

Kangerlussuaq: Avsec the Greenlandic way

Greenland might be the largest island in the world, yet its total population numbers a mere 55,000; a similar number are registered as being employed at London Heathrow airport! It's also probably the only place in the world where the main international airport is 130kms from the nearest town, to which there are no roads and land access is only possible mid-winter by a dog-sled journey. One might think passenger screening, access control and maintaining a trained security unit in such an environment would be unnecessarily burdensome, so **Philip Baum** headed north to find out the Greenlandic attitude towards aviation security.

Contrary to public perception, not all of Greenland is under ice. Kangerlussuaq, to use its Greenlandic name, (Søndre Strømfjord in Danish) is situated on the west coast of Greenland, just above the Arctic Circle. It has a continental climate with dry hot summers and cold winters. There can be few airports that have such extremes of temperature, from up to 28 degrees Celsius in the summer down to -50 degrees in the winter. Yet, despite this it is open year-round and is almost immune to fog or whiteout. In the two years that the current Airport Manager, Allan Pedersen, has been in Kangerlussuaq, the airport has been closed for a grand total of 8 hours.

The airport was originally built as an American air force base, and was only officially handed over to the Greenland Airport Authority in 1992. The airfield itself has a runway of 2,815 by 60 metres. Nearly all the original buildings remain in use, including the bowling alley, night club, swimming pool and barracks. Today, almost 600 people live in Kangerlussuaq, all of whom are either directly or indirectly employed by the airport authority. Around 75% of the employees are Greenlandic and most of the others are Danes. In addition to managing the airport, the authority runs the airport hotel (reception is about 20m from the gates) and the only 18 hole golf course north of the Arctic Circle (players may carry a tuft of grass to place under the ball for each stroke as the course itself is actually an 18 hole bunker!).



Greenland's aerodrome index

Although there are some flights from Narsarsuaq, in southern Greenland, to Copenhagen, Kangerlussuaq remains the main gateway. First Air fly to Iqaluit and Ottawa in Canada, SAS operate flights to the Danish capital three days per week and the national carrier, Greenlandair, flies there twice weekly. And, despite the fact

that Greenland is a Danish territory, the Copenhagen route is treated as international, primarily because they arrive in Copenhagen's international terminal where arriving and departing passengers mix freely. Some international flights from Iceland's Keflavik Airport, outside Reykjavik, do fly to Ittoqqortoormiit, Kulusk and Narsarsuaq, yet these are primarily sight-seeing trips to Greenland's eastern glaciers.

Air transport in Greenland is no luxury, it's a necessity, albeit an expensive one. The only ways that one can travel between the Greenlandic towns, all of which are situated around the coast, are by air or sea. It is for this reason that Kangerlussuaq, with its year-round accessibility, has become Greenland's hub. Throughout the day passengers, travelling from one part of Greenland to another or internationally, transit in Kangerlussuaq, pausing possibly for a quick round of golf en route. Due to its hub status the airport authority has also developed a conference centre that serves both the domestic and international market. Avsec World 1999? What a location for the millennium conference!

As a Danish territory, Greenlandic aviation is actually governed by the Danish Civil Aviation Administration (DCAA) and statutory requirements are set out in Denmark's National Aviation Security Programme. The 6 airports, 11 heliports and 42 helistops are all man-



*Greenlandair's newly acquired B-757
now flies regularly to Copenhagen*

aged by the Greenland Airports Authority, a body set up by the Greenland Home Rule Government in 1988, and which has its own Airports Security Programme that is currently under review. The airports are gearing up to the realities of 100% screening, although currently this is only applied to international flights with random screening on some domestic routes.

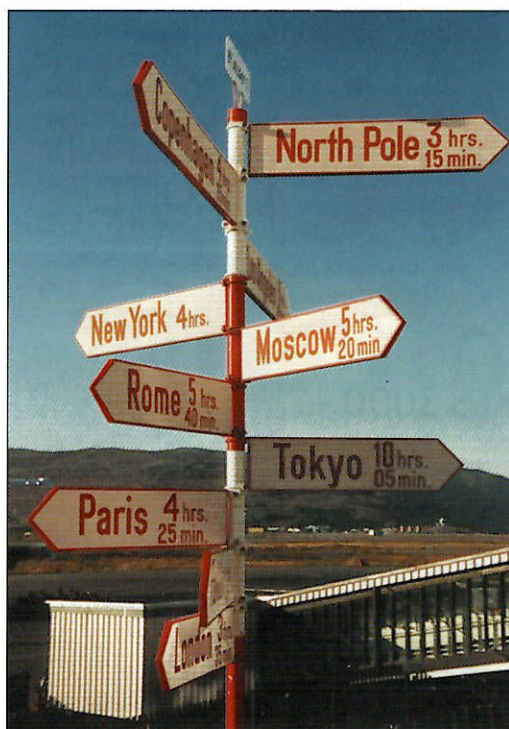
The airport maintains a security staff of 20 personnel, most of whom are part-time. The same people may be serving drinks in the airport's night club in the evenings (and, incidentally, Greenlandic coffee makes an Irish coffee seem like baby milk formula!). All staff have just undergone a three day training course run by local staff, and the x-ray operators have received fourteen days training conducted by instructors from Copenhagen Airport. The combined educational programme is approved by the DCAA. Until this year all security training was conducted in Billund, on the Danish mainland, but the realities of sending so many staff from all of Greenland's airports to Denmark has made this impractical. The authorities now plan to run a Train-the-Trainer course in Kangerlussuaq and the successful candidate will then be required to travel throughout Greenland and provide training to staff at their own airports.

The screening process witnessed for one international flight was impressive. With the aid of Heimann X-ray equip-

ment (HiScan 6040-A for hand baggage and HiScan 7555A for checked baggage), Outokumpu (Metorex) Metor 120WP archway detectors and Ole Bader Survey mini hand-held magnetometers, the passengers were processed efficiently and would serve as an excellent example of a professionally run checkpoint. On every flight, according

to Pedersen, five or six illegal or dangerous goods are detected; this was borne out on the one flight I saw. It should be remembered that hunting is part of everyday life in Greenland and consequently firearms are widespread, as are hunting knives. Tourists, currently totalling 14,000 per annum, are also prone to purchase musk ox horns or reindeer antlers as souvenirs; these could be used as lethal weapons and are removed from passengers and checked in. Any item removed is boxed up, if possible, and the passenger is given a disclaimer (as shown below).

Such finds certainly keep the screeners alert, but they are also conscious of other threats. Nobody fears international terrorism in Greenland although, as many trans-Atlantic flights overfly Greenland, the possibility exists that a hijacked aircraft might be asked to refuel in Kangerlussuaq. The greater risk is that of drunk and disorderly passengers, or even suicidal individuals considering that Scandinavia is known to have some of the highest suicide rates in the world. There has been an incident of asylum seekers attempting to use Greenland as a gateway to North America. Last year a group of Chinese passengers bearing forged Thai passports were detected at Kangerlussuaq. They had flown from Keflavik in Iceland and were en route to Ottawa. Generally, it is the airline that assumes responsibility for the checking of passports. Indeed, there are no immigration



*Greenland may seem remote but,
in flying time, it's not so far away!*

controls at the airports. The sole policeman based in Kangerlussuaq represents the immigration authorities, in the same way that the Airport Manager and newly-appointed Security Manager, Birthe Rasmussen, perform customs inspections.

With nationalist movements around the world demonstrating their willingness to use extreme measures to gain independence, the degree of Greenlandic acceptance of Danish sovereignty is a significant question. Pedersen, a Dane himself, believes that the Greenlanders are generally very content with their current political status and most understand that independence is not economically viable. Denmark gives Greenland an annual block grant of around £250 millions. Karl Fencker, Greenlandair's Station Manager in Kangerlussuaq, believes otherwise and thinks that, whilst the Greenlanders are currently happy with their status, there may be a movement towards complete independence in the future. Yet we could be talking very long-term, as Greenland's recent history has been economically prosperous.

Until World War II Greenland was self-sufficient, although with a very low standard of living. During the war the Americans established a number of bases there, all but three of which (Kangerlussuaq being one) were closed when peace was



Dash 7's are utilised to connect the main Greenlandic towns with Kangerlussuaq, from where Greenlandair's B-757 and SAS's B-767 provide the international connections.

declared. Today, Thule in northern Greenland is the American's sole remaining base. Provincial councils took on the development of the country until 1953 when Greenland became more closely integrated with Denmark. Greenland has had home rule since a referendum in 1979, yet the country seceded from the European Union in 1985. With its capital in Nuuk (Godthab in Danish), Greenland has its own flag, own stamps, own language and dialects and the only aspect of the country's infrastructure that is not visibly independent of Denmark is its continued usage of the Danish Kroner as currency.

Pedersen believes that the Danish treatment of the Greenlanders might be envied by their Inuit cousins in the North West Territories of Canada where there has been some resentment as to the way in which they have been 'managed' by the Canadians. With this in mind, Pedersen considers that the Canadian carrier, First Air, is a more likely target of any nationalist movement than Greenlandair. However, it is important to note that the Canadians have now also given home rule to their Inuit population.

The absence of any perceivable threat has not resulted in a drop in guard at Kangerlussuaq. Staff wear airport passes in restricted areas and security personnel monitor all persons boarding aircraft.

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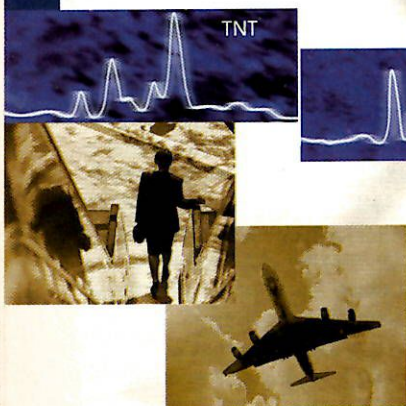
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On approach into Ilulissat

Whilst there is no perimeter fence, and this is reflected in the National Aviation Security Programme, one must not forget that the only real way to get to the airport is by air and that fence construction would be unnecessary, let alone incredibly expensive (considering the permafrost that would create installation problems).

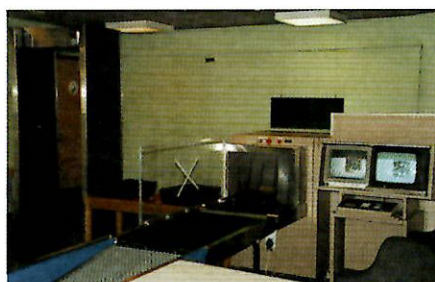
There was one incident last year when a Norwegian woman boarded an aircraft and then got off by the rear steps and disappeared. As a result of positive passenger/baggage reconciliation, conducted by both boarding card receipts and cabin crew carrying out a headcount check on board, her absence was noted. Her baggage was off-loaded. Some days later she was found, barely alive, by some Greenlandic trekkers miles away from the airport. As a result of exposure to the elements, although she survived, both arms and legs had to be amputated.

As Kangerlussuaq was originally constructed as a US base, there is no single fuel farm due to the risk of an aerial bombing wiping out fuel supplies. Consequently, fuel reserves are spread out over a very large area. Only one company, Statoil, supplies the airport and two years worth of fuel are kept in store. There is only one delivery per annum and additional stock is maintained as an insurance against that delivery being delayed due to Arctic weather conditions.

Although the majority of Greenland's exports are sent sea freight, some cargo is despatched via Kangerlussuaq, predominantly frozen fish, the X-ray operators nightmare! A 'known shipper' policy exists and, to be fair, as Greenlanders all really do know each other, such a policy is more than reasonable.

Security procedures for international flights are carried out in Kangerlussuaq and not in the airport of origin. Yet if a connecting Greenlandair flight is delayed, such checks may be instigated at one of the other airfields. Due to an absence of x-ray equipment in the other Greenlandic airports, this necessitates physical search. This situation is set to change as, once there is 100% screening on domestic flights, all the other airports will have to be equipped with x-ray machines and archway detectors.

I had an opportunity to visit Ilulissat, one of Greenland's domestic airports. Although it serves a town of only 4,500 inhabitants, the airport is a hive of activity. It is the chosen destination of most of Greenland's tourists as the ice fjord is located here and the awesome icebergs that break away into the Atlantic Ocean are a sight that no visitor should miss. With the sea being frozen from January until May, the airport also serves as a launchpad from which Greenland's northern settlements can be supplied with basic provisions. The airport does have a perimeter fence and an



Security checkpoint at Kangerlussuaq

access control system is to be installed next year. Morten Nielsen, the ATC Manager, says that access control has now become an operational necessity as well as a security one. Greenland is a country where everybody knows each other and, consequently, the 'meeters and greeters' are prone to rush to the steps of arriving flights to welcome their relatives and friends. Indeed, the increased security measures are in place due to the airport being situated in a town unlike Kangerlussuaq. Security at Ilulissat, and indeed at all airports except Kangerlussuaq where there is a full time Security Manager, is coordinated by an individual who is assigned such responsibility in addition to their normal duties; generally it is the Airport Manager who is the security designate.

Greenlandair, known locally as Grønlandsfly, itself was established in 1960 and operates a fleet of conventional fixed-wing aircraft and several types of helicopters. The high traffic routes connecting Kangerlussuaq with the towns of Nuuk and Ilulissat are served by DeHavilland Dash-7 aircraft, whilst their newly-acquired B-757 serves Copenhagen. The Dash-7's are set to replace many of the Sikorsky S-61N helicopters as recently the Greenland government decided to build a network of seven more regional airports (Upernavik, Uummanaq, Aasiaat, Sisimiut, Maniitsoq, Paamiut and Qaanaaq) to replace existing heliports. The high cost of air transport within Greenland is, in part, attributed to the expense of helicopter transportation; the gradual phasing out of Greenlandair's helicopters from routes where, considering climatic conditions, fixed-wing aircraft



Greenlandair's Sikorsky helicopters are soon to be replaced by Dash 7's

can operate will bring down ticket prices in the future.

The carrier has its own airline security programme, approved by the DCAA. It has also produced its own booklet entitled "Security on the Airside" which has been circulated to all Greenlandair stations. Ground-based staff are also scheduled to receive training on a nationwide programme commencing in October 1998.

Most of the crew receive their training in Denmark. The B-757, and its crew, are actually based in Copenhagen and fly charter operations to Greece for a Swedish tour operator over the weekends. Naturally, Greenlandair management hope that their international operations will increase. The creation of a business class, currently scheduled for this autumn, will better position them for competition with SAS, as will their intention to serve Greenlandic cuisine on board. From a personal point of view though, their biggest asset is the genuinely friendly nature of the crew. My flights, both internationally and domestically within Greenland, were some of the most enjoyable I have experienced anywhere in the world.

It has been said that if a traveller has seen the world, there's always Greenland.... How mistaken can one be? Having witnessed the ice fjords of Ilulissat, the ice cap at Kangerlussuaq and seen some of the most dramatic aerial views of a land of natural beauty, I can only urge the reader who believes they have seen the world to pack their bags and head north to a country that, in itself, should be classified as one of the world's great wonders •



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