

To leave town, you have to cross a field full of semi-feral animals. The chains look sturdy, but you could swear you can see them stretch as the dogs bark, howl and jump. It's quite unnerving, and I couldn't get used to it at all, however much I told myself that they were simply hoping their owners were coming to feed and that they weren't going to move far. It won't be long now, though, just a couple of months and they'll be back in service, their remarkable, and very visible energy harnessed to transport the townspeople around on their sleds.

Autumn on the West coast of Greenland isn't warm, but nor is it as cold as you may expect. There's snow on the ground, of course, and giant chunks of ice float past you (you're never far from the coast, really). So yes, it's below freezing. But it's still, calm, and you have to subscribe to the notion that there's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing. You haven't got the plague of mosquitoes that bother visitors all Summer, and you haven't got the ice-bound inaccessibility of Winter, either. You just have to make sure you catch it before all the tourist facilities shut down for another year.

Most visits to this island start in Kangerlussuaq, by virtue of it being pretty much the only place you can build a decent-sized airport. There's little here to keep you, although it's not unattractive. Greenlandic town names tend to be fairly literal, and this name means 'very big fjord'. You can walk up the valley a bit, past the world's most something golf course (northerly, icy, something like that – blame the US forces that were stationed here), and find a peak with a lonely, abandoned radio transmitter shack (US forces again), and give yourself a glimpse of what's to follow: in one direction, dotted prefab-looking houses and a giant, shimmering fjord awash with tiny icebergs. In the other... A vast, forbidding expanse of nothing. Hilly, rocky, empty, wild and with just a hint of pack ice in the background. It took two hours to walk here from the airport, and yet, once past the dogs, you don't hear anything or meet anybody.

From here, a domestic flight takes you up the coast to Ilulissat, known to readers of *Miss Smilla's Feeling for Snow* by the Danish name of *Godhavn*. The Greenlandic name means 'icebergs', and on approach from the air, it's obvious why. Ilulissat Kangerlua is an icefjord. This is a rare natural phenomenon, where the shape and shallowness of a fjord sitting at the end of an active glacier means that, instead of the glacier pushing its ice out to sea in the form of icebergs, the ice breaks off and get stuck in this fjord: part glacier, part sea. Pressure slowly builds up until the ice breaks free of the icefjord's confines and finally makes it out to sea. From above, it looks like a broken glacier. You need to see it on the ground.

Ilulissat itself is a fairly typical Greenlandic town. There's not much land that's inhabitable here, so everything clings to the coast near inlets and natural harbours. Industry is centred around the port and the fish processing warehouses dotted around it. Housing radiates from around the main harbour, consisting mainly of smallish, primary coloured, wood and metal houses, perched on rock. The main centre of town has a handful of shops and the grill-bar, centre of the town's entertainment.

The path out of town towards the kangerlua is well signposted. Once you're past the dogs, you've got a fairly long, slightly uphill walk across tundra, made all the longer through expectation (your appetite has, after all, been whetted by the flight in). The hill is enough to hide the nascent icebergs, building the sense of expectation further. Then, the first glimpse. You near the brow of the hill, and the peaks of the icefjord start to poke out. These aren't the rugged, snow-capped peaks of mountain views, but rather a mix of rough and smooth, cleaved and collapsed, pure white and electric blue.

It's quiet at this time of year, so there's nobody else around, even this close to town. The air is

thankfully quite still, given the temperature, but the only sound is a slight rushing from the wind, broken occasionally by the distant sound of the dogs. The scene reveals itself further as you approach, and once at the top of the hill, which turns into a cliff at the edge of the fjord, the full glory of it is revealed to you.

There's a lot to take in. Strangely, the first thing you notice is the sound. It's too early in the day for the fishermen, so it's just you, tidal water, and a few thousand trapped icebergs. The slow, background lapping of the water is accompanied by an eerie, irregular, whistling noise, as ripples and waves force air through eroded funnels in the ice. Then there's a creaking sound: actually quite loud, now you notice it. It gives the impression that this mass of water, frozen and liquid, is somehow alive and struggling, trapped as it is between glacier and ocean. Finally, a foreboding, irregular crashing noise, reminding you how dangerous it is to be out there in among it, as blocks of ice the size of a house crash down, accompanied by a flurry of activity: the fish are unsettled and scattered, and the seabirds have been waiting for this moment to swoop in.

It's quite dazzling. The wet ice shimmers, some with a pure white hue, some with the brilliant blue of ice formed and compressed under the crushing weight of a glacier, an inconceivably long time ago. The variety of shapes and sizes is incredible: sheer faces, symmetrical blocks, razor-back apexes, or points and curves that make some resemble Rhineland castles. Some have broken free and been swept up to the shoreline, either looking like miniature versions of the parent ice that has spawned them, or streamlined into boat-like form, multi-hulled and adding to the upper register of the chorus of whistling going on all around. You can just make out fishing boats starting to dart nervously through the fjord, their toy-like appearance at last giving you the full sense of scale of the place.

I stare until my face feels raw in the cold, and then walk around a bit, to get a different view. Further up the fjord are some hills and lakes, giving you the aerial view. A little further down towards the sea, you can clamber down to the shoreline.