

WORDS & PICTURES PETE ADAMS

# GREENLAND

Pete Adams is well versed in the demands facing the professional travel photographer trekking the globe in search of new inspiration. As he reveals, the extreme cold and isolation provided some of his toughest challenges yet in his quest for stunning images

“IT’S NEITHER EASY NOR INEXPENSIVE to visit Greenland, but as the helicopter swept over the frozen fjord to reveal the picturesque village of Tasiilaq, I sensed it was going to be worth every penny and all the hassle.

“I’d left London a couple of days earlier for Reykjavik, in Iceland, where I spent one night in a hotel before flying on to Kulusuk in Greenland. From there I had a short, but spectacular, helicopter ride to Tasiilaq – my base for the next 11 nights. The flight was delayed due to bad weather, but this was not uncommon in the spring. My head was filled with Arctic dreams; dog sledding, ice-fishing and the famed Northern Lights. It was March and the landscape was dutifully covered in a luminous blanket of snow and the air had the nip of a fine Scottish malt.

“I’d travelled to Disko Bay, on the west coast of Greenland, more than ten years before to witness the spectacle of icebergs calving

from the glacier into the bay. This time, I wanted to try the less-populated and more basic east coast.

“The first few days were clear and sunny, so I immediately started shooting. My wanderings were accompanied with some paranoia though as, despite it being a rare event, an overly-curious polar bear had been spotted on the edge of the village.

“Before I ventured out into the wilderness, I tasked myself with capturing the village’s colourful wooden buildings. From experience, I’ve learnt to shoot as much as possible when early impressions are vivid and fresh, especially when the weather is co-operating. After a couple of days, the sights of fish drying, icicles hanging from roofs and chained husky dogs can become commonplace and their photographic merit is easy to neglect, but these are just the sort of things that have a visual impact on visitors and help create a sense of place.





"I spotted some small figures in a circle out in the middle of the fjord, so I decided to investigate. At first, walking on the frozen sea was unnerving. I knew the ice was thick and safe, but I couldn't banish thoughts of it breaking. Out on the ice I could see interesting patterns and leading lines from a dusting of snow, which gave me strong foreground interest for photographs. As the small Lowry-type figures came closer, they revealed themselves to be ice fishermen, and successful ones at that. Each man sported a profitable catch. I took detailed pictures of the fish laid out on the ice and then stepped back to frame the fishermen against the mountains.

"The clear weather meant that I wasn't going to get much rest – conditions were perfect for the Aurora Borealis, more commonly known as the Northern Lights. I'd planned my visit to coincide with a full moon, and though this might mean the lights would appear somewhat muted to the naked eye, it ensured that any foreground interest was illuminated by the moon, with the effect heightened by the reflective snow. As soon as it was dark outside, I put on every layer of clothing I had and ventured out for what would be a long and cold wait.

"It wasn't too long before I saw the tell-tale arc of light grey appear in the sky, as though a large spotlight had been placed to backlight the mountain range. A local told me the lights usually appear from this direction, so I allowed myself to feel optimistic. Sure enough, about half an hour later, the shimmering green curtain of light moved across the sky. Though excited and feeling a deep sense of awe, I composed myself and focused on one of the wooden cabins, framed against this incredible 'moving' sky. Setting the camera to the Bulb setting at ISO 200, to keep digital 'noise' to a minimum during these long exposures, I opened the shutter for 60 second periods at f/5.6, quickly changing composition as the



**OPENING SPREAD:** "Aurora Borealis and the view over Tasiilaq. I took this 60 second exposure at about 2am, with the only sound coming from the Huskies baying and barking."

**RIGHT:** "Tasiilaq again, with the Aurora Borealis in view. I wanted to capture the lights shining from the house with the Northern Lights in the background."



"I composed myself and focused on one of the wooden cabins, framed against the incredible 'moving' sky"



**TOP:** "This early morning view over Tasiilaq is a five shot panoramic. I didn't use a polariser, as they can cause the sky to appear uneven when stitching."

**LEFT:** "I found the bone sunglasses and seal skin jacket where I was staying, and asked this local Inuit hunter to model them for me."

**RIGHT:** "Fishing in Tasiilaq. A focal length of 180mm compressed the scene to provide a sense of scale."





**ABOVE:** "This panoramic was made up of four vertical shots. It was taken in Tiniteqilaq with a 24-70mm lens, just as the sun was dipping behind the horizon."

**FAR LEFT:** "To capture the huskies as they pulled the sledge up a steep slope, I had to run ahead and lie down in the snow for a low viewpoint."

**LEFT:** "A seal hunter out on the sea ice. I thought that the orange helmet gave the image a nice touch of colour."

**RIGHT:** "The huskies in Tiniteqilaq spend the majority of their time attached to long chains like this, but they are very friendly and curious animals."

**"In thick gloves, fumbling around with camera controls is like being a teenage boy, groping around to undo a bra strap"**

lights moved across the sky. The light display didn't last long, but I continued to shoot even after the vivid green colours disappeared and a fainter grey re-appeared.

"Digital SLRs are more sensitive to solar storms than the eye, so if you're not sure whether the light grey is a sign of a formative Aurora, take a test shot. You may find some of the telling green pattern, allowing you to plan your shot, or even capture something there and then.

"The next day, I boarded a dog sled for the four-hour journey to a small village north of Tasiilaq. The Huskies were straining at the leash, eager to get going. Thankfully, the sledge was moving up wind, as although I was amazed at the dogs' ability to relieve themselves while running – I was sitting at the front of the sledge!

"Towards the end, I started to feel the chill and found myself day-dreaming of a hot drink and a warm fire. My mind was quickly diverted though as we began a steep descent and turned a corner to be fronted with a magnificent sight. There, in the distance, were 30 or so wooden houses creating speckles of yellow, blue, red and green in a sea of white. The scene, which was set beside a frozen fjord, was capped off with small icebergs anchored off the shore, and the horizon was rimmed with snow-glazed mountains.

"I stayed with an Inuit hunter and his family and early the next morning, he took me along with him on his daily search for seals. We took out a small boat and scanned the horizon for the telltale bobbing of a black head. We landed on a small island and I took some pictures of the hunter, framed against the dramatic backdrop, as he scanned the water with his binoculars.

"Later that afternoon, I took some shots of the wooden cabins against patterns created by the sea ice. Over the four-day stay, I noticed how quickly the ice shifts and buckles, constantly changing shape.

"I climbed up high and used a long lens to track a few seal hunters as they crossed the ice back to the village. From this distance, the men looked like small ants crawling across a large iced cake. As the sun dropped and lost some of its strength, the flare became less obtrusive and I shot straight into it, focusing on the patterns created by the small sheets of ice. The ice was glistening against the ink-black water and the vast sweep of the bay demanded a panoramic shot. With the versatility of stitched panoramics, my only real constraint was how much of the view and how many frames I should shoot. Having reached what felt like the edge of the world, I shot as many as I could, deciding to edit later. I levelled my Manfrotto tripod and swept the camera around, allowing for a generous overlap of frames, concentrating on the 'joins', as one snowy mountain looks much like the next.

"It was colder than an Alaskan well-digger's backside down there by the water, especially as a cold wind had picked up, and I began to wish that I'd invested in that expensive down jacket before leaving. I was literally layered up to the eyeballs, stylishly sporting a balaclava plus a hat. However the perennial problem for the cold weather photographer is the hands. In thick gloves, fumbling around with camera controls is like being a teenaged boy, groping around to undo a bra strap. I've often torn gloves off in frustration, only to see something ▶

**Pete's kit**

Pete's outfit included two Canon EOS-1Ds MkIII bodies with 24-70mm, 70-200mm and 17-40mm f/4 lenses. He also took a Manfrotto 190 Pro tripod with an Arca Swiss ball-head and RRS camera plates. He didn't take a flashgun with him, as the bright conditions and reflective snow made it unnecessary.





"Another shot from Tiniteqilaq, taken with my 24-70mm lens. I was intrigued by the clear water and the ice shelf below, so I got down low and used the house to add scale and context."



"While I was shooting, the dogs changed tack and I only avoided falling off thanks to the quick reaction of the driver, who grabbed my shoulder."

like a polar bear wander out of frame, helpless as my digits refuse to operate. This time my best clothing purchase was a pair of thin, silk-like inner gloves. These allowed me to whip off my main gloves when necessary, and fine-tune the camera controls without welding my fingers to the metal camera body. However, these thin gloves are not strong, and small moth-like holes soon appeared. I also invested in some disposable warm packs. They're just small envelopes that you shake and place in your pocket. Then, as if by magic, you have your own pocket heater that lasts for several hours; so between shots, I'd quickly thrust my hand into my trouser pocket and squeeze tightly, thankful that there was no one around to see this bizarre spectacle!

"On the dog sled journey back to Tasiilaq, I tried to capture as much of the trip as I could, using a high shutter speed to negate the speed and the bouncing of the sledge. Achieving shutter speeds of 1/250 and 1/500sec isn't a problem in the bright light. This wasn't the sort of weather to be hanging around in though, and my driver was anxious to get back, so most of the shots



**ABOVE:** "The huskies were pulling our sledge downhill very quickly indeed. It's a bumpy ride too, so trying to hold a camera meant that there was a real risk of falling off. A fast shutter speed of 1/250sec was necessary here to keep everything sharp."

**TOP RIGHT:** "A view from the sea ice, looking back at Tasiilaq as the sun sets."

**MIDDLE RIGHT:** "One of my shots from the snow storm in Tasiilaq. It was incredibly cold and windy."

**BOTTOM RIGHT:** "These huskies are hardy creatures. They have to be, as they spend all of their time outside in the freezing cold sub-zero temperatures."

were taken from the sledge, almost from a dog's eye view – or a dog's behind, from where I sat. Heading over the mountain pass and shooting into the sun, I was getting some dramatic shots. But at one point, while I was shooting, the dogs suddenly changed tack and I only avoided falling off thanks to the quick reaction of the driver, who grabbed my shoulder. These are seriously strong animals and there are not many ascents they can't handle, even with two of us in tow, but they did struggle a couple of times, which enabled me to get off and run ahead. Lying in the snow, I captured a few frames as they headed towards me.

"Back in Tasiilaq, I was happy to see I was no longer alone, as a group of Germans had arrived at the hotel. Though this might have meant that they were the first to reserve the snow shoes in the morning, it did mean we now had a cook, and that night I relished a delicious four-course dinner. The main course was whale steak, but apparently it was the product of a mercy kill.

"Over a post-dinner coffee, I reflected on the number of unusual experiences on this trip. It seems, however, that I was premature in my reflections. That night, a huge snow storm descended and my return flight was cancelled. Still, I turned the situation to my advantage and used my camera to capture the dramatic weather, taking shots of houses completely engulfed in snow and ice patterns on the buildings. I was almost disappointed when I finally got the call to check-in for the helicopter, and as I shot the sea ice from above, I braced myself for the jolt of the real world. ■