

Greenland Sail to Climb 2019 Final Trip Report

Gabriel Clarke
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Gabrielclarke93@gmail.com

Introduction:

The trip has been the culmination of 2 to 3 years of planning and dreaming by myself. Ever since hearing of a friend's trip to West Greenland on Dodo's Delight, I have been extremely excited by the idea of doing it myself, with friends. Both James and myself have extensive experience sailing professionally around the UK, Europe and Atlantic coasts, therefore we were keen for a challenge. Some of my professional sailing has been on the Scottish West Coast, a place I am extremely fond of, so Greenland seemed a logical step up. I have many friends with strong climbing backgrounds from my time spent in Wales and Cornwall, therefore I knew I could put a team together to combine skills in a 'Sail to Climb' trip.



The Crew:

Gabriel Clarke 26

-Skipper, owner, trip organiser and climber. I stayed with the boat for the entire trip leaving Cornwall early May and returning to Cornwall early September

James Steevenson 27

-Mate and Skipper, James would often take charge of the boat while we were climbing and remained for the entire trip from Scotland to Greenland and back.

Sam Nunn 27

-Climber with experience in climbing in America, Europe and all over the UK. Sam joined us for the outbound crossing and spent 2 weeks climbing in Greenland.

Henry Francis 26

-Climber with experience in Kirgizstan, Mexico and all over Europe. Henry joined Safe Arrival for 4 weeks arriving in Sisimuit and leaving from Ilulissat. We spent much of our time with Henry onboard in Uummannaq fjord

Mark Harris 44

-Climber and sailor with experience climbing rock and ice within UK and Europe. Mark joined us for 2 weeks in Uummannaq and flew home from Ilulissat.

Oscar Van Simina 26

-Oscar joined us for the return crossing from Nanortalik to Cornwall, he had previously crewed one Atlantic crossing but was keen for the challenge of the north Atlantic on a small boat.

Shorebased: Jamie Robinson

-Jamie provided weather routing and forecast information for both crossings via Iridium messenger to our satellite phone. This system worked extremely well and gave us huge confidence.

Aims:

Our intention was to sail from the UK to Greenland, explore northwards from Nuuk towards a final destination around Uummannaq fjord. Whilst sailing we would explore West Greenland's spectacular fjords and islands with the intention of establishing new climbs and anchorages where possible. Once finished in Uummannaq we would head southwards, with the intention of leaving Southern Greenland to cross back to the UK by mid-august.

The boat:

Safe Arrival is a GRP (Fibreglass) 1973 Rival 32. 32ft in length, 9ft beam, draws 1.4m and weighs approximately 8 tonnes. I bought her two and a half years ago, and since then I have undertaken a major refit to prepare her for this trip. Work which I did included a full rewire, fitting solar panels, a Refleks heater, an engine rebuild, rig alterations, buying new sails, new anchor and tackle, accommodation alterations, and construction of GRP spray hood. I took medical advice to prepare an extensive safety and medical kit.

The Trip:

Preparation and departure:

After an uneventful trip up the Irish Sea in early May, we arrived in Mallaig, Scotland. The trip up the Irish Sea also provided the chance to shake-down the boat after a winter in Cornwall. Mallaig was our departure point for the Atlantic crossing to Greenland. It was my intention to use Mallaig to supply the boat, refuel and undertake maintenance, as I know the harbour well. From studying weather patterns and by taking advice from others, it appeared advantageous to cross from as far North as possible.

James arrived after I had done 4 days of maintenance, and we compiled a shopping list with the intention of victualing the boat for the entire trip! It seemed at the time an obscene amount of food, but we had been warned of extremely high food prices in Greenland. We raided Morrisons and Lidl in Fort William, and loaded Safe Arrival with the contents of 8 full shopping trolleys, at a cost of £1500.

Departure and crossing:

Sam, our third member of crew for the crossing, joined up on the 27th May, and after a heavy night of celebration we departed from Mallaig with extremely sore heads bound for Greenland. I'm quite happy to confess at this point that all of us were totally terrified about what we were about to embark on. It really felt, at this point, that we had bitten off more than we could chew.

Our good friend Jamie was providing weather forecasting and routing via text on satellite phone, and after much discussion, it seemed the best route out was along the 60th parallel. Consequently, the first 3 days of the trip were spent sailing due North, once clear of the Sound of Barra. By the 31st May we were running due West at 61 North in easterly Beaufort Force 7s and 8s, the first of several gales on the way out. Between the 1st and 9th June we made great progress West, with fair winds the whole way, though we were becalmed a few times and were obliged to sit it out and wait as we were keen to conserve fuel. The temperature dropped dramatically and we spent more and more time with the heater lit, or sheltering under the spray hood, if on watch.

On the 10th June whilst 120 NM south of Cape Farewell we were hit by a severe gale, Force 9 from the north east, presumably the likes of which give the Cape its fierce reputation. The blow lasted 24 hours and we saw winds in excess of 50 knots. We needed to hand steer at this point, having previously relied on the wind-vane steering. Safe Arrival and her crew handled it beautifully, despite the storm jib being ripped in two. Although terrifying and stressful it never felt unsafe.

Once the wind dropped and veered South East, we ran 4 days North arriving in Nuuk, Greenland's capital, on the 13th June. The crossing took 16 days and we covered approximately 1600 NM. We only used 25 litres of diesel in the entire crossing, and despite ripping all 3 headsails Safe Arrival performed excellently in challenging circumstances. On our approach to Nuuk we saw our first icebergs.



James takes a reef mid Atlantic



Sail repairs en route



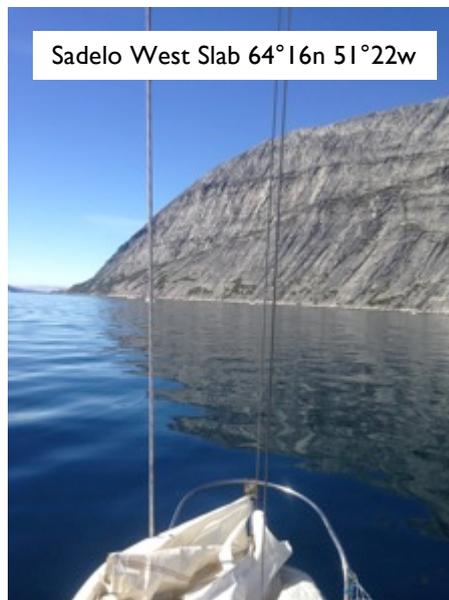
Nuuk and Nuuk Fjord:

On arriving in Nuuk we had several maintenance jobs to attend to, and most definitely we were all in need of rest. We chatted with other yachts and crews including the Irish 'Killary Flyer' and the French Canadian 'LifeSong'. After changing propane cylinders, carrying out maintenance jobs, and making calls home, we headed out into Nuuk Fjord to explore our surroundings for potential climbing.

We left Nuuk for Storo Island (65°15'n 51°14'w). The short 15NM passage was our first in Greenland, and it was safe to say our minds were blown. Nuuk Fjord is full of stunning anchorages and astonishing cliff faces. It seemed the potential of this place was unlimited. We walked around the bay of our anchorage that day, having anchored off the sandy spit mentioned in the Royal Cruising Club pilot book. After walking to the base of main cliff we opted on climbing something smaller the following day.

The right hand shoulder of the main face provided stunning climbing on solid rock at not too steep a grade. The middle few pitches felt like climbing every 3* classic Cornish VS strung together. After 7 pitches and 250m of climbing the angle slackened and we spotted a potential decent scramble to the right of our line. We named the route 'North Atlantic Bake Off' giving it a grade of HVS 5a. The following day James dropped us directly onto the west side of the island Sadelo (64°16'n 51°22'w) below an impressive looking slab. The boat left and after an hour of padding around on the surprisingly steep lower slabs we decided that we couldn't find an obvious route up so retreated by walking around to the anchorage on the south side.





Manitsog:

We left Nuuk feeling like there was a lot more potential in the fjord. We motored north for Manitsog, stopping overnight at Tovqussaq (64°52n 52°12w), an abandoned fishing village. We anchored beneath the impressive Kin of Sal Island (65°26n 53°05w). (Although not charted, we found sufficient depths everywhere and e-Chart seemed reasonably accurate). We spent a total of 4 days here walking and climbing. We attempted a new route on Shark's Fin Wall about 400m in height. We climbed 2 quality pitches at E2 but loose rock above and the onset of rain forced a

retreat. We also climbed a bunch of single pitch routes around the anchorage. Sam flew home from Manitsoq and James and I took Safe Arrival North via the impressive Hamborgersund, arriving at Sisimuit within the Arctic Circle on 30th June.



Uummannaq Fjord:

Henry joined Safe Arrival in Sisimuit, having flown from the UK. It was my plan to have at least 2 climbers on the boat at all times, excluding myself. Sadly, however, a key climber was unable to join us due to a broken leg weeks before leaving.

We departed Sisimmuit for Uummannaq, calling at Disko Fjord on the west side of Disko Island. The feeling of remoteness in this place is very hard to convey. We entered Uummannaq Fjord and made straight for the North West bight on Qaqugdlugssuit (70°45n 51°16w) as the area had been described as having bigger moderate grade walls. We anchored here and from the nearby high point we had a 360 degree panoramic view of the ice-filled fjord and beyond into the Kangerdlua Glacier. In moments like these it was very hard to believe that we had sailed from Cornwall!



We opted to warm up on something smaller and anchored off Ukalilik Island's southern spit (70°49n 51°20w), where we were sheltered from the large quantities of glacial ice. We attempted a route that afternoon but retreated after 2 pitches, as the line became featureless and protectionless. The following day we opted for a route to the left under a substantial roof. After fiddling in tricky gear Henry led the crux pitch, traversing under the roof at E4 6a, which I found extremely impressive. I had to aid-climb my way through the hardest moves, carrying a rucksack, with all the grace of a seal! The rest of the route was straightforward with easy climbing and we put up "Arctic Heat Stroke" E4 6a 150m.

From here we moved to the Umasugssuup Ilua anchorage (70°52n 51°39w) on Appat Island. The entrance to this anchorage is one of the most impressive places I have ever sailed into. We walked from the anchorage to the island's high point looking over the entire Uummanaq Fjord from a height of 1500m: this was a sight I will never forget! We fished for monster cod and climbed some single pitch routes around the anchorage.



We moved to Uummanaq Island to refuel, call home and hopefully climb. After a day of resupplying, Henry and I set out early to attempt a route on Uummanaq Mountain's north peak. After a monster slog up the nasty scree slope, we started climbing on extremely good rock, however, after 4 pitches I begin to really struggle

with both the exposure and the difficulty of the route. The combination of my lack of big wall experience, on top of the stress of organising and skippering a trip like this, as well as the remoteness, weighed heavily on my mind. Eventually we decided to retreat to discuss our options. We agreed, after some discussion, that the focus of the trip would shift slightly away from solely climbing and that we would use our time here to really explore this wild place, and if there were options to climb, we would.



We left Uummannaq for Drygalskis Halvo (70°32n 50°46w) as the whole team was keen to walk to the ice pack. We anchored in a narrow gut without a single shred of evidence of humans, except a small boat with 2 fishermen hand-netting sea trout. We walked an entire day to the head of the Sermigdlip Kangerdilua Glacier. I found this to be a truly awesome sight! Following this we became storm bound for 2 days with strong gusty winds up to 50kt and heavy rain, scuppering our plans to climb the following day.



We travelled slowly back towards Uummannaq Island exploring several uncharted anchorages before spotting a shorter route on the north end of Talerua (70°32n 51°43w), which was a 100m Cornish-style sea cliff giving us “Seagull Soup”. This was 3 pitches at VS followed by some serious gardening.

We returned briefly to Uummannaq Island to collect Mark, our final climber. We set out immediately for Ikerasak Island to explore its climbing potential. Early the following morning we set out to attempt the arête route “Married Men’s Way” E3, a route originally climbing by Ben Ditto and Olivier Farversse of Bob’s Wild Bunch. After 6 pitches of great climbing Henry, Mark and I stood on top. This was a total highlight of the trip. We spent the following day exploring the island and its small fishing community.

Next we explored the ice-choked channel between Ikerasak Island and Drygalskis Halvo putting our boat handling to the test in avoiding thick ice. We also climbing 2 new routes in Drygalskis’ south western bay and explored several new anchorages. A large gentle slab at (70°50n 51°09w) gave us “Slartibarfast’s Recommendation”, 6 pitches of straight-forward climbing at a civilised grade of HS.

Drygalskis Halvo Slab (70°32n 50°46w)



Slartibarfast's Recommendation HS

Talerua (70°32n 51°43w)



Seagull Soup VS

Ikerasak Island



Married Mens Way E3 5c

From our time in Uummannaq, James and Henry planned to walk from Uummannaq Fjord to Disko Fjord over the Nuussuaq Peninsular, a distance of approximately 30 miles. We, meanwhile, had to travel 160 NM by boat around the peninsular into Disko Sound. Unbelievably we arrived within 2 hours of each other, after a single nights bivvy. On entering the Qeqertaq Fjord ($70^{\circ}03'n$ $51^{\circ}16'w$) to pick up the walkers we encountered the heaviest ice of the trip, which required careful navigation in our fibreglass boat. Henry flew home from Ilulissat the following day and we explored the anchorages of Rodebay and Paakitsoq. Mark flew home on the 1st August and James and I pointed Safe Arrival south to resupply and prepare for the return crossing.



Heading south:

We left Ilulissat, and stopped overnight on the uninhabited Kronprinsens Islands ($69^{\circ}00'n$ $53^{\circ}18'w$). We arrived in Manitsoq on the 5th August, and spent several days here on maintenance (engine service, rig check, cleaning, refuel) and resupplying our fresh ingredients for the return crossing. We left Manitsoq for Nuuk where we met the crews of Gambo, Ilean and several others yachts that we had met along the way.

In Nuuk, Oscar joined us, our final member of crew for the crossing home. After less than 24 hours in Nuuk we departed for Nanortalik. We arrived in Nanortalik on the 16th August after a day spent at the Uunatoq hotspring. This is well recommended after living for 3 months on a 32ft yacht with minimal showering options! We took on 200 litres of fuel and 200 litres of water for the crossing.



Return Crossing:

We departed Nanortalik in thick fog (a common feature of our trip), losing sight of Greenland almost instantly. To avoid light winds or head winds we tracked due south towards latitude 51 North before turning the corner Eastwards towards the UK. The first half of the trip saw light winds with the boat struggling to make 4kt. We opted to carry sufficient diesel to motor through the calms, of which we saw only 24 hours total. Once we had made sufficient southing to 51N we picked up with West and Southwest winds up to Force 8. We made good ground from there on, running 150NM on some days. The return leg was an emotional affair after so long away, as James and I were extremely tired. Thankfully the weather was kind and we only saw one gale. We sighted Bishops Rock Lighthouse at 12:00 BST on 31st August and just made last orders at the Turk's Head, St Agnes, Scilly. We left the following evening for Falmouth, arriving home on the 2nd September.



Findings:

With hindsight, I would have ensured that we always had 2 climbers aboard, excluding me. It became apparent that the responsibilities of skipping the boat throughout the trip, as well as trying to get to grips with big wall climbing in the Arctic was too much of a challenge. At the time, I was worried about reconciling competing demands, but we did resolve this and were able to adjust our priorities. I am pleased with the routes that we did achieve.

Our provisioning and supplying of the trip was a real success. Our food supplies lasted almost the entire trip and we were only required to make a small resupply in Greenland prior to returning. Likewise our satphone weather system worked extremely well and I would repeat this system in future.

I was extremely pleased with Safe Arrival, and how she handled the journey out and back as well as in the Arctic. At all points, she felt comfortable and safe despite being small in comparison to most other yachts that we saw in Greenland. We never felt her fibreglass construction limited our exploration. Our size also proved to be an advantage, as it allowed us to anchor closer and slot in where other yachts could not. Overall, I have learned a huge amount about operating a small vessel in the Arctic, as well as having made my first crossing of the Atlantic.

Ice in Uummannaq Fjord



Thanks

I am very grateful to the Artic Club, the Gino Watkins Memorial Fund, Mount Everest Fund and the Royal Cruising Clubs Marshall Award who all supported me so generously to help me achieve this trip.

Of the £10,000 the trip cost, we received £8,000 in grants and £2000 of my personal savings. On return to the UK the expedition budget had been entirely spent.