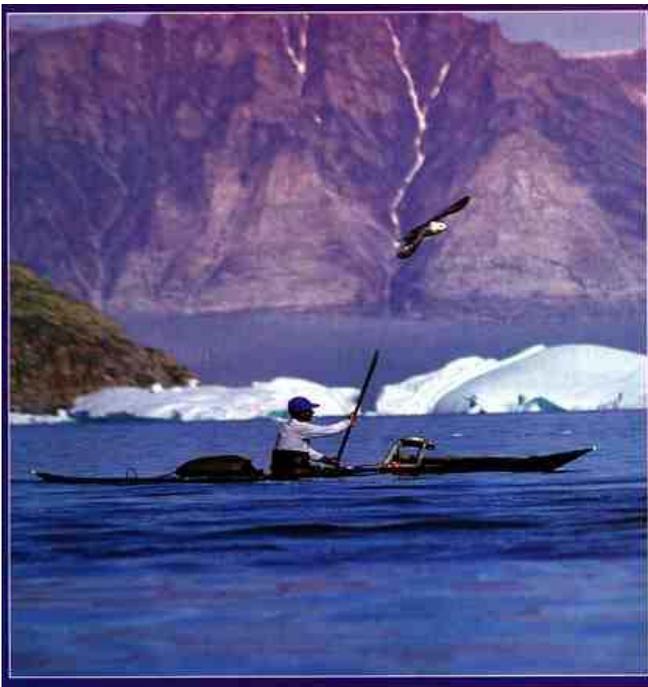




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Translation of an article in the  SPORT

Uummannaq - back to the roots of kajak-sports



Uummannaq, this is not only a journey into the northwest of greenland, not only a journey in a land of glaciers, icebergs, whales and seals, fjords and rocky coasts, a journey into a bizarre, cold but beautiful and tolerable intact nature. Here was the starting point of some famous greenland expeditions to the inland ice with the german scientist Alfred Wegener; he established the famous research station "Eismitte" - translated maybe "Center of Ice" - just in the middle of the icecap of greenland where he died on his forth expedition 1930 together with his inuit fellow Rasmus Villumsen. Even Uummannaq was the scenery for a famous german movie "SOS Iceberg", which was produced also in the thirties of this century; it's not the story of the movie which is interesting for us but two facts: one is one of the last scenes of the film, where the famous Knut Rasmussen organized lots of dozens of inuits with their kajaks floating through the icebergs which had calved from the mighty Rink Glacier. I think there are only a few movie documents in the world, which showed inuit kayak life so impressive. But this Dr. Frank Universal Film Expedition was accompanied by a scientist, Dr. Sorge, an expert in glacier science. His function was a scientific adviser, but he also used the opportunity to continue his studies of the Rinks glacier. This glacier is told to be the fastest running glacier in the world. Every four weeks he calves and on a front of about 4 miles width and 300 feet high above the water pieces of about 600 to 1000 yards break off. After this the Karratsfjord is completely filled with the biggest icebergs on the northern hemisphere.

Dr. Sorge used a Klepper Foldboat to navigate through this maze of ice. His way led first across the iceflow of Ummiammakku Isbrae, another big glacier, where he also studied the motion of the ice, the depth of the fjord,

even here he realized that the Karratsfjord is one of the deepest on earth. The inner Karratsfjord is fulfilled with icebergs, so that even the inuit have never travelled through this barriers of ice.

Sorge could surmount all these obstacles and found his way up to the glacier. When he landed and tried to bring the equipment ashore an enormous glacier calving took place and a wave run ashore about 100 feet high. His boat was smashed and he just had saved supplies for about a week. His only chance was to wait for this week, maybe an aircraft of the movie company would search for him when he didn't come back within this week...



He was found and later rescued by a steamboat with a hazardous trip. This was the history as far as we knew it at the start of our tour.

Uummanaq, this is one of the very few places in western Greenland with a nearly original character of a Greenland village. Uummanaq itself lies on a rocky island, there are no big apartment houses like you find in other Greenland towns in the south. The Inuit are housing in little colored wooden houses which are spread all over the rocks. Around the island of Uummanaq lots of huge icebergs are floating up and down with the tides, these icebergs have calved from the face of the

mighty and fast running glaciers at the fjords end. Around Uummanaq there are seven other little villages, all the people there live from seal hunting and fishing. But today none of them uses a kayak for hunting. Little motorboats have superseded the use of kayaks. I think young people in these villages have no skills in kayak driving, the art of kayakcraft seems to be forgotten. Only sometimes you have the opportunity to discover the remainders of a kayak in the backyard of one of the houses.

It's not easy to reach the town of Uummanaq. We took a SAS-DC10 from Copenhagen to Sondre Strmfjord or Kangerlussuaq as it is called today. There you have to change to a little turboprop Dash 7 Airplane that brings you up to Ilulissat/Jakobshavn, a flight always going along the rim of the Greenland icecap. Again you have to change to a helicopter which brings you in a contour flight between the tops and glaciers of Nugsuaq Peninsula - if the weather is high and no mist grounds the helicopter. Or you take one of the two postships cruising up and down the west coast but this takes time. But even keep in mind, also on the way back you have to take in account that bad weather can leave you grounded. Imaqa!

If you have arrived, maybe with sunny weather, clear sky, the spectacular views typical for polar regions, the steep slopes of the mountains, icebergs floating in the background of the heliport, if you start your way through the huts of the Inuit, you will discover the typical wooden racks, which are used to dry and store fish and birds, also in summertime the dog sledges lie on the top of these racks; even you will expect a kayak stored there but only very seldom you get the occasion to discover one. Sometimes it's only a wreck.



Disappointment overcomes us. But stop, down at the little boatharbour is a frame with three white kayaks. No, these are not the traditional kayaks, we expected: no sealskin, no linerack, the skin of the boats was made of canvas painted with oil paint, none of the boats were equipped in a traditional way.

The intention of our tour was not only the search for native kayaks, it should also be a kayak tour on the footsteps of the German Greenland expeditions of Wegener and Sorge. We had some problems to solve in Uummanaq. We met Kununguaq Fleischer, one of the rare Greenland people speaking English and taking care for aliens. Lots of cups filled with strong

coffee we drank together with him in his school office, when he tried to find someone to bring us with our gear up

to Nugatsiaq outside of the Rinksfjord, where we intended to start our tour. He introduced us also to Jan Larsen, a young danish teacher who came up to Greenland with his wife not only to train the soccer team but he also foundet a workinggroup at the vocational school, in which young people of the village could learn traditional kayakcraft.

I will give only a short report about our kayak tour, it was a very impressive tour, but even the summerlife in Uummannaq is worth to be reported. In 1989 Uummannaq celebrated its 225th anniversary according to what was written down in history books. Certainly the settlement is much older, but the written history started, when the first european whaler appeared in that area or the christian missionaries like Hans Egede introduced chronicels. Such an anniversary will be celebrated, here and everywhere, four days long. Kununguaq told us not to miss these days and the schedule of our tour should make it possible.

It was intended to celebrate these days with traditional Kaffemik and Dancemik, the opening of the new local museum, soccer games, the opening of the new KNI-supermarked - and a kayak race with kayaker from all over the western coast of Greenland. It was announced, that even the best makittalik of Greenland will come, which means the master in rolling kayaks. In these first days of our tour we could only see the preparations of these celebrations: the big supermarket of the KNI the greenland counterpart of the Hudson Bay Company, was still under construction. In the vocational school the working group was very busy to finish their first kayak. They had started working on four frames which lie there in an early stadium of construction. Jan Larsen told us that he wanted to hunt four to six seals, to finish his boat in a traditional way with real seal skin. But the manufacturing of the boat didn't go in a very traditional way, they used very modern tools, which every carpenter uses in his workshop today and of coarse it was the carpenters classroom they worked in. They formed the coamings and cut their paddles out of simple wooden laths. Anywhere between the four frames I discovered a book of the greenland national museum in Nuuk written by H.C.Petersen. It was the wellknown Handbook of kayakbuilding: so it works with the tradition. Outside the school at the backwall hung a big wooden board with the sketch of a traditional hunting kayak showing all the names for every part of a kayak. This showed that there is not only the book of H.C.Petersen with plans of a kayak.

We talked with Jan Larsen to confirm our tourplans. Our intention was to get up to Nugatsiaq at the mouth of Rinksfjord. By the way lies Igdlorssuit, the unknown island as it is named in the charts about 45 miles away from the Uummannaq island. Jan told us that in former time there was kayakrace between Uummannaq and Igdlorssuit, just across the open bay. With the chance of heavy wind, bad wether coming up, rough sea, big and short waves, fog, icebergs calving, whales. We got respect for these kayakers. But today they only paddle the short distance between Uummannaq and Storen - about 3 miles distance.

We looked across the bay to Igdlorssuit, and we got an experience how fast the fog can come up, or how fast the wind can change, if you ever had paddled a distance of about 10-15 miles across an open bay in heavy fog with a sight of about 150 feet with icebergs and crushed ice, then you can imagine what can happen on a distance of about 40 to 50 miles in the narrow hull of an eskimo kayak.

With these Impressions we started our tour through the fjords around Uummannaq. We saw lots of Inuit hunting, but none of them, really nobody in a kayak. Friends of us, which came to this area in 1980, could observe Inuits showing their kayaks in Uvkusigssat. But in 1989 we saw really no kayak in the little villages around Uummannaq. Even our plastic kayak impressed the inhabitant of the villages. Sometimes in the night - when we tried to sleep in the midnightsun - some of the inuit came to look for our boats und the construction of our rudders, also they were very interested in the design of our modern paddels as we used light whitewater RIM paddles, not traditional greenland style. Children even tried to sit in our boat as the adults only looked from the side when we were present. Only when our boats seemed to be left alone, they came and tried to feel the material.



Nearly four weeks we spent in the fjords, sometimes very lonely. At the end of the Kangerlussuag with just another very fast running glacier we had some days without meeting or even seeing anyone. Sometimes it is impossible to keep clear of the big icebergs. You have to paddle through passages of about 100 to 200 feet width

between icebergs which are also 100 to 300 feet tall. Sometimes it seemed that there are no passages left. All ways closed by ice. But as you come close you recognize that even there is a way through. We met finnwales every day. Every time they came very close and we asked ourself wether these giant animals know that we are different people from these who slaughtered them in the past and even today. Compared with the whales size we are only little toys, even toys also compared to all the gigantic scenery around us. A little bit we feared that the old tales of the inuit came true, that we could be capsized by strokes of the whales flukes.

More than one time we had to cross long distances through fog, sometimes it was possible to see the sun but not more the 100 feet ahead of us. And then like ghosts a huge white wall appears in front of us, we had paddeld straight towards one of the big icebergs. Comming closer the color of these giants change to a light or dark blue glowing in the sun shining on their top. Navigation is only possible with compass. You have to determine your direction in times of good visibility, have to look for landmarks on the opposite side of the fjords, keep them in mind, keep the direction while paddling. Every time we wondered that we hit the chosen landmark so accurate. Lots of noise is produced by the cacking ice, sometimes you think you are within a shooting range of tanks, and then you hear the sound of outboarders - the little open boats of the inuits, mostly youngsters hopping through the icefields - like the kids in our towns with their motorcycles; they like the sound of their machines.



We came back to Uummannaq. The little harbour was overcrowded with motorboats and fisherboats. Even some tawler and a suplyship of the KNI were present. Everywere the white and red flag of Greenland was waving. White for the ice, red like the rising sun. The whole village was decorated, everybody was busy to prepare the celebrations.

A four days festival started with a big Kaffeemik and Dancemik - as the people of Greenland call this part of the celebrations - just in front of the big sport- and townhall. Danish cooks were hired and flown in from Nuuk, the capital of Greenland. They bake and grill black seal meat, dried cod is preferred by the kids like

potatoe chips in Europe and America. And they let us taste something which looks very strange to us, we can't identify what it is until Kununguaq tells us that it is whaleskin. It looks like something between pudding, rubber and bacon: I think we prefer cookies and cake.

The Dancemik runs very unusual for us; a little band played alternatively an international hit and then an oldfashioned whalersdance where all dancers are stamping heavily. Every second dance was the same whalers dance and every time the keyboard player started with this tune, all the dancers hurried to dance and to stamp. The international hitparade seemed not be very attractive.

We had to stay at the festival area, because Kununguaq feared that we could run into trouble with drunken inuit, which sometimes are not very glad to see europeans. But as long as everybody sees, that we are guests of Kununguaq, everybody would respect us.

But between we got the chance to leave the party without the supervision of Kununguaq and went to the kayak workshop, where the first boat was nearly finished. The members of this group worked hard to sew the skin and they fixed it very untraditionally with cramps. Now we meet also an elder Greenlander, who seems to know how to finish these traditional boats. He shows the youngsters how to shape the paddle. Everybody is eager, as the day of the great race comes tomorrow and at least one boat of the series shall take part.

This night became very long. Kununguaq involved us into long but senseless konversations. His brain was tipsy, about a whole bottle of brandy was his consumption of the evening. But as we were not interested in drinking alcohol, we were sober.

Next morning Kununguaq cought us in the village and invited us again for a cup of coffee in his school office. He seemed to be fit again. Its astonishing, the festival was completely organized by Kunuguaq, and today the new museum will be opened.

So lots of work is waiting for him. But everytime there was time enough for a Kafemik with us.

Some Inuit carry an old skinboat into the museum, a kayak with original seal skin, even in Greenland a kayak belongs into the museum. A real Umiak was mounted on a rack in the garden of the museum, in the same way as they did it hundreds of years in front of their houses to keep it clear from the dogs.



Kununguaq already had told us that the remainders of the motor sledges (driven by propeller!!) and some other expedition gear from the last Alfred Wegener expedition was picked up on the glacier by helicopter some weeks ago and brought to the garden of the museum. As Alfred Wegener is one of the famous German Polar scientists and he died dramatically here on the ice, should this little village become place for pilgrimage of German expedition tourists? To the opening celebrations the first already has arrived: an old retired insurance agent, he is interested in expedition history and he boasted himself to have interviewed all of the surviving members of Alfred Wegener's expeditions - he seem to be a little bit crazy, every German, he

was meeting, he told thousands of stories, like the mighty waterfalls around here.

The third day of the festival and the harbour filled with little motorboats. From all of the settlements around the people come with their little motorboats some of them carrying a black kayak on top, also from all around the houses in Uummannaq the people come down, the village is empty, the harbour overcrowded. At noon the celebration of this traditional kayak race will start: a kayak race from the island with the heart rock, the island of Uummannaq, to Storen, translated the great island, 3 miles across the fjord.

There comes also the first of the new kayaks build in the school, and the owner and builder presents the boat very proud to us. It has a beautiful shape and shines in its bright white colour. All the paddlers try to slip into their narrow cockpits. Eskimokayaks are sized to fit to their owners' body and legs. The cockpit and the whole hull of the kayak gives the body and the legs of the paddler very few room. It is a difficult procedure to enter the boat, a shoehorn would be helpful, especially if they try to transfer from motorboat to kayak on the water. Helpful hands try to keep the kayak stable, but one of the kayakers got a convulsion in his leg and his fellows had to remove him from his kayak.

Lots of spectators lined up along the whole stretch of the race course with their motorboats. Even the families of the paddlers support their favorites. But the racing course is full of icebergs. Fog is winding through the iceblocks.

We also enter our kayaks, of course the best way to observe the race is to follow it on the water.

The participating kayaks at the race lined up outside the harbour for the start. They are equipped very different. Some showed no hunting gear on deck like the new boat from the school, others are completely outfitted with Nuvfit, the bird spear, with Atdligak, the seal spear, Asatdlut, the line rack, Alek the line, Norssak the throwing stick, Sanarfit the killing lance, Unak the harpoon, Sermersuit the ice knife, Avatak the bladderfloat, Igimak the harpoon head and Anguigak the lance. Even a short spare paddle - Pautit - is fixed on some of the boats. Some of the boats carry an other interesting item on their deck: it looks like a long funnel shaped bag kept open by a rigid ring. The narrow end is fixed at the bow. I have seen a similar construction in the Seakayaker Magazin to carry a drift stopper. But for what it is used here. It is used to carry the rifle on the deck and to keep it protected against the water. Before they invented this method to carry the rifle outside the



boat, some severe accidents happened, when the paddler tried to pull the rifle out of the narrow hull: he capsized or he shot in his leg.

Starting shoot comes from one of the accompanying boats and the kayaker are gliding across the fjord. Fog is moving in from the Baffin Bay. It seems to be a very unrealistic scenery, with mighty blue and white icebergs and the fog coming in like a moving wall, about 500 feet high. As the competing kayaks have paddled the first quarter mile, and we were still observing them from the starting line, I decided to follow them with my loaded Appel-Eski, an old german take-a-park Eski-kayak (The two parts of this kayak can be shifted into another, so that you have a compact unit, which can be transported easily, even by plane.) As we have all our gear with us - after the race we will paddle to Qilakitsoq, the old graveyard, where the mummies of the Nuuk museum had been found - our kayaks are not very fast.

For me it was only to get an information about the relation of our kayaks to the original Greenland kayaks concerning speed and paddle technique. But stroke by stroke it attracted me to catch up with one of the Inuits in their boats. It was not very difficult to reach the last 3 participants of the race. And I have never taken part in kayak competitions. And I did not use my fast kayak, which I use back home in Germany. Even I had no problem to take pictures between from the native kayakers. Some of the Inuit were using the short storm paddel, which they have to shift between every left hand and right hand stroke. So some of them could not reach higher speed. Even some paddler had lots of trouble with a mountable fin. Some of them dismounted the fin just short before the start, other got problems with it within the race.



At half the distance only three kayaks were in front of me. And it seemed to be easy even to reach them or to outrun them. But this was not my race, and I stopped this action. Instead of this I waited for the field coming back and got a lot of nice pictures, especially from an old hunter in his traditionally equipped kayak with his special technique to use the storm paddle in front of the high snow capped mountains of the Nuqsuaq Peninsula, with a sunny sky and fog moving in. It was not easy to paddle so slow to follow the last of the race. But back in the harbour of Uummannaq the next attraction was waiting for the spectators. One of the last specialists in Eskimo Rolling have come

from the south of Greenland to meet this festival and showed his artistic peaces. Shure, if we have our roll training at home in germany in the pool or maybe in the whitewater, there are lots of experts rolling the kayak without paddle, and even they are able to keep a Munich Mass of Löwenbräu Beer clear of water when rolling. But he did it about one our long without rest in the cold icy water of the little harbour. He showed rolling with the help of all the hunting gear, he had fixed at his boat. And all the rolls without a modern dry suit. But his annorak, made from sealskin seemed to be very effective.

My problem was, that I had only half of my last film left. And no videocamera with me. Such an occasion without a sufficient tool to produce a dokument.

Up to the time of the departure of our helicopter we paddled to Qilakitsoq and along the Nuqsuaq Peninsula to avoid the crowds and even Kununguaqs coffee was too much for us as we often met him in Uummannaq, and every time we had to follow him into school to drink anotherone - we were his special guests.

Two more quiet days.

Once we saw one of the expedition cruise ships of the german discoverer line, which cruises in polar regions with a scientific touch. But as the passengers tried to visit Uummannaq, the whole town was empty. Only Finn Pedersen, the keeper of the new museum was waiting for them and one lonely paddler showed his kayak in the harbour. No one else could be seen.



A little bit strange for the passengers.
And absolutely unusual in summertime to come into a village in Greenland without lots of people in the streets.



3 hours later the passengers went back on board, and short time later the reason for this empty town was over: A soccer game on a soccer field hidden in the rocks behind the graveyard; a soccer field completely blasted into the rock and only through a little gap you can reach it - totally hidden for tourists; if there is a soccer game, really everybody is spectating.

The time comes to say farewell. We had to pack all our gear, bring the boats down to the Harbour, to the storages of the KNI, as they will be shipped back to Ålborg in Danmark. Last visit at Kununguaq's home to say God Bye, than we go back to the heliport. Not much time is left and the Seaking helicopter comes and takes us away from a sunny island within an icy world.

So as you plan to visit Greenland, do your journey in Greenland by kayak, take some time, try to get contact to the people, they are interested in your boats but sometimes you will have problems to speak with them. Even with the Danish language it is difficult to talk to Inuit, but with English you have nearly no chance up here in the north.

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