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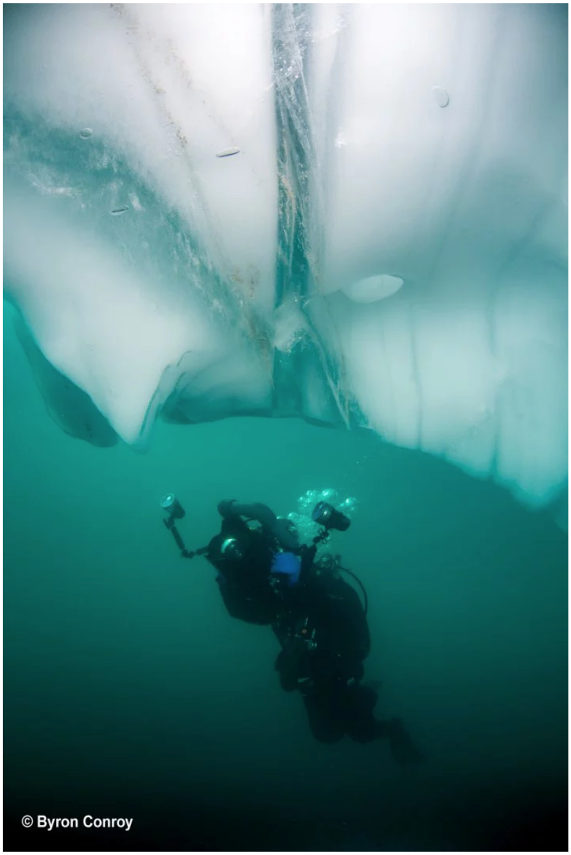
Underwater Adventures with Eco-Photo Explorers

An Intimate Exploration of Greenland

May 9, 2018 | Article and photos by Eco-Photo Explorers Michael Salvarezza and Christopher P. Weaver

Iceland and Greenland lie across from each other separated at the closest point by only a few hundred miles of the tempestuous waters of the Denmark Straight in the southern part of the Arctic Ocean. They are relatively close and yet so very different from each other.

According to Norwegian legend, the Vikings tried to deceive their enemies and conceal their true location by reporting that they had landed on a new island that was cold and icy and that a nearby island was lush and green. Because of this, the habitable green island of Iceland assumed its current name while Greenland, covered in glacial ice, received its perplexing name.



Regardless of the moniker, Greenland, the second largest island in the world is an ice-covered wilderness that remains largely unexplored. Dramatic vistas, beautiful fjords choked with towering icebergs, and frozen tundra that comes alive with autumn colors are some of the hallmarks of the magnificent desolation that is Greenland.

Divers visiting this mysterious land will find numerous unexplored rocky landscapes covered in kelp and marine invertebrates but it is the opportunity to dive alongside majestic icebergs that really gets the heart pounding.

Greenland is a big place without much infrastructure. Most expeditions take place on ice-strengthened vessels departing from Iceland. Indeed, our vessel, the M/V Plancius, left the town of Akureyri in the north of Iceland and journeyed across the Denmark Straight bound for ScorsbySund on the eastern coast of Greenland. Travelling across this lonely stretch of water gave us the feeling that we were truly leaving civilization and venturing to the vast stretches of wilderness in the Arctic.

Our first glimpses of Greenland confirmed all of our anticipations…towering snowcapped cliffs, dramatic ice-choked fjords and majestic icebergs all enveloped in an absolute silence so different from the cacophony of modern life!

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We couldn't wait to dive!

Our first plunges into the frigid waters of Greenland were in a place called Vikingebugt in the Danmark Fjord. Here, we came across scores of Brittle Stars creeping and crawling along the rocky bottom, along with carpets of colorful anemones draped over the boulders of the dropoff. The water was cold and clear, with negligible current. We dove to a maximum depth of 20 meters (60 feet) in recognition that the nearest decompression facility was a long way away back in Iceland.

Although we hoped to see Narwhales, Greenland Sharks, Seals and maybe even Whales while we explored the fjords of ScorsbySund, our disappointment at not having any encounters was tempered by the absolute joy we felt diving on Greenland's icebergs.

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For untold millennia, the glaciers of interior Greenland have inexorably pushed their way towards the sea and massive icebergs have routinely calved off into the water creating icebergs of every imaginable shape and size. With climate change bringing warmer temperatures these icebergs are forming at an even faster rate. Our objective was to explore the icebergs underwater.

We searched for a while in a place known as Jytte Havn until we found a reasonably safe looking 'berg to dive and before long we rolled off the zodiacs into the cold water. Instantly, we were transfixed. Below the water line is where most of the iceberg exists and the ice formations, smoothed by untold weeks or months in the sea, present an ever-changing palette of other-worldly landscapes. As we passed divers exploring the iceberg, we could literally see the smiles frozen on their faces!

One of the icebergs we explored created an incredible buzz with the entire dive team that lasted for days afterwards.

It was early afternoon and the sun was peeking in and out of high clouds as we searched amongst the multitude of icebergs in the Rypefjord area looking for a stable 'berg to explore. After some time, we came across a fairly nondescript iceberg, one that almost had a dirty appearance on the surface as it seemed to have been stained with mixed rocks and soil on the jagged ice of the iceberg. It seemed stable and before long we were splashing into the water alongside this "dirty iceberg".

The water was murky and it took a moment to focus our eyes as we searched for the underside of the iceberg. Slowly at first, and then more abruptly, the stunning image of this iceberg's underside came into view. We were instantly captivated.

This particular glacial remnant drifting in the waters of Rypefjord emerged from the murky water as a crystal palace under water. The ice was clear as glass everywhere we looked! The transparent ice gave us views into the inside of the 'berg itself. Trapped deep inside the crystalline glass were rocks, silt and dirt obviously caught in the glacier's traverse across the Greenland landscape. There were shelves of glassy ice with piles of rock and stones resting on them as if they were part of an elaborate table setting. And, as the ice slowly melted in the surrounding salt water, waterfalls of silt could be seen cascading down the interior walls of the glass palace iceberg.

In some places, shards of glassy ice jutted out from the main body of the iceberg, and it was both beautiful and spooky to see the wavy images of divers on the other sides of these glass walls.

We had never seen anything remotely like this and we were mesmerized by the infinitely beautiful shapes and textures of this arctic wonder. The divers who had made this dive could be heard regaling others with descriptions of this iceberg long into the night in the ship's lounge.

We chose to explore Greenland in September for several reasons. The weather at this time of year is relatively mild although snow and rain conditions are possible at any time in this region. With the autumn comes a flash of color on the shore as tundra vegetation turns orange, yellow and crimson red. The evenings are filled with the possibility of seeing the Aurora Borealis and the waters are not completely frozen over. After our dives, we would often make landfall and wander inland looking for Musk Ox, Arctic Hare and maybe even Polar Bear. Unsuccessful for the most part, we were satisfied with our underwater explorations!

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Greenland is melting. It is of significant importance because of climate change and the melting ice will affect the entire world at some point. For divers, Greenland represents a new frontier, one that has rarely been explored and one that is transforming rapidly each year. It is a land of superlatives and it is part of some of the very last true wilderness areas left on Earth. But the only way to truly get to know Greenland is to dive into her waters, walk amongst her tundra and contemplate her future while witnessing the dancing lights of the Aurora Borealis deep inside a frozen fjord. One must become intimate with Greenland to understand her for what she is…a majestic treasure that we all must strive to protect.

Factfile

Getting There: Expeditions to Greenland depart from Akureyri, Iceland. Flights should be arranged to/from Iceland's Keflavik International airport. Icelandair has regularly scheduled flights from London.

Diving and Accommodation: The M/V Plancius is a 293-foot ice-strengthened expedition vessel owned and operated by Oceanwide Expeditions. The Plancius has room for 116 passengers and Oceanwide runs several expeditions a year to Greenland, along with itineraries to Antarctica and Svalbard.

www.oceanwide-expeditions.com

This expedition to Iceland and Greenland was organized by DUI, who chartered space on the M/V Plancius for this trip. DUI runs a number of expedition style trips each year to remote destinations.

www.divedui.com/collections/trips-1

Diving in Iceland was arranged through Magma Divers, a full service PADI dive facility specializing in offering divers varied diving itineraries around all of Iceland.

http://magmadive.is

When to go: Trips to Greenland are typically conducted in the late summer months to take advantage of the mildest weather. Diving in Iceland takes place year-round, with the best weather in the summer months.

Prices: DUI's two-week expeditions to Iceland and Greenland are priced at $8999.00

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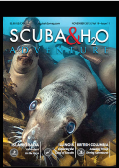

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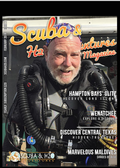

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