

10 “Cool” Reasons to Cruise the Arctic

I was sure that chilling out on a two-week cruise would warm my heart and soul. There’s no question that playing around on boats is cool, but what if that boat was cruising in the Arctic? Greenland is not exactly a “hotspot,” even if it is the largest island in the world. In fact, only 57,000 people call this 85 percent ice-covered place home. As for Canadian neighbor Baffin Island, the fifth-largest island in the world is a treeless wonder of tundra, mountains, fjords, and fewer than 11,000 people.

“The trip is self-selective,” said Michael Nowack, who came to see as much of Greenland as possible. “Not everyone wants to see the barren Arctic.” His raison d’être was just the tip of the iceberg; there were at least 93 more – one for each passenger aboard Clipper Cruise Line’s ice-strengthened *Clipper Adventurer*.

A towering iceberg calved from Ilulissat Kangerlua

The High Life

By Susan Zimmerman • Photography by Randall Hyman

Wonder if the Arctic's high life is for you? Here are 10 passenger-tested reasons that will have you packing rain pants and waterproof knee-high boots:

1. Need a change of scenery? The Arctic is definitely different. Hanging out aboard a 330-foot ship, miles away from the classic Caribbean itinerary, we navigated ocean currents and icebergs, cruised past snowcapped mountains and glaciers, raced after whales and walruses, and stopped at will to traipse through the tundra and smell the wildflowers. The only thing missing was the palm trees.

2. Looking for friends in “high” places? Then head north. When our ship made port in the remote Baffin Island settlement of Clyde River, I knew I wasn’t in Kansas anymore – seal skins and antlers lay strewn next to almost every home. We were so off-the-beaten wake that we were the first cruise ship that had passed through in ages. Local Joeline Sanguya, one of the 800 Inuits who call this 70 degrees north, Arctic outpost home, gave us some pointers on dealing with wayward polar bears and minus 40-degree-temps. Now that’s a “high-placed” friend!



3. Tired of seeing pictures of icebergs? There’s nothing like the real deal. “I never saw an iceberg I didn’t love,” said passenger Mary Doyle as our Zodiac cruised past some “chips” off the old ice block from Ilulissat Kangerlua, the northern hemisphere’s most prolific tidewater glacier. A mug shot of a ’berg may be worth a thousand words, but drifting through a towering field of skyscraper-sized ones left me wordless. Closing the book and coming face-to-face with icebergs is a real eye-opener.

4. Bored with visiting polar bears at the zoo? See them on their own turf. Everyone wanted to see the Arctic’s polar bears, which we did more than once. But the best sighting by far was the bear we saw in a cove. “You don’t get better than this,” commented Crispin Day, a ship expedition member, as we floated in a Zodiac a mere 60 feet from the largest carnivore on earth. Any closer and we’d have been lunch. After sizing up this polar’s paw through my binocs, I realized being so close was quite the “feet” accompli.

5. Ever get a big toothy grin from a walrus in the ocean? It’s worth running to see! “I’m sorry to do this to you, but there are walruses on the starboard side,” Captain Philipp Dieckmann apologetically announced over the speaker to the hotel manager during lunch. He knew what was coming. Forks were dropped and a mad dash ensued out of the dining room, though there was one young passenger who worriedly asked, “When the walruses are gone, can I go back and finish my French fries?” Just remember: Wildlife waits for no one – French fries will keep.

6. Hankering to hang out with dogs? A howling good time awaits. The chorus of yaps and woofs that echoed through Ilulissat, Greenland’s third-largest town, reminded me that dogs rule; this canine contingent outnumbers humans 6,000 to 5,000. A word of caution to those prone to reach out and ruffle the fur: The adult dogs bite (and are kept chained), so it’s best to look and not touch. The freely roaming pups are there for the patting and will satisfy anyone’s doggie desires. It takes only one pup to warm a heart!

7. Turned off by the regular old nightlife? Let the northern lights turn you on. “If I see the northern lights, that will be the epitome of what I came for,” Doris Matyasovich told me early in the cruise. Her epitome came at 67 degrees north on a windy, 38 degree-Arctic night. All scientific mumbo jumbo aside, the shimmering, pulsing, swirling, towering sheets of light were simply out of this world. It was as if some giant invisible paintbrush had painted the sky green.

A glacier meets the sea at Baffin Island’s Dexterity Fjord.



8. Love amusement park rides, but don’t like the lines? There’s no waiting here. “This could be a ride at Disneyland,” laughed passenger Jan Christian, as waves crashed around the ship while crossing the Davis Strait between Greenland and Baffin Island. Moments later she asked a passenger next to her, “Is this chair bolted down? Then I’m holding on to you if you don’t mind.” Riding the Arctic’s wild waves is better than anything at an amusement park. Just one ticket supplies unlimited fun – satisfaction guaranteed!



Uummannaq, Greenland

9. Feel the need to go out on a limb? Go climb a forecastle. As the ship cut through the glasslike water of Baffin Island’s Dexterity Fjord, the urge to reenact Leonardo DiCaprio’s *Titanic* spread-eagle stunt on the bow railing overtook me. The captain had one request when I asked permission: “Just don’t spread your arms,” he said grinning. I kept my word and hands to my side as I stood at the forecastle. Though I fell just short of my “titanic” goal, I felt on top of the world. This “limb” is sure to satisfy the strongest of whims!

10. Last but not least, need help parallel parking? See how it’s done Arctic-style. “Do you think he sees it,” passenger Jim Cullinane quietly whispered to me as we both sat in the bridge, spellbound by an iceberg directly in our path. Seconds later our fears turned to thrills as the captain deftly parallel parked the ship next to a quarter-mile-long, 20-foot-tall iceberg. “Ice is very special when you put it in the middle of the ocean,” he said with a twinkle in his eye, having just given everyone the “chill” of their life. Seeing is believing!

The “cool” moments overflowed after two weeks of cruising the Arctic’s wide-open spaces – from iceberg hopping to racing across the ocean in Zodiacs looking for whales to getting up close and personal with polar bears. These “frozen” memories are now stuck in my mind like a tongue to an ice cube.

Whatever it was that drew me to these ice-covered lands, be it primeval instinct or just human nature, two names will forever send goose bumps of chilly delight through me – Greenland and Baffin Island.

“The Arctic seems so much more interesting than Antarctica; all they have is penguins,” laughed passenger Edward Wallace. So what are you waiting for? The Arctic’s high life awaits. ■

AND NOW FIVE REASONS TO CRUISE CLIPPER

1. *Clipper Adventurer* is an A-1 Ice-Class-, double-bottomed hull-ship, with sophisticated navigational and communications equipment.
2. It has a fleet of Zodiacs, onboard naturalists, and a 24-hour open bridge.
3. No sweet-talking is required to come aboard.
4. The small ship is equipped to the gills and can go where the big ships can’t – from maneuvering among ice floes to steering up close to deserted shores.
5. The ship’s trademark, freshly baked, Frangelico- and Tia Maria-laced chocolate Clipper Chipper cookies are served like clockwork at 4 p.m. daily. A word of caution: Eating too many can be dangerous – like icebergs, you see only 10 percent; the other 90 percent is beneath the surface.

– S.Z.

