

Hard accessibility

Access by ship to East Greenland has always been difficult. Only in a very short window each summer, the supply vessels can be fairly confident to reach the targets on the east coast of Greenland. The better part of the year the east coast is blocked by huge amounts of ice. The currents of the ocean are moving the ice from the Greenland Sea in the north along the coast through the Denmark Strait to the southern point of Greenland, Cape Farewell.

In historical times there are dramatic accounts of the difficult landing through the ice to the east coast. In his book 'Crossing Greenland' from 1890, Fridtjof Nansen tells about his own experiences in the ice and others before him. The year 1777 was a fatal year for many whalers. In late June, an entire fleet of 27-28 whaling ships were caught fast in the ice. Some of the ships managed to get loose but twelve ships remained fixed and drifted southwards with the ice along the coast.

In mid-August, six of the vessels were crushed in the masses of ice. The rest drifted further south. They could see the coast, but could not get in there. The rescued sailors from the wrecks found way to the remaining vessels, but many drowned or died from cold. After a journey of 107 days and caught in the ice on a stretch of over 1.250 miles, there was only one ship left. On board 286 men now were gathered without enough food. Several seamen tried to cross the ice to reach the coast, but either they disappeared without trace or they returned exhausted back to the ship.

The icebergs and ice floes, drifting south along the east coast of Greenland, continue around the southern tip of Greenland, Cape Farewell, and drift to the north along the west coast of Greenland. Six of the whalers from a ship came free of the ice, and drifted in small boats from the vessel all the way to a rocky island north of Nuuk. They overwintered on the rock island, although it was difficult to find shelter. They risked constantly drowning during the severe winter storms. In March, the year after, they were found and sailed to Nuuk – nine months after their vessel was caught in the ice and after having drifted 800 miles in their open boats.

These events, which began in June 1777, killed 320 men.

Although the climate is changing, and although there is now much more powerful, much better navigation technology and ice strengthened supply vessels, the transport by ship to the settlements Tasiilaq and Illoqqortoormiut still is limited to find place in a few months each year. And there are years, where the freight arrives weeks after the schedule. It is a great day, when the first supply vessel arrives, and the shelves in the shops again are be filled up with commodities.

The photograph shows the east coast watched from the transatlantic flight between Greenland and Denmark.

Although it is midsummer in the month of July, the mountains along the coast are dressed in snow and huge amounts of icebergs and ice floes are drifting along in the Denmark Strait.



The east coast of Greenland, July 2013

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Go to the Text