
Ski Mountaineering in Greenland

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Scenes from the Arctic: A Greenland Journey

1991 British East Greenland Expedition

(Plate 59–62)

The tiny boat slowly chugged its way through the ice floes and disappeared out of sight beyond the snout of the huge glacier pushing straight out into the sea. Somewhere up on the ice, 1000ft above the shore, were our tents, skis and pulks, left for us by our friends now departing on the boat. Twenty miles further inland was our main food and fuel dump, dropped off by helicopter a month earlier. The departure of the boat brought home to us the reality of our situation – isolated in an Arctic wilderness for the next four weeks.

Twenty-four hours earlier we had flown from Reykjavik to the airstrip at Kulusuk, a small island off the east coast of Greenland and just south of the Arctic Circle. Then, in a rainstorm, we had scrambled into the boat for the long evening sailing, through ice-clogged fjords, to Sermiligaq fjord where, in the gloomy dawn light, we stumbled up the moraines to locate the tents and to sleep for a while after our 30-hour journey. The morning brought brighter light and a trip down to the sea and up again to relay the rest of the gear to our first camp, leaving a cache of fuel and foodstuffs for our eventual return. While sorting the equipment and dividing it into four pulk-loads, we were visited by a scavenging Arctic fox, hunger overcoming its natural wariness.

The next day, refreshed by a good sleep, we loaded and harnessed-up to start the glacier trek to Slangen, a gateway pass to the mountains of Schweizerland. As the snow-line was low we could soon step into our skis and haul the pulks more easily, while trying to grasp the scale of the glacier – wider than any in my experience of the European Alps. We worked up through a gentle icefall and gradually rounded a big bend on to the undulating upper glacier stretching for miles in front of us.

After six or seven hours of steady pulling, we stopped to camp and eat, retreating to our sleeping-bags as the temperature fell below freezing point. Another, shorter, day of pulling landed us at Slangen – a broad, level pass with spectacular, enticing vistas of peaks to the north and flanked by interesting mountains on either side. Good weather had now returned and, having pitched the tents, we spread our damp gear to dry quickly in the warm sunshine. As our main food dump was here, we decided to stay a day or two to sort out our supplies and plans, and to climb one of the neighbouring peaks. The food-pile looked huge when we unpacked the boxes but, as on all expeditions, what you've forgotten you can't have; we sorted it into loads for

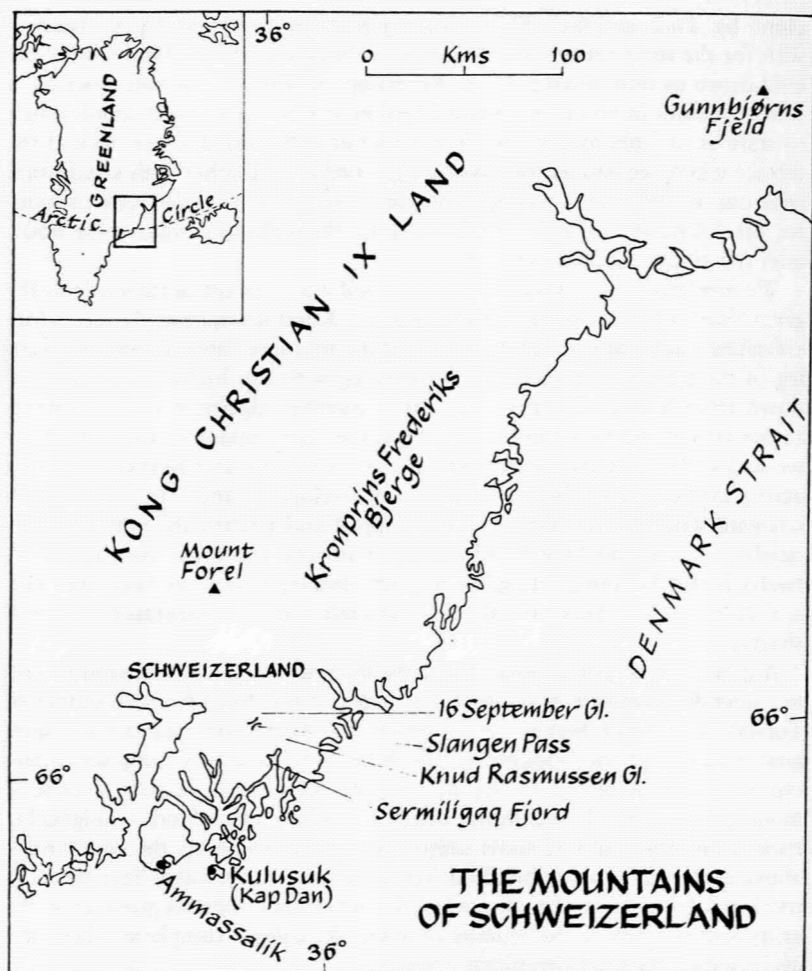


59. *Above East Greenland: Slangen Pass*

60. *Below P 1720. The ascent followed the mixed snow and rock ridge falling directly from the summit, centrally towards the camera.*

(Photos: Jim Gregson) (p136)





outward and return phases of the trip. Obviously our pulk-loads were going to be considerably increased in size and weight for our next move. Slangen, at 1200m, was colder in the shade than the fjords had been, but in the calm of a sunny afternoon it was a pleasant place to sit.

Above our tents rose a fine rock-peak the walls of which were marked by an enormous intrusion or dyke writhing through the cliff like a great fire-breathing dragon. We all felt drawn to this peak and eagerly packed climbing gear for an attempt via a ridge falling to the glacier a couple of miles down from the camp. The ridge gave a mixture of snow and rock climbing on a fine crest, leading us to the summit not long after midnight. Northwards lay hundreds of jagged peaks silhouetted against a purple and pink sky. This deep twilight was as dark as we experienced throughout the expedition – the sun dipped behind the mountains but there was always enough light to travel and

climb by. Photographic ambition on my part led to powerful persuasion to wait for the sun to reappear – but after an hour and a half of immobility the cold drove us into moving down. Reversing our ridge in the soft dawn light was a pleasant interlude of moving together as roped pairs, with ample pause to stare at and photograph the fine mountains all around. Once back at the terrace where we had left our skis, we grinned at each other with satisfaction over our ascent; then we skied contentedly up the firm glacier back to camp for breakfast, after which we fell asleep on the pulks and woke some hours later roasting in the heat of the sun.

We now planned to take two weeks' food and haul off northwards to the great cirque of peaks adjacent to the gigantic Knud Rasmussen glacier, before travelling back out through Slangen picking up more summits on the return leg of the journey. Leaving late one evening with our bulky loads we skied down from Slangen to cross the 16th September glacier, running in wide-radius curves and trying not to ski across the ropes linking us together. After we had been going two or three hours, we realised that a mist-bank rolling across the surface of the ice would soon envelope us and leave us trying to navigate without landmarks; so we stopped and pitched the tents – fortunately, as by midnight it had begun to rain, and continued for more than twelve hours. Sleeping, eating, reading and sleeping passed the next afternoon and evening, by which time the skies cleared and the temperature dropped sharply.

A 4.30am start got us away and onto the miles of glacier between us and our intended campsite at the toe of a ridge coming down from an outlier of Tupilak, the area's highest peak, which is a huge twin-topped rock spire guarded by dangerous-looking icefalls. By 9 we had our new camp set up and our wet gear hung out to dry in the sun. All around us were a host of mountains, nearly all unclimbed, offering climbing of all kinds – ridges, big rock walls, icy couloirs, snow arêtes. After scrambling up the rocky ridge above the tents for a few hundred feet to survey some possible lines for us to try, I was distracted and engrossed by the profusion of flowers growing on the gritty ledges – wonderful clumps of jewel-like colour, completing their life-cycles within the brief Greenland summer.

The next evening, after a meal, we slept till 10.30pm and then got up to ski across the glacier ice for an hour towards a fine peak facing our camp. Up a glacier bay, then a gully, before traversing left on ledges to a steep snow arête, we moved continuously together to cross a nice corniced crest just as the sun flooded its flank with golden dawn light. A short rock scramble led to the top, where the view opened out to the north and east across row upon row of pinnacled ridges and massive glaciers and, far beyond, the iceberg-studded seas of the Denmark Strait separating East Greenland from Iceland. To the north-west, the sky was a rich yellow and behind us the mountains glowed in the warm sunrise. We lingered in the calm air, shooting off copious amounts of film, drinking in the expansive panorama and sizing up some of the other neighbouring tops. Eventually we descended without incident and skied happily back to the tents.



61. *Above* Looking across 16 September glacier from P 1720

62. *Below* Ulimaut in Sermiligaaq fjord

(Photos: Jim Gregson) (p136)



The next day we travelled up the 16th September glacier for a few miles to climb through some icefalls to reach the summit of the mountain directly above our camp. This gave interesting route-finding and finished with a rock buttress giving on to a spacious top. From here we could study Tupilak and Rødbjerg, both very fine peaks for strong parties. Fifty miles away lay the bulk of Mount Forel, long thought to be the second highest point in Greenland, and beyond, to the west, the plateau edges of the inland ice, the main ice cap extending across the island for hundreds of miles and up to 10,000ft in thickness.

A few miles to the north lay another peak which attracted us – we studied a possible way of gaining its gleaming snow arêtes by a glacial bay and a steep ice tongue. Part of the latter was hidden by a minor rock buttress, but we felt it was worth having a look at as our next objective. Once through the icefalls we had a wonderful run down firm slopes, refrozen after the sun had left them, onto and down the glacier. After a day and a half of resting, washing, repairing stoves and diary-writing, we decided to make an attempt on the red-rock-walled mountain with the long snow arêtes.

Starting off late in the evening, we went on skis for a couple of hours of uncomfortable travel over ridged and furrowed, hard gritty ice, climbing into the glacier bay that we thought would provide an access-route to the ridge. As the slopes steepened we switched to crampons and moved up to gain a view of the ice tongue we expected to climb, which we had only partially seen from some miles away. When we could see the full extent of the ice slope, even in the midnight twilight, we could grasp what our distant view had not revealed. Instead of the straightforward slope we had hoped for, we were faced with a convoluted, serac-broken sweep of ice hemmed in by rocky spurs. We tried to spy out a possible line, all of us voicing some misgivings, more about the problems of later descent than of going up it. As we deliberated in the half-light, trying to postpone our disappointment at the prospect of giving up, there was a great roar and crashing of blocks as a large serac barrier collapsed and broke loose down our line. That decided it for us; we about-turned and crunched off downwards to retrieve our skis. There were plenty of other mountains.

We decided to make our way back towards Slangen, doing some more climbing as we moved out towards our eventual fjord-head exit point; so we set about dismantling our camp, leaving only footprints and ski-tracks. As we recrossed the wide span of the 16th September glacier, we were overtaken by a creeping fog-bank which disorientated us for a while. When it cleared away after an hour or two, we looked back on our erratically zigzagging trail detouring through ill-seen crevasse zones. Back at Slangen we made two further fine ascents. The first one gave us the steepest ice pitches we had encountered to gain a footing on a corniced ridge leading to a summit pinnacle of rusty-brown but loose rock, with room for only one person at a time. The other peak was climbed via a deeply crevassed icefall and a succession of thin, curling snow ridges high above the glaciers, with a finish on a sharp rock turret. All around lay a vast reservoir of untrodden summits.

Having picked up most of our remaining supplies from our Slangen dump, we eventually set off to descend in the direction of our shore-line rendezvous, hoping to climb another mountain on the way. Benefiting from snow surfaces and increased fitness, we amazed ourselves by skiing rapidly down two-thirds of our glacier descent in a few hours one evening. However, progress was stalled when the weather rapidly changed without warning and we were pinned down in camp by a 24-hour snowstorm with high winds and zero visibility. After a second night we concluded that we had to move on come-what-may, as we needed time in hand to relay loads and get all our gear down to sea-level. The morning was brighter, with breaks in the cloud, so we dug out and packed to go. The next few hours pulling were hard work through the soft new snow, until we had lost enough height to get onto bare glacier ice. Soon after this we could no longer profitably use skis, so we changed to crampons to gain traction over the rough, stony lower reaches of the glacier. Considerable melting had occurred in the weeks since our arrival and the snow cover was much depleted. This led to some manhandling of the heavy pulks to cross belts of moraine on the ice surface. Eventually, a couple of miles from the sea, we had to stop and face up to backpacking everything to the waterside.

Drizzle fell as we stuffed our rucksacks, then strapped more awkward items on the outside. The loads grew to a point where we had to help each other to pick them up. Staggering and bent over, we struggled along the glacier edge and onto the steeply-falling lateral moraine to slip and slide our way down the 2000 feet to the shore – hard, hot, uncomfortable work – until we sank with relief amidst the boulders by the glacier snout. Our first idea was to get the tents up, sleep, and go back up next day for the heavier stuff like ropes, hardware, and the pulks themselves. But after some discussion it was agreed that we would rest briefly and then reascend to collect everything in one more trip. Once it was all down we could relax. Grim-faced, we toiled up the loose slopes once more, realising how tired we were but committed to the labour. The second loads were immense, compounded by the pulks, nearly six feet long, lashed turtle-shell fashion to our sacks. Four very weary climbers tottered down the shifting moraine rubble to camp a few feet above the high tide level, thankful that the worst physical hardship of the expedition was now behind us.

The following day we sorted and packed almost everything into loads for freighting home. The fjord-head was filled with much more floating ice than had been there when we landed, and we paused to consider how our pick-up boat, due the next day, would cope. While waiting for the boat to show up, we could rest and enjoy our surroundings. Three huge glaciers ran down through the mountain into Sermiligaq fjord, making it a beautiful and impressive place. Icebergs calved from the glacier-fronts at all hours of day and night, sometimes in spectacular fashion only yards from our tents; distant booms from across the sea were succeeded many minutes later by surging waves tossing the floating ice hither and thither. We walked along the water's edge and up the adjacent hillsides, absorbed by the colours and shapes of the ice in

the sea, the textures of the rocks, and the variety of the flowers still in bloom late in August.

The boat did not arrive on the day we had fixed but the fascinating environs made our extra stay a pleasure. Then the sudden appearance of the red-and-white vessel nudging its way through the ice floes caught us unaware, causing us to scurry around to strike the tents and bundle away the last odds and ends. The *Ulimaut*, a sturdy, converted 36ft fishing-boat, could only get to 30 yards or so from the shore so we and our equipment were ferried aboard by dinghy; the Greenlandic, Inuit people crewing the boat were very welcoming, and soon we were under way bound for Kap Dan, 70 miles distant.

The journey out through the fjords was an eight-hour cruise of delight. The sun shone from a clear blue sky as we sailed past the high icecliffs of the glacier snouts and amongst icebergs huge and small, through narrow channels with mountainsides sweeping straight up out of the water. A moving kaleidoscope of visual experiences lasting all day brought us back to Kulusuk, with a day in hand to visit the Inuit people at Kap Dan village, before flying out to Iceland and home to Britain – with lingering, longing memories of a marvellous expedition to a pristine Arctic wilderness.

Summary: 1991 British East Greenland Expedition to the Schweizerland district, north of Ammassalik, 27 July – 27 August, via Sermiligaq fjord. Participants: Jim Gregson, Simon Molyneux, Brian Povey, Paul H Walker.

Ascents:

Peak 1 (the 'Dragon Peak'), west of Slangen Pass, 66°14'N, 36°40'W, c1800m

Peak 2 P1720m, 66°17'N, 36°27'W

Peak 3 66°18'N, 36°27'W, c1700m

Peak 4 (Slangen East Peak), 66°13'N, 36°35'W, c1900m

Peak 5 66°12'N, 36°40'W, c1700m

Also attempted P2070m, 66°20'N, 36°22'W