

The Russell Glacier

Greenland is the world's largest island. 81 per cent of Greenland is covered by ice. The Ice sheet is up to 3,500 meters thick. The ice is constantly in motion.

Kangerlussuaq is a small settlement by the head of a big fiord in Western Greenland. The edge of the ice sheet is located 25 km west of the settlement. At the edge of the ice sheet you find the Russell Glacier.

The tongue of the Russell Glacier rises 40-50 m vertically. The movements of the ice sheet cause that large and small pieces of ice are breaking off and crashing down with thunderous sound into the glacial river in front of the glacier tongue.

The enormous forces in this extreme natural phenomenon have often cost lives in Greenland. In 1961, a block of ice worked loose at the Russell Glacier. The diameter of the block had a diameter of 75 meters.

The result was that the block of ice exploded in front of the glacier front. Pieces of ice were shoot as projectiles in the surroundings. A group of tourists was hit by the ice, even they complied with the prescribed rules for onsite visits to the glacier. At the same time the crash caused a great flood. Five tourists were killed and 28 were wounded.

On other occasions, it is the flood that cause the worst injuries. In 2008, two tourists were killed when the tourists on a visit at Kangerlussuaq was hit by a wave from a glacier. Glacier waves are known to science under the Icelandic term "jökulhlaup" derived from the words jökul (glacier) and hlaup (crack). A jökulhlaup is the result of a collapse of the glacier ice. If there is melt water dammed up behind the ice, the water comes out at high speed. The quantities of melt water can be enormous.

In 2007, such a collapse of the glacier wall in the Russell Glacier took place. In a lake on an area of half a square kilometer the water depth decreased 25 meters. It was estimated that 28.8 million cubic meters of water poured into the river in front of the glacier.

Most jökulhlaups in Greenland take place far from inhabited areas without anyone noticing them.

In August 2011 I photographed a collapse of a block of ice at the front of the Russell Glacier. You can view the collapse in this slide show. Watch the slideshow [here](#).

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The front of the Russell Glacier, August 2011

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