

SHAPED BY LAND

GREENLAND GROWS SKIING AT HOME

Evening light hits the village of Qeqertarsuaq on the southern tip of Disko Island. Home to world-class ski terrain, this is the only volcanic region in Greenland. In the background, steep, basalt mountains drop directly to the sea.



Adam Kjeldsen descends a bowl far above Itisoq Fjord before dropping into a cliff-lined chute below. The clouds cleared just as we topped out, giving us an incredible view of the fjord below.

Words, Photos and Captions **EMILY SULLIVAN**

FRESH off six weeks of heli-guiding around West Greenland, Adam Kjeldsen is sorting gear on the couch in his parent's house on a late spring evening in Nuuk, Greenland. At 64 degrees north latitude, the sun won't set until 10:15 p.m., and a deep orange glow streams through the westward windows overlooking the Nuuk Fjord. It's taken me three days to travel here from Alaska, but my exhaustion doesn't register as Kjeldsen describes skiing across the sea ice under pink skies as a child. Affable and charismatic, it's easy to think of him as an old friend despite a winter's worth of long-distance correspondence. Having noticed a Greenlandic representation gap in ski media, I reached out to Kjeldsen to learn about his roots and community. He, in turn, invited me to come over and see it for myself.

Most ski tourism in Greenland focuses on terrain and largely misses the culture that makes the country so unique. For many, the allure of skiing in remote locales are the uncrowded backcountry, the continuous ski lines from summit to fjord, and the novelty of skiing amongst glaciers from a sailboat. But athletes and tourists who travel to Greenland and forego time in local communities can easily, and unknowingly, miss the depth of the country's beauty.

Greenland is a huge country with a small population. Its 836,300 square miles are mostly covered by the now famously receding icecap, and of the country's 56,000 residents, the majority are Greenlandic Inuit, or Kalallit peoples. The coastline is dotted with small settlements, ranging from small villages of a few hundred folks to nearly 20,000 residents in Nuuk, Greenland's capital. Greenlandic

people are accustomed to problem solving, subsistence harvesting, and living in right relation with the land. But there are no roads between settlements, so travel is either by water or air, which can be expensive and difficult.

Kjeldsen's easy smile and calculated skiing are shaped by these realities and a profound connection to Greenland's vast landscape. Instead of describing his favorite ski line near Nuuk, he'll describe the local wildlife. He'll reference the ptarmigan that perch on the surrounding rock walls like tiny sentinels, watching as skiers skin through the canyon below. He might share that his son, Miki, caught his first ptarmigan nearby—a point that brings more pride than a first descent ever could. Finally, he'll paint a picture of the views: granite walls towering above a glacial amphitheater which tumbles steeply from summit bowl, to couloir, to fjord—a classic Greenlandic ski line.





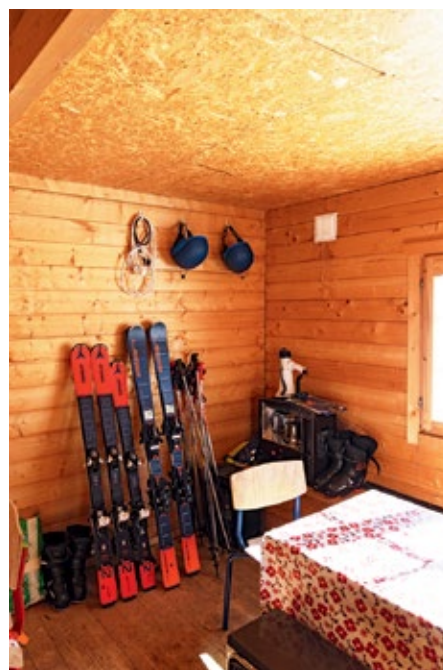
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

Raven's Nest Camp at Itisoq Fjord. This basecamp serves as a jumping-off point for backcountry ski and snowshoe adventures with Kjeldsen's guide company, Two Ravens.

Qeqertarsuaq DSP purchased extra gear for young skiers who might not be able to afford their own ski equipment. The extra equipment lives in the clubhouse at the base of the club's backcountry training grounds.

Kale Moelgaard proudly displays an image of his grandchildren with their skis at Christmas. Though Kale doesn't speak English and I don't speak Greenlandic or Danish, his pride in his family was easily understood.

Kale Moelgaard, the organizer of Qeqertarsuaq Ski Club (DSP), has an afternoon coffee in the club house.



Like many Greenlanders, Kjeldsen relies on self-harvested stocks of caribou, seal, and smoked cod to fuel his adventures. And despite spending weeks each year heliskiing in world-class terrain, he prefers slower days spent guiding human-powered skiing, enjoying the connection to his surroundings and shared conversation with his partners. Skiing with Kjeldsen is a joy—his alpine racing background is evident as he carves with precision at high speeds, whooping with childlike enthusiasm.

Kjeldsen grew up in Aasiaat, an Arctic community of just over 3,000 residents. According to Kjeldsen, the town is located on “the flattest land in Greenland,” and much of his childhood lacked a ski lift. The local club would ski across the frozen bay to a hilly island, trudging uphill in alpine gear to race back down. For five weeks each winter, the sun doesn't rise in Aasiaat. But starting in January, even with only a couple hours of daylight, the ski club would train and race. In spite of harsh elements, community through sport is a common thread across Greenlandic life. For Kjeldsen, the chosen sport has always been skiing.

DESPITE ITS recreational popularity, skiing was not a traditional Inuit means of travel—long distance winter travel was completed by dog sled. Through the influence of ongoing Danish colonization, skiing gained traction in Greenland in the 1950s during a period of rapid modernization.

The Greenland Ski Federation is the country's oldest sport association, founded in 1969. Many adult skiers in Greenland had similar ski roots to Kjeldsen, hiking uphill with their friends and a handful of Federation coaches to ski back down. Today, the largest towns in Greenland have small lifts, but like many aspects of Greenlandic life, skiing still melds the old with the new—longstanding cultural values like community care and reciprocity thrive alongside the newer feeling of sliding downhill on snow.

On the closing afternoon at Sisorarfiit-Skiliften in Nuuk, everyone on the hill knows each other by name. The base feels somewhat industrial, situated just above the airport, but the slopes offer sweeping views over the city and the surrounding fjord system. Local youth arrive to Sisorarfiit via a city bus after school.

Sandwiched between strips of reddish tundra and granite bedrock, two slushy blue-square runs blanket 417 feet of vertical drop. There's been a severe lack of snow this year, and the bedrock-to-snow ratio doesn't look too promising. It's April 20, and these bull wheels are stopping weeks earlier than usual. But the afternoon turnout is good, and a steady stream of skiers lap the piste. I stand out enough that a kid named Fredrick asks who I am and how I got here before helping me navigate the POMA lift. As the sun creeps across the northern sky, toddlers in snowsuits spin casual laps with their parents, and teens gather above jumps, hitting airs one by one. When the lift stops running at 6 p.m., it feels far too soon. There are still four hours until sunset, after all.

Sisorarfiit's early closure pushes me further north to Sisimiut, the second largest community in Greenland. In the town of 5,500, just north of the arctic circle, there are reports of “the worst winter ever” as a lack of precipitation threatens another early end to the ski season. The town sits adjacent to the country's largest swath of ice-free terrain, making it both a haven for game hunting and a backcountry paradise. Snowmachine highways snake out from Sisimiut's edges, passing dozens of rowdy dog yards and eventually topping out on nearby summits. Nestled in the backcountry three miles from town, a T-bar and a small ski area called Solbakken, “the sunny slope,” sit surrounded by dramatic couloirs. While some locals sled-ski the chutes and nearby glaciers, most families spend weekends skiing mellow laps at Solbakken with the local ski club, Sisimiut SSP.



Adam Kjeldsen descends from 3,500 feet above sea level, overlooking the Itisoq Fjord far below.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

The T-bar at Solbakken ski area sits motionless after the last day of the season in Sisimiut. The surrounding backcountry terrain is easily accessible via numerous snowmobile highways.

Qeqertarsuaq local Aqqalu drives the Pistenbully for the municipality of Qeqertarsuaq. The equipment is used to groom Qeqertarsuaq DSP's training grounds, but also to work on the lift installation project.

Sisimiut Ski Club (SSP) members including Inuuna Ingemann-Lund (left in helmet) and Millie Chapman (right in helmet) gather at the base of Solbakken ski area after the last day of lift service.

Krister Støvlbaek wrenches on the new ski lift near Qeqertarsuaq. The ski lift project has been ongoing for seven years due to equipment complications and remoteness. It is now near completion and projected to open in 2024.

ATHLETES AND TOURISTS WHO TRAVEL TO GREENLAND AND FOREGO TIME IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES CAN EASILY, AND UNKNOWINGLY, MISS THE DEPTH OF THE COUNTRY'S BEAUTY.

A flurry of Facebook messages and friend requests lands me the company of Ulloriaq Kruetzmann, the Vice President of Sisimiut SSP's volunteer board. On a gray April afternoon, the threat of wet snow lingers in the air as Kruetzmann prepares coffee and a spread of narwhal maktak (buttery whale blubber attached to a chewy piece of outer skin), dried musk ox meat and fresh-baked bread in his home. Kruetzmann says traditional foods embody the freedom of being Greenlandic. "Without our own traditions," he tells me, "we don't have our culture. We don't have the same life quality."

With a deep voice, large frame and full beard, the 32-year-old dog musher is a gentle giant—exceedingly kind and deeply invested in developing young skiers, like his children. Roughly 260 skiers belong to Sisimiut SSP today, and according to Kruetzmann, 80 percent are youth. The most dedicated club members train five days a week between a small hill in town and the backcountry lift at Solbakken.

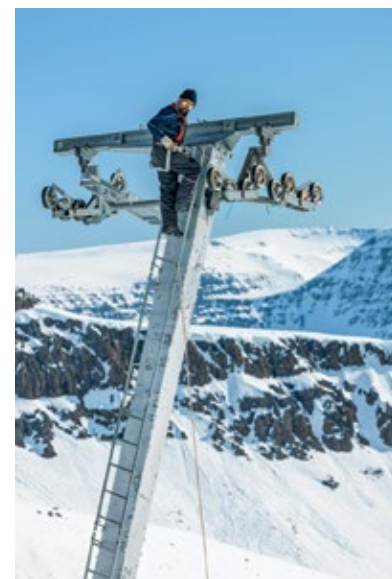
Kruetzmann says that despite being a newer sport, skiing teaches today's youth traditional Inuit values, like taking care of one another, learning about terrain and weather, and gaining familiarity with snow conditions. Friendly competition between young skiers also helps them progress while fostering connections between these small communities. He says the ski club provided some of the best memories of his life: ski racing, sleeping in snow caves and, most importantly, making lifelong friends across West Greenland.

I catch the last day of lift service at Solbakken with Kruetzmann's daughter Inuuna Ingemann-Lund and her close

friend Millie Chapman. The girls, escorted to the ski area by their parents on snowmobiles, are competitive ski racers in the U-14 age division. After a few slushy laps, I ask if they ever ski off-piste, curious if they tire of the 350 feet of groomed snow at their disposal. They giggle at the question. They prefer high speed carving on groomers—this is their craft, and it never grows old.

THE OPPORTUNITIES AFFORDED to the youth of Nuuk and Sisimiut by their seemingly modest ski lifts are hard to overstate—it's widely acknowledged that outdoor recreation is a necessity for mental and physical health in remote Arctic communities. And though ski racing is not as popular nationally as it was in the '80s and '90s, there are still communities with active ski clubs that train without lift service. One such community, Qeqertarsuaq, is currently engaged in a multi-year effort to install a lift for its community of 800 residents.

Sisimiut local Krister Støvlbaek lures me further north to learn about the ongoing efforts to install the ski lift in Qeqertarsuaq's backcountry training grounds, a project he's been hired to wrench on. At 69.2 degrees north, the small village on Disko Island is only accessible by boat or helicopter, and winter ice conditions make Disko Bay dangerous to navigate. Thanks to travel delays with Air Greenland, it takes me two and a half days to get from Sisimiut to Qeqertarsuaq, only 170 miles apart as the crow flies. "Welcome to travel in the Arctic," a desk attendant tells me after my third flight cancellation.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

A young skier rides the POMA lift at the Sisorarfiit ski lift in Nuuk. The ski area overlooks the Nuuk Fjord and Sermitsiaq Mountain in the background. It was the last day of operations for the 2023 season, and a fair number of skiers had shown up to spin laps after school.

Adam Kjeldsen prepares beluga maktak and home-caught dried cod for supper at Two Ravens' ski camp in the Nuuk Fjord area.

Ulloriaq Kreuzman feeds a sled dog puppy muskox meat at his dog yard in Sisimiut. Greenlandic sled dogs have an incredibly pure blood line and are only legal north of the arctic circle.

LIKE MANY ASPECTS OF GREENLANDIC LIFE, SKIING STILL MELTS THE OLD WITH THE NEW—LONGSTANDING CULTURAL VALUES LIKE COMMUNITY CARE AND RECIPROCITY THRIVE ALONGSIDE THE NEWER FEELING OF SLIDING DOWNHILL ON SNOW.

When I finally arrive, Støvlbaek is waiting for me at the heliport with a snowmobile.

Twenty years ago, the town had as many sled dogs as people, but with the arrival of snowmobiles the number has decreased to about 300 sled dogs. We weave along the well-worn sled trails, threading between colorful houses and across frozen lakes, my ski bag strewn across Støvlbaek's lap. The 45-year-old is an ex-pro skier with an affinity for sleds. After competing for 14 years in Norway and Sweden, he worked as head coach for Greenland's national ski team. He says that in a large country with a tiny population, pursuing outdoor passions with community is just part of staying sane. "We are like a little family," he says with a laugh, "It's so much fun, learning something together and progressing."

Four miles from town in an east-facing bowl, eight green pylons sit erect and evenly spaced. Framed by 3,000-foot plateaued mountains, the lift-to-be overlooks Disko Bay's deep blue waters, speckled with icebergs the size of villages. This bowl serves as a training ground for DSP Qeqertarsuaq, a ski club of about 60. After an extensive sled tour of the nearby mountains, Støvlbaek and I return to town under a dusty purple sky and cross paths with Kale Moelgaard, the club's organizer, heading up to the bowl for some headlamp-lit laps. Moelgaard says that currently, the team uses sleds for

uphill travel, but the ski lift will make training easier and more accessible to many locals. Installing the ski lift has been a multi-year project due to the remote nature of the village and complications with the Austrian group that sold the lift to the municipality. Now, the Greenlandic team leading the project are closing in on the finish line.

Though the primary goal of the lift is to support the local community's mental and physical health, a secondary goal is to increase winter tourism opportunities—and revenue—in Qeqertarsuaq. Disko Island is one of many locations in Greenland that is gaining popularity for boat-based, heli-skiing trips. Tourism is growing rapidly throughout Greenland—from 8,000 to 17,000 annual visitors in the Qeqqata region over the last decade—and is projected to explode when new international airports are completed in Nuuk and Ilulissat in 2024. Dominated by foreign operators, most ski tourism in Greenland is based on sailboats and served by helicopters, catering to wealthy travelers without giving back to the local communities. More often than not, yacht-based skiers on Disko Island don't set foot in a village like Qeqertarsuaq.

"[Ski tourists] don't mingle—they're based on boats and helicopters," says Støvlbaek. "I want them be able to see the culture and speak to the locals."



TOP TO BOTTOM

Adam Kjeldsen descends chalky snow in the backcountry above the Nuuk Fjord.

Fishing boats sit dormant for the winter at a small bay in Qeqertarsuaq. The village's main industry is fishing, and many residents rely on their own home-caught stores of fish, whale and seal for sustenance.



KJELDSSEN HOPES THAT OPPORTUNITIES WILL SOON EXIST FOR YOUNG GREENLANDIC SKIERS TO OBTAIN AVALANCHE AND GUIDING EDUCATION IN THEIR OWN COUNTRY, TAUGHT BY PEOPLE OF THEIR OWN CULTURE.

Realistically, it will be years until the ski lift near Qeqertarsuaq is truly accessible to tourists, but it's worth the effort as visitation to the country booms. At least 10 foreign operators offer ski tours in Greenland, employing guides from Europe, the U.S. and New Zealand. Two Ravens Guides, co-founded by Kjeldsen and his business partner Thorlak Nielsen, and Greenland Extreme, founded by Arne Hardenberg, are the only Greenlandic companies that offer ski tours. Kjeldsen says that the lack of Greenlandic ski guides stems from barriers to obtaining guiding certifications for Greenlanders. International travel to the country is incredibly expensive, and there are no local professional development opportunities for ski guiding. But some foreign operators, like Powderbirds Helicopter Skiing, have agreed to hire Two Ravens' guides and subsidize certification opportunities in the U.S. With this initiative, Kjeldsen hopes that opportunities will soon exist for young Greenlandic skiers to obtain avalanche and guiding education in their own country, taught by people of their own culture.

Fostering a new generation of Greenlandic ski guides could help bridge the gap between ski tourism and cultural experiences, a niche that Kjeldsen and Nielsen are already cultivating through Two Ravens. Camped next to the deep blue waters of Itisoq Fjord, the pair serves their clients beluga maktak and kuisat, a meal of fresh-caught fish that's boiled over a campfire then poured on a large rock. Guides and clients alike pick through the pile of fish with their hands, indulging in fresh sea urchins, shrimp and mussels pulled straight from the fjord. The next night, the guides

cook caribou they hunted together, sharing pictures of the hunt while roasting meat over a campfire. Seth Morrison and his wife, Aurelie Gonin, amidst a week of skiing and filming with Two Ravens, help cut potatoes for dinner, discussing hunting and Inuit culture with the guides.

Kjeldsen says that the practice of sharing food and story with clients develops a deeper understanding of hunting as a substance practice in Greenland, which can be easily misunderstood by outsiders. Nielsen adds that eating kuisat, maktak and wild game in camp just feels natural—it's an extension of how he has always camped and lived. These authentic food experiences give ski tourists a small glimpse into the inherent values and practices that define Greenlandic life, providing a window into local culture.

On a foggy afternoon high above camp, Kjeldsen and I watch as a cloud bank dissipates to reveal the dark blue fingers of the world's second largest fjord system far below. Granite walls surround our line, radiating warmth we hope will soften the refrozen snow. There's no rush to ski down, and we share stories as we take in the view. Aware that Kjeldsen has recently guided some big names on major expeditions, I ask what he's most proud of in his guiding career. "It might sound a little cliché," he tells me. "But I'm actually making a living doing something that I've loved since as long as I can remember. There's less than a handful of local ski guides here, and I'm one of them."

After a few quiet moments enjoying the view, we transition our equipment for the descent. It's not long till Kjeldsen's hoots of joy echo through the rock as it plunges toward the sea. §