

## LIFE ON THE ICE

### Greenland: The World's Largest Island



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#### Living at the Top of the World

Greenland is the world's largest island. It lies largely above the Arctic Circle, between Canada and Iceland, and though geographically closer to North America it has long been closely connected to Europe and has deep political, cultural and economic ties with Denmark. Most of its surface area is covered with a huge sheet of ice. At its heart, this ice is estimated to be several kilometres thick. Most of Greenland's inhabitants live around the coast of the island, which is dotted with fjords and inlets. The population of Greenland is just over 50,000 people, which makes it the least densely populated country on earth.

#### A History of Greenland

Greenland was discovered in the tenth century by the Viking explorer Erik the Red, who had been exiled from his native Norway. Erik attempted to lead a band of settlers to live in the new land he had stumbled across, but they gradually left for Iceland and North America. Among them was Leif Eriksson, who is credited with discovering the Americas many centuries before Columbus.

Of course, long before Erik the Red came to Greenland, it had been settled on and off by various Arctic tribes, among which were those belonging to what is now called the Dorset culture (because archaeological evidence of their culture was found in a place called Cape Dorset in Nunavut, Canada). These early peoples may have been extinct by around the year 1000, and later waves of settlers belonged to a culture known as Thule. The Thule people

originated in Alaska and were the ancestors of the Inuit people, who are the native population of Greenland today.

The word 'Thule' is interesting. In antiquity and the Middle Ages in Europe, 'Thule' was the name given to the most northerly part of the world as depicted on early maps. It was so far away, and so little known, that it was considered mythical – nobody really knew where it was. Some maps depicted it as an island. The words 'ultima Thule' on maps meant 'the end of the known world'. In the modern world scholars think that Thule may have meant Norway, or islands off the coast of Scotland like the Shetlands or Orkney, and one scholar thinks it may have referred to Ireland. However, most people now agree that the medieval Thule refers to Greenland or Iceland. The Thule people are named after this ancient idea of 'Thule'.

Modern Greenland is a self-governing nation, though Denmark looks after Greenland's defence and its budget. The capital of Greenland is Nuuk, which lies on the country's south-west coast. There are many scientific research stations located in Greenland, and the United States has established an airbase there. Greenland is rich in mineral deposits, which climate change and global warming are making more accessible.

Greenland's ice sheet provides scientists with valuable information about the world's climate, and climate change; by drilling into the ice-sheet and examining the ice cores, many things can be learned about the climate, conditions and temperature of the region many thousands of years ago.

The official languages of Greenland are Greenlandic and Danish. English is an important language, too, and children learn it in school from an early age.

### **Flora and Fauna**

The seas around Greenland are rich in fish and seabirds, and among the native land animals are included the polar bear, reindeer, and musk ox. Many species of whale, including the narwhal, are common around Greenland's coasts, as are seals – fishing has long been a vital part of the region's economy. Vegetation is sparse but several species of tree are found on the island, as well as shrubs, lichens and flowering plants. Many domesticated animals, including chickens and sheepdogs, are descendants of forebears imported by European settlers, and some of the larger species considered native (like the musk ox) migrated from Canada a long time ago.

### **Inuit Culture**

In *The Eye of the North*, Igimaq is a member of the Inuit people. The Inuit are descended from people of the Thule culture, which emerged in Alaska in the early middle ages and reached Greenland in about the thirteenth century, just as the people of the Dorset culture (who had lived in Greenland up to this point) were dying out. Interestingly, prior to this migration, the Thule people had split from the Aleut, a tribe whose descendants live today in the Aleutian Islands, a long archipelago between North America and Russia.

Inuit culture is found all the way across North America, from Alaska through Canada and Newfoundland and into Greenland. The culture is not 'monolithic' (all the same everywhere), but instead displays regional differences in language and tradition.

The Inuit have a long history of using dogs for transportation. Igimaq is a skilled dogsledder, with a team of dogs at his command. Traditional Inuit dogsleds could be made from wood, animal bones or whale baleen. Dogs were, and are, an important animal in Inuit culture both for companionship and as working animals.

In the east of Greenland, the climate is mildest and people can hunt whales and narwhals all year round using a type of boat called a kayak (or qajaq). Igimaq is a hunter like this, and he uses a kayak, as seen in *The Eye of the North*. Inuit people are traditional hunters and fishers, and they make use of any naturally available plant, including seaweed, for food. Inuit people also use boats for transportation; sometimes getting around by sea is easier than going over land!

Inuit people also hunt land animals like caribou. Many Inuit peoples in various places across the Arctic use **inukshuk** to mark the caribou trails and to use as landmarks to find their way around in a largely featureless landscape. An **Inukshuk** (plural: Inuksuit) is a man-made stone construction, built by placing stone upon stone, until the desired height and shape is reached. Some are simply made of a single upright stone, and others are built to look like a human figure. As well as landmarks, the inukshuk may also have another practical function: they can mark good hunting grounds, or treacherous terrain. Some people believe the inukshuk also have a sacred function.

Inuit people rely on hunting to survive, even more so in the past than they do now. Most of the Arctic regions in which the Inuit live are not suitable for wide-scale farming and so, traditionally, many uses were made of the animals hunted by Inuit people. Skins were used to make clothing and shelter, bones and ivory were used to make tools and equipment, the oils and fats from the animals were used as fuel. Of course, the meat from hunted animals was vital to keep people alive. In the short summer season, things like plants, berries and seaweed were gathered.

Greenlandic Inuit have a strong artistic culture – carving of bone, ivory and soapstone, sewing of skins and mask-making are all common. There are many traditional sports and games played by the Inuit, and the winners of these games are feted as heroes!

Some Inuit peoples, though not all, built and lived in igloos. Sometimes these were temporary, as some Inuit peoples were nomadic (the people tended to move around in order to hunt and fish and didn't form permanent settlements). Other igloos were more permanent and could be maintained long after they were built, forming settlements and villages. Some shelters could also be made using animal skins, like tents, which were very portable. In the modern world most Inuit peoples live in houses, though many still hunt (though using modern weapons) and still use traditional methods of building shelters when travelling around on the trail. Igimaq in *The Eye of the North* lives in a colourful wooden house in a small settlement near the coast.

Inuit peoples have strong beliefs in the power of the natural world, and they have many stories about how the world was made as well as many gods and goddesses. They also tell tales of the power of the Northern Lights – some believe the lights contain the spirits of loved ones who have died. Others tell you that if the lights are mocked, they will come down from the sky and chop off your head! Traditionally, Inuit peoples were shamanic, though they are mostly Christian today.

Sedna, the goddess of the sea, is widely revered in Inuit culture and she goes by different names depending on where you are. She is credited with creating the animals which live in the Arctic waters, such as seals, whales and walruses and is a goddess who must be placated and treated well – or her wrath is terrible to behold...

Sadly, climate change and global warming is having a very bad effect on Inuit culture and Inuit peoples. The changes in the ice sheet, quotas imposed on the animals the Inuit hunt (even though their survival doesn't completely depend on hunting anymore) and a lack of employment opportunities for young people are taking a heavy toll on traditional ways of life.



**Image: Inupiat Family from Noatak, Alaska, 1929. Photo by Edward S. Curtis.  
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