



LOGBOOK



To the Kingdom of the Polar Bear

Svalbard, July 3rd – 8th 2010

Written by Simon Cook

SATURDAY, July 3rd 2010

Spitsbergen

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

Weather: overcast, some wind

Temperature: 3° C/37° F

After a day of rest and lunch in a tepee we boarded our new home for the next few days, the *Polar Star*. After checking-in, welcome cocktails and snacks were served in the observation lounge. This was followed by a brief introduction and a presentation by Expedition Leader Steffen Biersack, the Captain Leszek Slawski, the Hotel Manager Natasha and the guide team. Some of us explored the ship and others went to bed, in anticipation of all the adventures that lay ahead of us.

SUNDAY, July 4th

Ny-Alesund - 78° 50' N, 011° 30', E

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

Weather: overcast, some sun, light wind

Temperature: 9° C/48° F

This morning the *Polar Star* sailed out of Isfjord and passed the mountainous island of Prins Karls Forland. Just before lunch there was an announcement that a Polar Bear had been seen on the land. There was quite a bit of panic as we ran for our coats, cameras and binoculars and ran out on deck to see the 'King of the Arctic'. It was quite a big one and was walking around close to the beach and occasionally lying down. The water was too shallow for us to get close but the bear was easy to see against the green vegetation. We never expected to see a bear so soon in the trip so it was very exciting! After lunch the ship turned into Kongsfjorden and headed for Ny Ålesund, which 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 here 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. Some went bird hunting (armed with a telescope only!). The shop here is perhaps the

northernmost one in the world so we had to pay it and the waffle shop 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 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 the many 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. 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 Arctic Tern, which may have spent the winter in Antarctica! The greeny-brown eggs are being incubated in scrapes in the ground, which seem to suit the birds just fine. They were very protective and dive-bombed anyone who ventured too close. Scattered around on the sea were quite a few eider ducks, which mostly nest on nearby islands to avoid predation by the local foxes. Other interesting wildlife included Barnacle Geese with goslings, a single Brent Goose, an Ivory Gull and Snow Buntings.

Our journey next took us out of Kongsfjord and northwards, up towards the northwestern corner of Spitsbergen. Passing towering, jagged, snow-capped mountains and glistening glaciers, the captain soon turned 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. These are the mountains Willem Barents first saw when he discovered the islands in 1596, naming the biggest island Spitsbergen (peaked mountains) after them.

Our destination was a small peninsula that stuck out from the southern shore; this is where we landed with the zodiacs. Gravneset (the graveyard peninsula) is where Dutch and English

whalers based in northwestern Spitsbergen came to bury their dead in the 17th and 18th centuries. There are 150 men buried here. Down on the beach there are remains of three blubber ovens where blubber from whales was rendered or boiled down. At the end of the beach lies a small cabin where the Sysselmannen (Governor) has officers during the summer.

Once we were ashore there was a lot of information from the guides about the history of the area. Then there was a chance to walk along the beach towards the glacial moraine or, for the hikers, towards the glacier in the nearby side fjord. We were surrounded by glaciers and snowy mountains and around the tops above us there were numerous flocks of Little Auks. Although we are beyond midsummer's day now, there were still very few flowers to be seen. The only two species were Alpine Saxifrage and Tufted Saxifrage.

However, those of us who went along to the moraine saw something much more exciting – another Polar Bear! It was swimming across the fjord towards us so a zodiac was sent out from the beach to 'shepherd' it away from us and back to the other side. This was a good reminder that bears can be anywhere here. From the ship the bear could be seen walking along the slopes on the north shore, before finally lying down on a bed of comfortable moss. Soon afterwards, most of us were lying down on a comfortable bed too.

MONDAY, July 5th

Moffen - 80° 00' N, 014° 27.8' E

Lågøya - 80° 21.8' N, 018° 17.5' E

Phippsøya - 80° 43' N, 020° 47' E

Furthest north - 80° 51.8' N, 020° 22' E

Weather: overcast, light wind

Temperature: 6° C/43° F

We reached the walrus haul-out on the island of Moffen at approximately 05.45 in the morning. 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 was still frozen over. It was very foggy and from some distance away we could see it very clearly.

As we drew closer to the southern tip of the island, there on the shore were two groups of Walrus and there were a few in the water too. In all there were approximately 160 - 170 animals present. For the eagle-eyed (we are allowed no

closer than 300 m) there were also Brent Geese, a Great Skua, and two of the rare Sabine's Gulls.

Due to the late outing at Magdalenefjorden last night, and a very early visit to Moffen, we had a late breakfast this morning. When we finished eating, the zodiacs took us to the beach at the northern end of Lågøya, or Low Island. On the way we passed a small Swedish vessel, the Stockholm, whose guests we met ashore. It was not long before two of the rarest and most beautiful bird species in Spitsbergen were seen. The first to be spotted was Sabine's Gull, which only breeds in the high arctic and has a total world population of perhaps only 10,000 pairs. In Spitsbergen there are probably fewer than 10 pairs and we saw three different birds. They had very distinctive grey, black and white wings, a grey head with a black necklace, a red ring around the eye and a black bill with a yellow tip. They were unafraid of us and landed right next to us on several occasions.

The other special bird was Grey (or Red) Phalarope, of which several were seen. The three species in the family are unusual for two reasons. Firstly, it is the male that incubates the eggs and looks after the chicks (so females may mate with several males and lay two or three clutches of eggs). Secondly, unlike all other shorebirds, phalaropes swim and feed by stirring up minute food items in shallow water by dangling their legs below them and spinning in circles. In the breeding season the birds are a rich, brick red colour and, like the Sabine's Gulls, do not mind being close to people. In the non-breeding season the birds are predominantly grey and white, with some black bits here and there. Very surprisingly, we saw a bird in non-breeding plumage. Phalaropes are very small birds but, nevertheless, they spend nearly all their lives on the open ocean. The ones from this area will be at sea off the coast of West Africa in the winter.

There was another attraction near where we landed too and it was a big one – Walrus. In total there were about 50 of them, 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 them and sit and watch for some time. The main 'activity' of the walrus was sleeping but some did haul themselves down to the water's edge and go into the sea. 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. Seeing (and, more especially, smelling) these huge animals at close range was a real treat. "Essence of Walrus" was just the thing to make us anticipate our warming lunch of Norwegian meatballs!

From Lågøya it was only a short 'drive' to one of the northern islands, Phippsøya. There was still some rotten fast ice in the first bay, plus lots of snow ashore. At the ship it was windy and a little choppy but it was decided to go out exploring in the zodiacs to see what we could find. Around the corner conditions were better. At the edge of the ice there were some curious Black Guillemots, which came quite close to the boats.

At the ship the wind had strengthened and, after cruising around in the bay, some boats returned to the ship, where the waves were a little bigger. Other boats stayed out and some of us made a landing on real Arctic pack ice whilst others went on a circumnavigation of the island itself. In places the wind was very strong but at the northern end it died away completely but left a big swell. These two boats covered not only a great horizontal distance but also a great vertical distance before reaching the ship again!

After dinner the northernmost island in Svalbard (and the northernmost point in Europe) appeared ahead of us. Ross Island (and the British Antarctic Survey ship that we saw previously) is named after Sir James Clark Ross, 1800-62, English Arctic and Antarctic explorer. He took part in a naval expedition to Spitsbergen as a lieutenant in 1827. Just to the north of Ross Island was where we reached our furthest north position: 80° 51.8' N, & 020° 22' E. We stopped the ship in the ice to celebrate our achievement as we were only 488 nautical miles or 561 statute miles or 903 kilometres from the North Pole. Our celebratory toast was in the observation lounge and took the form of a Norwegian drink called Aquavit. Eventually, having stopped in the ice, it was time to head off so we set course for the Hinlopen Strait.

TUESDAY, July 6th

**Hinlopen Strait and
Bråsvellbreen - 79° 17' N, 020° 20' E
Bjornsundet - 78° 59.2' N, 020° 03' E
Alkefjellet - 79° 36.7' N, 018° 20.5' E**

Weather: overcast, calm, sea like a mirror
Temperature: 5° C/41° F

Very early this morning there was a call on the speakers saying that there were whales on the starboard side. The sea was flat calm and not far away two black shapes broke the surface. They were the second largest species of whale – Fin. At between 15-18 metres in length they are giants of the seas and are found worldwide but it is very unusual to see them in the enclosed waters of the Hinlopen Strait. These two stayed very close together and came very close to us too. One had a huge dorsal fin and the other animal, perhaps just a little smaller, was stained brown by microscopic organisms on the skin called diatoms.

Every now and then the whales would sound (make a deep dive) and leave the characteristic footprints (circular patches of upwelling water from their tail flukes) behind on the surface. On one such dive one animal lifted its tail flukes right up and out of the water, which is an extremely rare thing for this species to do. When they came up again their heads and mouths could clearly be seen. There were also short periods of rest at the surface as they drifted close to the *Polar Star*. Many of us got up and it was a sight that we never thought that we would see on this trip!

Later in the morning the ship approached the great ice wall of Bråsvellbreen; on the way a number of Walrus were seen. There was a lot of ice in the water, including some distant icebergs and at times the sea was like a mirror. The large island of Nordaustlandet is mostly covered by two huge icecaps and we were sailing along the southern edge of one of them. The vertical wall was very impressive and in places there were meltwater streams cascading over the lip of the ice and into the sea. The water was deep enough close to the ice wall for us to sail along for some way along it. We are used to seeing cliffs of rock so to see one composed of ice was a little strange.

As we ate lunch we sailed south into heavier ice, which the ship broke very easily. There were many pools of meltwater so the ice will not last for much longer. The kittiwakes still followed us though and were trying to catch the small, black fish that live under the ice. The ship then turned to the west, towards an island called Wilhelmøya and Gerit (the Ice Queen) gave a lecture on her favourite subject - ice. Unfortunately the Polar Bear didn't know about the lecture and appeared just a few minutes after it had started. When first seen, the bear was on a big sheet of ice but it soon went into the water and swam off so we

left it alone and went to see a nearby iceberg instead. Gerit had to wait a few more minutes but after the ice was looked at, photographed and filmed, her lecture resumed.

Bjornsundet (Bear Sound) was not far away so we were soon there. The channel was quite narrow and after a while we turned to port into a bay with Moltkebreen (Moltke Glacier) at the end. On the way another bear was seen but, because it was so far away, it was a long time before it could be seen easily. Even when we got closer all we could see was the rear end of the animal, which appeared to be crouching by a seal hole in the ice. Every now and then it lifted its head and looked around. The ship was then turned so that people outside the observation could see the bear too. The hotel people had arranged some hot chocolate and rum for us in the fresh air. What a great idea!

A little later on we approached Alkefjellet (the Auk Cliff) and got ready for an excursion in the zodiacs. It is home to perhaps 100,000 nesting Brünnich's Guillemots and a similar number of Black-legged Kittiwakes. The guillemots are members of the same family as puffins and, being black-and-white, look just like penguins but they are not related. From the boats we could see that the nesting ledges were packed with birds, which were standing shoulder-to-shoulder. They do not have a nest but lay the egg onto the rock. Both the male and the female take turns to incubate the single egg and look after the chick.

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 and looked like clouds of swarming insects and the noise was terrific. There were also thousands of guillemots resting on the sea near the cliffs too. 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. Mostly above the guillemots are the kittiwakes

At the beginning and end of the zodiac cruise there were surprises for some of the boats. At the beginning there was a collapse of some of the rock, which crashed down into the sea. This frightened many of the birds nearby, causing them to fly off their ledges. Later on an Arctic Fox was seen high up on the slopes below the nesting birds. It was so small that, with its camouflage colours, it was difficult to see, until it crossed patches of snow. The fox would be

looking for any eggs or chicks that had fallen from the nesting areas, as well as trying to catch the adults themselves.

At the nearby small ice wall there was more excitement! The ice was very impressive but when Ingrid tried to move away, her engine would not start! Simon and 'Ingunn the Viking' came to her rescue and clipped all three boats together. The zodiacs then drove slowly and with some splashes, back to the ship. Ingrid's boat was manoeuvred into position by the gangway and her guests departed as normal. To get back to the ship themselves, Simon's guests hopped across to Ingrid's boat and then they too went up the gangway. Our long day finally ended at around midnight!

WEDNESDAY, July 7th

Alicehamna - 79° 44.5' N, 012° 12.5' E

Holmiabukta - 79° 48' N, 011° 35' E

Weather: sunshine and fog, calm

Temperature: 5° C/41° F

This morning the ship was anchored within sight of the old trappers hut at Alicehamna. Although there was a clear, blue, sunny sky on the other side of the fjord it was very foggy. There was also a small amount of ice in the water and on one of the floes lay a Bearded Seal. Breakfast was later today so when we were ready we were taken ashore. It was only a short distance to the hut and, from there, not too far to the top of the hill.

The day was beautiful – no wind and a sunny sky. The pool of water behind the beach was like a mirror so it was perfect to reflect upon our surroundings. At the hut we were told about the trapper who lived here at the beginning of the twentieth century and also died here, the day after being found by people from another, distant hut. He was buried on top of the hill and his substantial grave had a large, wooden cross at its head. Nearby was a stone cairn, some reindeer antler, two empty eider eggs and lots of Mountain Avens in flower. The views from the top were tremendous and they were enhanced by the fog. We could see tiny figures on the beach, snowy hills, fogbanks, the ship at anchor on a glassy sea and the tops of distant mountains. On the way back to the ship there was an incident and Gerit had an “inflated” opinion of herself!

After lunch the ship anchored not far away but in the fog. Our mission was to set off in the boats and look for bears at a place where there were the remains of a whale. The bones were visible in the water but there were no bears feeding there. Just a little up from the beach could be seen the top of a bear, which was lying down among the rocks. A little higher up the slope was another one that lay there, looking down at us.

Soon the fog closed in so we drove further into the bay to see what else we could find. On some ice in front of a small glacier was a large group of male eider ducks and on the water in the bay were Black Guillemots. Further around the coast we came into another bay and there was a single Ringed Seal balancing on a rock. This is normally only done in Spitsbergen by the Harbour Seal so it was surprising to see this behaviour in a Ringed Seal. Several times it slipped into the water and came up on another rock. It was very confiding and allowed us to get very close. Once everyone was back aboard, the *Polar Star* set course for the south.

THURSDAY, July 8th

Isfjord

Alkehornet - 78° 12.9' N, 013° 49.5' E

Brucebyen - 78° 38' N, 016° 44' E

Weather: overcast, clam

Temperature: 5° C/41° F

The landing this morning was a very easy one. From the beach at Alkehornet there was a choice of a stroll, a medium walk or a long, strong hike across the tundra. Much of the water from the melting snow had drained away so the ground was mostly dry underfoot. The lush vegetation was very soft and spongy and many flowers were in bloom. The list included Snow and Pygmy Buttercup, Alpine, Bog, Brook, Purple, and Tufted Saxifrage, Hairy Lousewort, different Whitlow-grass species and the rare Boreal Jacob's Ladder.

In addition to the plants there were also Reindeer to look at. They can be very approachable so many of us got very close pictures. One female had a tiny calf and several adult males, with large antlers, were also in the area. Up on the huge, triangular cliff many pairs of Brunnich's Guillemots and Kittiwakes were nesting but they were far too high for us to see them well. On the lower areas the most obvious

birds were the Arctic Skua and the tiny Snow Bunting. The strollers stayed very close to the coast, the 'mediums' went to the bottom of the slope beneath the bird cliff and the hikers went much further along the tundra to the west. The views across the fjord to the distant, snowy mountains were very impressive.

The *Polar Star* then headed east, deeper into Isfjord. Our destination was Brucebyen, close to Nordenskiöld Glacier and opposite the former Russian mining town of Pyramiden. After organising and leading the Scottish National Antarctic Expedition, 1904-08, the Scot, William Spiers Bruce (1867 – 1921) established the Scottish Spitsbergen Syndicate to explore for minerals such as coal and extract them. Brucebyen was the base for the company's operations. However, despite high hopes, there was no commercial success.

Bruce visited Spitsbergen nine times and also enjoyed the patronage of Prince Albert of Monaco, with whom he sailed on the *Princesse Alice* as a guest and scientist. The houses at Brucebyen are the best preserved remains of Bruce's company and pieces of equipment from those times lay around them. There is also a narrow gauge railway that goes down towards the sea. The landscape here was very different to the soft tundra that we saw this morning. The flat area around the huts consisted of extensive deposits of small stones and there were also some small ponds too. There were flowers of several different species, such as Mountain Aven, Tufted, Bog and yellow Mountain Saxifrage and the white form of whitlow-grass. The most exciting find was right where we landed – Oysterleaf. This is a plant that Simon has looked for everywhere he has been on Spitsbergen but this was the first he had seen in the islands. There were not many birds in the area but a Purple Sandpiper with four eggs, a pair of Grey Phalaropes, a Ringed Plover and a pair of Ruddy Turnstone.

The outing from the ship was organised so that half of us went ashore to the huts while the other half went out in the boats. Our destination was the nearby wall of the glacier, which is nearly four kilometres wide. From the zodiac cruise and from the beach we returned to the ship so that we could 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 presented to us. After taking pictures of the team there was a superb

presentation by Dominic. This took the form of still photographs and video footage, 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 fitting way to end our voyage and some of us even ate outside too!

In all we were 93 guests and guides onboard from 14 different countries:

| | |
|---------------|----|
| Great Britain | 10 |
| Sweden | 2 |
| Norway | 7 |
| Finland | 1 |
| Denmark | 1 |
| Netherlands | 5 |
| France | 15 |
| Germany | 30 |
| Switzerland | 3 |
| Austria | 8 |
| Italy | 4 |
| Australia | 3 |
| Canada | 2 |
| U.S.A. | 2 |

And the total distance that we sailed during our expedition cruise was 931 nautical miles/1,071 statute miles/1,724 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...

Steffen Biersack, Expedition Leader

Heiko Kuhr, Assistant Exp. Ldr.

Dominic Photographer

Niklas Gerhardsson

Little Mo, Ice Pilot

Ingunn Loyning

Gerit Birnbaum

Ingrid Kårstad

Samuel Blanc

Simon Cook

& with help from Dr. Paul Stubbing and his young assistant, Brenda!



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.