



LOGBOOK



In the realm of the Polar Bear

Svalbard, June 2008

Logbook written by Simon Cook

FRIDAY, June 13th

Longyearbyen, 78° 10' North,
015° 20' East & Barentsburg,
78° 00' N, 014° 00' E

Weather: bright and sunny!
Temperature: 7° C/45° F

After a sightseeing tour to the Svalbard Museum and around Longyearbyen we boarded the Polar Star. Instead of getting on from a dock, as we expected, we found ourselves bundled into small, rubber, inflatable boats – zodiacs! We would come to know them very well indeed over the course of the next few days.

After check-in, welcoming cocktails and snacks were served in the observation lounge. This was followed by an introduction and a presentation by Expedition Leader Hannah Lawson, the Captain Jacek Majer, the Hotel Manager Rita Hivekovics and all the guides. We got a lot of practical information and had a lifeboat drill as we sailed away from the town. Dinner was served while we sailed west along Isfjorden to the Russian town of Barentsburg.

This settlement is located in Green Fjord and is a Russian coal mining community with around 500 inhabitants from Russia and Ukraine. It is a family community with around 25 children, and the only place at Svalbard where you find some farming. They have a pig farm, and also a greenhouse. Cattle, which they had for a long time, are no longer held in the little farm because they have all been eaten. We had a guided tour around the city with two local guides and Bernard sang for some of us in the church. We visited the community and were entertained by an entrancing folklore show in the theatre. Simon was surprised to be “adopted” by one of the locals!

During our stay a single Beluga Whale swam up and down right in front of the ship so those of us present got extraordinary views of this often elusive Arctic animal. Later on, after everyone had embarked Polar Star we sailed out of Isfjorden and passed the island of Prins Karls Forland on our way north to many anticipated adventures.

SATURDAY, June 14th

Ny-Alesund, 78° 50' N, 011°
30' E, Magdalenefjorden, 79°
30' N, 010° 30' E and the ice!

Weather: clear and sunny, some cloud, fog and snow later
Temperature: 1° C/34° F, windy

In the early morning we came into Kongsfjord and arrived at Ny Ålesund, the world's northernmost community. It is a former mining settlement that has become an important international research centre - mainly on the atmosphere and ozone layer, but geological, biological and glacial research is also carried out here by many different countries. We had guides in town, where we divided into different groups and some went bird hunting with Simon (armed with a telescope only!). The rest of us had a cultural and historical overview. During our time here we looked at the old train that was in use in the mining period. Among everything else “northernmost” here, this was the northernmost railway in the world. We walked through this small town, with colorful wooden houses from before World War II. Some of us even went inside one of them – where they have made a museum – and we could see how people were living in the early 1960's.

Next to the Amundsen bust we heard about all those people starting their expeditions from this remote settlement. But the most interesting story was the one about the Norwegian Roald Amundsen and the Italian Umberto Nobile flying over the North Pole in an airship in 1926. Some of us walked over to the airship-mast that is still there. After that we enjoyed some time for ourselves and some shopping, in this peaceful place.

From the dock the ship headed north, past the seven glaciers, towards Magdalenefjorden. This is the most well known fjord in Spitsbergen and also one of the few places where big cruise ships are allowed to come. It is a lovely fjord with peaked mountains on both sides and an impressive glacier at the end. These are supposed to be the mountains Willem Barents first saw when he discovered Svalbard in 1596, naming the biggest island Spitsbergen (peaked mountains) after them.

Entering the fjord, a snow-covered peninsula stuck out from the southern shore; this is where we landed. This is Gravneset (“the grave-yard peninsula”) where Dutch and English whalers from northwestern Spitsbergen came to bury their dead in the 17th and 18th centuries. There are 150 men buried here. Down on the beach but hidden under snow there are remains from two blubber ovens where blubber from whales was rendered. At the end of the beach lies a small cabin where the Sysselmannen (Governor) has officers during the summer. Walking past the cabin we climbed up onto the end of a small moraine to enjoy the views and on the way back we saw a fox.

The captain then took us through the remains of the fast ice to the Waggonway Glacier at the head of the fjord. The glacier had calved recently so there was a lot of blue ice to be seen – a breathtaking sight. From here we sailed north, weaving between some of the islands at the northwestern extremity of Spitsbergen on the way. Walrus were to be seen but all eyes were on the lookout for bears. Very soon the ice became denser and the ship began to force its way through. After a lot of searching in poor visibility a bear was finally spotted at 23.46 – after most of us had gone to bed!

Nevertheless, we were soon out on deck, to find that the bear was young and very curious. As soon as it saw the ship it made a beeline for us; when it reached the edge of the ice it simply and without hesitation went into the water and swam towards us! Over the course of the next 25 minutes we had very close views of the bear and were thrilled to see it rear up twice on its hind legs in an effort to get a better look at us. In the end, because the strong wind was causing the ice to close in around us, the captain headed us towards Raudfjorden, to the south.

SUNDAY, June 15th

**Raudfjorden to the ice –
furthest north position: 80°
00.5' N, 011° 57.9' E & Ytre
Norskoya, 79° 50' N, 011° 30'
E**

Weather: windy with snow all day
Temperature: -1° C/29.5° F

Soon after breakfast we were heading more or less due north and it wasn't long before drift ice started to appear on the horizon. At 09.30 a big bear was seen on the ice so the ship was taken close to the ice edge. However, the bear showed no interest in us and slowly moved away. Our time was then spent trying to see how far we could get in the ice, which stretched as far as the limited visibility would allow. It was during this time that our furthest north position was reached so we celebrated in the correct manner. The captain tried to signal the crossing of the line by giving a long blast on the horn but to no avail. Then without warning, the horn started itself but couldn't be turned off!

Our destination for the afternoon was the nearby small island of Ytre Norskoya. It was only a short way to go but we were slowed on the way by ice. We had an easy landing on a cobble beach, climbed up the snow staircase and split up into different groups for different hikes. This was our first true wilderness landing so all of the guides came prepared for bears, being armed with flares, bangers, rifles and loud voices. Some of us had a short walk to see a pair of Brent Geese before looking at a small colony of Little Auks. Others were more adventurous and some even reached the top of the island! The snow made things a little difficult and slow but it was good to be off the ship and on “dry” land. One lucky group saw a walrus in the sea on the way back to the ship and that rounded off the day very nicely, until after dinner that is.

We sailed south through the ice, looking for wildlife as we went along. At 21.38 another bear was spotted on a huge floe so the captain turned the ship and we slowly approached it. The bear seemed a bit shy and played peek-a-boo from behind a mound of ice but we could still see that it was a big animal; when it came into full view we saw it was a male. He wasn't interested in us either and slowly walked away. The ship then slowly sailed away.

MONDAY, June 16th

**Lilliehookfjorden, 79° 16.0' N,
011° 40.0' E & Fjortende
Julibukta, 79° 07.5' N, 011°
52.0' E**

Weather: Overcast with sunny period, some light snows

Temperature: 0° C/32° F

Today we woke up to grey skies, out of which some light snow was falling. There was also sunshine and some wind too, which made going out for a cruise in the zodiacs a little chilly. The boats set off in couples to explore the area and most, if not all of us, got the chance to land on a small island for wonderful views of the glacier. A single Bearded Seal was spotted, there were Arctic Terns perching on ice, Common Eider nesting on the largest island and two boats had very close views of a pair of Grey Phalaropes. Just down the fjord the ship stopped at the cliffs at Cadiopynten, where there was a small colony of Brunnich's Guillemots. In amongst them and on the water too were 16 puffins and a single Common Guillemot, which is quite a scarce bird in Svalbard.

Our afternoon landing place was nearby on a gently-sloping beach, which made getting ashore very easy. In one direction was a walk towards a remarkable hanging garden, with many different plants in flower, whilst in the other direction was an impressive glacier - Bernard was ecstatic! The ice wall was cracked and splintered and much of the freshly exposed ice (after calvings) was a vivid blue. Above the landing beach, on the cliff, was a large colony of Brunnich's Guillemots and lots of orange lichen. Another option here was to go by zodiac to the small cliff where there were guillemot nesting ledges. We were able to get very close to them but could not see any eggs, which are laid on the bare rock. Another attraction at this place was the delightful Puffin, several of which were seen, plus Barnacle Geese too. Soon afterwards the ship carried us away from the bay towards lands to the south, passing blue icebergs on the way.

TUESDAY, June 17th

Poolepynten, 78° 26.5' N, 011° 53.0' E & St. Jonsfjorden, 78° 34' N, 013° 11' E

Weather: bright and sunny; very windy am
Temperature: 3° C/37° F

Our landing place this morning was named after a 17th-century English whaler but there were no signs of whales at Poolepynten. Instead there were walrus; about 25, to be precise! Most were

on the shingle beach but up to 5 of these huge animals could be seen jousting and tussling in the water nearby. Landing downwind, we were led in groups of about 20 to within about 40 yards of these impressive marine mammals. They showed no signs of wariness so we were all able to spend a good bit of time close to them. The backdrop of distant snowy mountains was perfect for "in habitat" photographs and video. This was yet another highlight of our voyage.

After lunch the ship anchored in breathtaking St. Jonsfjorden in between two glaciers – Konowbreen and Osbournebreen. In front of the first there was still a lot of solid-looking fast ice. Once ashore most of us set off up the hill to get a view of the surrounding landscape and on the way a ptarmigan was seen. The views from up high were breathtaking so they made the strenuous hike well worthwhile. Meanwhile, the fast ice had suddenly broken up and was being blown by the wind around the ship. The captain quickly repositioned it as the first of several zodiac cruises got underway.

In addition to zig-zagging through the ice floes there was the added excitement of closing in on Bearded Seals. However, for two people there was an even more surprising turn of events. Honeymooners Teresa and Adrian went out in their own special 'love boat' on a private charter. Their driver was none other than the second best in the entire fleet, the best being in hospital after an accident. After a while their guide spotted a bearded seal in the water amongst the ice and headed slowly over in the hope of a closer look. The seal was spotted close to the boat but when it surfaced it had tusks – a walrus! It was very curious and swam right up to the boat and almost touched the pontoon with its whiskers – what a honeymoon treat!

WEDNESDAY, June 18th

Hornsund, 76° 59.0' N, 015° 50.0'E

Weather: bright and overcast
Temperature: 3° C/37° F

Sailing into Vestre Burgerbukta, just before breakfast, we were able to see lots of fast ice with, in the far distance, lots of seals on the ice itself. After breakfast we continued deeper into Hornsund, with the lookouts on the bridge on high alert for wildlife. Before long another bear was spotted. It was a long way away but the

captain took the ship into the edge of the fast ice and we sat quietly for one hour. The landscape was a wonderland of snowy mountains, mighty glaciers, glass-like sea and extensive fast ice, which had many pools of seawater in it. Close to the bear a small group of Beluga suddenly surfaced in one of them, was seen briefly and then disappeared. The bear continued to walk over the ice in search of food, before taking to the water and trying to surprise unwary gulls.

On the way to our afternoon location we stopped for a short zodiac cruise, which turned out to be very successful. We were lucky to be in the right place at the right time to see a group of 10-15 Beluga swimming close to the shore. The whales were in sight for a little time before they dived, never to be seen again. Our after-lunch landing place was below the 759 m/2,490' cliff at Gnalodden, upon which many Kittiwakes and Brunnich's Guillemots were nesting. The sight and sound was tremendous! Some of the slopes below the rock face were carpeted with the pink flowers of the abundant Purple Saxifrage and there was also scurvy grass in bloom.

Guides were posted around the perimeter of the landing site so that we could wander freely and look at, for example, the Pomor site, a grave, the old trappers hut and the hot spring. The water coming out of it was so hot that it was impossible to even dip a toe into it, let alone bathe! The views across the fjord were terrific and got better as one climbed higher up the slope towards the bird cliff.

Before dinner the Polar Star headed out of Hornsund on a course that, if it had not been changed later, would have taken us somewhere to the north of Greenland! Stefan and Bernard later gave interrupted and delayed after-dinner presentations on the flora and fauna of Svalbard and the Arctic. Four of the "fauna" appeared very close to the ship after Hannah's eagle eyes spotted some distant spouts. The owners turned out to be 2 Fin and 2 Humpback whales, which were feeding actively, thus providing us with very close views. The fins were longer and more slender than the shorter, fatter humpies but the latter delighted us by repeatedly throwing their tail flukes up in the air. Their very long pectoral fins could be seen underwater; they can be up to 15 feet long. The whales were a terrific end to another exceptional day!

THURSDAY, June 19th

Kapp Toscana, Van Keulenfjorden, 77° 33.3' N, 015° 04.5' E, Kapp Linne, 78° 03.8' N, 013° 37.5' E & Trygghamna, 78° 14.5' N, 013° 51.0' E

Weather: overcast but bright

Temperature: 4° C/39° F

The ship was already at anchor so immediately after breakfast we boarded the zodiacs for the short ride ashore. Awaiting us was an old trappers hut, now only used for recreational purposes. However, close by was a reminder of days gone by – thousands of bones from Belugas, amongst which a pair of Snow Buntings was nesting. Enough of the snow had melted to allow us to set off across the tundra on a variety of walks. The energetic had a long walk, the moderately-inclined had a medium walk and the pleased-to-be-off-the-ship group pottered around in the area of the hut.

Walking conditions were very good so everyone was able to do as much or as little as they liked. The people on the long walk saw some bones from a Sperm Whale that washed up on the beach in 2006. As in other places that we visited, purple saxifrage was much in evidence, as were good numbers of eiders. Other notable bird species included a pair of Arctic Skuas, a pair of Grey Phalaropes and an Iceland Gull, which is a rare visitor to Svalbard.

On our way north to Kapp Linne we had a disembarkation briefing and some time to start packing our bags. We landed in the late afternoon very close to the old Isfjorden radio station, now a hostel for winter and summer tourists. The surrounding area is a bird reserve so although we could not hike we had very good views across the tundra

Later on, other activities to keep us busy included more packing, engine room tours, the Captain's farewell cocktail party, a voyage slide show and an Arctic barbecue outside the observation lounge. The ship was at anchor in a spectacular fjord close to Longyearbyen called Trygghamna.

In all we were 92 guests and guides onboard from 10 different countries:

AUSTRIA – 1 person
DENMARK - 4 people
FRANCE - 22 people
GERMANY - 18 people
ITALY - 6 people
NETHERLANDS - 3 people
NORWAY – 6 people
SWEDEN – 4 people
UK - 25 people
USA – 3 people

During the cruise we saw polar bears, walrus, beluga and foxes plus colonies of kittiwakes, Brunnich's guillemots, puffins and little auks. We also broke through ice with the ship and sailed past stunning and dramatic scenery.

On behalf of Spitsbergen Travel, the guide team and lecturers, ships crew and officers we thank you for choosing us as your companions throughout this adventurous journey in the most beautiful parts of Spitsbergen.

We hope this logbook will make you remember this adventure, again and again...

Hannah Lawson, Expedition Leader

Simon Cook

Kjorsti Dale

Anja Fleigg

Niklas Gerhardsson

Bernard Lefauconnier

Stefan Stoll

Helle Vittinghaus

& with help from Dr. Mark!



Man's five senses are sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Spitsbergen Travel's vision is to create joy by stimulating your senses in a way that you never forget. We hope that this last week has alerted all five senses... FOREVER!

Are you sad to leave Svalbard? Interested in knowing more about trips during the winter? You can find more information on our website www.spitsbergentravel.com or in our catalogue.