named after a Caribbean dancer. We snorkeled with hammerhead sharks and — memorably — California sea lions, who nudged us toward open water with their flippers, away from their rookeries. (Galapagos travel tip: Snorkel away from the beach, lest you're a pool toy for a pinniped.) As authors of a book called "Wild Encounters," we've witnessed some thrilling wildlife, but this was extraordinary. By night, we attended lectures about birds, wildlife, and natural history, and woke up most days before 7 a.m. to do it again.

Such is life aboard an expedition voyage. These small ships, typically hosting fewer than 200 passengers, venture into spaces where larger ships can't fit. They specialize in bucket-list locales — including the Arctic and

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PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The colorful homes and buildings in Greenland's capital, Nuuk (population 20,000), with distinct Sermitsiaq (Saddle) Mountain, at 3,970 feet, in the background.



Adventure Canada's first stop on the Greenland and Labrador trip takes passengers to Kangerlussuatsiaq Fjord where there's an option to paddle around icebergs and up to a glacier, or do a Zodiac tour.



A female polar bear in the Torngat Mountains National Park in northern Labrador during a trip to the region last September aboard the Ocean Endeavor.

We wanted northern lights and glacial fjords.

We got so much more.

BY KARI BODNARCHUK | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

KANGERLUSSUAQ, Greenland — When my son, Sam, and I booked a trip to Greenland and Labrador, we had a couple of goals in mind: To see the aurora borealis, to explore glacial fjords only accessible by boat, and to find a polar bear. A last-minute deal through Adventure Canada meant we could travel to this Arctic region at the start of the northern lights-viewing season in September, with a chance to see icebergs, fjords, and Inuit villages along the way.

What we hadn't anticipated was the profoundly moving and transformational experience of traveling through Inuit territory on both sides of the Atlantic with people who grew up in these regions or had in-

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Lena Onalik, the first Inuit archeologist for the Nunatsiavut Government's Department of Language, Culture, and Tourism, grew up with her grandparents in Makkovik.



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Discovering nature’s wonders and new friends

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timate ties to the land. Our expedition leader, Jason Edmunds, was an Inuk who grew up on the Labrador Coast — in a self-governing Inuit region called Nunatsiavut — where we would make numerous stops on our small-ship voyage. The crew also included more than a dozen Inuit from Greenland and Labrador, people who would share firsthand stories about their land, their culture, and the region’s history.

On this trip, Edmunds’ family would also be onboard — including his kids, his wife, and her siblings and families, and a couple of grandparents — for an annual reunion. It would be a multigenerational trip — perfect for 12-year-old Sam (onboard family reunions happen at least once a year).

The trip started in Kangerlussuaq, home to one of Greenland’s main airports, where we boarded the Ocean Endeavor with 167 other passengers and cruised overnight down the longest fjord in western Greenland, 120 miles long. We stayed up virtually all night — for the next two nights, in fact — after gentle wakeup announcements that the northern lights were “really putting on a show.” The lights danced overhead, arcing over the ship from side to side in dazzling greens, purples, and reds. Then tall columns of light shot up into the heavens, brighter than I’ve ever seen thanks to the dark skies. Sam stood on deck, spellbound, until his neck ached from craning and his eyelids drooped.

At the head of the Kangerlussuatsiaq Fjord the next day, I joined a group to kayak around icebergs and bergie bits with clear views of glaciers wedged in between steep rocky mountains. We paddled among crackling bits of melting ice, which occasionally scraped against our boats, and watched a calving glacier release a chunk of ice the size of a large building. Sam (not an experienced paddler) hopped on a Zodiac and made friends with the assistant expedition leader and other guests as they cruised up near a seal floating on an ice floe and collected a chunk of glacier ice for the ship’s bar.

Any concerns I had that Sam would be bored soon vanished. In Nuuk, Greenland’s capital, we rented mountain bikes (available onboard) and cycled all around this small city of 20,000, stopping to visit the Greenland National Museum with its amazing collection of cultural artifacts, kayaks, and mummies; eat muskox burgers at a local restaurant; and explore as many backroads as time allowed. It didn’t take long to get around, since downtown was just 1.3 miles from the harbor (Greenland only has about 90 miles of paved roads, two-thirds of which are in Nuuk). We eventually wound our way up through colorful neighborhoods to a hilltop that offered views of an iceberg-dotted bay backed by iconic Sermitsiaq Mountain. Sam tested the bike’s suspension as he rolled down rocky embankments — perfect terrain for an active kid.

During our journey, Sam joined the other kids to make homemade pizza, record their own horror film, and write a song with an onboard musician, which was played one morning following the usual wake-up announcements. At other times, he hung out in the library working on puzzles with fellow passengers or doing homework (a crew member — also a schoolteacher — helped him with his math for ages one day). Or he joined me for the many talks and hands-on activities.

The onboard geologist taught us about gray gneisses and basaltic dikes, and then showed us rocks that were 3.9 billion years old (we spent a lot of time at the rock table). We also spent hours hanging out on the bridge talking to the crew and to Kristine Hanifen, a visiting researcher who was recording information on seabirds in the Arctic for the Canadian Wildlife Service (two other guest researchers were studying the presence of microplastics in the ocean and the potential introduction of non-native species to remote areas because of cruise ships).

During the 491-mile Atlantic crossing, Sam and I joined a workshop on how to sew sealskin stuffed animals — not an easy task — while others learned about photography and Inuit beadwork or sampled traditional Inuit food. One night, we got to see a qulliq, a lighting ceremony with Maria Merkuratsuk, an Inuk elder and cultural leader, and Edmund’s daughters, Islay and Charlotte, during which Merkuratsuk lit a soapstone lamp containing olive oil, Arctic cotton, Labrador tea, and twigs from the tundra. This symbolic, touching ceremony signifies life and hope, and brings people together.

Lena Onalik, the first Inuit archeologist in Nunatsiavut and an advocate for Indigenous language, also taught passengers a new Inuit word each day, such as nakurmiik (thank you), puisi (seal), and silakisuaq (beautiful day).

Once we reached the Labrador Coast, we spent a couple of days exploring fjords and remote spots in Torngat Mountains National Park, an Indigenous protected area where all park staff are Inuit.



The kids loved everything about these landings: Fast Zodiac rides, scrambling over rock slabs, rock hopping along shore, and examining found bones, including vertebrae, a seal skull, and a polar bear paw with fur still intact.

We had a choice of activities during landings. Bear guards (crew members with guns) marked the outer perimeter and we could explore on our own within this area, or we could go on organized guided hikes that were themed (about geology or photography, for instance) or that matched our abilities and interests — usually rated medium, difficult, and extreme. Sam and I always chose “extreme” and enjoyed fast-paced treks across a landscape with no trails or trees — we were above tree line at this latitude — but with plenty of scrub brush, lingonberry bushes, and other hearty plants to scramble across. Visiting these areas in the fall meant the Arctic terrain was ablaze in vibrant colors.

In Eclipse Sound, our landing was thwarted by a local resident: A large female nanuk (polar bear). “We won’t be driving bears away for our pleasure,” said Edmunds. “It’s fall and they are often near shore wasting time for the sea ice to form,” he explained, adding that they use the sea ice to access seals for much-needed food after fasting all summer.

We viewed the bear from a respectful distance by Zodiac; it stared at us for a while — so close we could see its wet nose and the details on its paws — and then continued foraging for berries (they are mainly meat eaters but will consume berries if hungry). Seeing a polar bear so close was a thrilling experience, but the most meaningful part of the trip came from learning about the land and lo-

cal history from the Inuit crew.

We sailed into Nachvak Fjord in the heart of the Torngat Mountains one day, to a place called Ramah where Onalik had worked for six weeks excavating an Inuit sod house — much like the one her great-grandfather had been born in on this very spot. She pointed out the many sod house depressions across the site — and also areas in the grass where bears had bedded down — and answered our many questions about Inuit life and about tent rings, cache pits, and culturally important artifacts.

We also visited Hebron, a town with a palpable heaviness to it, located in a 28-mile-long fjord.

“I welcome you to my homeland,” said Merkuratsuk. “This is the fjord I traveled to every summer from a baby to 5 years old,” she said, and then told us a tragic story of forced relocation, when the Canadian government evicted 253 people — including her family — and sent them to live in other communities. Talking about her past helped her move on, she said.

Before the winds kicked up and forced us back to the ship, we spent hours hiking in the hills around Hebron, wandering around the collapsed homes and old cemetery, and reading an apology from the Canadian government on a plaque behind the old Moravian church.

Our final stop in Nunatsiavut was Nain, the largest community on the coast — population 1,200 — where Edmunds had grown up and where his parents still lived. The community — only about two miles from end to end — has a tiny airstrip, dirt roads for people on their ATVs, bikes, tractors, and cars, the Nunatsiavut government building, a hotel with a restaurant (where Sam, always hungry, tried poutine), a couple of one-stop

Top left: Sam Wright, 12, of Ferndale, Wash., looks into one of the abandoned buildings at Hebron.

Top right: Adventure Canada’s expedition cruise makes numerous stops in the remote Torngat Mountains National Park — a park where all the staff are Inuit.

Above: Kangerlussuatsiaq Fjord in western Greenland is 46 miles long and 2,300 feet deep. It flows through a deep uninhabited canyon with glaciers at the head — a popular place for paddling around icebergs that calve off of the area’s glaciers. It takes these icebergs up to two years to reach the coast of Labrador in eastern Canada.

Left: Traveling to the Labrador Coast in September means the hillsides are ablaze in color, even in the northern regions above tree line. Here, you find Labrador tea, lingonberries, and other colorful plants on the tundra.

shops that sell everything from washing machines and bikes to fresh veggies, and two schools.

We gathered at one of the schools so the students could perform traditional Inuit games that are meant to build strength and resilience — important qualities to survive in the north — and still at the heart of competitions between different Inuit communities. The kids showed us the seal crawl, high kick (with a stuffed seal as the object to kick), squat kicks, and arm pulls (like tug of war with a stick), and two girls performed throat singing.

Sam brought a soccer ball with him on the trip — in case he had an opportunity to play, and to give to someone along the route. In Nain, he met Onalik’s son, Charlie, at the high school and passed the ball onto him — a touching moment and a cool connection between kids from two different worlds.

The Inuit crew all disembarked in Nain, but we had other local experts onboard to guide us along the final leg of our journey, which took us to summer fishing communities along the southern tip of the Labrador Coast and then to Newfoundland. We hiked and paddled in Terra Nova National Park and visited North America’s first Viking settlements before the ship made its way through the narrow passage into St. John’s harbor.

We’ll never forget the dancing and vibrant colors of the aurora borealis, the direct gaze of that beautiful polar bear, and the explosion of ice plunging into the sea from the calving glacier, but we’ll hold on even tighter to the stories and experiences shared with us about Inuit culture, and the new friends we made.

I’m sure Sam will go back again someday, maybe with a bag full of soccer balls to reconnect with old friends, or with his own kids in tow.

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