



# LOGBOOK



## *To the Kingdom of the Polar Bear*

*Svalbard, August 13<sup>th</sup> - 19<sup>th</sup> 2010*

Written by Simon Cook

**FRIDAY, August 13<sup>th</sup> 2010**

**Spitsbergen**

**Longyearbyen - 78° 10' North, 015° 20' East**

**Barentsburg - 78° 03.8' N, 014° 11.9' E**

**Weather:** overcast with sunshine later

**Temperature:** 6° C/43° F

Following lunch and a bus tour of Longyearbyen we boarded our new home for the next few days, the *Polar Star*. After we had been welcomed aboard, cocktails and snacks were served in the observation lounge. There then followed a brief introduction and a welcoming message from the Captain, Jacek Majer, Expedition Leader Heiko Kuhr and the guide team and the Hotel Manager Janet Aurelio. Afterwards there was a safety briefing from the Chief Officer, followed by an outside drill near the lifeboats.

It was not long before the ship left Longyearbyen and headed for Barentsburg. The town lies not far from Longyearbyen, in Green Fjord (Grønfjorden) and is a Russian coal mining community. We arrived just as dinner finished. The 400 workers (from Russia and Ukraine) have 22 children, 100 pigs, a church and a prison-like consulate. Once we were down on the dock we were introduced to our local guides, who showed us around their town. But first there were 241 steps to ascend, or we could go by bus instead! The tour was followed by a folklore show in the theatre, which is in the large cultural and sports centre. It was a dazzling display with elaborate costumes and it was all performed by people from the community, rather than a professional troupe.

Soon after the show finished, the ship left the dock and headed north, past the island of Prince Charles Foreland (Prins Karls Forland). The quality of the sunlight on the clouds was astonishing. We went to bed in anticipation of all the adventures that lay ahead of us.

**SATURDAY, August 14<sup>th</sup>**

**Ny-Alesund - 78° 50' N, 011° 30', E**

**Magdalenefjorden - 79° 30' N, 010° 30' E**

**Moffen - 80° 00' N, 014° 27.8' E**

**Weather:** overcast, cool, breezy & snowy!

**Temperature:** 2° C/36° F

Shortly after breakfast we docked at Ny Ålesund;

it is said to be the world's northern-most community. It is a former coal mining settlement that has become an important international research centre. Work is mainly on the atmosphere and ozone layer but geological, biological and glacial research is also carried out, by many different countries. During our time here we had guided walking tours in town, where we divided into different groups for a cultural and historical overview. The shop here is perhaps the northernmost one in the world so we had to pay it a visit and spend some money!

The old train that was in use in the mining period was a good photographic subject, especially with the mountains and glaciers behind it. Among everything else here holding the title "northernmost", this train worked on the northernmost railway in the world. We walked through this small settlement, with colourful 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 the many people starting their expeditions from this very remote settlement. But the most interesting story was the one about the Norwegian, Roald Amundsen and the Italian, Umberto Nobile. They flew over the North Pole in an airship in 1926. Some of us walked over to the mooring mast that is still there.

There was some wildlife here too. The most obvious species was Barnacle Goose. There were several groups around the town and among them were some young ones. Many of the goslings are eaten by the fox family, which lives under an old house. During our visit two different foxes were seen but they only came out for a few minutes at a time. Other birds included Snow Buntings, the last Arctic Terns, Glaucous Gulls, two Red-throated Divers and a single Ivory Gull. The gull is pure white, is a species of the high Arctic and is often associated with sea ice. The one we saw flew around the ship before heading towards the dog pens on the edge of town. The most unusual sighting was of a single Harbour Seal, which the "wildlife guide" has never seen here before.

Our adventure then took us out of Kongsfjord and northwards, up towards the north-western corner of Spitsbergen. The landscape was spectacular – glaciers, jagged mountains and fresh snow on all of them. These mountains are the ones Willem Barents first saw when he discovered the islands in 1596. He named the

land Spitsbergen (peaked mountains) after them. After briefings and the collection of rubber boots the captain turned the ship into the entrance of Magdalenefjorden. This is the best-known fjord in Spitsbergen and it is 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. When we arrived we saw that the mountains here too were topped with fresh snow and the sun was starting to break through the cloud.

We were all set for our landing when the wildlife guide spotted a bear at the other end of the fjord. The ship headed that way and then it was seen that there were two, not one! The first one had joined another one in the water and they were playing together near the shore. The ship got closer and closer and they didn't even turn to look at us. They were in sight for three hours and during that time we watched them in the water, on the shore, in the water again and then back on land. It seemed that the slightly larger one was making advances to the other one – a male and female? At other times they walked close together and even started eating the plants on the slope. When we left them they were lying down, resting, on a mossy slope. It is very unusual to see one bear in the fjord but to see two and so well for so long was outstanding!

Our route to the north took us through a channel called South Gate and into another large fjord, Smeerenburg Fjord. Once here we turned to the north and eventually got out to the open sea, where we set course for the island called Moffen. On the way and after dinner, there was a presentation in the lounge about the birds of Spitsbergen. It must have been pretty good because even Simon managed to stay awake! Immediately afterwards we went through a snowstorm, which left the deck outside the lounge white!

We reached the walrus haul-out there shortly after 23.00. Moffen is very unusual because it resembles a tropical atoll – it is low-lying and made of shingle with a large lagoon in the middle, which used to be open to the sea. It was clear and calm so from some distance away we could see the island very clearly but just as a dark line on the horizon. As we drew closer to the southern tip of the island, there on the shore was a large group of Walrus and there were a few in the water too. The island is protected so we were not able to approach closer than 300 yards but even at that distance the ivory tusks on the fat,

blubbery creatures could easily be seen. The ship spent some 30 minutes here and then headed away; we then headed away to bed.

## **SUNDAY, August 15<sup>th</sup>**

**Lågøya - 80° 21.8' N, 018° 17.5' E  
And our furthest north position!**

**Weather:** wind & snow

**Temperature:** 0° C/32° F

When we finished eating breakfast, the zodiacs took us to the beach at the northern end of Lågøya, or Low Island. Once we were ashore we found that there was a big attraction waiting for us – huge walrus! The first group of walkers headed over the shingle bank, and saw that on a small, nearby island there was a Polar Bear. It was lying down and stayed there for the whole of our time ashore. In late summer, when the sea ice has all gone, bears are attracted to seabird colonies and beaches where walrus come out to rest. Nearby was a very old grave and by the time we had looked at it, it was time to see the walrus.

In all there were about 40 of these animals, in two groups. They were mostly, if not all, huge, fat, blubbery males. The majority were ashore but there were a few in the shallow water by the beach. We were able to approach the ones on land and sit and watch for some time. Every now and then there would be a little disagreement and two or three animals would raise their heads in the air and snort at each other; there were some very large tusks on display. The main 'activity' of the walrus was sleeping but after some time three hauled themselves down to the water's edge and went into the sea.

Two were already in the water and were very curious about us. Slowly they came closer and closer, to get a better look. Eventually they started to come out of the water and they were then joined by three more from further along the beach. Seeing (and, more especially, smelling) these huge animals at such close range was a real treat, especially when one lifted its head and showed that it had a fish in its mouth! The beach smelt very strongly of "Essence of Walrus" and it was just the thing to make us anticipate our warming lunch of Norwegian meatballs. The warmth of the ship was very welcome, after the cold and the snow that we endured outside.

On the way north the wind increased so instead of heading towards exposed Nelson Island for a landing we continued northwards. It was just to the north of Ross Island where we touched the line of latitude at 81° north. Actually we went a little further because our final position was 81° 04' N, 019° 36' E. This was another notable achievement on our voyage as we were only 536 nautical miles or 616 statute miles or 992 kilometres from the North Pole.

It was here that we stopped the ship, stopped the engine and celebrated with some delicious Norwegian aquavit. Looking around, we had an incredible view. In front of us, stretching as far as the eye could see was solid pack ice and just behind us was a bear! It was spotted during dinner and as we ate our food the ship went into the edge of a huge ice sheet. The bear was lying down but got up and started walking slowly towards us. It looked quite young but it was very fat so it was obviously successful at catching seals. After only a few minutes it was very close and walked down the starboard side towards the stern. From here it moved away a little before lying down to watch us watching it! We stayed parked in the ice until late in the evening and then we finally headed off towards the south.

## **MONDAY, August 16<sup>th</sup>**

### **Hinlopen Strait**

**Kinnvika - 80° 02.5' N, 018° 13.3' E**

**Alkefjellet - 79° 36.7' N, 018° 20.5' E**

### **Nordaustrlandet**

**Bråsvellbreen - 79° 17' N, 020° 20' E**

**Weather:** very windy – an ‘arctic blast’ ☺

**Temperature:** 1° C/34° F

When we awoke this morning the ship was already at anchor at Kinnvika. The wind was blowing at more than 30 knots and the very exposed, open landscape was painted white with a lot of fresh snow. The warming breakfast was very welcome, for then we went ashore. The boat ride was bouncy but luckily it was only a short distance to the collection of old sheds. Designed in the post-war-modern style, they were built as part of the global scientific programme for the 1957/58 International Geophysical Year. Allison had spent some time here in the recent past and gave us a vivid, gripping and exciting explanation of what life was like in those days gone by. Many of the sheds were open so it was good to get out of the “Arctic Blast” to see what the interiors were like.

Living conditions looked very similar to the same kind of huts found in Antarctica. The hikers had gone straight off from the beach and reached the top of the nearby hill, before the captain called everyone back to the ship. The already strong wind was increasing in strength.

Next, we approached Alkefjellet (the Auk Cliff). Due to the strong wind and waves we stayed on the ship but still got very good views. The cliffs are home to perhaps 100,000 pairs of Brünnich’s Guillemots and a similar number of Black-legged Kittiwakes; the sight of all these birds was stunning. The guillemots are members of the same group as puffins (the auk family) and, being black-and-white, look just like penguins but they are not related. From the ship we could see that in addition to all the birds on the cliff there were many more, both in the air and on the water. The guillemots do not have a nest but lay the single egg onto the rock. Both the male and the female take turns to incubate the egg and look after the chick. The chicks are encouraged by adults to paraglide off the cliffs (before they can fly) but it is invariably the male that leads the chick away from the colony and looks after it until it can fend for itself.

Here and there on the cliffs was the Glaucous Gull, a predator that takes both eggs and chicks. The sky near the cliffs was full of birds, which looked like clouds of swarming insects. The sea by the cliffs is over 200 m deep and the cliffs themselves are very impressive too. There are vertical columns of basalt, intruded into an area of sedimentary rock, stained white and pink with the accumulated generations of guano. The nesting kittiwakes are mostly high up on the cliffs, above the guillemots.

After lunch there were lectures about the Arctic (Bernard) and glaciers (Martin). Martin had only just finished when a bear was announced over the speakers. In fact there were two on a small, basalt island and the water was deep enough to allow us to go round to the other side. One bear was lying down among the rocks but the other, which showed up really well against the brown background, was closer and was walking around. It seemed to be going through a tern colony, perhaps eating chicks, because adults continually dived at its head. It was pretty exciting to see the bears so unexpectedly but we were soon on our way again.

When we arrived at Bråsvellbreen all we could see was ice, ice, ice. Even better, the sun was now shining brightly! The vertical ice wall was

very impressive and in places there were melt water streams cascading over the lip of the ice and into the sea. The stormy waves were breaking under the lip at the bottom of the wall and rolling along the front. The height of the face was 65 to 80 feet (20-25 metres) and the water was deep enough close to the ice wall for us to sail along it so we did, for some distance. We are used to seeing cliffs of rock so to see one composed of glistening ice was a little “Harry Potter-ish”. When we turned to the south we passed some large icebergs, which had probably come from the ice cap, further to the north.

**TUESDAY, August 17<sup>th</sup>**

**Spitsbergen**

**Boltodden - 77° 29' N, 018° 11' E**

**Isbukta - 76° 51' N, 017° 15' E**

**Weather:** clear, sunny & breezy

**Temperature:** 5° C/41° F

On the way to our anchorage this morning a number of whales were seen. They were huge Fin Whales, the second largest species after the Blue Whale. Fins can be up to 85 feet (25 metres) in length and they occur worldwide. It is quite unusual to see them in this area so we were very lucky. From their behaviour it seemed as if they were feeding. After surfacing from a dive they took several breaths before submerging again. The spout is very high and columnar, sometimes bushy, if it is windy. The back was strongly arched prior to diving and on several occasions the tail flukes were nearly lifted out of the water. Nearly but not quite!

After breakfast we went ashore and landed on a nice sandy beach. The long walkers set off up into the hills and were not seen again. Where they went, what they did and what they saw remained a mystery. Meanwhile, the rest of us went along the coast in the direction of the old sheds. It was an easy walk and there was a variety of things to look at. In different places there were rock pavements going into the sea; there were piles of seaweed washed up on the beach; there were the wonderful old sheds; there was tundra vegetation and there were 75 Barnacle Geese and three Arctic Skuas. Although most of the flowers had died off there was one place where they were still blooming. Amongst them were the pink Moss Campion, the yellow Bog Saxifrage, the white Tufted Saxifrage and the yellow Tufted Cinquefoil. Walking along in the sunshine was very pleasant!

En route to Isbukta we cruised down the east coast of Spitsbergen. The landscape was very dramatic, especially as it was sunny. There were brown hills, high snow and ice-covered mountains and glistening glaciers. On the other side of the ship there were Fin Whales. Their spouts were seen from a distance and as we got closer it seemed to be a female with a large calf. The small one was keeping very close to the large one and we got very close views of them before they dived for food again. At 15.00 we dived into the lounge for fruit cakes and to listen to a talk about glaciers from the premier expert on board, Bernard.

Shortly afterwards, at the northern end of Isbukta, the anchor was dropped and we set off in the boats with the sun still shining down on us. It was a long way to go and the sea was choppy but eventually we arrived at the dramatic, huge Vasil'ev Glacier, (Vasil'evbreen). Here it was possible to stop the engines and listen to the ice popping and cracking in the water around us. The ice wall continued southwards for many miles so we stayed at the northern end. Not far away were two small islands and some of us made a surprise landing there. Meanwhile, four slightly more adventurous boats landed right by the glacier itself and walked up the tongue of gently sloping ice to a vantage point high above. From here the views, with the sun lighting the ice, were truly spectacular.

The boats got us back to the ship just in time for dinner but our day wasn't over yet. Victoria showed a selection of her excellent photographs from the trip in the lounge. Only a few minutes later we got the chance to use our own cameras, when whales were spotted. Once we got close enough to identify them we could see that they were, once more, Fin Whales. For more than 1½ hours there were whales in view, perhaps 40 or so altogether. They were feeding so didn't spend long at the surface but there were enough of them for some of them to be very close to us. The spouts were huge and were lit by the low sun, giving them an almost spiritual look. In amongst its much larger relatives was at least one Northern Minke Whale. Once we left the whales our course took us close to the southernmost tip of Spitsbergen, which we rounded on our way to Hornsund.

**WEDNESDAY, August 18<sup>th</sup>**

**Hornsund**

**Gnålodden - 77° 00.9' N, 015° 53' E**  
**Brepollen - 77° 04' N, 016° 24' E**  
**Samarinvågen - 76° 56.4' N, 016° 13.8' E**

**Weather:** sunny, overcast & sunny again!  
**Temperature:** 5° C/41° F

The whole day was spent in Hornsund and there was plenty to do and see! We went out in the zodiacs after breakfast at a place called Gnålodden, on the north coast. This is the site of an old trapper's hut that was housing a scientist. He was from the Polish station near the entrance of Hornsund, which was established in 1957. At that time the glacier front in Hornsund was very close, now it has retreated several miles. In the last few years the *Polar Star* has recorded an average retreat of 180 metres per annum.

Once we were all ashore we could stroll around the area at will. It was very nice to be able to walk freely, without being escorted by a rifle-toting guide! Above the hut was a very steep slope and at the top of that was the bird cliff. Thousands of kittiwakes and guillemots nest here and the noise was tremendous. There were birds in the air all the time and hundreds more rested on the sea. On top of some of the larger rocks, lower down, were some nesting Glaucous Gulls, which had large, dark brown, spotty chicks. Now that all the Brunnich's Guillemots have left the kittiwakes are the only residents. Other 'natural history' of interest included the occasional puffin, a number of both Barnacle and Pink-footed geese and a flock of 29 Purple Sandpipers. There were few flowers but an area near the hut was carpeted with the bright yellow Bog Saxifrage.

Next we went east to Brepollen, home to huge glaciers. When we arrived at one of them we got a close look at the cracked, fractured and shattered front. The sight was very impressive and near the ice wall those of us with binoculars could see many kittiwakes; mostly on the water. A river of fresh water runs under the glacier and when it reaches the end, it rises to the surface. This upwelling carries much food with it (from the sea water) and enables the birds to get easy pickings.

Our afternoon excursion was a zodiac cruise in Samarinvågen. The first two boats had hardly left the ship when a bear was seen. It was high up on a hill and disappeared from sight. Shortly after being relocated it went into the water amongst brash ice, where many of us got brief views of it. Continuing along the ice wall at the

glacier, many of us were hoping for a spectacular calving but it didn't happen until we had all passed by! The waves spread out all the way across the fjord. Among the millions of small pieces of ice there were some much bigger bergy bits and even mini-icebergs. Some were blue and one of them was full of holes too; they made excellent photographic subjects. During dinner the sun came out again and lit up the mountains and glaciers as we set course for the open sea.

The sea area to the west of Hornsund is quite shallow but then the seafloor drops away sharply to depths of 1,000 metres and more. In areas like this cetaceans (whales and dolphins) can sometimes be found but would we be lucky? That was the question and the answer was a partial 'yes'. There were some Fin Whales in the area through which we sailed but they were mostly distant. Every now and then we would get better but views, since they were busy feeding. Some White-beaked dolphins appeared too but they were even briefer! The sun was still shining from a clear, blue sky and some of us waited to see if it would dip to the horizon. By 01.00 it still wasn't there but the fiery orange orb hanging in the sky was spectacular.

## **THURSDAY, August 19<sup>th</sup>**

### **Isfjord area**

**Alkhorneret - 78° 12.8' N, 013° 52.4' E**  
**Skansbukta - 78° 31.6' N, 016° 02.9' E**

**Weather:** bright & sunny!  
**Temperature:** 8° C/46° F

After breakfast the zodiacs shuttled us to the beach near the 1,000-foot high bird cliffs at Alkhorneret. On the tundra there were many flowers of several different species, including Bog Saxifrage and some uncommonly seen Polar Cress. The Bog Saxifrage was the most distinctive because the flowers were deep yellow in colour and the ones that we saw were the last of the summer blooms. The walking was very easy and we didn't need to go far to find things of interest. The local reindeer were here too and we got extremely good and close views of them. Several males had fine sets of antlers and continued to eat as we admired them.

Birds in the area included Snow Bunting, some Arctic Skuas, Pink-footed geese and Glaucous Gulls. High up on the brilliantly-white, triangular, bird cliff there were thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes. However, they were so

high that they were not very easy to see. Brunnich's Guillemot also nests here but they all seemed to have gone. Most of us climbed a little way up the hill below the bird colony and got better views of the birds and sweeping views across Isfjord, to our south. Other creatures that we saw were foxes. We all got a surprise and most, if not all of us, got to see at least one. The fox down near the sea was already white, in readiness for the coming winter. The other two were seen at a rocky outcrop and one of them was changing from its summer to its winter coat too. The foxes made an excellent ending to our time ashore.

The ship left just before lunch and headed off towards Skansbukta for our final excursion. Here there were very high cliffs but the nesting fulmars at the top were almost invisible. On the flat plain around the abandoned gypsum mine and on the slopes above it there was much plant life but many of the flowers had already bloomed and died. The most interesting species was another kind of *Saxifraga* – Hawkweed-leaved Saxifrage. At one end of the beach was an old, wooden boat and in the middle was a hut, which is still used today.

When we were ready, there was a chance to go around the corner by zodiac to a cliff to search for Puffins and other interesting seabirds. In addition to seeing many puffins on the cliff, there were many flying around and one or two were seen on the water too. They made a fitting end to the exciting run of wildlife that we have seen on our voyage.

Later on we started to get ready for the captain's farewell cocktail party. The senior officers of the ship introduced all of the crew (except the ones on duty on the bridge and in the engine room) and the guides were also wheeled out. After taking pictures of the team there was a superb presentation by Victoria. This took the form of photographs all of which had been taken during our voyage. Finally, there came the barbecue,

which was cooked for us on the deck outside the observation lounge. It was a surprise finale and some of us even ate outside too!

In all we were 91 guests and guides onboard from 14 different countries:

Great Britain	12
Sweden	1
Norway	16
Denmark	1
Netherlands	3
France	2
Germany	31
Switzerland	7
Austria	5
Italy	5
USA	4
Dominica	1
Australia	1
China	2

And the total distance that we sailed during our expedition cruise was 1,092 nautical miles/1,256 statute miles/2,022 kilometres.

*On behalf of Spitsbergen Travel, the guide team and the ship's crew would like to thank you for choosing us as your companions for this adventurous journey to some of the most beautiful parts of Spitsbergen.*

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

*Heiko Kuhr, Expedition Leader  
Gro Vestues, Asst. Expdn. Ldr  
Victoria Hogan, Photography  
Bernard LeFauconnier  
Niklas Gerhardsson  
Little Mo, Ice Pilot  
Martin Machiedo  
Ingunn Løyning  
Allison Bailey  
Silje Mordal  
Simon Cook*

*AND with help from Dr. Meredith Webb & friend Birgit!*



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](http://www.spitsbergentravel.com) or in our catalogue.