

Nuuk, Greenland

Greenland's coastal capital is a small city with big plans. Head north (and north again) to a fast-growing town where the weather sets the pace, but the people set the mood...

Words **Sean Connolly**





The problem with founding fathers (clockwise from top) The statue of the Lutheran missionary Hans Egede, who founded Nuuk in 1721, is a difficult reminder of the country's links to its colonial past (and present); despite being the capital of Greenland, Nuuk's largely Indigenous population is still less than 20,000; this is a city that lives and breathes the sea

Winter bathers strip down and fling themselves into Nuuk's icy fjord every Sunday morning, sandwiched between statues of a bronze Hans Egede (the Dano-Norwegian Lutheran missionary who founded the city) and a granite effigy to the Mother of the Sea. These duelling monuments represent the two very different world views that met on this seashore 300 years ago and have largely defined Greenlandic life ever since.

Hans Egede, looking down from atop a hill in his starched clerical ruff, would likely rather see these brave swimmers (the water is rarely above 5°C) in the red weatherboard cathedral just up the road. He arrived in Greenland in 1721 to restore contact with a lost colony of early Norse settlers, but finding none here, he stayed on to convert the Inuit locals to Lutheranism.

The Mother of the Sea, (or Sassuma Arnaa in Kalaallisut, Greenland's indigenous tongue) by contrast sits directly in the surf, her flowing hair and bare breasts lapped by the tides and surrounded by a carved menagerie that includes a walrus, a seal, an eel, a polar bear and a nude shaman studiously combing her hair.



She represents an old local tale, in which the sea mother holds back the animals because of the people's careless attitudes on the land. The shaman combs her hair to make amends, then returns to land with a warning: hunt sustainably and safeguard the environment or she will keep the earth's bounty for herself, protecting it in her underwater home and letting the humans starve.

This tug-of-war between local tradition and imported lifestyles continues to this day in Greenland. It is perhaps best exemplified by the island's political status as an autonomous country within the Kingdom of Denmark – Danish, but decisively at a distance. And though the Danes don't much care about saving souls these days, their influence on the island remains a hot topic – old Hans Egede got a bucket of red paint on his head in 2020 and the word 'decolonise' scrawled at his feet.

And so, Nuuk is very much a city between

two worlds: Indigenous (90% of Greenland's population is Inuit) but Nordic; traditional but modern; remote but cosmopolitan; independent but attached. Walking around the city, this dichotomy can sometimes feel a little too on the nose as you look up to see reindeer antlers mounted to glass-and-steel apartments that ►

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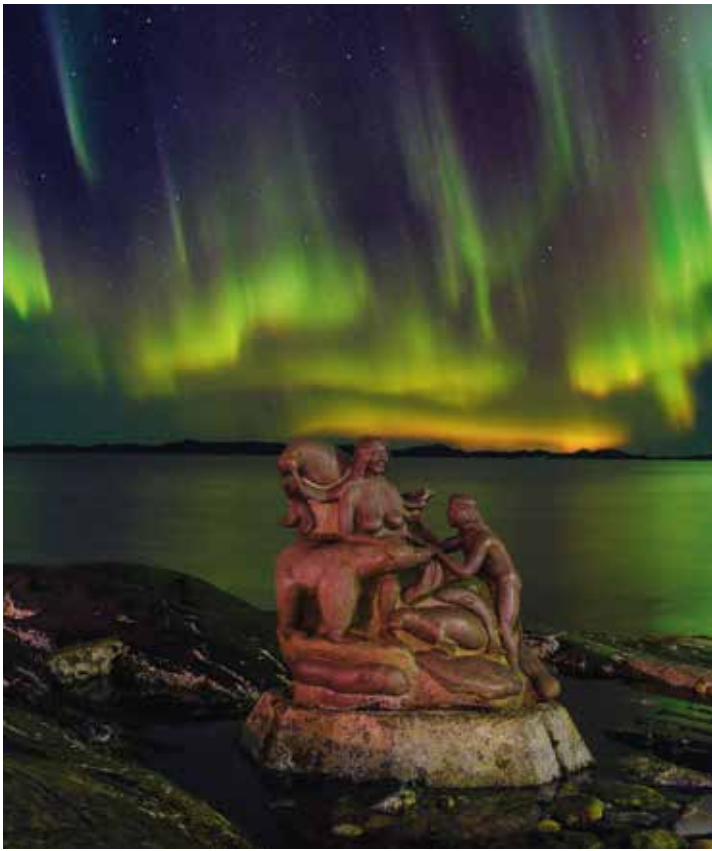
Currency: The Danish krone (DKK), currently DKK8.37 to the UK£. Contactless payment is everywhere here (except on the bus!). Alternatively, there are ATMs in the city centre.

Getting there: All flights to Greenland start in Copenhagen or Reykjavik; most arrive via Kangerlussuaq as Nuuk airport is (until it's expanded in 2024) too small. The terminal is 6km from the centre – buses don't correspond to flights, so a taxi is £17.50 (nuuktaxi.gl).

Getting around: Thanks to its tortured topography, greater Nuuk can be tricky to navigate, but the centre and Old Nuuk are easily walkable. There are three bus routes (£2.50/ride; bus.gl).

Festivals: The summer solstice is also Greenland's National Day, when boats leave Nuuk's Colonial Harbour for a competitive seal hunt – and return for the skinning! Expect music, speeches and traditional dress. Otherwise, check out Nuuk Snow Fest (Mar; snow.gl) and Nuuk Nordic Biennial (May; nuuknordisk.gl), or the music festivals of Qooqqut (Aug; katuag.gl), and Akisuanerit (Sep/Oct; atlanticmusicshop.gl).

64.1743° N, 51.7373° W



Lighting the way (clockwise from top left) The northern lights ripple in green waves above Nuuk's statue of the Mother of the Sea – although the city lies just below the Arctic Circle, its remoteness and low light pollution still make it an excellent place to see the aurora; a pair of antlers – a common sight on buildings across the capital – hangs from one of the city's colourful weatherboard houses; Inuit murals decorate Nuuk's housing estates; the mountains on the outskirts of the city can be tricky to navigate due to a dearth of signage and trail markers, but they yield some incredible views over the surrounding fjords and wilderness, so don't be put off exploring

would look more at home in Copenhagen. Any good editor would rewrite such a blatant metaphor, but here it is, in the flesh – and bone!

That's just life today in this unlikely pastiche of a city. The world's northernmost capital is also one of the smallest, counting fewer than 20,000 residents – slightly less than the population of Orkney, or just larger than the Pacific island nation of Palau.

Back on the shore, the swimmers frantically dressed themselves and chattered their way uphill for a coffee, giddy with adrenaline from their brief communion with the frigid sea. Like most of their Nordic neighbours, locals here take their coffee black, but cans of condensed milk behind the counter hint at the preferences of the Thais and Filipinos staffing the cafés. In fact, South-East Asians have something of a monopoly on Nuuk's takeaway scene, making it surely one of the only places in the world where you can order a reindeer red curry.

In keeping with this surprisingly varied cultural mosaic, Nuuk's architecture also seems to border on the schizophrenic: Old Nuuk, home to the excellent national museum and Colonial Harbour, feels like a fishing village, cut through by streams lush with tussock grass and wild Angelica, while neighbouring Myggedalen is all postcard-perfect coastal homesteads painted in vivid, distinctly un-Nordic colours. But walk just a few minutes inland and you enter a land of long, slightly Soviet numbered blocks daubed in cultural murals that have now become icons of the city. Go further still and you find geodesic radar domes, angular, New Nordic apartment towers (again with those antlers!), and finally Nuuk's prison at the edge of



town – winner of a modern architecture award in 2017.

And while you can easily get lost in the city's culture and architecture, the ever-present nature on all sides of the capital is perhaps Nuuk's most defining characteristic. Perched on a rocky cape ('nuuk' means 'cape' in Kalaallisut) at the end of one of the world's largest fjord systems, the city is wedged between the mountains and

the water – a tangled clump of spaghetti-noodle streets and abrupt dead-ends splayed along the jagged shoreline. Rocky outcrops puncture the low, treeless heath, and there's nowhere in the city where the wilderness – the seemingly endless expanses of wild, punishing, spectacular nature that Greenland is so known for – is out of view. And locals wouldn't have it any other way: on sunny weekends you can hear a pin drop in the city centre as everyone is out hiking, hunting and fishing. Even well-behaved prison inmates can go out to hunt, so long as they're accompanied by a guard.

This is how Nuuk has quietly become the Nordics' quirkiest capital – an unlikely smorgasbord of Scandi-cool charm transplanted to a land of extraordinary landscapes, unforgiving nature and a proud Indigenous culture that still informs the rhythms of daily life. It's also become something of a boomtown, attracting immigrants from Maniitsoq to Manila, and host to several-dozen massive construction cranes at any given time. And while the world at large hasn't quite woken up to Nuuk yet, one only needs to look ever so slightly southwards to neighbouring Iceland and the Faroes to see the wave coming – it may be cold, but everyone's diving in.

Stay here...

Small & characterful

Inuk Hostels

A cluster of cabins in the Qernertunnguit neighbourhood. It's a bit removed from the centre but the views over Sermitsiaq Mountain and the fjord are unbeatable. Each cabin has a shared kitchen, or just sip hot soup at their café. Book a session in the sauna if you get cold. *Twin rooms from £94pn; inukhostels.gl*

Mid-range

Hotel Aurora

Hidden down a potholed lane of boat-builders and Asian grocery stores known as Entreprenørdalen ('Entrepreneur Valley'), a colourful exterior gives way to tidy, clean Scandinavian-style rooms. The delicious Kaffivik café-bar (kaffivik.gl) is also just across the street. *B&B doubles from £155pn; greenland-escape.com/aurora*

Best address in town

Hotel Hans Egede

The go-to address for business travellers in Nuuk, this conferencing stalwart is as central as can be, overlooking the city's main drag (Akquinersuaq). Rooms are comfy and modern, and the top-floor bar is surprisingly good value. Or you can try your luck at the (pricier) attached steakhouse. *Doubles from £207pn; hhe.gl*

4 TOP THINGS TO DO

Set sail

Nuuk is a city of few roads but has 880+ private boats to call on. Nuuk Water Taxi (watertaxi.gl) operates from the Colonial Harbour and can take you whale watching, fishing or into the icefjord.


Hike & forage

Paradisaldalen (Paradise Valley) – just behind the prison – is an easy day hike and a popular foraging spot for crowberries, bog labrador tea and wild thyme. Take care on the slopes of Ukkusissaq (Store Malene) – trail markers can be inconsistent and the weather unpredictable.

Eat local

Greenlandic food might seem unapproachable, with dishes ranging from blubber to smoked narwhal, but it's worth a try – the 'Greenlandic tapas' at Cafétuaq (katuaq.gl) is just the ticket.

Art & artisans

Nuuk is dotted with galleries, but don't miss the workshops at Ajagaq (Nuukullak 18), where artisans craft in bone, stone and antler and carve protective totems, known as *tupilaks*, from wood. 



WANDERLUST RECOMMENDS

Music: Everyone here can sing along to Greenland's first ever rock band, Sumé. They became countercultural icons in the 1970s and the subjects of a popular documentary in 2014 – <https://youtu.be/7la1SI1S3Qs>

Spotify: This 'Kalaallisut' playlist features a variety of buzzy tracks from newer local acts like Andachan, FINNi, and Pukuut – <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/0c8Kt2PhaQPuxVePXqhHng>

Info: The tourism board sites of Greenland (visitgreenland.com) and Nuuk (visitnuuk.com) are comprehensive and have everything that you need to know.