On a cold, gray mid-April morning, I straddled a fat bike while taking in 360-degree views of bleak and beautiful fjords and lakes. Worn, rocky mounds and marshy plains stretched as far as I could see. I took in the swirl of melted and refrozen browns and whites coated in a silence so complete it buzzed. My companion, Mike Brcic, and I had pedaled from Kangerlussuaq, West Greenland, a former U.S. military base and now a town of 500. We were bound for Sisimiut, on the west coast of Greenland, via frozen lakes and tundra — four days and 100 miles away on the Arctic Circle Trail.

As one of the first teams to travel this 100-mile route by bike, we comprised an “expedition lite” — we had snowmobile support in the form of two locals, Bo and Oli, pulling trailers with our personal gear, food, and kerosene for hut heaters. But for pedaling, navigating, and dealing with wind, cold, ice, rotten snow, and the isolation of the northern cone of planet Earth, we were on our own.

Most of Greenland is covered in a massive ice sheet — humans live and hunt on a narrow swath of land around the perimeter, so there are few roads. To leave Kangerlussuaq, we pedaled one of the longest — a 10.5-mile spin on dirt. The road climbed past a trailer with a crooked sign reading “Kellyville: An incoherent community, population 7.” It was an unassuming U.S. National Science Foundation atmospheric research facility.

Just beyond the sign — and the fat house cat rubbing up against it — the gravel doubletrack strayed past crumbled cement and a piece of rusted corrugated roofing, relics of a U.S. military science project. The road then turned to singletrack and barreled off into the tundra with a swooping descent through snow-covered crowberry bushes, and we disappeared.

The Arctic is bizarre and beautiful. It felt good to be back. I had backpacked this route a decade ago, picking my way through rolling hills carpeted in fat blueberries and peppered with fragrant porcini mushrooms and sinking ankle deep in surface water while swatting at blackflies day after day. Now covered with snow, the trail looked a lot different. In most places, red-painted trail markers and rock cairns were coated with ice or deep in snow so we followed snowmobile tracks refrozen into the tundra.

The weather was warm, and the sticky ice offered the bikes good grip. In places the ice looked black and profound, and in other sections snowflakes had made a lacy patina on its surface. The beauty of the Arctic lies in the details. We covered more than 20 miles and then paused to warm up in the Katiffik hut with steaming cups of instant chicken noodle soup prepared by our drivers. The building was so small it looked like a dollhouse. I didn't want to stop for long so I took off solo for the final push, past a team of fluffy Greenlandic sled dogs lazing in the warmth of the day. It was 14 miles down the middle of Amitsorsuaq Lake to the next cheery red hut with white trim, Canoe Camp, our first night's lodging.

Inside it was deliciously warm. Bo and Oli had fired up the kerosene heater, melted water, and set out cheese and...
bread. You burn a lot of calories being out all day on a bike in the cold, and I downed a sandwich before I even took off my boots. The hut was clean, comfortable, and surprisingly large. The main room had six bunks with mattresses, a heater, a picnic table, and a cooking area. Two other rooms held at least as many people and had their own heaters and tables. A couple of bent aluminum canoes rested on wooden boat racks outside. In summer, they're free for the taking for hikers who want to paddle the lake instead of hiking around it.

I changed out of my bike clothes into sweats and hut slippers and investigated the howling noises. Three shy and tired sled dogs were staked out back, clearly distressed at having been separated from the pack. Their musher would return the next day to retrieve them.

We saw no sign of Mike. Oli and Bo were discussing whether they should check on him when a small black dot appeared on the horizon. Mike staggered in half an hour later and collapsed on one of the beds. “I thought I was going to die out there,” he choked. “I wasn’t sure if I was going to make it.” We chuckled, but we weren’t sure he was kidding. The big landscape and the total silence were blowing his mind and pushing the boundaries of his comfort zone.

The dogs howled intermittently all night, but I still managed to grab a few hours of sleep. Bo’s signature breakfast — bread, bacon, sausage, eggs, cheese, and coffee — was the caffeine and caloric bomb we needed to brave the bone-chilling wind rattling the hut windows. After a warm day and a cold night, the ice had refrozen into a slick mirror. I nervously picked my way between tiny patches of snow. The wind blew me sideways.

On the next lake, my tires slid out and I punched through refrozen ice into six
inches of slushy water. It seemed like walking with the bike might work better. I fell again. Mike fell. We cautiously picked our way across the lake’s slippery surface looking for any stripe of snow or piece of frozen dirt to prevent us from falling again. We reached firm land, then a frozen river. We skittered along its banks, hopping between hummocks of grassy turf. I hunted and pecked a route up the hillside off the main trail, finally connecting with an old snowmobile track.

The next stretch wasn’t a lake, but it was still a challenge. A melting river meandered back and forth across the trail — Mike and I alternately rode through the golden winter grasses and pushed across the squishy plain. Where the bows in the river were especially wide, we took a running start to hurdle across the stream, then passed bikes to each other.

Hills became mountains, but we could see for miles. We paused at the edge of the next lake, which was so smooth it looked like a Zamboni had just finished grooming it. It looked like a nine-mile-long ice rink. We scrambled up the hill to scout a good line. No luck. So we clipped in and rolled. We both landed on our backs, our bikes falling on top of us, before the tires could make a full revolution.

Hardship and Type II fun are not just elements of an expedition but core to the experience. This tour was tough — it pushed our personal limits and let us flex our decision-making and problem-solving powers. In this instance, we took the easy out and hailed the snowmobiles before we could seriously hurt ourselves.

Bo and Oli came to our rescue. I squeezed in behind Bo with my bike balanced on my shoulder. At the next strip of land, I tumbled off the sled and shook out my cramping arm, grateful for the shuttle and psyched to be back under my own power.

The route ahead wasn’t necessarily easier than the ice rink, but we got creative. An animal trail led up a slabby rock face away from the slushy lake that formed the next part of the trail. It was off camber, but it had a good view and got us out of the wet. We hike-a-biked, stepping over squat bushes while trying not to slip on the tapestry of green and yellow lichen.

The scenery changed. As we wound through a narrow valley, the mountains grew steeper and more dramatic. We pedaled a broad plain, and for the first time I saw Arctic Circle hiking trail markers. We grunted through a series of short, punchy climbs up rock-pimpled hillsides, and then we spotted the next hut.

It was so small we would have missed it had it not been painted red to stand out from the gray and white landscape. Inside Bo and Oli had a fire blazing in the kerosene stove. There was barely enough room for the four of us to sit on the three torn foam mattresses stuffed around the cramped table. Mike hung his dripping wet shoes to dry, and I soaked up the warmth while sipping
triple servings of still-too–hot instant Thai chicken soup and scarfed egg-shaped marzipan sweets left over from Easter.

After lunch, we pedaled straight into the biggest climb of the trip, and it was a grind. I focused on my front wheel and turned the pedals one at a time. The snowmobile-packed trail followed a steep and winding doubletrack, parts of which were slushy. Oli got his snowmobile stuck while Bo rallied his at full throttle through the soft-snow mire. Bo dropped his trailer to double back and assist Oli. We carried on. Our tires slipped. We pushed. We pedaled, and then we pushed again, finally cresting the summit to views of big mountains on the horizon.

It was stunning. I stood solo at the high point while Bo and Oli sorted out their sleds and Mike finished the climb.

It was quiet enough to hear the wind swish through a bird’s feathers as it plays on an updraft over your head. It’s a remoteness that, when it’s calm and sunny, tucks you under its wing and transports you to another world.

We playfully bounced down the hill, high from the day. The sun soon dropped behind a ridge and, despite heavy winter gloves, my hands felt stiff and cold. I was hungry and had to pee. I stopped to regroup and look around. The landscape looked black and white. Delicate ribs of snow rose like a sea of shark fins from the frozen lake where I stood. Striations in the rock wall at the lake’s terminus looked like cave paintings left by an ancient civilization.

It’s possible. This area is a traditional Inuit hunting ground for reindeer and musk ox — a lumbering, 750-pound, bison-like creature with curving dropped horns that frame its head like a cartoon hairdo. Hunters have been wandering these hills for thousands of years.

I saw a cabin high on a hill, and as much as I wanted to be in my hut slippers holding a steaming cup of coffee ASAP, I knew it wasn’t our night’s destination. As I pedaled past, I saw that Mike had hiked up to it — he seemed to be surveying the kingdom from his perch. “Not our hut,” I let him know.

“I can’t go on!” he yelled into the increasingly bitter cold afternoon. “I’m staying here.”

I thought he’d lost it. I tried to be compassionate and rational, and I literally talked him down from the cliff. He finally slipped down from the cabin, I force-fed him a maple stroopwafel, and we put our heads down and turned the cranks.

The cold compounded our fatigue. Luckily I had the advantage of knowing the lay of the land from my hike a decade before, and I knew our hut wasn’t far. We talked about nothing in particular to make the time pass. The hut appeared as we rounded a corner, and Mike collapsed on the bench inside in thorough exhaustion.

Inajuattoq Hut wasn’t as big as Canoe...
Camp, but it was more modern feeling, with a separate nine-bed bunkroom and a dining nook with windows on all sides. I slathered a slice of Chef Bo’s nut bread with thick butter and watched through the window as a dog sled made its way across the frozen lake.

A young woman drove her team up to the hut, then climbed off the reindeer-hide–draped sled and entered. Aviaq, a young female musher from Sisimiut, would join us for the second half of the trip.

Despite her glam glasses, she was clearly a badass — decked out in a heavy hand-knit wool sweater, white Sorel boots, and polar-bear-hide pants made by her mother. Female mushers are as rare as albino musk ox, but Aviaq had been driving dogs with her father since she could walk. She had a day job at a retail shop but hoped to someday mush full time.

Managing working dogs is a project, and Aviaq did it with graceful ease and the strength of a longshoreman. She untethered the dogs one by one, removing their harnesses and clipping the dogs to a long lead she’d staked so that no two dogs would be close enough to fight. She donned gloves and pulled a heavy plastic bag filled with fish from her sled, and the expectant yipping and howling began. Dog by dog, she unloaded fistfuls of whole capelin, a kind of local salmon, and the dogs snapped up the fish, swallowing them whole.

After a good night’s sleep, Aviaq’s dogs couldn’t wait to run. Mike and I were ready before the dogs were harnessed, so we headed across the lake for the hills. But the pack of excited dogs caught us, splitting around me as they romped forward at full tilt. I got knocked off my bike and dragged in slow motion, tangled in their leads, the wooden sled inches from running me over and my bike scraping along the ice. Aviaq was mortified. I was fine and now armed with the knowledge that steering dogs is an imprecise science.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 58
I extricated myself from the mess of leads and sent Aviaq and the dogs ahead. After 15 minutes, they’d gotten their yayas out, and Mike and I rode next to them all day without incident while Aviaq took Instagram snaps of us with her phone. Dog sledding is a traditional form of travel here. She’d never seen a bike on the ice, and she thought we were hilarious.

Riding with the dogsled made the time pass. So did the promise of sunshine, which emerged from behind the clouds for the first time since we had started.

Our last hut was perched on the edge of a fjord where the ice had heaved up into miniature volcanoes as far as the eye could see. Off in the distance, we saw other huts — private hunting camps. Though we still had at least half a day’s ride from Sisimiut, the trip to this hut was less than an hour by snowmobile, and in summer you can reach the head of the fjord by boat.

The weather broke. Sun sparkled on the snow as we rolled in. Inside the cabin, Noah, a hunter and friend of Bo’s, had laid out a slab of beluga whale skin, local sushi. Whale skin is an important food in this culture. It provides vitamin C, critical for preventing scurvy where humans don’t have fruits and vegetables. Noah crosshatched the fat and sprinkled it with salt. It was chewy like octopus with the fattiness of otoro (a part of tuna), and quite tasty for calorie-depleted winter cyclists. We topped it off with Greenlandic coffee — made of coffee, milk, and a lot of some kind of alcohol.

We had the perfect last night. We hiked up a small peak for a bird’s-eye view of the peaceful scenery — the big mountains of Sisimiut and the Atlantic in the distance.

It was one last half-day huff over the pass to return to civilization. Sisimiut, population 6,000, is one of Greenland’s largest towns and lies nearly 30 miles north of the Arctic Circle, but it’s busy with cars, shops, and a shrimp factory. And Sisimiut was in the middle of an Arctic music festival.

The end to any adventure is bittersweet. I had a hot shower, and we decimated the hotel buffet. While it was nice to have the comforts of home, I knew I’d be dreaming of my time on the ice for months and years to come. Returning to Greenland, I realized how much I had missed it. Being on my bike there, I saw how much more there was to explore.

Berne Broudy is a Vermont-based writer and photographer. Find her on twitter @berneab and on Instagram @bernebroudy.