

TRAVEL ARCTIC CIRCLE

Idyll on ice

Ponant's powerful icebreaker takes passengers right into the heart of polar-bear country, writes Jane Cornwell.



5am, somewhere off the coast of East Greenland. "My dear guests, this is your captain," comes a French accented-voice from the tannoy above my king-sized bed. "There is a bear on the ice on the starboard side. I repeat, there is a bear. With two babies." And in French. "Deux bébés! C'est incroyable! Extraordinaire!"

There's a rush of footsteps, a rustle of polar parkas, along the hallway outside the door of my deluxe suite. Such rare polar bear sightings are crucial to why 120 passengers (out of a possible 245) are travelling on Le Commandant Charcot, the world's only luxury icebreaker and a triumph for French line Ponant.

The \$520 million, hybrid-electric LNG-powered vessel, launched in 2021, goes where no cruise liner has gone before, thanks to its Polar Class 2 ice-breaking hull. Along the north-east coast of Greenland. Above the Arctic Circle. To the North Pole. On explorations to rival those of legendary polar explorers such as the ship's French namesake, Jean-Baptiste Charcot.

Framed photos of him sit amid objet d'art in the Deck 5 lounge, where floor-to-ceiling windows look onto the bow's helicopter deck and beyond that to ice, more ice and four times during our 10-day adventure – a lone, wandering bear.

Or, rather, this morning, a mama bear who has stopped to feed her cubs. She sits facing us, her hind legs splayed, her fur pale lemon against the pristine white, eyeing Le Charcot calmly. We bunch into the front corner of the wraparound outdoor promenade deck and watch her in return, our cameras clicking in the silence, our breath steaming in puffs. The bigger cub bats its smaller sibling off a teat.

"That little one's probably a goner," whispers a nearby naturalist, one of the many onboard science experts (the ship has a range of research-dedicated facilities) from under his binoculars.

Life is tough in the Arctic, the northernmost region of Earth. Unlike Antarctica (an uninhabited land mass, with penguins), it is a diverse habitat that takes in bits of countries including Norway, Iceland and Greenland.

It is populated by Indigenous people – in Greenland, the Inuit/Kalaallit – who have adapted to its cold extremes, and it has bears. It also has narwhals and a species of grouse that changes colour to try to fool the silver Arctic foxes that eat them.

"We are bringing you the spirit of polar exploration," says Captain Etienne Garcia, something of a silver fox himself, after bounding onto the stage of Deck 5's Lila Theatre to the strains of the Star Wars theme. "This is not an expedition voyage,"

he continues, flanked by a semi-circle of smiling, uniformed colleagues. "Our itinerary is subject to the ice and the weather. Please know that things can change in minutes."

So we've set off from Reykjavik, Iceland, across the Denmark Strait, in whose tricky waters Jean-Baptiste Charcot's ship, the Pourquoi-Pas, was wrecked in 1936, taking the captain down with it (a fate most unlikely to befall our own captain, thanks to Charcot's reinforced hull and two five-bladed, 300-tonne, 360-degree-swivelling azimuths).

Armed with electrocardiogram certificates for polar plunging and waterproof trousers for polar hiking, kayaking and dog-sledding, we head towards East Greenland's Ammassalik region, the ship pushing through cracks in the ice or breaking ice that is already melting.

We take a left, and park up a ship's length inside the frozen Tasilaq fjord. The ice closes magically over the strip of dazzling

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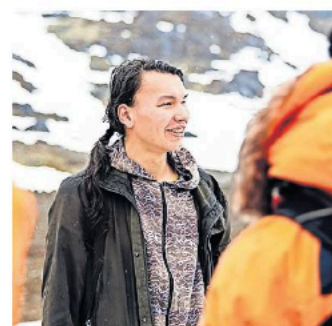
blue that has been trailing in our wake (a mesmerising sight when viewed up close from a table at Deck 5's Nuna, the first restaurant-at-sea from the Michelin-starred Alain Ducasse).

It's early May, the start of spring, and the 150-metre-long ship is the first visiting vessel the Inuit inhabitants of Tasilaq, East Greenland's largest town (population 1930), have seen in six months.

"We just think, 'Finally, something entertaining'," smiles Jaakusaaq Sørensen, a naturalist guide and erstwhile Tasilaq resident who teaches us about Inuit culture and religion including the myth of Sedna, the goddess of the sea and creator of marine animals.

Unlike us, Sørensen hasn't just seen a narwhal; he's caught and eaten one. "The ship being here hardly disturbs the ecosystem at all," he replies when asked. "But the glaciers are melting in the pole. You only have to look at the old and new maps to see that."

Life jackets and gumboots on, we stride across the fjord to Tasilaq and its primary-coloured prefab houses, pick-up trucks and



Main: Guests set off on a dog-sledding expedition. Above: A polar bear and her cubs, and naturalist guide Jaakusaaq Sørensen. Left and below: Taking the polar plunge, recliners with a view. Top right: Survivalist and hike leader Robin. PHOTOS: CINDY MILLER HOPKINS, JANE CORNWELL, VIOLETTE VAUCHELLE

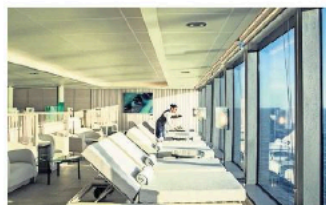


Need to know

The next 10-night Inuit Spring of Ammassalik sailing on Le Commandant Charcot embarks from Reykjavik on May 4, 2025.

From \$26,180 a person. Pre and post programs available at an additional cost.

For more on this and other polar expeditions with Ponant, go to au.ponant.com or call 1300 737 178.



one-way traffic intersection, its supermarket selling everything from nappies to hunting rifles.

A fluffy husky puppy follows us along the coast road, wanting love – unlike the lean teams of working dogs that whizz our sleds along the frozen fjord at Kulusuk, 25 kilometres north, the next day. While early supplies for the town are offloaded by crane, a group of locals come aboard Le Charcot for a tour, and a few Inuit zoom up on snowmobiles to bop a volleyball over a net set up on the ice next to the ship.

We watch them, these tiny jumping figures, from the big glass window of the sauna in the spa on Deck 9, where a sit-in

snow cabin pumps out snow, my shoulder knots astound my masseuse ("Mon dieu!"), and the detox bar in the Nuan Wellness Lounge – heated pool, recliners, skylight – has a juice menu that begs exploring.

"Be brave, Madam," says blender-wielding barman Fernando, who reappears each evening in the Observatory Lounge to refill flutes from a magnum of Veuve Clicquot.

Our three-hour polar hike is led by a strapping Swedish survival instructor named Robin, whose quiet confidence and reloadable rifle (a last resort if the other guide's anti-bear flare gun fails) feels in keeping with our last frontier, exploration vibe.

We climb a snow-covered cliff towards a rocky tundra clad in moss, taking in the pink bloom of crowberry flowers, the plants trapped inside iced-over pools, feeling intrepid if chastened by the fact we begin our steep ascent via foothold steps dug for us in the snow.

Five-star service is a given with Ponant: even the soaring glacier we meet at our hike's end rewards us, or so it seems,