Iceberg FAQ's

1. Where do icebergs come from?

The majority of the icebergs in the North Atlantic come from about 100 iceberg producing glaciers along the Greenland coast while a few originate in the eastern Canadian Arctic Islands. The glaciers of western Greenland, where 90% of Newfoundland's icebergs originate, are amongst the fastest moving in the world, up to 7 km per year. The icebergs we see off Newfoundland are carried south in the cold Labrador current.

2. How do Icebergs form?

Icebergs are edges of a glacier that have broken off and slipped into the ocean. Glaciers form on land as an effect of snow building up over thousands of years. Each layer compresses the later until, 60 to 70 meters down, glacial ice is formed. Similar to the flow of a thick liquid, glaciers then "flow" or "creep" towards the ocean under their own weight, and eventually slip in.

3. How old are icebergs?

The icebergs that reach the east coast of Newfoundland probably calved from a glacier more than a year before. They often spend a year or more in cold arctic bays melting slowly (or not at all in winter) until eventually passing through the Davis Strait and into the Labrador Current. Rarely do icebergs last more than one year south of this point. The glacial ice that icebergs are made of may be more than 15,000 years old!

4. What causes the coloured streaks in icebergs?

The blueish streaks of clear, bubble free ice often seen in icebergs results from the refreezing of melt water which fills crevasses formed in the glacier as it creeps over land. The ice is blue because of the natural light scattering characteristics of pure ice. Occasionally airborne dust or dirt eroded from land ends up on the glacier surface eventually forming a noticeably darkened brown or black layer (in any orientation) within the ice of a floating iceberg.

5. How much of an iceberg is below water?

The "tip of the iceberg" expression can be explained as follows: Icebergs float because the density of ice (around 900 kg per cubic metre) is lower than that of seawater (around 1025 kg per cubic metre). The ratio of these densities tells us that 7/8 of the iceberg's mass must be below water. Usually icebergs protrude underwater so that they are 20 to 30% longer than they appear from above the surface. Also, the average depth (draught) of an iceberg is slightly less than its apparent length above water.

6. What should I watch for when looking at an iceberg?

For those who wish to look beyond the beauty of icebergs there are many things to look for which can make iceberg watching more interesting. Besides estimating the iceberg's size and shape there are many features which may be noted. Coloured streaks, caves and tunnels, old and new waterline notches, even objects such as boulders or birds are seen on icebergs. Even more spectacular is the occasion of an iceberg calving and rolling which can often be heard from a good distance.