



1 - The Basic Concept

Every year a National Kayaking Championship is held in Greenland where competitors in many different age categories engage in the traditional kayaking techniques of racing, rolling, harpoon throwing, and rope gymnastics. It has been organized by Qaannat Kattuffiat (the Greenland Kayak Association) starting in 1985.

Although it is called a championship competition and a male and female champion are determined, it's really more of a celebration of traditional kayaking legacy as ancient hunting folklore is introduced to younger generations. Going there to watch or take part in the activities is an experience you will never forget. It requires more than a week of vacation time, and costs more than a new fiberglass kayak but if you are thinking about doing it the information that follows will be of interest.



Teen girls on the awards platform, Nuuk 2010



Racing among icebergs in Paamiut, 2012

2 - Reasons to Go

Since the games were opened to foreign participants in 2000, a handful of Americans have gone to Greenland to attend. Besides the fact that any trip to Greenland will be uniquely enriching and provide inspiration and memories to last a lifetime, here are some other reasons to go:

See firsthand the origins of kayaking and the culture that surrounds it

Test your skills in real Arctic conditions

Share your enthusiasm for kayaking by helping Greenlanders celebrate and preserve their cultural heritage

Meet some of the top Greenland kayakers

Pay tribute to the people who invented and developed kayaks

Assist and encourage another foreigner who is making the trip



Rolling competitor, Ilulissat, 2013



Lining up for the start of a race, Paamiut, 2012

3 – When and Where

The Championship takes place in the summer, usually in early July. It lasts about a week. The location is rotated between a handful of towns along the southwest coast of Greenland. In the last ten years it has been held in Ilulissat, Sisimiut, Nuuk, Paamiut, or Qaqortoq.

Qaqortoq is the southernmost. The town's name is hard for foreigners to pronounce.

Paamiut is the smallest municipality with more of a village feel.

Nuuk is Greenland's capital, far larger than the other towns and best equipped with modern infrastructure.

Sisimiut is north of the Arctic Circle, which is where the sled dogs are.

Ilulissat is the northernmost and a popular tourist destination on Disco Bay, distinguished by its plentiful icebergs.



The school gym houses the out of town teams in Paamiut, 2012



A typical breakfast offering

4 - Arrangements

You will need to secure your own lodging if you arrive early or stay beyond the competition. During the week of the games competitors are fed meals and given a place to stay. Usually this is a large room in the local school with mattresses on the floor. Some participants may prefer other more comfortable arrangements. Accommodation options range from the local hostel to full service hotels or renting a house through the tourist agencies. Camping on the outskirts of town is permissible if you have your own gear.

At meals those who are vegetarians, gluten-free, or lactose intolerant will have challenges. Fruits and vegetables can be obtained at shops but don't expect it to be farm fresh. You do get the chance to buy exotic meat and fish directly from the hunters and fishermen who caught it. Greenlandic lamb is a gourmet delicacy. Seal may take some getting used to.



The fast changing sky in Nuuk, Greenland's capital



Have a jacket or sweater close at hand

5 - The Weather

During your stay the temperature generally won't go below freezing and can range into the low 60's when the sky clears.

Conditions can change quickly from sunny and calm to rainy, windy, and chilly. After a stretch of cold rainy weather you may yearn for a dose of calm sunshine, until you are reminded that this brings the mosquitoes out. It's a daily dilemma deciding what to take along when venturing outside: rainwear or sunscreen, sweater or T-shirt, knit hat or headnet. The safest option is to bring everything.

In Ilulissat and Sisimiut the sun never sets in early July. In other places you probably won't be awake during the few hours of darkness anyway. You won't need a flashlight, but you may want eyeshades for sleeping.



The kayak must be carried this way during portage



Help is close by during the races

6 - The Races

There are four types of races, each done on a different day. The long distance race is between 15 and 20 kilometers. The portage race is shorter but has 2 or 3 sections where the kayak must be carried on land. The short distance race is 3 to 6 kilometers. The three-person relay race uses the short distance for each leg of the race. Routes are determined depending on the local conditions. Women and kids get shorter distances. Trying to guess when your particular race group will start can be stressful. They don't wait for latecomers, and you're likely to get cold if you get on the water too early. Keep an eye on the others in your group for clues.

Rolling gear such as a tuilik is not usually worn while racing. Some Greenlanders wear little more than jeans and a T-shirt in good weather. The organizers have motorboats assigned to cover the race route and ensure the safety of all participants.



Only a few signs are in English, Danish, Greenlandic



Between 5 and 7 Danish kroners is about one dollar

7 - Language & Money

Most Greenlanders speak Greenlandic and Danish. English is learned by some as a third language but don't assume English will be understood wherever you go. Learning a few words of Greenlandic will come in handy. Terms like 'thank you' or 'no' are easily mastered, but the structure of full sentences is bewildering. A phrase like "I don't want to see him again" becomes all one word and breaks down to "see-want to-again-not-him/her-I." To add to the confusion there are also regional differences in pronunciation and spelling. Yet it remains a very much alive and fascinating aspect of Inuit society.

The currency is Danish Kroners. As in Denmark and other Scandinavian countries, everything seems expensive. Only a few tourist shops will accept dollars. Banks, when open, can exchange your money.



The ice is never far away in Ilulissat



The team should roll simultaneously, or try to

8 - Rolling

Rolling is done in two events, individual and in teams of three. In team rolling all three members must make the roll to get credit for it. You may be asked to fill out a team if you can roll well and haven't been recruited yet. While different ages and nationalities can comprise a team, genders are not mixed.

Foreigners are allowed to use neoprene tuiliks, but Greenlanders can only use them for practicing. If you get to try one of the beautiful handcrafted sealskin tuiliks you will most likely find it harder to do your rolls.

The water temperature is indeed cold and it also varies from town to town. Qaqortoq is noticeably milder than Ilulissat. On a good sunny day rolling without gloves isn't too bad, but in wind and rain your fingers soon feel like icicles if you go with bare hands. Don't worry about the "eight kilo" brick specified in the rules. They use a paving stone that's about half that weight.



Fighting Mother Nature is a losing proposition

9 – Plans & Expectations

The average Westerner will find the day-to-day pace of Arctic living rather frustrating. Planning and scheduling take a back seat to living in the moment. What matters most is what is happening right now. You will need to be flexible and adaptable to last minute changes and unexpected shifts in the day's agenda. Bear in mind that these are people whose ancestors not only came to terms with the harshest weather on the planet, they made their home in it, respecting the superiority of Nature's power. To survive on subsistence hunting in this environment a person had to seize opportunities as they arose and be patient when they didn't.

If the airport is fogged in, the plane must wait. If the harbor is clogged with ice, the ship will be late. If the wind is howling, harpoon throwing will have to be postponed. A race might even start early because someone in charge thought it was a good idea.



Ropes competition in Sisimiut 2011



One hand stays on the paddle while throwing the harpoon

10 - Ropes & Harpoons

Rope gymnastics is the only event done on dry land. Watching the wiry, lean and agile guys zip through their routines is a sight to behold. Many of the older participants forego ropes. There is no requirement that one has to do every discipline. While very few of the kids engage in rolling, most of them have a go at ropes and it can take much of the day to give everyone their chance. Sometimes the adults compete on a different day. There have been years when the last person finished after midnight. Foreigners often end up going last after having been ready since morning.

Harpoons are thrown for both distance and accuracy, which provide two separately scored results. If you bring your own harpoon make sure it weighs at least one kilogram (without the norsaq) or it will not qualify for competition use. You also must have a holder to keep it from falling off the deck while you paddle up to the throwing line.



Don't lose sight of the importance of helping others



Everything is okay if it's okay right now

11 - Attitude

Many of the Americans who have competed in past years were exceptional paddlers who took training seriously, perhaps too seriously. The Greenland games are best thought of as a family picnic rather than the Olympics. Having the appropriate attitude is more important than how strong your skills are. As a foreigner you take on the role of ambassador for your country whether you desire to or not. A sincere interest in the culture and lore of traditional kayaks will get you a lot more respect than arrogantly crushing your opponents. In the old days, seal hunters never boasted about their achievements.

Greenlanders have an amazing ability to refrain from worrying. Things often turn out okay in the end, so fretting about potential problems is just wasted energy. You may often find yourself anxious and stressed about the near future while those around you are happily enjoying the present.



Judges decisions should be taken as final



Foreigners may or may not receive medals

12 - Awards & Scoring

Although an official set of rules has existed for a long time, what is put into practice in any given year can vary widely for no apparent reason. Avoid the urge to dispute or protest. Go with the flow and remember that the games are supposed to be fun.

The top three competitors in each category receive gold, silver, or bronze medals. The kids medals are the same shape but smaller. The process for determining the overall winner relies on a formula that takes into account each of the nine events, including the two events that use a three-person team, assigning a point value to each result. It can be a bit confusing because the point value of one's rope or rolling score is also determined but uses a different type of points. There are restrictions, which can appear arbitrary, on who is eligible to win the overall title.



It's a nice evening even if you can't understand anything



Qajaq Ilulissat winning the team trophy in Qaqortoq, 2008

13 - The Awards Dinner

On the final night of the championships a banquet is held where speeches are made, all the remaining medals are awarded, the trophies for Kayak Man and Woman of the Year are presented, qajaq songs are sung, the winning team is announced, and then live music and dancing continues into the wee hours.

This is a joyful occasion where the pressure and anxiety of competing is done with and there is lots of laughing, picture taking, and socializing. People like to get dressed up for this occasion although it is not required.

After the ferry departs the next day or the day after, taking the other teams home, things in town quiet down. The local qajaq club members have regular jobs and family obligations. If you stick around you may feel a little sad, seeing all the excitement die down. You can make plans for next year.



Kangerlussuaq airport



Sarfaq Ittuk, the Arctic Umiaq Line's ferry

14 - Travel and Costs

To get to Greenland one flies via Iceland or Denmark. You arrive at either Narsarsuaq in the south or Kangerlussuaq to the north, as only these airports can accommodate the big planes. You then switch to a smaller plane or helicopter to get to the competition town.

Going to the Greenland Championships is not cheap. Figure on at least about \$2500, but that requires roughing it and missing out on the unique opportunities tempting any tourist including seeing a glacier up close, eating musk ox, whale, or Greenlandic lamb in a restaurant, visiting a remote village, or taking home beautiful souvenir pieces by master craftsmen. Staying longer than the competition week will also add to the cost. A trip along the coastline on the ferry is a great experience and allows you to travel with the out-of-town teams if you schedule it accordingly. Being prepared to spend a total of \$4000 to \$5000 will give you plenty of options.



Many kayaks are finished just before the event starts



A sealskin tuilik takes a lot of work to maintain

15 - Equipment

Taking your kayak to Greenland is an issue. Folding kayaks checked as plane luggage have been used successfully. Bringing a non-folding kayak means shipping it several weeks early. Some people have built a skin-on-frame there, sourcing the raw materials in advance. It's a nice gesture to bring or build a skin-on-frame and then leave it there when you depart. In fact any gear including dry suits, wet suits, neoprene tuiliks, paddles or harpoons that you donate to a club will be much appreciated.

Borrowing a kayak is possible but you can't count on a comfortable fit, and it will probably be shared among others so you won't have exclusive use of it when you desire. If you want to borrow a sealskin tuilik be aware that it may not fit the cockpit you plan to use it with. Sealskin doesn't stretch as easily as neoprene.



Helen Wilson and Kamp Absalonsen, Qaqortoq 2014



The 2009 US contingent arriving in Ilulissat

16 – Who has been there

Greenland Championship attendees from the USA:

- 2000 Greg Stamer, Cindy Cole, Harvey Golden,
Marc Seidenberg
- 2001 (no U.S. attendees)
- 2002 Greg Stamer, Richard Nonas, Vernon Doucette
- 2003 Harvey Golden, Mark Molina
- 2004 Mark Molina, Becky Molina, Joe Molina,
Cheri Perry, David Kinney, Mel Rice,
Dubside
- 2005 Cheri Perry, Turner Wilson
- 2006 Dubside, Alison Sigethey, Tom Milani,
James Song, Tom Sharp
- 2007 Sandy Noyes
- 2008 Dubside, Helen Wilson
- 2009 Dubside, Marcel Rodriguez, Jenny Owen,
McKinley Rodriguez, Jeanette Rogers,
Richard Rogers
- 2010 Dubside, Helen Wilson, Heather Lamond
- 2011 Dubside
- 2012 Dubside
- 2013 Dubside
- 2014 Dubside, Helen Wilson, Heather Adams

Note: Some of these people attended the games but did not compete.



James Roberts from Canada shares a harpoon, Qaqortoq 2014



Men's 2nd, 1st, and 3rd place Champions, Sisimiut 2006

17 – Go for it!

Although the communication network with Greenland is sometimes spotty, Qaannat Kattuffiat likes to know who is coming. You can get help with arrangements through QajaqUSA (qajaqusa.org). There is normally a registration fee, which is quite small compared to plane fare.

Many of those who have gone have successfully raised support money through various calls for donations or grants.

While the location for an upcoming championship is generally announced a year ahead of time, it can be difficult to book flights and make plans as early as you would like because the dates are often undetermined until mid-spring. Think of this as your first opportunity to refrain from worrying about potential problems that haven't become real problems. It's a technique that will help you immeasurably later on. Good Luck.