

A sucker for ice sheets

Finnish photographer **Tiina Itkonen** can't get enough of northern Greenland or the Polar Eskimos she's photographed for 15 years



Uummannaq III
2007

My interest in Greenland was sparked by the legend of *The Mother of the Sea*. The Mother of the Sea punishes the Greenlanders' evil deeds by gathering all the animals they hunt in her hair at the bottom of the sea. I first went there in 1995. I was still studying photography at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki and decided to spend six weeks in Greenland taking photographs for my final exam project.

From Nuuk, the capital, I traveled to small villages in the far north of Greenland. It's not easy traveling in a country where there are no roads between cities. I traveled to Qaanaaq by plane and helicopter, and was given a lift to Siorapaluk by a Norwegian sailboat. Siorapaluk is the world's northernmost vil-

lage. The villagers told me I could stay at the hunter Pilutaq's house while he was away on a trip. I was afraid he would come back and find a stranger in his house. Luckily he never turned up. An oil tanker took me to the next village, Qeqertat, where a storekeeper's family offered me a bed on arrival. Little by little, I learned some Greenlandic words and got acquainted with the locals.

I expected to find a stress-free way of life, and I wasn't disappointed. Everything happens *immaqa agaqu* – "maybe tomorrow." And the next day they say *immaqa agaqu* again. People live according to the climate and the seasons. From time to time, harsh weather prevents traveling between towns, as well as fishing and hunting. To wait a day, or even a week, makes no difference. Nobody is in a hurry. There's always time to get things done.

Altogether I have made eight trips to Greenland, each lasting about six weeks. My most memorable trip was in 2002, when I visited the Polar Eskimo villages of northwest Greenland for the third time. I was showered with invitations to birthdays and hunting trips. I have wonderful memories of living and working in Savissivik – hunting by dogsled for seal, whale, reindeer, musk ox, birds and fish, catching auk seabirds on mountain slopes, playing soccer on sea ice. My favorite place is Uummannaq, which means "town by a heartshaped mountain." My hosts, Ann Andreassen and Ole Jorgen Hammeken, run the world's northernmost children's home and take

good care of me. I'll never forget the time we took the children to meet Santa Claus – we needed 27 dogsleds. We had a picnic on the sea ice while they played.

The local cuisine is delicious, with plenty of fresh fish, prawns, seal, reindeer and lamb. My favorite Greenlandic delicacy is *mattak*, or raw whale skin, a healthy treat with lots of vitamin C. The strangest thing I've eaten is *kiviak*, or fermented auk meat, a Polar Eskimo dish eaten in Qaanaaq. The birds are squeezed, feathers and all, into a bag made from sealskin and buried in a box underground. The delicacy is then dug up on festive occasions, when the rotten birds are easy to pluck and eat just as they are. *Kiviak* smells and tastes like old cheese. It tastes better than it smells.

There's so much beauty in Greenland. Judging distances is almost impossible, with no trees or tall buildings to block your view. An island that looks to be 2km away is actually 10 times as far. Most beautiful of all is the Ilulissat Icefjord, a Unesco World Heritage site. Some of the icebergs look like pyramids, while others resemble whales' tails. They can drift up to 4,000km before finally melting.

Tiina Itkonen, 41, lives in Helsinki. Her work has been shown at the New York Photo Festival, the Michael Hoppen Gallery in London, and the Shiseido Gallery in Tokyo. Her first book, *Inughuit (Libris, 2004)*, was a portrait of the lives and landscapes of Polar Eskimos. Her second book will be published by Hatje Cantz later this year. www.tiinaitkonen.com

5 FAVORITES

Restaurant Ulo in Ilulissat for fresh fish and tasty meat. *Hotel Arctic*. Tel: +299 94 41 53. www.ulo.gl

Hotel The *Hotel Arctic* has spectacular views of the Ilulissat Icefjord. *Hotel Arctic, Ilulissat*. Tel: +299 94 41 53. www.hotel-arctic.gl

Store Ultima Thule in Qaanaaq. It's full of beautiful handicrafts and carvings made by locals. Tel: +299 97 14 73. www.turistqaanaaq.gl

City Uummannaq is full of unforgettable sights; the colorful wooden houses on the mountainside, dogsleds whisking off in flurries of snow, mountain peaks obscured by veils of cloud, fishing boats resting on the frozen sea.

A view I never forget The *Ilulissat Icefjord*, the icebergs drifting by like something out of a dream on their fateful journey.