

Hooked For LIFE

Northern Canada and
Greenland in 2014

by Erik de Jong, Bras d'Or Station



Bagheera near Egi Glacier, Ilulissat Greenland.
Photo by Jorgen Rasmussen

ONCE YOU HAVE SAILED TO THE ARCTIC, YOU EITHER HATE IT, OR YOU'RE HOOKED FOR LIFE.

In my experience there is little in between those two extremes. I personally was hooked as a young teenager, when my parents took me north on their boats. This year's voyage to the north was going to be my 14th sailing trip to the high latitudes, and this time with my own vessel *Bagheera*, purposely built for adventures like these. It took as much as fall, winter and spring to prepare for all we might find on our way, and leave as little to chance as possible. The Arctic is a remote place and help is far away if it even exists.

May 18 came, the crew that signed up to help me sail the boat to Greenland showed up, and we headed out into the Atlantic. We were as little as 30 miles out when the autopilot started to object and refused to continue steering. Since we had about 1800 miles to go to Greenland, we decided to sail back to Dartmouth Yacht Club and investigate the problem. It appeared that *Bagheera* was equipped with the wrong autopilot when we built her. The fact that it took more than 20,000 miles of sailing before the problem materialized was only due to the fact that she was built to last and everything was oversized. Several parts of the steering gear showed hairline cracks, and two components were fully broken during those 30 miles. We had no choice but to order a new autopilot, new steering gear components and replace the faulty parts. After a full week of shipment delays and other frustrations, we finally received what we needed, and in as little as 8 hours of working, we were on our way again. The crossing to Greenland was fairly uneventful and took just under two weeks with a one night stop in St. John's Newfoundland to get some additional fresh provisions and fuel.



Carefully negotiating ice in Upernavik Fjord, Greenland



Western Greenland had a cold and long winter and spring, just like Eastern Canada, but our first day in Nuuk was a day of real summer weather. We explored town without the need for a coat and even managed to get a tan. Due to the delayed departure from Nova Scotia, I was a little bit under pressure to get the boat up north for the next crew arrival, which was to take place in Ilulissat, about 450 miles further along the coast. By the time I was ready to depart Nuuk, there were only 4 days left. I singlehanded this part, and started out with 20 knots of headwinds, followed by three days of complete flat calm wind and seas. The engine ran for a continuous 76 hours when it decided to seize up on me, literally in sight of Ilulissat harbor. I managed to arrange a tow into port via one of the local people, and a long, intensive search for a solution started. After a week of going through classifieds, talking to mechanics and trying to arrange parts, I was

View anchored off Pond Inlet, Baffin Island

about to give up and return to Nova Scotia with a non-functioning engine and do a complete overhaul there. It was only then that I found a completely overhauled bare engine block that was identical to what was installed in *Bagheera*, and it could be ready for shipment in as little as a day. Arrangements were made with Air Greenland to get the engine into the belly of a Dash 7 airplane, and flown to Ilulissat. Shipping by freighter would take as much as two months. It was only 3 days later that the new engine block arrived and it was up to me to make a working engine out of the new block, built up with about half of all the parts from the old engine. It all went surprisingly well, and it was only a day and a half later that I was able to make my first motorsail into Disko Bay fjord with the new engine.

From that moment, everything went very smoothly and except for minor things, *Bagheera* kept going the way we expected her to. A crew of professional photographers from Australia arrived in Ilulissat. They had hired me to sail them via Melville Bay and the western part of Lancaster Sound to Pond Inlet at the north end of Baffin Island. This was one of the most fantastic trips I have ever sailed. After settling them onboard, we made several short day sails to the icefjord just south of Ilulissat, followed by a day's sail south to Jacobs Havn to search for musk ox to photograph. Later, in the first week of having them onboard, we sailed back to Ilulissat to pick up some lost luggage for one of the crew members that was mission critical to get the desired photographs. One day's passage north of Ilulissat is

another nice glacier that ends up in the fjord, and we sailed up close to watch it calve. There was so much ice in front of the glacier that anchoring was impossible, but there was no wind either, and we allowed *Bagheera* just to float for the night between the ice floes.

North we went, via Svartenhuk, Upernavik and the Devil's Thumb. I had tried in previous years to penetrate into Melville Bay, but never managed to do so, due to weather or ice conditions. This year we were lucky, but it was tough, because there was a lot of glacial ice in the bay. *Bagheera* had to negotiate two full days and nights within the ice to get anywhere, and we had to go back and try different routes several times. During our adventures in Melville, we were closely followed by our friends on *Snow Dragon II*. *Bagheera* pushed the ice, while they were baking bread, cookies, cakes, full meals and breakfasts. Every few hours, we would stop the boats, raft together and have a meal, snack or coffee together. It was a highlight to navigate through these waters that are seldom visited by ships, let alone yachts. Navigational charts barely exist and a lot has to be done on sight, with depth sounder and on gut feeling. After a short coffee break and engine check, *Bagheera* and *Snow Dragon II* sepa-

rated again, and we continued north to Cape York exploring the Western part of Melville Bay.

After another day and a half between the sea ice and amazing landscapes, we still did not manage to get close encounters with the desired wildlife, so we decided to cross to Devon Island in Canada to test our luck in the Canadian Arctic. The sea ice at the west end of Lancaster Sound, where we planned to go for Beluga photography on Summerset Island, was still not broken up even though it was already August. This meant that we had to abandon that part of our schedule. Instead, we sailed into Admiralty Inlet at the NW end of Baffin Island. We were only halfway to Arctic Bay when we ran into sea ice with concentrations so dense that polar bears would actually be able to hunt from it. That is where we decided to wait and let the boat float between the ice floes, as we had done many times this summer. I was asleep while the photographers were on deck searching for a yellow dot to move on the ice. They were lucky! Only a few hours in, one of the guys spotted a single bear. We started the engine to move the boat closer, but the sea ice proved too dense and too thick for *Bagheera's* engine to push through. We left the boat where she was and waited. It was not

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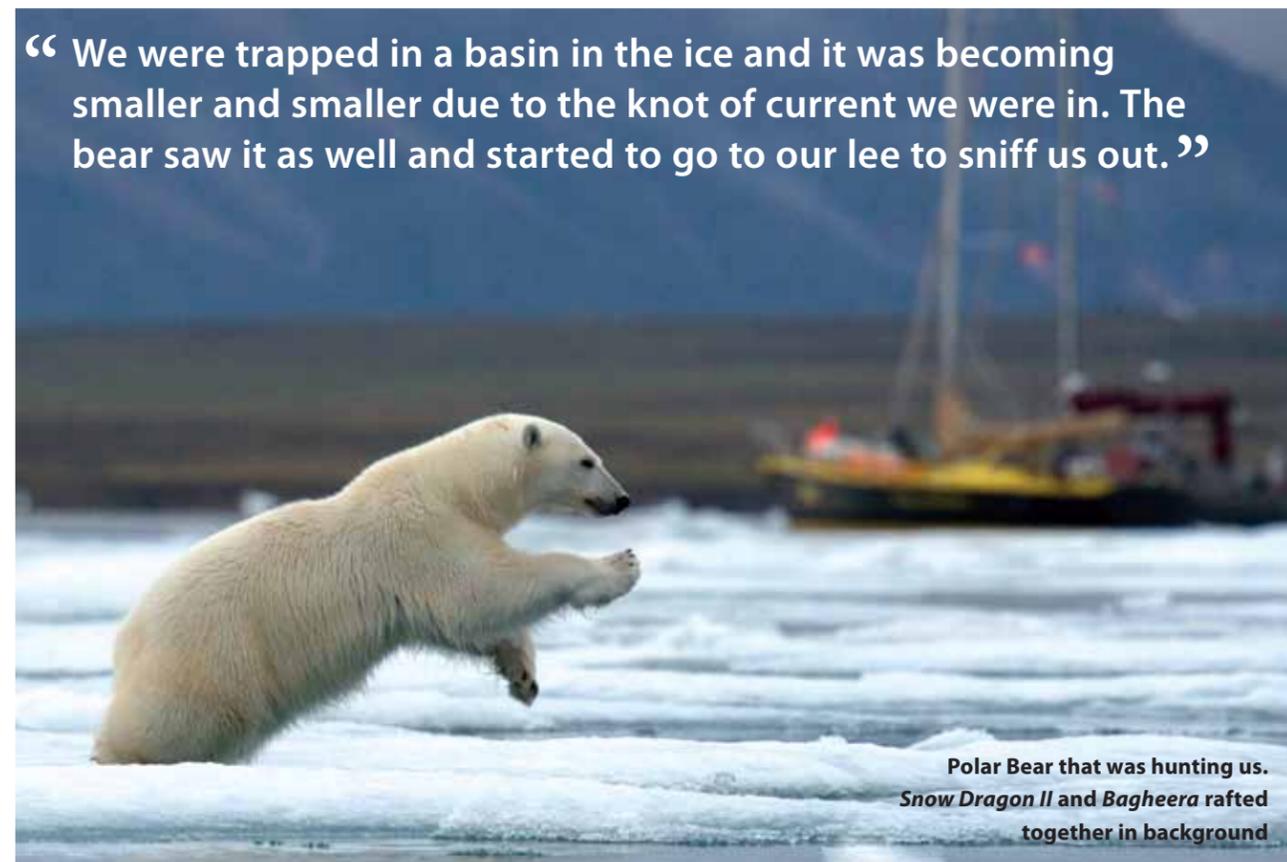
until the next day (it doesn't get dark during the summer in the north) that we managed to get close enough to get some decent pictures. Around us, the ice was constantly moving, and we were slowly getting trapped. In order to prevent that from happening, I had to move further away from the bear. Safety of boat and crew comes before good pictures.

Admiralty Inlet was a success, and we celebrated with freshly baked cookies, oven roasted pork chops and champagne. It was time to head east, as we had only one week left before Jorgen and his crew were scheduled to fly home. Pond Inlet was paved with patches of sea ice that we had to sail carefully through in order to make progress. Pond Inlet itself was still surrounded by dense sea ice, and so were Eclipse and big parts of Milne. Our plan was to go to Milne Inlet because it is a gathering place for Narwhals in August. The Narwhal is also known as the unicorn whale. The ice forecast from Environment Canada gave us little chance of getting in, but you never know for sure unless you try and take a look at the actual situation. Often ice charts are based on old information, even though they are freshly put together by meteorologists. The photographers slept while I pushed the boat by engine through the ice fields. We were progressing very slowly and I did not believe we would make it, as ice concentrations became more and more dense and the leads narrower. I climbed the mast to get a clearer picture of how the ice was spread out over the different basins, but there was a whitish-gray surface as far as the eye could see. I had to turn back on several occasions to follow different open leads, and

after 12 hours of pushing ice, while only progressing 20 miles, we made it to the south end of the fjord where there was no ice. By that time I had been awake for over 36 hours and needed to eat and rest before we would be able to move anywhere else. Since there was no wind, we had the boat float in the ice again, while the photographers were sitting on deck waiting for wildlife to appear. We stayed in Milne for two days with beautiful weather and amazing scenery. Unfortunately we saw only a few Narwhals, not the thousands that usually gather in this location. We concluded that we were too early in the season. We did encounter a seal migration—literally hundreds of seals passed the boat, curiously popping their heads above the water to see what kind



Riding out strong catabatic winds in Milne Inlet, Baffin island



“ We were trapped in a basin in the ice and it was becoming smaller and smaller due to the knot of current we were in. The bear saw it as well and started to go to our lee to sniff us out. ”

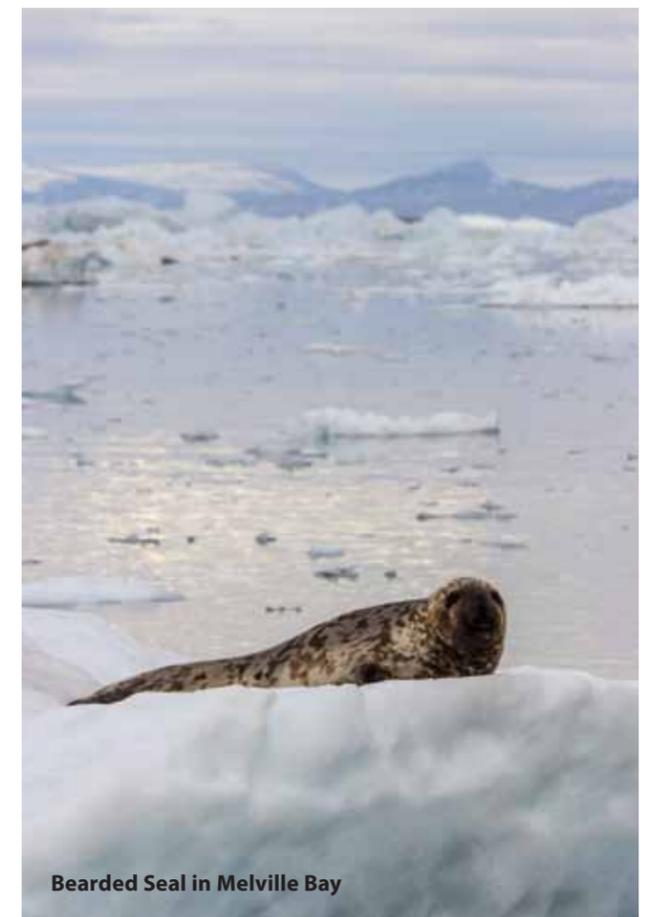
Polar Bear that was hunting us. Snow Dragon II and Bagheera rafted together in background



Polar Bear on sea ice in Admiralty Inlet

of obstacle was floating in their path.

On our way back out of Milne, all the ice was gone from the fjord and we had a very clear and fast way out of the bay. What took us over a full day on the way in, was done in less than 4 hours on the way out. Oliver Sound was our next destination. We were not even half-way there when we received an email from our friends on *Snow Dragon II* that they were floating in the ice about 30 miles north of us and had some bears around the boat. We had a short discussion and changed our plans. We went full speed to the same location, being helped by a knot and a half of current. When we arrived in Navy Board Inlet, we encountered the heaviest ice that *Bagheera* had seen since she was built. Again, it took 3 hours to cover the last 3 miles, but once there, we rafted up the two boats and assessed the situation with wind, current, ice and the locations of the bears. The dinghy was launched shortly after our arrival and, armed with half a dozen cameras, we sailed closer to the ice sheets where a bear was taking a nap, after having eaten a seal earlier that day. We got some nice images, but the bear woke up scared and ran away before we could get a good shot. I sailed back to the boat to give other crew members a chance to approach the bear, and this time we had better luck. A lead opened up and we could approach the bear to within less than 100 meters with a safe amount of open water between us and the bear. We always want to have open water in situations like this, as a bear can outrun dinghies and humans, but cannot out-swim dinghies. After having taken many pictures, I went back to get the other guys again to give them the same opportunity. We went to the same place and the bear started moving around us, by the looks of it, completely ignoring us. We got so excited that



Bearded Seal in Melville Bay



“ While we started with near gale force conditions, we ended up three quarters of the way there with increasing sustained winds topping at 50 knots and gusting quite a bit higher. ”

we did not pay enough attention to our changing surroundings, and the lead through which we came in closed behind us. We were trapped in a basin in the ice and it was becoming smaller and smaller due to a knot of current. The bear saw it as well and started to go to our lee to sniff us out. Some very exciting as well as scary moments followed, but we managed to successfully scare the bear away by shooting in the air with our rifle. And a few minutes later, we got a chance to sail out of the ice back to the mother ship. We were very lucky that day, and we have decided this was never going to happen again. We took more risk than we should have and we were happy that everyone, most importantly the bear, walked away unharmed.

The last few days with Jorgen onboard were spent in Eclipse Sound, Oliver Sound and Pond Inlet village. I had to track down some spare parts that were shipped to Pond, including a new brain for our brand new autopilot that quit on us in Greenland. We had hand steered the last 1400 miles, and I wasn't looking forward to more hand steering. We had to re-commission the autopilot again, including calibration of the fluxgate compass. This was a real nightmare due to the fact that the magnetic North Pole is only 900 miles away from Pond Inlet. The magnetic force is so weak and pointing more toward the earth than parallel to its surface that the

calibration is practically impossible, but we had no choice.

After having spent three days in Pond Inlet, where a new crew arrived, we headed back to Oliver Sound, as that is a very good spot to fill up the fresh water tanks. We use large barrels (15 gallon) with watertight lids that we transfer by dinghy between the beach and the boat. It takes all morning to fill both water tanks. We wanted to go back to Milne Inlet to see if the Narwhals had arrived, and both the weather and ice conditions looked favorable to do so. Since we only left around 2 p.m., and we didn't want to pull through another night with little to no sleep, we made an overnight stop in an uncharted and unnamed inlet that to our surprise formed the best anchorage we had seen during the whole summer. In fact, it was so good and so protected that we stayed another day and night while doing some maintenance on the boat and made a hike to the top of the mountain directly east of the anchorage. When time came to leave for the last part to Milne, the wind was up quite a bit, and we could make it under sail to the bottom of the fjord. While we started with near gale force conditions, we ended up three quarters of the way there with increasing sustained winds topping at 50 knots and gusting quite a bit higher. It was madness to continue straight into that kind of tunnel winds between the mountains, so we searched for a more or less

protected place to ride it out behind anchor. The wind was battering us all night long, and the next morning gave only a slight improvement. Since the main objective was to go north to Ellesmere Island and northwest Greenland, we abandoned the plan to see the Narwhals and headed back out of the fjord running down wind in stormy conditions. As soon as we entered Eclipse Sound, the wind diminished, while we could see the white caps behind us in the fjord. This was a great example of Baffin Island's infamous fjord storms. North we went, out of Navy Board, past Devon Island, past Coburg Island and hugging the east coast of Ellesmere Island. The wind was dying more and more and the outlook showed that we would have to motor for the next week if we wanted to continue north. The decision was made to head east and pay a visit to Thule in NW Greenland.

Thule is a surprisingly interesting village, lots of new developments, neat for Greenlandic standards and a reasonably well provisioned local store. After Thule we went south, exploring several uncharted anchorages some of which were indicated as "unsafe" in the British Admiralty Pilot. Since there was no wind at all, we opted for checking them out anyway because they were calling us. They proved to be near perfect as escape harbours with little or no dangers at all! So if you ever are in the area, Booth Sound is great as an anchorage. Stay away from the east shore as there is poor holding in gravel and boulders, but the south arm and north arm are perfect in a muddy clay bottom

that is very gradually sloped. The sandbar at the entrance which the BA Pilot is talking about is over 60 feet deep ... not really an issue for yachts. We stayed several days exploring this part of the coast, and sailed back to Clyde River on Baffin Island via a stop on the beautiful islands of the Carey group, half way between Canada and Greenland.

I had another crew change in Clyde River, and from there the plan was to sail practically nonstop back to Halifax, roughly 2000 miles to the south. The coastal sail along Baffin Island, as well as the crossing to Labrador were quite uneventful. It started to get dark again, and the LED search light we mounted on the pulpit proved to



Moravian church of Hebron , almost completely restored at time of our visit.

This is why Greenland is called Greenland.





be very helpful. Usually we would stop sailing and heave to overnight when there was ice present since you cannot really see it. This light made us aware of ice that was more than a mile away. That was a successful experiment. While crossing to Labrador, we discussed with our friends on *Snow Dragon II* that we would meet up again in Hebron, Labrador. When we arrived there, they were already at anchor, and even though it was quite windy, we had a very pleasant stop. We had to push south. Work was waiting and my crew had purchased plane tickets. The last 1000 miles were not really much fun—often gale force winds and one serious storm off the coast of Labrador. In the last 1000 miles, we sailed approximately 700 upwind and were very happy when we could change course running downwind into the fjord of Halifax, our home port. 🌊



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erik de Jong is a naval architect born into an offshore sailing family. Growing up in the Netherlands, most vacations were spent sailing in Norway, Iceland and Scotland. Already at a very young age, Erik knew that he wanted one day to sail in the high latitudes with his own boat. Everything in life revolved around that idea. Bagheera was designed by Erik when he was only 16 years old, and construction, which was done by Erik and his father, followed only five and half years later. His working life was spent with North Sails as a sail and rig designer, and later as a naval architect for small commercial vessels. Before Bagheera was ready to sail, every opportunity for offshore sailing was grabbed with both hands resulting in multiple trans-Atlantics, many trips to the high north and several offshore races. Now that Bagheera, a purpose built, ice-reinforced, high latitude vessel, is finished, Erik can be found up north in the summer months. The vessel is used for charter for dedicated research and photography expeditions.

Bagheera is a 52-foot Dutch flagged, steel expedition vessel, cutter rigged and built for shorthanded sailing. Her current home port is the Dartmouth Yacht Club, Nova Scotia, Canada.



Sunset above Uummannak, west Greenland