

Travel Long: Moving Across the Midnight Sun

EDITORIAL AND PHOTO BY TERENCE BAKER

Recently, I wrote of the joys of slow travel (Notebook, Feb. 2010). Now, I'd like to write about *lengthened* travel.

Tourists chase the sun. By that I mean that they do from places such as New York, where we know the power of the cold. For me, though, equally important is the amount of daylight. Your vacation is *your* time, so if the sun is out for more than 15 hours, twice as much can be visited within the hours of daylight. It's like having two vacations in one, and I'm all for that. Let's follow the sun and light around the world.

Sometimes the sun never sets. In Alaska, I've slept at 4 p.m. and marveled at 4 a.m. At Wildfowl Lake on the 135-mile Denali Hwy., I saw the sun dip, sit on the horizon and rise again while watching beavers jam up streams. On the Arctic Circle, there is little distraction and 24 hours of light seem to move at the speed of 48. Little noise, fresh air and huge, 360° views all result—at least in me—in a sense that time can be manipulated to my own benefit.

My game plan: Sleep for 6 hours and spend the other 18 absorbing memories that last much longer than the time it takes back home to catch up on sleep.

In the Norwegian Arctic, on the immense island of Svalbard, I forewent sleep altogether. On my final day, the plane left at 4 a.m., so I saw little point. It was August 28, and already in the five days since the last day of perpetual sun, darkness had crept back in daily, 20-minute installments. At 1 a.m., I climbed a thin stream to a mountaintop (a friend held a rifle, a necessary precaution against Polar bears) and gazed at the sun illuminating a pristine length of sea called Adventfjorden. Farther north, at the 80th parallel, I watched huge-tusked walrus off an icy atoll called Moffen. Here the sun does not




set with a speedy curtain call, as it does in the Tropics.

In Ilulissat, Greenland, at a paltry 69° 13'N, I could not get to sleep at 3 a.m. and then wondered why I had to. Two Minke whales glided by, and 8,000 Greenlandic dogs tied to wooden stakes serenaded me. It remains a fond memory.

In our winter, we can head south and continue chasing the endless sun at the world's other end. Tasmania receives only 16 hours of sun on its midsummer's day, but that's okay. It's always nice to see a sunset, and one that happens when you are ready for it, after most of the calendar day is gone. In the late hours, I saw honeybees flitting around huge, undulating lavender fields near a village called Nabowla and still got sufficient sleep to attend the next day's World Penny Farthing Championships (a must if you're here in February) in the small town of Evandale, where cyclists race big-wheel bicycles.

In our own hemisphere, the last mainland speck of southern Chile is Punta Arenas, where a disintegrating

child's merry-go-round guards a pebble beach in view of the *Lord Lonsdale*, which ran aground in 1942 and today looks like an emerging narwhal's tusk. I left the shipwreck at 4:30 a.m. and headed to the majesty of the Torres del Paine National Park across the bleak beauty of Patagonia, where stoic gauchos on horseback at last came home from repairing fence posts and ostrich-like Rheas tore across lonely roads. The next day started (or had the last day really ever ended?) at the Cueva del Milodón, a cave in which were found the remains of a gigantic, prehistoric ground-sloth. It was a pilgrimage of sorts, as this is where writer Bruce Chatwin ended his journey from Lima, Peru, 3,000 miles to the north, in his classic journal *In Patagonia*, carrying a piece of sloth fur that his aunt believed came from a brontosaurus.

It did not read oddly to me that Chatwin set foot on Patagonia soil in its long days of December. 

Terence Baker is the travel editor of this magazine.