

Greenland courts Americans despite Trump

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USA TODAY

ILULISSAT, Greenland – Much like the luminous and shape-shifting ice sculptures that dominate every sightline in this craggy Arctic Circle town, Greenland's tourism industry is ever expanding, breaking off into new formations, floating past a window. And, for now, both are tuning out President Donald Trump and preparing to host more Americans.

How's that going to land – for everybody?

In Ilulissat, Greenlandic for “icebergs,” a new airport is being built for

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**“We don’t care where
our visitors come from.”**

Ulrik Amdi Sørensen

Manager of Hotel Arctic in Ilulissat, Greenland

Zion's Church, built in Ilulissat in the late 18th century, is one of the most photographed churches in Greenland. Greenland's profile has risen since President Donald Trump's comments.

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Greenland

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large transatlantic aircraft. Towering construction cranes dot the rocky promontory on which the town – population 5,000 – sits. Fishing boats and tour operators zip in and out of a busy harbor fronted by a state-of-the-art shrimp peeling and processing factory. There’s a plan afoot for another new hotel that will look out over waters full of the seals, whales and narwhals that congregate around Qeqertarsuaq, or Disko Island, the largest island off the world’s largest island.

But while Trump himself has not traveled to Ilulissat despite his pledge to “get Greenland” from Denmark for national security reasons, more Americans almost certainly will. On June 14 – Trump’s birthday – United Airlines began direct U.S.-Greenland flights, making it far easier for them to visit a place their president says the United States will acquire “one way or the other.” Never mind that Greenlanders and their ultimate political masters in Copenhagen have made it clear they aren’t buying whatever it is Trump is selling when it comes to his Greenland overtures.

“We don’t care where our visitors come from,” said Ulrik Amdi Sørensen, manager of Hotel Arctic, a sprawling site with lodgings, two restaurants and conference rooms perched on a hillside with views of Ilulissat Icefjord.

The icefjord is a UNESCO world heritage area, meaning it has cultural, historical or scientific significance that gives it legal protections. It is the “sea mouth” of Sermeq Kujalleq, a glacier in western Greenland about 155 miles north of the Arctic Circle. Its ice sheet produces around 10% of Greenland’s icebergs. As far as glaciers with reputations go, it has a doozy: In 1912, an iceberg chunk calved from the face of Sermeq Kujalleq drifted out to sea, appeared out of the mist and slammed into the Titanic on its disastrous maiden voyage.

Greenland gets closer to the U.S.

United’s flights will go to Nuuk, Greenland’s capital, about 350 miles south of Ilulissat. Nuuk opened its own expanded international airport in 2024, enabling Trump’s eldest son to land there on his father’s “Trump Force One” private plane for a day trip in January. That visit unsettled locals because of the president’s Greenland comments.

Locals were also offended when they saw members of Donald Trump Jr.’s entourage hand out \$100 bills, food and “Make Greenland Great Again” hats to homeless people to lure them to an event. A few months later, Vice President JD Vance and his wife, Usha, confined a planned Greenland visit to a remote Arctic military base after it became apparent Greenlanders didn’t want to speak with them – not least because they arrived during an election.

However, Ilulissat and its icebergs are Greenland’s biggest tourist draw. Scientists classify their shapes as “tabular,” “sloping,” “pinnacled,” “dry-docked” and “blocky,” among other descriptors. To the untrained eye, they resemble anything from a pancake to a herd of elephants; from a spiky skyscraper to a blob of the classic Italian dessert tiramisu. Icebergs can be blue, yellow, black. They can even look like striped candies.

Like characterizing an iceberg, it’s difficult to precisely pinpoint how many Americans are currently traveling to Greenland.

According to Visit Greenland, the territory’s tourist agency, about 145,000 tourists overall visited in 2024, the majority of them arriving on large cruise ships. Most stay ashore for only a few hours at a time. In 2024, just over 4,700 travelers from North America stayed overnight in a hotel room in Greenland.

What’s clear, said Tanny Por, who directs Visit Greenland’s international marketing and promotion efforts, is that Greenland has received a lot more attention “for many different reasons in the past six months.”

She cited the new airports, United’s direct flights and also upcoming direct flights from Copenhagen to Nuuk with Scandinavian Airlines.

Por said it was too early to gauge how Donald Trump’s interest in Greenland has impacted bookings for Americans.

Still, Hotel Arctic’s Sørensen estimated just 5% of guests at his hotel in a typical year come from the United States. He expected that to increase because of the new flights to Nuuk, Ilulissat’s airport expansion scheduled to finish in 2026 and because, well, because Trump has effectively helped put Greenland “on the map.”

Sørensen acknowledged that the attention Trump has brought to Greenland, shaking its relative Arctic anonymity, is weighing on the minds of



Flemming Lauritzen sits inside Arctic Living Ilulissat’s small reception area with his wife and business partner, Ane-Sofie Lauritzen. They say it’s not tourists but cruise ships that are problematic in the area. PHOTOS BY KIM HJELMGAARD/USA TODAY

some of his guests.

“Most of the Americans who have stayed with us this year have immediately told us when they arrive: ‘We don’t support Trump,’” he said.

In Nuuk, a boutique named Outdoor Greenland recently sold out of a T-shirt with the phrase “Greenland Is Not for Sale” emblazoned on it. On a recent afternoon, a young woman working in the store said the item proved hugely popular with tourists and Greenlanders alike.

“I guess they served their purpose,” Nora Gelskov said.

Visiting disconnected Greenland

Greenland’s cities, towns and settlements are not connected by road.

The only way for tourists to move around is by boat, plane or helicopter.

If visitors make it to Ilulissat during the summer season, which typically runs June through August, they will find a place that, to outsiders, retains the feel of a rugged frontier town.

Workers in overalls walk down dusty streets that turn into dusty tracks before petering out to nowhere. Houses are made of wood and painted bright shades of red, yellow or blue. They are built directly on top of rocky terrain, with their waste and water pipes exposed. There’s no high school.

Zion’s Church, erected in the late 18th century and once the island’s largest building, is now probably the most photographed church in all Greenland. On a recent afternoon – or was it 3 a.m.? It’s hard to tell when the sun never sets – its steep-pitched roof and dark-brown wooden facade solemnly stared out at Disko Bay’s glittering icebergs.

A reporter counted three supermarkets in Ilulissat. In addition to Danish chocolates, meat and dairy products and a sprinkling of well-traveled summer fruit, they sell power tools, car oil and various gear that looked like it could prove useful on a seal, whale or caribou hunt, a normal feature of life for Greenland’s Inuit communities.

They make up almost 90% of the island’s 57,000 inhabitants.

Greenland dogs

Still, if icebergs dictate Ilulissat’s visual landscape, dogs are in charge of how it sounds. (Icebergs also make noise.)

Dog sledding has been a part of the Greenlandic identity for thousands of years.

In winter, dogs are used for hunting, fishing and traveling between settlements. In Ilulissat, there are an estimated 2,200 husky-type sled dogs – nearly one for every two humans.

Throughout the day – also at night – Ilulissat’s dogs could be heard howling,

barking in a squeaky high pitch and generally carrying on from the fields and hillsides on the town’s edge where they are kept. They sat around, frolicked, snoozed, wondered about their next meal and licked pups or themselves.

“People ask us: Why do you still keep dogs?” said Flemming Lauritzen, who set up Arctic Living Ilulissat, a dog sledding center that runs tours and educational activities, with his wife, Ane-Sofie.

“I tell them: ‘Imagine sledding into the mountains in December,’” he said.

“‘It’s dark. A full moon. Newly fallen snow. Maybe the northern lights are there. When you arrive at your spot, you overlook the whole ice sheet shining like a sugar bowl. The only sound is of the dogs’ breath. Magical.’”

Dog sledding in retreat

Dog sledding, according to the Lauritzens, is also slowly vanishing.

Among the threats: fuel-efficient snowmobiles, a changing climate melting the ice and shortening the season, and infrastructure development for tourists, which erodes available land where the dogs are kept.

Thirty years ago, there were 30,000 sled dogs in Greenland. Now there’s half that.

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Ulrik Amdi Sørensen
Manager of Hotel Arctic in Ilulissat, Greenland

“We are not opposed to tourists. The people that fly in, they’re not the problem – Americans or anyone else,” said Ane-Sofie Lauritzen, speaking inside a cozy wooden cabin the couple built to receive visitors at the center.

On the walls are maps detailing their expeditions and traditional Greenlandic cold-weather garments made from animal hide and fur. Outside, about 30 of their dogs munched on dinner: fish scraps.

“It’s the cruise ships,” she added. “People get dropped off in our little town, buy a lot of the food and goods in the supermarkets, which means people like us often can’t get the essentials we need.”

Destination Greenland?

Jens Lauridsen is the CEO of Green-

land Airports, the government-owned operator of the territory’s 13 airports.

After United announced in October it would be flying to Nuuk, Lauridsen was quoted in a company news release saying the move would “significantly enhance Greenland’s visibility on the global stage.”

Lauridsen was almost right. Trump got there first. He has done much of the heavy lifting.

In an interview, Lauridsen said he is confident the United flights would “grow tourism from North America” despite the recent political backdrop. He believes most Greenlanders “see a benefit from tourism,” though it represents a relatively small part of Greenland’s economy compared with fisheries and a grant from Denmark, the largest inputs.

“The question is how fast it develops,” he said.

Senior members of Greenland’s government, tired or perhaps just wary of talking about Trump’s Greenland obsession, declined an opportunity to comment. But Kuno Fencker, an opposition lawmaker who wants Greenland to become independent from Denmark as soon as the conditions are right, said he believes the government made a mistake by choosing not to expand all of Greenland’s airports, focusing only on the ones in Nuuk and Ilulissat.

“Of course, we want more tourists. We also want to diversify our economy,” he said.

A spokesperson for United declined to reveal how well its flights to Nuuk have sold.

The Americans are already here

USA TODAY came across few Americans in Greenland over the course of a week. One couple, off a cruise ship they boarded in Baltimore, made a brief stop at a Nuuk hotel because they wanted to get a “real Danish beer.” Another, from Oregon, made a last-minute decision to fly to Nuuk from Iceland, where they had been vacationing.

Both couples said they found the scenery stunning, Greenlanders polite and friendly, and thought many Americans would agree. However, they wondered if recent geopolitics might dissuade some potential visitors.

In one sense, Americans have already made their mark in Greenland.

So have Jamaicans.

On a recent day, Arnaq Bourup Egede was at work in an Ilulissat store called Malibu, named after the strip of beaches near Los Angeles. Malibu the store sells a Greenland-designed urban-and-sports-wear label called “Bolt Lamar,” a joining of the names of Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt and American musician Kendrick Lamar.

“Yeah. I don’t know. Maybe,” Egede said in response to a reporter’s question about whether she wanted more American tourists to show up in Greenland, and whether she viewed them as a boost, a burden or neither.

In terms of land mass, Greenland is enormous, three times the size of Texas. It’s also a small place. Egede plays for Greenland’s women’s national soccer team when she’s not working in the store. Her brother is Greenland’s former prime minister, Múte Bourup Egede.

She paused. Egede, a reggae music fan, thought about the question some more. A large picture of the Jamaican star Bob Marley leaned on an upper shelf near the register. Bob Marley and the Wailers’ 1977 song “Waiting in Vain” played on the stereo.

“I’m not against American tourists,” Egede finally said. She added that there were other branches of the business she worked in spread across Greenland’s cities. They were called “California,” “Miami” and “Alaska.”

Contributing: Jennifer Borresen



Greenlandic husky-type sled dogs are a constant presence on the edge of Ilulissat. There are an estimated 2,200 dogs – nearly one for every two humans.