

WHAT IT TAKES THE MUSHERS OF GREENLAND

It's not that long ago that the only way to move across Greenland's icy wilderness was by sled and dog. **Anna Smith** finds out how tour operators and hobbyists are keeping the ancient art of mushing alive, despite a myriad of challenges.



Credit: Theis Mortensen



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When humans first came to Greenland 4,500 years ago they were accompanied by dogs. Settling with their owners on the gigantic ice mass between Iceland and Canada, the Greenland

dog remains the only native breed on the island and are fiercely protected by both locals and the law to preserve their ancient heritage. We don't know for sure when they were put to work pulling sleds, but with the most conservative estimate being 1,000 years ago, it's safe to say that mushing is in their DNA.

The advent of snow mobiles has meant that the Greenland dog is being used less and less for these traditional practices, nor are there as many racers or hobbyists keeping packs, but these unique pups are still being harnessed and worked in a new way – for tourism. Going on a sled dog ride for a few hours or a few days is an increasingly popular activity in the increasingly popular destination. Sat snug in a sled or calling commands from the reigns, mushing is the perfect blend of culture, adventure and convenience for your trip and a quintessentially Greenlandic experience.

"If you throw a stick in front of a Greenland dog, it looks at you like 'why are you throwing a stick?' But if you put it in front of a sled it starts running."

Rasmus Poulsen, a native Dane, got his first pack of dogs within a month of moving to Greenland in 2013. He shared them with a couple of his friends from university where he was studying Arctic engineering and used a children's bobsled to get around. "It was just a really Greenlandic thing to do, go out mushing. It was a cheap way to get out in the wilderness, in some ways at least – because we could share the pack."

Having made the decision that mushing was more fun than engineering, he dropped out of university and relocated to his girlfriend's home town of Tasiilaq in the east – starting Tasiilaq Tours (www.tasiilaqtours.com), where he runs dog sledding excursions with the opportunity to snow-shoe, ice-fish or sail.

In 2023, more than 200,000 tourists visited Greenland, which, although a globally low number, is extraordinary for one of the most remote and sparsely populated countries in the world. Generating 1.9 billion Danish Krone (DKK) in revenue (around £200 million), tourism is an attractive business prospect for many residents. For those who own Greenland dogs, the opportunity to make money whilst exploring the magical fjords, glaciers and coastline seems like an ideal venture.

For the Love of It

The catch to running a commercial mushing business is that it is a pretty terrible business model to begin with. Rasmus explains; "Having dog sleds for tourism is a hobby that goes into zero. It's not a good business, especially if you start counting in hours. If I should pay myself every time I go out and run the dogs and feed them and so on, then I would have a very, very bad business. Now I get revenue that can maybe support the dog food, but not much more."

It costs Rasmus around 40,000 DKK a year (£4,500) to keep his pack and, with the cost of food rising and the sledding season getting shorter, that cost is likely to increase. Although he sees more tourists coming to Tasiilaq, there are also more tour operators vying for their time. In most cases, if someone wants to keep dogs, tours will only supplement the maintenance of a hobby.

That doesn't mean it's not a hobby worth having or tour worth taking. Greenland, especially in the east, is a remote winter wonderland with mountains, glaciers and fjords stretching into the North Atlantic. Rasmus takes his guests to Pupik, where you can snowshoe up to a panorama of the dramatic Sermilik Icefjord; the small, traditional settlement of Tiniteqilaq for a cultural experience "on the edge of the world"; and Quærnduardi where visitors can try their hand at ice-fishing. With the snow cover and terrain dictating where it is possible to ride, Rasmus' favourite tours are the unexpected ones.

"Usually, we are crossing a fjord, we are going over a lake, that's quite easy because it's not going up high in the mountains, but the last couple of years we have been forced to go other ways. I tried a tour where we were climbing 950m above sea level over a glacier and then had a 30 minute downhill ride. That was just magnificent. My favourite tours are definitely the ones where we're going up, sleeping in a hut, and then going back home the next day or the day after. That is where you get out and you're really using the dogs."

Mushing teams can range from two to 12 dogs depending on the load they're pulling, and the highly trained dogs react to vocal commands for direction. Mushers also have a brake pedal to slow the pack down. As working dogs, the relationship between owners and their packs tends to be strictly business, but the hierarchy within the pack itself is essential for a smooth ride.

"Usually you have a pack leader. The pack leader is often also the one who is the leader when we are riding, but not necessarily. The pack leader is the strongest one and the dog who is leading the pack when we are riding is the one who listens most to my commands and who is most motivated."

As towns have expanded and attitudes towards dogs have changed, it's less likely for packs to be housed on the same land as their owners or have a dedicated space in the fjord system where they can run free. This makes it harder for packs to naturally maintain their hierarchy and makes the culture less visible; a visibility that is essential to keeping the culture alive, as Rasmus has found when it comes to maintaining the 175 year old sport of sled dog racing.

"It really depends if there's anyone doing all the things that need to be done for a race – finding sponsors so they can buy some food or some prizes for the victors, as well as putting down a start line where we can tie up the dogs. If somebody is doing a lot of work in that then we also see a growth in the interest of having dogs. But we have fewer dogs than we used to have here, it goes up and down from season to season."

There's Space Enough

There are fewer dogs across Greenland as a whole, with the population more than halving in the last 30 years.

The most recent comprehensive count was done in 2016 and indicated there were just under 15,000 dogs left on the island. For a place with 56,000 people this may seem like a lot (roughly one dog for every four people), but for a pure genetic breed that is still in decline, the population has to stay above a certain number to prevent inbreeding and genetic weaknesses - issues that could threaten the breed entirely.

Rasmus cites the convenience of snow mobiles and unpredictable snow and ice as reasons for the decline. Statistics Greenland adds rising prices and infectious disease to the list. Unfortunately, as with many stories about Greenland, climate change can account for a lot of these issues. The Arctic has been warming at four times the rate of the rest of the world since 1979 and its effects are acute in a country that is 80% covered in ice. As the sea ice melts, the dogs are no longer needed for traditional hunting or fishing practices and rising temperatures are accommodating diseases that they have seldom been faced with.

A 10 million Krone (£1 million) vaccination programme was rolled out by the government to protect the breed from disease, which, as of 2018, had reached a quarter of all Greenland dogs. Culturally, Rasmus is seeing a younger demographic (25-40) of hobbyists who are dedicated to keeping the tradition alive. Tourists looking to engage in Greenlandic culture are also necessitating the maintenance and breeding of packs.

“A lot of the dog packs here wouldn’t be here today if it wasn’t for tourism. The more tourists we have, and the more tours they buy, the more dogs you will also have.”

When asked whether more tourism was a good thing for Greenland, his answer was simple; “Yes. We have space enough.”

The Catch-22

Rasmus’ sentiment on tourism is reflected in the government’s. The National Tourism Board, Visit Greenland’s, slogan since 2021 has simply been ‘Towards More Tourism’ - and it seems to be working. 2023 was one of the country’s most successful years ever with a 74% increase in cruise passengers and a 9% increase in ‘land’ visitors since 2022. There is a general positive attitude towards tourism from residents, but some feelings of overwhelm when large ships disembark thousands of passengers at once, sometimes doubling the population of a town in a matter of minutes.

This amenability towards tourism is a huge benefit to the Greenlandic government. Since Greenland gained home rule status from Denmark in 1979, and, as a result, lost a number of subsidies in their main export (fishing), they have needed to diversify their economy. To do this, the government landed on two things: mining and tourism. Tourism has become vital to the Greenlandic economy, and, with three new airports opening before 2026, it is only set to grow.



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Nevertheless, there are concerns with the sudden influx of flights, boats and people. Although there were significantly more visitors, overnight bookings on Greenland only rose 1.9% between 2022 and 2023. This could signify that locals aren't economically or socially benefitting from the tourism boom, with the majority of profits going to foreign cruise operators who are accommodating tourists off-shore. To a certain extent, mushers are shielded from this as they are some of the only people with the skills to run tours. Despite this, they are still less likely to get hired by foreign companies because of language barriers, and, if they are, their wages are often insufficient to support their packs and live comfortably (Over-tourism: excesses, discontents and measures in travel and tourism, 2019).

There are also concerns among those watching the ice melt. There aren't many major studies on the impact of tourism on the Greenlandic environment (in fact, there is a more reliable study about how few studies there are) but with Sustainable Travel International estimating that 8% of the world's total carbon emissions stem from tourism, it isn't unreasonable to assume that the issues impacting the Greenland dog are in part due to the tourism that is helping to maintain them.

The Greenlandic government, despite their open arm policy to tourism, aren't shying away from the impact of climate change. In 2023 they signed the Paris Agreement; the international treaty designed to limit global temperature rise and reduce greenhouse gases. More unexpectedly however, is the otherwise positive stance they are taking towards the melting ice.

Research conducted in the Indigenous Affairs Journal (2008) showed the population were "being encouraged to think positively about the opportunities that climate change is bringing". Opportunities range from mining and arable farming once the permafrost has disappeared, to 'last chance tourism', in which foreigners boost the economy to get a glimpse of Greenland's unique landscape and wildlife before it is lost forever. The melting ice has already made it easier for cruise ships to navigate to more remote areas of the country.

This attitude has unsurprisingly been controversial, but with the majority of the blame for climate change laying outside Greenland's borders, social and economic resilience to it must be the better option than being a victim of it - as Former Prime Minister Aleqa Hammond argued. For the

Greenland dog, however, this tourism model is a Catch-22. The demand for foreign tours that necessitate the maintenance of the packs is also the thing that makes them less valuable for daily life on the island and more vulnerable to disease.

Customer Service

Although Greenland dogs are teetering between the front line of climate change and the last frontier of mass tourism, they may represent a best-case scenario for the future. Multi-day dog sled tours are a thrilling, low impact way of moving between landmarks and villages, promote education in culture and tradition, reinvest in local infrastructure and can help prevent economic leak to foreign cruise operators. In turn, an increased demand for tours should encourage the breeding and maintenance of packs and make it more economically viable to do so. Although choosing a sled dog tour may not stop the ice melting, it can add to a broader conversation about what kind of tourism is welcome in the world's fragile places.

Visit Greenland are keen to promote more conscious tourism also, with adventure travellers being at the top of their list for the 2021-2024 period. They view them as tourists "that offer the most value for the local community, minimize environmental impact and [are] considerate of local culture." As the country prepares to welcome more foreigners than ever, it is possible that the Greenland dogs can settle into a new way of life as well. They aren't naturally the most social, but Rasmus thinks it's time that they brush up on their customer service skills.

"I'm trying to train my dogs to be a little bit more friendly, because I'm using them with my kids, I'm using them with tourists and so on. When we get back from a tour, I'm trying to release all the dogs and have them run around in our area, then I call them and they come to me."

Although Greenland is in a time of flux, the Greenlanders have shown that they're nothing if not adaptable, and, with any luck, the Greenland dog will be too. With tour operators and hobbyists like Rasmus keeping the tradition alive, it is hopeful that 'last chance tourism' is a thing of the distant future when it comes to this extraordinary breed. As far as Rasmus is concerned, no money nor climate is going to stop him mushing. He simply replied: "I'm going to keep doing it as long as I want to". 