

# Meeting place: Nansen's Camp

## Site in Greenland by Heide Wilts

We fly around glacier covered mountains. It is like driving along breath-taking hair pin bends. ('can still hear them saying: "Narssarssuaq is known to have one of the most difficult runways in the world.')



- my stomach rises - a soft landing - an appreciative applause- Erich, Thilo and I breath a sigh of relief. Back in Greenland again at last, I think to myself: to breath clean clear air - to see far into the distance - to feel silence and loneliness and, of course, for wonderfully adventurous sailing. From the plane we could recognise "Freydis", our Viking woman, in the crystal clear green water of the Erik Fjord which ends here in Nassarssuaq on the "great plateau". The name of our yacht comes from a Viking saga. "Freydis" was the daughter of Erik the Red, the discoverer of Greenland, a hothead and ruffian, who was banned from the island on account of manslaughter. She is said to have been the first woman and leader of an expedition to cross the Atlantic from Greenland to - probably - Newfoundland. "Freydis" knows this stretch well, too. For the first time two years ago, we sailed on her from Newfoundland to Greenland and through the fjords in the south. As always on our numerous cruises on the high seas, the 15 metre hard chine steel sloop ( rigged with over 100 square metres of sail area) proved to be a good - natured and trustworthy "horse for the ride across the sea" in the Arctic latitudes of Greenland and Spitzbergen. But not this

time, the engine has been badly damaged by diesel fractionated by the cold. Without an engine in drifting ice off the coast of Greenland - a nightmare! Sleepless nights followed. In particular, we had to decide what we had best do. Should we give up our Greenland cruise and sail "Freydis" without an engine non-stop back to Germany? That would be bitterly disappointing, not only for our crew, but also for our four friends from Munich on their inland ice expedition - amongst them are Michael and Walter whom we wanted to meet after their descent at 'Nankeen's camp site' on an agreed date. These four alpinists, members of the "German Fridtjof Nansen expedition commemorating the centenary of the first crossing of Greenland's inland ice on skis in 1888", had already set out and therefore could no longer be contacted. We decided to first get an impression of the "disaster" ourselves. Our fellow crew members, Kurt, Gerda and David, who have already been on board for a few days, and who have used the time to fish in the fjord, hike in the mountains and visit the glacier, give us a warm welcome. Thilo and Erich get to work on the engine straight away. White clouds of diesel smoke come out of the exhaust. A murky liquid flows out of the service tank which once in a glass divides into three layers. Instead of cooking supper we heat up this horrible brew in a water bath. It takes a long time, but eventually the "soup" becomes clearer and clearer. Caribbean diesel is not made for Greenland temperatures. With a throttled engine and running on two or three cylinders, we potter through the Erik Fjord past gently rolling hills, olive green valleys, steep rock faces and past the entrance to the Quoroq Fjord with its large, forever calving, blue-green glacier. While our Freydis lies at the little pier in Narssaq ("Big Rock"), a pretty town of 2,500 inhabitants, Erich and Thilo have their heads buried in the engine. Gerda and I go exploring and make the acquaintance of Jan Jorgensen, a collector and cutter of minerals and amateur mineralogist. Jan shows us

with pride his cutting workshop and the sparkling treasures he found himself in Greenland: the bluish green *grinlandit* which is regarded as the oldest precious stone in the world and the cyclamen red *tugtupit* whose special characteristic is to become pale in the dark and turn red in the sunlight. He has also the more well-known stones, like lapis lazuli, moonstone and - much to our amazement - even rubies! During this time Kurt is making sure that the supply of fish on Freydis never runs out. He has been standing on the pier fishing since sunrise (approximately 6 o'clock). His maxim for Greenland: 'Get to know the people and the salmon.' We sail through the Brede Fjord and anchor in a quiet bay in the evening. It seems to be a kind of cemetery for icebergs, a panoptikum of curious figures made of ice. On entering the bay, we locate shoals offish on the echo sounder. Thilo lets Kurt teach him the secret of fishing, as here 'the door to the fishing grounds is wide open', he says enthusiastically. The bucket is full in no time. early in the morning comes the call 'Weigh anchor<sup>1</sup>'. Ahead of us a dense, dark grey wall of fog is developing which is soon going to swallow us up so that we can no longer see the mountains of Nunarssuit. Additionally the wind is blowing head on, so we have to tack! Despite the nerve-racking, tossing of the ship, Thilo and Erich are mainly in the engine room and only come up to get a breath of fresh air or "to make a sacrifice". Almost all the crew are more or less seasick. In the evening we decide that we would rather turn into the copper mine bay and anchor for the night than to continue to ride it out. The next morning sees bright blue skies. Gerda and I take the opportunity to sunbathe. While Erich and Thilo are back in the engine room, David, Gerda and I row ashore where numerous glacier streams run down the rock faces, creating inviting little pools on some of the plateaux. Although they are filled with ice cold water, we do not want to miss the chance of bathing in fresh water. And what is Kurt doing? He is fishing, of course.

Each cast, a cod. But paradise has its drawbacks. In view of the swarms of mosquitoes which descend on us, David complains, 'There are so many mosquitoes here that even the fish have bites on them.' In the late afternoon we return clean and content to the ship where Thilo and Erich greet us with long faces, black with diesel and oil. The engine has given up the ghost entirely. To sail without an engine along the icy and foggy Greenland coast to Godthaab, 300 sea miles away, means taking an incalculable risk. The safer route is back to Narssaq, but is at the same time a final "no" to our meeting with the inland ice explorers. Erich the skipper feels torn between the devil and the deep blue sea. After due consideration he decides to continue to Godtlaab In search of wind we guide Freydis out of the bay by means of the dinghy's 4 hp outboard motor firmly attached to the side. In the evening, colourful Arctic magic: delicate curtains of yellow and green aurora borealis drift over the dark blue of the night sky, as though they wanted to hide it. Offshore a breath of wind at last, but a head wind. Then a lull and thick fog. In the night a near miss with an iceberg. It is not until the next day when the veil of mist lifts that we see we are surrounded by big and small ice monsters. For two days we race northwards on stormy winds from astern. Fortunately, as it is the end of August, it still does not become really dark at night. The nightmare with the ice definitely decreases the further north we get due to the Labrador current, which veers west here, about level with Friedrichstal, taking the ice with it. As we approach the coast we are visited by a school of whales. Terns, storm petrels and gulls escort us through the entrance to Godthaab. Jan, our engine expert from Germany, who we have sent for to help us, has arrived and brought the necessary spare parts with him. I hardly set eyes on Erich, Thilo or Jan for the next two days. They are stuck in "Freydis's" engine room. At the airport and at the small tourist office I try to find out the latest news of our inland ice explorers. No success. "Immaka" ("Immaka" means "perhaps" and is one of the most commonly used words in Greenland.) we will receive a

message from them tomorrow. Gerda and I pay a visit to the national museum where mummies of over 500 years old, found near Godthaab on the island of Uummanaq, are on exhibition. The ornate and meticulously sewn garments and burial objects are amazingly well preserved, thanks to the perpetually frosty and dry climate in Greenland. They have been "freeze-dried", so to speak. On board, radiant faces and high spirits. The engine can be repaired! The innards of the engine are lying on the table in the cockpit. Supper will, therefore, be served on the fore-deck. For a change, there is cod in a sweet and sour peach sauce with rice on the menu today. Fish is always welcome - also partly because Kurt filets it so carefully that there is no question of "bone picking". Then on Sunday afternoon, the skipper and crew of Freydis are invited to be the guests of the mayor of Nuuk, Bjarne Kreutzmann. We bring greetings from the town of Cuxhaven, Nuuk's new twin town. The next day we learn at the airport that a pilot has been in contact with the inland ice group and that they are on their way down. That same evening we sail into the Ameralik Fjord (south of the Godthaab Fjord) in the direction of the inland ice, the white heart of Greenland. It will be a chilly night trip. Only the contours of the banks and mountain peaks are discernible in the gloom of dusk. At four o'clock in the morning, we anchor at the east tip of the fjord. Some Viking ruins are to be found on the shore. Slightly to the west is the site where a hundred years ago Nansen and his companion, Sverdrup, put up their tent to recover from their successful first crossing of the inland ice. Between 24 and 28 August we are there - as arranged - waiting for our four "Alpinos" who have crossed Greenland, taking the same route as Nansen did and under the same conditions. In the morning the sun is shining brightly. It is only then that we notice how muddy our anchorage is. Kurt fishes all the same, this time in murky water, but not a single fish bites. We are amazed at the variety of the birds that live here. Kurt tells us how he observed a raven, crowing loudly, fly round and round backwards several times. Being an ornithologist in his free time he is fascinated. David, on the other hand, has a very "simple and down to earth"

explanation for this unique phenomenon of bird's flight: 'Kurt has drunk too much Lumumba (cocoa and rum) again and is now beginning to see birds flying on their backs.' Just then a small helicopter flies over us. Erich dashes to the radio and talks to the pilot. News of the alpinists at last. They have already arrived safe and sound in Kapisigdlit, a small Inuit settlement in the middle of the Godthaab fjord. They have left a message for us in the Viking ruins. Hastily we cross over with the dinghy. Next to the Viking stone mounds, David and Thilo discover an ice pick and a pair of climbing irons - together with a message. In a plastic bottle there is a letter from Michael where he states that the members of the expedition arrived here on the 21st - that was yesterday. They had enough food for two to three days but did not want to risk waiting for us, in case we were late or not able to come at all. Apart from that they were in good form after 33 bivouacs and 32 touring days. They would wait for us in Kapisigdlit. So let us quickly "weigh anchor", return along the Ameragdla Fjord and into the Itivdleg Fjord, at the tip of which we drop anchor again. From there on, it is only twenty kilometres to Kapisigdlit on foot. We set off. We walk through magnificent scenery - mountains with ice capped peaks, glacier fed crystal clear lakes, dark green mossy countryside where blueberries and crowberries grow in abundance - all of which help to make up for my painful feet which are covered in blisters. The scrub of dwarf willows, alders and birch, fighting for space on the sunny banks of small mountain streams and waterfalls, is almost impenetrable. Herds of reindeer pass us, and now and again we are able to watch the majestic flight of the sea eagle against a cloudy windswept sky. The icebergs have a bluish green shimmer in the dark waters of the fjord. 'Long live Greenland. Long live the ice!' It is nearly dark when we reach Kapisigdlit. Right there on the slope where the settlement begins, we come across a house with brightly lit windows and with rucksacks in the inviting looking, open doorway. The house where the inland ice party are recovering after their venture, meeting other people for the first time and enjoying the luxuries of civilisation, belongs to a couple called Anni

and Daniel Lukassen, both teachers. And there they are, our "Alpinos", in good shape, sun-tanned and in good spirits. The joy we feel on embracing our friends, Michael and Walter, is deeply felt and real. We are about to put up our tent when Anni objects: 'We are only too glad to have guests here in this godforsaken place. Of course, you are going to stay with us, too.' Anni is Danish, but she was born in Greenland and has spent most of her life here. Her husband, Daniel, a typical Greenlander in appearance, has - we are amazed to hear - a German great-grandfather. He was one of the German Herrnhuter missionaries. On board "Freydis", the "Alpinos" enjoy their leisure time and pull with great enthusiasm their lunch out of the water. As one might expect, our "giants" catch "giant fish", one of them is a prime specimen of a cod weighing 14 kilos. The full moon plays hide and seek behind the mountain tops during a fantastic night trip back along the fjord to Godthaab (Nuuk). This year, for the first time, we get a taste of how changeable the weather can be in Greenland in August. An icy wind whistles past us. An area of depression is moving in from Newfoundland. Then on Sunday morning - it is time to say farewell to our alpinists. The course out to sea leads "Freydis" through an area of skerries. Layers of mist hang on the greenish grey mountain sides and low cloud shrouds the peaks. By the evening the sea is choppier. The strong swell, which has developed, is causing the ice giants to disintegrate. Increased vigilance is required. Nevertheless, every now and again there is a dull thud against the ship's side. In the night: a Force 5 to 6 head wind. We sail on the port tack away from the coast of Greenland in the hope that the wind will turn. The next day: a biting, cold, wet wind. Snow and hail showers provide some unwelcome changes in the monotony. Gusts of wind force us to take in and shake out reefs several times during the day. The sea is covered with white horses over which the storm petrels and terns are doing acrobatics in the air. "Freydis" is sailing close hauled of her own accord, and so we can sit protected in the deckhouse when we are not on watch. By midday the cloudy grey sky breaks up at last, and the rain eases up. The wind has also dropped distinctly and with it the swell.

Even those previously seasick report being really hungry. On the menu today there is chicken, "polarde with artichokes", appropriate for the high latitude we have reached. The following day is calm again. The sea is smooth and silvery like mercury; the storm petrels fly just above the surface, as if they are in love with their reflection. Luckily the engine is working perfectly as well as our electronic self-steering gear, which we have now installed ourselves. A great help as our compass is very difficult to read since our sunny Caribbean cruise. With all due respect, this time, we cannot agree with our amateur technician Thilo who thinks the compass is blind because it contains too much methylated spirits. Nearing the coast we are enveloped in mist once more. The cone-shaped mountain tops suddenly appear - unbelievably clearly, like a mirage - out of the patches of mist hovering over the surface of the water. Now and then we have to avoid ice giants again, which are stranded on the shore. Next destination: the hot springs in Ûnartoq.

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