



Andreas Nielsen visiting costal people, c. 1955

Photo courtesy of Elsebeth Butenko.

Greenland

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Greenland – Kalaallit Nunaat – has Canada as its nearest neighbor and is the world’s largest island, reaching 2670 kilometers from north to south and 1050 kilometers from west to east, about four times the size of France. It spans over 840,004 sq. mi. (2,175,600 km²) of which 708,073 sq. mi. (1,833,900 km²) is covered in ice while the

remaining 131,931 sq. mi. (341,700 km²) is land with no ice.¹ Paradoxically, Greenland has the world's sparsest population scattered among small villages and towns.² Nuuk is the largest town and the capital city.

Eighty percent of Greenlanders are Inuit, or mixed Danish and Inuit, while the remaining 20 percent are of European descent.³ Greenland relies heavily on shrimp, crabs and fish for its export market (90 percent). Local village economies depend on seal hunting.⁴

Greenland is well known for its mountains, glaciers and fjords. Roads are scarce and transportation is often very expensive. The majority of the population lives on the west coast and are almost totally economically dependent on budget subsidies from Denmark.⁵

A Broad History of Greenland

About 4500 years ago arctic people arrived in Greenland from Canada and started to settle. They were later known as the "Independence People One" or what we would today call Stone Age people.⁶

Around 1000 B.C. the next two waves of people that arrived in Greenland were known as the "Independence People Two" and the Sarkak people.⁷ The neo-Eskimos followed almost a century later.⁸ In A.D. 1250 the final influx of people that came to Greenland were known as the Inuits.⁹ They are the forebearers of today's Greenlanders from Canada.

Around the year A.D. 875 Icelander Erik Thorvaldson (Erik the Red) arrived in Greenland after sailing from Iceland.¹⁰ He indicated that the island was habitable which led to the arrival of the people from the north. These people remained in Greenland for almost 500 years.¹¹

In A.D. 1261 the people from the north decided to give their allegiance to the Norwegian king Haakon the Old and agreed to pay him taxes in exchange for the maintenance of trade routes.¹² However, in 1348 Magnus Smek, king of Norway and Sweden, forbade foreign trade with Greenland.¹³

Norway came under the Danish crown in 1369 and so did Greenland.¹⁴

The law against foreign sailing to Greenland was tightened in 1425, gradually eradicating the connection the island had with other countries.¹⁵

Danish explorers started to arrive in Greenland and claimed it in 1605.¹⁶ In 1819 a treaty between Norway and Sweden gave up all claims for Greenland.¹⁷

For the first time, a new law issued in 1953 enabled Greenland to send two representatives to the Danish parliament. Also, in the same year, they were given the status of a country that gave all Greenlanders Danish citizenship as well as all rights and privileges of Danish people.

In 1963 a people's register was introduced.¹⁸ Home rule was established in 1979 and in 1985 Greenland withdrew from the European community while still being part of Denmark.¹⁹

Home rule allowed Greenland to have jurisdiction over home rule organization, local government, culture, telecommunications, housing, tax, education, foreign trade, transport, public works, renewable resources, conservation and environmental protection, public health, hunting, agriculture and religion. Denmark is responsible for foreign relations, defense, security, currency, and most of the judicial system.²⁰

Language and Culture

The official language of Greenland is an Inuit dialect that is spoken in West Greenland. East Greenlanders speak a different dialect. The second language is Danish which is spoken by almost everyone followed by English, which is spoken by a small percentage of the population.²¹

The Greenlandic culture has its origins in the Inuit culture which is one of the oldest cultures on earth.

Early Religion and Christianity

Pre-Christian Inuit's believed in spirits that existed in animals and nature. These spirits needed to be called upon by Shamans. Shamanism still exists in Greenland, although not as widespread as before.

In the year 1000, Catholicism was introduced to Greenland by Leif Eriksson, son of Erik Thorvaldson. Leif brought priests with him to help spread the Word of God and Greenland became the first arctic land to embrace Christianity. Tjodhilde's²² Church was the first church to be built in Greenland and on the North American Continent. Two hundred years later the Catholic faith was well established on the island.

On July 3, 1721 Pastor Hans Egede and his wife Gertrude Rash arrived in Greenland, bringing with them the Lutheran faith.²³ Several missionaries, mainly from Denmark, followed, and today Greenland's main Christian faith is Lutheran.

Adventism

The Adventist message was originally brought to Greenland by fishermen from the Faroe Islands. In 1953 an Adventist named Andreas Nielsen from Denmark began evangelism in Greenland.²⁴

Since Greenland is an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, the Adventist mission in Greenland was overseen by the West-Nordic Union, of which Denmark was a part, until 1992 when the Danish Union of Churches Conference was organized. It was primarily from Denmark members that money and resources reached Greenland. The Greenland Mission continues to be under the Danish Union of Churches Conference to this day.²⁵

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1. Pie Borneman and Claus Petersen Hjalmar, *Bogen om Gronland* (Politikkens Forlag, 1962), 16.

2. Etain O'Carroll and Mark Elliott, *Greenland and the Arctic* (Lonely Planet, 2005), 70.

3. Deanna Swaney, *Iceland, Greenland and the Faroe Islands* (Lonely Planet, 1991), 368.

4. O'Carroll and Elliott, 76.

5. Ibid.

6. Jorgen Fleischer, *A Short History of Greenland* (Aschehoug Dansk Bogforlag A/S, 2003), 5.

7. Borneman and Hjalmar, 69, 74.

8. Ibid., 77.

9. Jorgen, 6.

10. Borneman and Hjalmar, 85.
11. Ibid., 85.
12. Jorgen, 8.
13. Borneman and Hjalmar, 88.
14. Fleischer, 16.
15. Borneman and Hjalmar, 90.
16. O'Carroll and Elliott, 20.
17. Borneman and Hjalmar, 104.
18. Ibid., 116, 121.
19. O'Carroll and Elliott, 17, 24.
20. Swaney, 365-366.
21. Ibid., 373.
22. Tjodhilde was the wife of Eric the Red. "Tjodhildes Church," Visit Greenland, accessed November 15, 2019, <https://visitgreenland.com/about-greenland/tjodhildes-church/>.
23. Edward Henriksen, *Greenland Past and Present* (Copenhagen, 1967), 207.
24. *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*, (1996), s.v. "Greenland."
25. Dorit Svendsen and Robert Svendsen, interviewed by Nathalie Johansson, Daugaard, Denmark, October 10, 2018.

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