



# LOGBOOK



## *To the Kingdom of the Polar Bear*

*Svalbard, July 16<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010*

Written by Simon Cook

**FRIDAY, July 23rd 2010**

**Spitsbergen**

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

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

**Weather:** rainy but sunny later

**Temperature:** 10° C/50° 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, the Hotel Manager Janet Aurelio and the guide team. Afterwards there was a safety briefing from the Chief Officer, followed by an outside drill near the lifeboats.

For much of the day it had been raining but when we arrived at Barentsburg the sun was shining brightly. The town lies not far from Longyearbyen in Green Fjord (Grønfjorden) and is a Russian coal mining community. 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! 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 Barentsburg and headed north, past the island of Prins Karls Forland. We went to bed in anticipation of all the adventures that lay ahead of us.

**SATURDAY, July 24<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

**Temperature:** 7° C/45° F

Shortly after breakfast we docked at 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. 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 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 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 Arctic Tern, which may have spent the winter in Antarctica! The adults are very protective but there were a few chicks out in the open. However, if we came too close to the young ones we found ourselves being dive-bombed. Sometimes the terns draw blood when they hit heads with their beaks. The biggest animal that we saw was reindeer. The best and the easiest to see was just behind the shop – a male with a large set of antlers. Scattered around on the sea were some eider ducks, which mostly nest on nearby islands to avoid predation by the local foxes. Other interesting wildlife included Barnacle Geese with goslings, an Ivory Gull and Snow Buntings.

Our adventure then took us out of Kongsfjord and northwards, up towards the northwestern corner of Spitsbergen. Before long 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. However, when we arrived the cloud was very

low and it was drizzling. The nearby mountains are the ones Willem Barents first saw when he discovered the islands in 1596. He named the land Spitsbergen (peaked mountains) after them.

Just inside the fjord we came to a small peninsula, which is where we landed. Gravneset (the grave-yard peninsula) is where Dutch and English whalers based in northwestern Spitsbergen came to bury their dead in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Amongst other things we learnt that there are 130 graves on top of the mound. Down on the beach there are the remains of three blubber ovens where blubber from whales was rendered (boiled down) for the oil. At the end of the beach lies a small cabin where the Sysselmannen (governor) has officers during the summer.

Towards the end of our time ashore the cloud lifted a little and the drizzle stopped, affording us views of the blue Waggonway Glacier at the eastern end of the fjord. Once we were back on board, the ship headed out of Magdalenefjorden. 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!

We reached the walrus haul-out on the island of Moffen just after 23.00 in the evening. Just in front of us was another small cruise ship but they moved away before we arrived. 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 overcast but 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. In all there were approximately 70 animals present. 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. For the eagle-eyed there were also Brent Geese with goslings, hundreds of Arctic terns, a Red-throated Diver, a Great Skua and a single, rare Sabine's Gull. The ship spent 30 minutes here and then headed away; we then headed away to bed.

## SUNDAY, July 25<sup>th</sup>

**Phippsøya - 80° 40.4' N, 020° 45' E**

**Nelsonøya - 80° 37' N, 020° 30' E**

**Rossøya - 80° 50' N, 020° 24' E**

**Weather:** overcast but bright with some sun

**Temperature:** 7° C/45° F

Our morning excursion was at Phipps Island, named after the Royal Navy captain who led an expedition here in 1773. One of the junior officers was a certain 14-year old, Horatio Nelson, later to become an admiral, a lord and the scourge of the enemies of the English. Nelson was almost killed by a bear and has a small, nearby island named after him (our afternoon landing).

The plan had been to offer a series of different walks, once we had all landed. The weather was very good and there were walrus near the water so the first boats disembarked their passengers on the nice, sandy beach. However, suddenly a bear appeared on our side of the walrus and when it started walking towards the group everyone was taken off the beach by the zodiacs. From the safety of the water we watched as it came even closer, until it sat down on the sand and then lay down. It was a very curious one and was quite happy waiting to see what would happen.

What happened was that the overfilled boats made their way back to the ship, three empty boats were collected and everyone was divided equally between the fleet. By the time we returned to 'Bear Bay' our friend was asleep next to the walrus, which were also asleep. It was very exciting to be in close proximity to both the bear and walrus and we were very lucky to have this bonus encounter. The anchors were dropped but none of the animals woke up so, after a while, we set off to look around the southern corner of Phipps Island. The cliff scenery was very impressive and we looked up at the high section that the long, strong hikers had been planning to reach.

After lunch we found ourselves at small Nelson Island. Nelson was in this part of Spitsbergen as a midshipman. He served on *H.M.S. Carcass* under Captain Lutwidge, who was second in command of the 1773 Phipps expedition. Soon after we arrived, a scout boat went out from the ship and had a surprise – they were radioed from the ship to say that a bear had been sighted on the island. It was underneath the bird cliff and

went towards the other end of the island, where it took to the water and swam away. Once it was clear of the island we landed on the rocks below the colony.

There were several species here but the most numerous were Brunnich's Guillemot and Kittiwake; others included Puffin, Black Guillemot and Little Auk. The noise was tremendous and the birds were flying to and from the nesting sites constantly. In addition to the teeming bird life there was a profusion of flowers, such as Scurvy Grass, Arctic Mouse-ear Chickweed, Snow Buttercup and Brook Saxifrage. The slopes were a perfect place to sit and gaze at not only the bird activity but also the views across the sea to distant land.

Not too far to the north lay Ross Island, another lump of rock named after a well-known English sailor. He was Sir James Clark Ross, Arctic and Antarctic explorer, The Ross Ice Shelf, amongst other things, is also named after him. Ross Island is a small hump of rock but it is very significant – it is the northernmost point of Europe. The so-called North Cape in Norway is not as far north as the peninsula just to the west so it is actually only number three on the 'North' or 'Northernmost' list. It is quite an achievement to land on Ross Island; we were lucky because the sea was calm enough for us to get ashore onto the rocks. To celebrate our landing we had a toast with Aquavit on the island itself. Many puffins flew past us and seemed to be joining in our party.

However, we still had another milestone to reach! It was just to the north of Ross Island where we touched the line at 81° north. This was another notable achievement as we were only 540 nautical miles or 620 statute miles or 1,000 kilometres from the North Pole. Soon it was time to head off east, towards the northeastern corner of Nordaustlandet and the venue for our morning landing, Storøya.

#### **MONDAY, July 26<sup>th</sup>**

**Storøya - 80 08.5' N, 028 00' E**

**Isispynten - 79° 43' N, 026° 42' E**

**Austfonna- 79° 45' N, 024° 30' E**

**Weather:** overcast, bright, calm

**Temperature:** 4° C/39° F

Today was unlike any other! In the morning we hardly had time to eat before we were told that

the zodiacs were ready to take us out. The ship was anchored a long way from the shore at Storøya so the boats arranged themselves into two groups of four. The first group set off for the large group of walrus on the beach and found a female bear with two small cubs at the waters edge. Meanwhile, the second group of boats spotted a swimming bear at the ship itself! It was a curious one and came very close before turning away. The beach bears remained close to the water and seemed to be just as interested in us as we were in them. Later on they walked away to a nearby bay and went right past a zodiac that had been the last to arrive off the other beach so all of us eventually got close views of the family.

Back at the walrus beach, for no apparent reason, many of them lumbered suddenly into the water. It couldn't have been that they were scared by the boats because, after a few minutes, several dozen animals came right up to us. They took turns to check us out and some seemed to go from boat to boat. Typically, every now and then they would dash away from us, only to swim back again moments later. Some of them had huge tusks and there were at least two calves amongst the adults, which made sure that the young ones didn't get too close to the boats. To have so many walrus so close to us was tremendously exciting!

In the late afternoon we arrived (off Nordaustlandet) at Isispynten, or Isis Point, only to find that it was now an island so the name should really be changed to Isis Island! The great, nearby ice wall had retreated over one mile and left the land isolated from the icecap. During the cruise some of us were very lucky and had very close views of a Grey Phalarope, still in its rich red and brown breeding colours. Two bears had been seen from the ship and, incredibly, a bear was seen on top of the glacier, with there being no apparent way up for it. It was a long way off but then much closer ones were spotted on the island. One was on top of a nearby hill a little back from the beach. It was lying down, looking at the boats and every now and then it lifted its head up into the air.

Having decided to move away, it stood up and walked out of sight. The three boats in the vicinity then started to head back towards the ship and were surprised to see the bear again, heading straight towards them from a long way off. It came right down to the water's edge, where it spent some time looking at the strange seals dressed in a black rubber suit. When a big

wave broke on the stones the bear jumped backwards, in an attempt to stay out of the water. Since the bear was only a few yards/metres away unprecedented views, photographs and movie footage were obtained. It was another jaw-dropping encounter!

In the evening the ship approached the great ice wall of Austfonna, the extensive ice cap on the eastern side of Nordaustlandet. This large island is mostly covered by two huge icecaps and we were sailing towards the southern edge of one of them. The vertical ice wall was very impressive. The water was deep enough close to the ice wall for us to sail along it so we did, for a short distance. We are used to seeing cliffs of rock so to see one composed of glistening ice was a little "Harry Potter-ish". To celebrate this unique event the catering crew had made a huge quantity of hot chocolate, which, together with some rum, was eagerly consumed. There was a lot of ice in the water, including some distant icebergs and the sea was flat calm.

Many pairs of eyes were on the lookout for large forms of wildlife and, finally, a distant family of bears was spotted. The ship was turned so that we could get a better look but the bears weren't on ice floating in the water – they were on top of the ice wall itself! There was no obvious way up so they had probably been there for some time. When they were first seen they were standing but they soon disappeared from sight because they were lying down. Every now and then we would see a head poking up and pointed in our direction. As soon as we had started to leave they stood up again! It was a quite dirty female and two very big cubs. The ship then turned to the south and we continued on our way.

## **TUESDAY, July 27<sup>th</sup>**

### **Edgeøya**

**Ryke Yseøyane Isles - 77° 50' N, 025° 00' E**

**Weather:** a blue, sunny sky

**Temperature:** 7° C/45° F

Before breakfast this morning the small Ryke Yseøyane Islands were visible ahead of us. Our plan was to go out in the boats and perhaps make a landing on one of the three small islands. This time there were no bears in sight so we were able to go ashore and visit the trapper's hut, which was only a short walk from the beach. The landscape here was very unusual – basalt rock and stones covered in black lichen, which

crackled under our feet like breakfast cereal when we walked over it. There was not a single flower to be seen but there were four kinds of skua in the area – Great, Arctic, Pomarine and Long-tailed.

The guide on point duty to the south of the hut got very excited when he spotted some distant Humpback Whales. Once we were all back on the ship we headed over to where we hoped they were and relocated them. There were five altogether and two of them were very close to the ship. We were able to see their tall, bushy spouts, their heads, backs and dorsal fins, their very long, white pectoral fins and, when they dived, their tail flukes, which were lifted up into the air. Another bonus came just before lunch when the ship slowed and turned around a large, tabular iceberg. More characteristic of the Weddell Sea in Antarctica than the Arctic, it was very impressive, especially since it was on its own in the sea. The waves were breaking against the sides and fountains of spray shot up into the air. A deep cave at sea level acted as a horizontal blowhole, with spectacular results.

Thick fog on the way to Andrétangen, on Edge Island, prevented us from getting ashore so an alternative programme in the lounge was arranged. There was a very informative talk about reindeer by Gro, a photographic exposition by Linda and a cruise recap by all of us. The highlight was being shown by Stine how walrus feed. By now we were out of the fog so we were able to enjoy the rest of the day in sunshine.

## **WEDNESDAY, July 28<sup>th</sup>**

### **Hornsund**

**Gnalodden - 77° 00.9' N, 015° 53' E**

**Brepollen - 77° 04' N, 016° 24' E**

**Vestre Burgerbukta - 77° 03' N, 015° 51' E**

**Weather:** overcast, bright

**Temperature:** 6° C/43° 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 Gnalodden, on the north coast. This is the site of an old trapper's hut that, when we arrived was housing an ornithologist. 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 a retreat of 180 metres per annum.

Once we were all ashore we could stroll around the area at will. Many of us went over to the right, where a family of foxes had been found. One adult and four large cubs were seen but after a while the adult and one cub went off up the slope towards the nesting birds. The remaining cubs were not quite sure what to make of us and bobbed in and out of the den, which was under a big rock. The little grey one was shyer than the others but was also keen to see what was going on. It was a good opportunity for us to watch them at close range, until they had seen enough and disappeared for the last time.

Above the den 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 the first tiny (Brunnich's) guillemot chicks are jumping off the nesting ledges the gulls will be looking for an easy meal. Sometimes they are able to catch the chicks in mid-air, as they glide down towards the water. Other 'natural history' of interest included the occasional puffin and a variety of flowers. The best was the bright yellow Bog Saxifrage, which was in full bloom.

When we sailed we went east to Brepollen, home to huge glaciers. There was lots of ice in the water, which was all from the glaciers. The sea ice, from the winter, disappeared some time ago. The ship slowed down to enable us to enjoy the close views of the glacier. The front edge was cracked, fractured and shattered and many pieces looked as if they were ready to fall into the water. 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 landing was due to be at a place just outside the entrance to Hornsund but, since it would have involved a long zodiac ride and the sea was quite choppy, we changed to 'Plan B' instead. This involved dropping the ship's anchor at the entrance to a dramatic fjord –

Vestre Burgerbukta. Instead of a landing the idea was to go for a zodiac cruise towards the blue glacier ice in the water and the dramatic glacier beyond that. There was a long way to go so the first two boats set off at high speed but, halfway there, slowed rapidly to a stop! This was because two huge bears had been spotted on a big chunk of ice. Eventually all the boats arrived and we were amazed to see that both bears had red faces – they were feeding on a seal. This had attracted several Glaucous Gulls and at least four Ivory Gulls. One bear soon swam away towards land and, after rolling in the snow to get the salt off its fur, walked and swam off further to the south. It went towards the ship, from where it could be seen later.

The other bear remained on the ice with what was left of the seal. Mostly all we could see were bones and gristle so the bears must have been there for quite a long time when we discovered them. Once again, we had another very close encounter with a bear. There was a little wind coming from the north so we were able to drift quietly without having the engines on. Both bears were very big and old-looking and quite brown too. Instead of going over to the eastern side of Spitsbergen when the fjord ice melts in the early summer, some bears stay on the west coast, making a living as best they can during the summer. How bears catch seals when there is so little ice in the water is a mystery but they are obviously successful. If we had wanted the ultimate bear sighting it would have been what we saw here – one (or even two!) bears on blue ice just a stone's-throw away from the zodiacs feeding on a seal. This was something that not even the experienced guides had seen before!

Well, once dinner had been consumed there was a fascinating presentation about the geology of the islands, by Steffen. However, it was not just geology that took our fancy; it was whales and dolphins too! The sea area to the west of Hornsund is quite shallow but then the seafloor drops away sharply to depths of 1,000 metres or more. In areas like this cetaceans (both whales and dolphins) can sometimes be found. But would we be lucky? That was the question and the answer was yes. Conditions were perfect for seeing animals at the surface – excellent visibility and a calm sea with an undulating swell. It wasn't long before some spouts were seen from the bridge and soon we were close to the animals themselves. The commonest whale here is the second largest species, Fin Whale but the two animals closest to us looked a little different. They were smaller, had a dorsal fin in a different

relative position (and a different shape) and they behaved differently at the surface. After watching for a while it was decided that they were the slightly smaller Sei Whale, a very unusual visitor to these waters. To complicate matters, there were also Fin Whales close to us as well! We were lucky and had very good views of all of them.

The ship continued sailing to the west and before long another close Fin Whale was seen. After that the whales seemed to dry up but their place was taken by dolphins. In the period up to 01.00 several dozen White-beaked Dolphins were seen. Many of them were distant but they were also very active and could be picked out by the big splashes they made after leaping clear of the water (breaching) and smacking down on the surface. There was also porpoising behaviour, in which they gracefully leapt clear and re-entered the water as well as barely breaking the surface to breathe. Some of the dolphins were in tight groups whilst others were spread out over a wide area. Over many of the groups were circling birds so the dolphins must have been feeding and driving prey to the surface, where the birds could then get a share. Watching them in the sunshine was a great way to end another extraordinary day!

## **THURSDAY, 29<sup>th</sup> July**

### **Isfjord area**

**Alkhorneret - 78° 12.8' N, 013° 52.4' E**

**Tempelfjorden - 78° 26' N, 017° 16' E**

**Weather:** bright & sunny, breezy

**Temperature:** 12° C/54° F

After breakfast the zodiacs shuttled us to the beach near the 1,000-foot high bird cliffs at Alkhorneret. At the beach itself a curious Bearded Seal came very close to one boat. As usual, we had a choice of a long, medium or short walks. The sunshine made things very warm and some of us discovered that we had put too many clothes on! On the tundra there were many flowers of several different species. They included Drooping, Bog, Alpine and Brook Saxifrage, Pygmy Buttercups and some uncommonly seen Nodding Lychnis and Polar Cress.

The local reindeer were here too and we got extremely good and close views of them. Several males had a fine set of antlers and there was also a female with a large calf. Other animals

included more foxes, which were seen by the medium walkers. Very good and close views were had of four fox cubs outside a den under some rocks. They spent a lot of time spread-eagled in the sun and also became curious when some deer came close to them. They were not bothered by us so we were able to stand close to them for several minutes. Birds in the area included Snow Bunting, two pairs of Arctic Skua (one pair had a chick) and Glaucous Gulls. The sun was shining brightly and high up on the spectacular, triangular, bird cliff there were thousands of Brunnich's Guillemots and Black-legged Kittiwakes. However, they were so high that they were not very easy to see. Most of us climbed a little way up the hill below the bird colony and got sweeping views across Isfjord, to our south.

The ship left just before lunch and headed off towards Skansbukta for our final excursion. However, when we got close we discovered that there was a bigger ship already there and they were just about to disembark 400 passengers on the small beach! Another 'Plan B' was needed so instead we went into Tempelfjorden for a look from the ship at Tuna Glacier. The afternoon sun made the glacier and the surrounding, brown hills and mountains look very impressive!

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 Linda. This took the form of photographs and 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 81 guests and guides onboard from 12 different countries:

Great Britain	12
Sweden	2
Norway	13
Denmark	1
Netherlands	2
Luxembourg	2
France	12
Germany	20
Switzerland	3
Austria	6
USA	6

And the total distance that we sailed during our expedition cruise was 1,110 nautical miles/1,277 statute miles/2,056 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  
Steffen Biersack, Ast Exp Ldr  
Linda Drake, Photographer  
Niklas Gerhardsson  
Little Mo, Ice Pilot  
Stine Skogland  
Allison Bailey  
Silje Mordal  
Simon Cook  
Gro Vestues*

*AND with help from Dr. Meredith Webb!*



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!

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