

The rising son

A mother-and-son adventure to the wild, ice-filled fjords of Greenland offers a chance for reflection and connection, writes Rhonda Carrier

my son Ripley and I are standing deep inside a fjord in east Greenland – one of the remotest places on Earth – watching a musk ox lumber down the mountainside towards a vast, deserted beach glimmering gold in the Arctic sunshine.

It's like a cross between a scene from prehistory and something from a futuristic movie. With a sense of awe that's all too rare in daily life, both of us hold our breath, barely speaking as we take turns to view the creature through our binoculars and the powerful lens of one of the HX photographers accompanying us.

Ripley, 21, has just graduated from university and this trip is, in part, a reward for him for doing so well. But he knows it's much more to me than that. I've sorely missed him and though he's back for a while, he'll be moving again soon to begin his career, so we probably won't live

together again. We're here to spend time together in a place that's new for both of us – and I can't wait to see what we'll discover.

GROWING GAINS

I travelled a lot with my three sons as they were growing up. But I always thought I was going to save the bigger, more expensive, more distant trips till they were in their mid-teens, so they'd appreciate and remember them better. When the time came, it proved too expensive, but I also asked myself: why would I spend thousands taking three surly teens to Japan, only to spend my days bellowing at them to get out of bed or being pestered for the Wi-Fi code?

Late teens and young adulthood are different. My children are all men now, with their own lives. Suddenly, they are companions rather than little people to steward and entertain. ➤

Hurry Inlet, King Christian X Land, eastern Greenland

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Steve Allen



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Whales off the Greenland coast; Rhonda and Ripley; a Zodiac expedition in Spitsbergen; *Fram* at Strongbreen glacier

PICTURES: Stian Klo; Jan Hvizdal



RIPLEY'S
view



"Observing hundreds of millions of years of sedimentary rock uncovered by a glacial movement so slow it can't be seen; watching a musk ox that looked as old as the landscape; hearing snapping sounds as air escaped that had been trapped inside an iceberg for millennia – all these made the fact that I was the youngest on our ship by quite a margin feel insignificant.

Although this cruise was a break from the sense of urgency in my life, it turned out to be very different from previous holidays I'd been on, and I came back with the reassurance that things are progressing in their natural rhythm."

When Rip goes away with his girlfriend, however, their preference is for sunshine, sandy beaches and cities. So when I mention a Greenland cruise to him, he's somewhat unsure. He's also not a natural traveller – he dislikes flying due to vertigo and is anxious about both the motion of the ship and being so far from land. But he also knows it's a unique opportunity it would be ridiculous to turn down.

I, on the other hand, know he'll love it. But it's only on our first night in the Norwegian Arctic archipelago of Svalbard, before boarding the ship, that I get a sense of how meaningful this is going to be for him. While visiting the environmental research station at Ny-Ålesund on the west coast of Spitsbergen, meeting huskies and spotting wildlife including Arctic hares and foxes, Ripley opens up to me about some tricky feelings he's having about his future. They're things it's hard for a mum to hear because, while I can try to guide him, I have to let him make his own way; it's time to let go of the reins.

FRAM-TASTIC

Svalbard, with its mining history and the ever-present threat (or hope) of seeing a polar bear, blows our minds (though it's reassuring that HX sends you out with armed guides ready to get you to safety should one appear in the distance).

But the real adventure starts after we board our ship, HX Expeditions' *Fram*. Ripley is delighted – it's comfortable and there's great food, including Greenlandic dishes by guest chef Inunnguaq Hegelund.

“We see so many wonders during our 14 days on board, from scarlet sunsets to icebergs like Disney castles on steroids

We each have a plush, spacious suite with mod cons and indulgences such as a minibar, and daily laundry service and treats.

Despite his anxieties, Ripley is happiest standing on deck with his binoculars, wrapped up warm spotting dolphins, minke whales and seabirds. He spends hours out there alone, deep in observation and thought.

We see so many wonders during our 14 days on board, including scarlet sunsets, icebergs like Disney castles on steroids and soaring basalt columns reminiscent of Ireland's Giant's Causeway. We hike across mossy peatlands, hold broken-off chunks of glaciers and help collect samples of phytoplankton to monitor the health of this environment, inspecting them under a microscope in the onboard lab.

Some of the daily outings by Zodiac include landings to explore our surroundings. In Blomsterbugten, or Flower Bay – part of the Kaiser Franz Joseph Fjord in northeast Greenland – I join other passengers on a polar plunge. Ripley, meanwhile, stands with a camera at the ready, rolling his eyes at my squawking as I hit the freezing 4C waters of the bay. ➤

DESTINATIONS

NORDICS | GREENLAND



ABOVE: Children playing football BELOW: Expedition Grand Suite on *Fram* PICTURE: Association of Greenlandic Children



INSPIRING YOUNG MINDS

Against this setting of otherworldly beauty, I see my son change. I see him reassess the universe. I see him grapple with his vertigo, but also his fears and insecurities. I see him seek out alone time, on deck or in his cabin, to process all of this. But I see him become more sociable with fellow passengers, too.

He does, at times, seem sensitive about being the youngest on the cruise; the next passengers age-wise are nearing 40. But on the other hand, many of the crew are young and he is inspired as he watches them follow their passions. We talk to a cetologist (marine mammal expert), collect data as part of the Nasa Globe Cloud Observer citizen science project and watch talks on geology, climate change and geopolitics, delivered by experts in their fields from all around the world.

One researcher tells us he has been waiting decades to make the first study of the kelp forests of east Greenland – kelp being integral to the planet's health and an important future food course – and says HX has made this possible. We passengers are the first to see the groundbreaking footage he records with his underwater drone.

Through all these interactions, Ripley learns what he already knew in his heart – that it's not weird to be geeky, to have strong political views, to follow your passions. That, in fact, the world will be changed only by people such as the scientists here on board.

Before we disembark in Iceland, we stop at the tiny settlement of Ittoqqortoormiit. I watch the young man I've brought to the world join crew members and other passengers to play football against local kids, all in the shadow of a mighty glacier. And I know that by bringing him to the Arctic, I've changed his perspective on life for ever. **TW**

BOOK IT

HX Expeditions offers a 17-day all-inclusive Arctic Island Odyssey – Svalbard, Greenland and Iceland (2027) cruise starting from £9,123 per person, departing on *Fram* on July 26, 2027. The price includes flights from Oslo to Longyearbyen, a pre-cruise night in a hotel, transfers, Wi-Fi, meals and drinks (including house wine and beer). International flights cost extra.

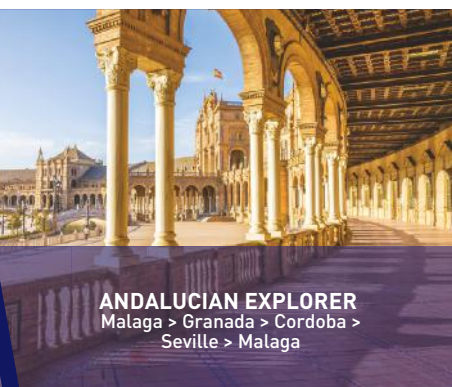
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