

# Rainbow capital of Greenland



Colourful wooden houses in Old Nuuk look out over the icy mouth of the Nuup Kangerlua fjord system, settled by Norse pioneers in the 11th century

**Eleanor Rosamund Barraclough** explores the city once known as Godthåb, settled by Inuit hunters, Norse exiles and missionaries



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**T**he world's largest island spans well over 800,000 square miles – yet its capital, Nuuk, has a population of fewer than 18,000 people. It is hugely picturesque: a cluster of rainbow-hued wooden houses clinging to rocky promontory at the mouth of a vast fjord – and its history is equally colourful.

The area was settled by Paleo-Eskimo cultures as far back as 2200 BC. Viking-Age pioneers, led by the murderous ex-outlaw Erik the Red, arrived around AD 1000. In Nuup Kangerlua, the 100-mile-long fjord system running inland from Nuuk, you can still find ruined stone foundations of farmsteads dotting the steep mountain slopes, relics of the small community known as the Western Settlement founded by Erik's party.

By around 1450 those early Norse settlements had failed but, since contact with Europe had long been lost, the Scandinavians didn't know the colony had died out. In 1721, Dano-Norwegian missionary Hans Egede set off to bring Lutheranism to Greenland. Finding no trace of Nordic brethren, Egede directed his missionary zeal towards the indigenous Inuit from whom modern Greenlanders are descended. (During this time

the Lord's Prayer was translated into Greenlandic, with the immortal line "give us this day our daily seal meat.")

Egede's first base was on Kangeq Island, where the Inuit fished and hunted seal. This was the birthplace of Aron of Kangeq, a 19th-century Inuit hunter, painter and oral historian known for his woodcuts of Inuit culture and folk tales. The fishing hub on Kangeq was finally abandoned in the 1970s after centuries – even millennia – of human occupation, its livelihood devastated by commercial fishing and its remaining inhabitants rehoused by the Danish government in apartment blocks in the capital.

In 1728 the colony relocated 11 miles north-east to the mainland; initially named Godthåb (Good Hope), in 1799 it became Nuuk. To explore its origins as a colonial missionary outpost, roam the colourful wooden houses of Old Nuuk clustered around the harbour. In colder months, icebergs drift across the bay, and you might see a whale's fluke slapping the sea. Visit Hans Egede's house, with its slatted red roof, and reindeer antlers mounted on mustard-yellow walls; atop a nearby outcrop you'll find a statue of Egede, staff in hand, Lutheran robes buttoned tightly from neck to

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ankles. Behind the statue is Nuuk's red wooden cathedral, Annaassisitta Oqaluffia (Church of Our Saviour), built in 1849; in 1994 Kristian Mørk was ordained here – the first serving bishop of Greenland for 616 years, since the death of the last medieval Norse bishop, Álf, in 1378.

Below the church stands a partly submerged sculpture of Sedna, Inuit mother of the sea, a walrus at her back and a polar bear by her side, recalling a much older set of beliefs. Cross the bridge by Egede's house to Greenland's National Museum, housing an extensive collection of medieval Norse artefacts and – more haunting still – four 'ice mummies', including a six-month-old baby. Discovered in stone-covered graves 500 miles

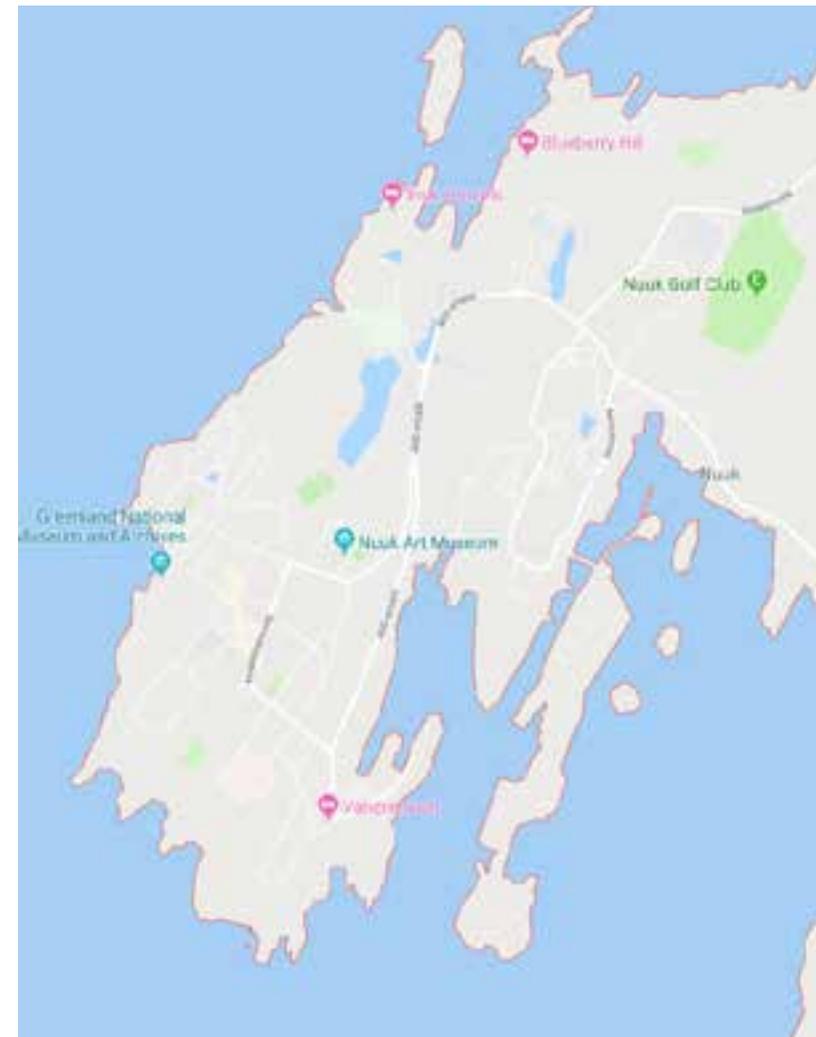
**In colder months, icebergs drift across the bay; you might see a whale's fluke slapping the sea**

north of the Arctic Circle, still clothed in seal and reindeer skins, their bodies were preserved by ice for over 500 years.

Look for a black building with 'C11' painted in yellow on the roof, a reminder of the country's strategic importance during the Second World War, when that code guided pilots. Greenland was

left vulnerable when Denmark fell to the Nazis in 1940, so the United States built air and sea bases, weather and radio stations across the island.

Near Nuuk's historic centre is the site of Blok P, a troubling reminder of Greenland's 20th-century social history. Once housing 1% of its population, the result of a centralising policy imposed by Copenhagen, this vast concrete block was cramped and impractical for its Inuit residents, who needed space to gut their catches and store hunting equipment. Symbolically demolished after Greenland achieved autonomy in 2009, the space where it stood is now a social hub, with a new school is planned for the site. In a city often defined by its colonial past, Nuuk now looks to its future. 🌐



## NUUK IN EIGHT SITES

**Hans Egede's house**  
The country's oldest house was built in 1728 for the 'Apostle of Greenland'

**Sedna**  
Sculpture of the Inuit sea goddess to whom hunters prayed for a good catch

**Greenland National Museum and Archives**  
Important museum housing Inuit ice mummies and Viking-Age remains

**Annaassisitta Oqaluffia**  
Greenland's first cathedral since the Middle Ages was built in 1849; crowds gather here to celebrate National Day on 21 June, the longest day of the year

**Kangeq Island**  
Location of Hans Egede's original mission, birthplace of Inuit painter and oral historian Aron of Kangeq, and site of a ghostly abandoned Inuit fishing village

**Moravian Brethren Mission House**  
Built using timber shipped from the Netherlands, the mission house was established in 1747

**'C11' building**  
Reminder of Greenland's strategic importance during the Second World War

**Nuup Kangerlua remains**  
Ruined farmstead foundations along the 100-mile-long fjord system reveal where hundreds of medieval Norse settlers lived before the colony died out around 1450