



LOGBOOK



To the Kingdom of the Polar Bear

Svalbard, July 30th – August 5th 2010

Written by Simon Cook

FRIDAY, July 30th 2010

Spitsbergen

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

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

Weather: grey, with low cloud

Temperature: 7° C/45° 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, the Hotel Manager Janet Aurelio, Expedition Leader Heiko Kuhr and the guide team. Afterwards there was a safety briefing from the Chief Officer, followed by an outside drill near the lifeboats.

As soon as both we and our luggage were safely on board, the ship left the dock and headed for Barentsburg. The town lies not far from Longyearbyen, in Green Fjord (Grønfyorden) 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, 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. We departed Longyearbyen in drizzle but at Barentsburg the sun at last managed to break through the clouds for a few minutes.

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

SATURDAY, July 31st

Ny-Alesund - 78° 50' N, 011° 30', E

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

Weather: overcast early, sunny later

Temperature: 10° C/50° 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, 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 Arctic Tern, which may have spent the winter in *Antarctica*! The adults are very protective but there were few chicks to be seen today. Other birds included numerous young, grey, Snow Buntings. Like the terns, at the end of summer the buntings will migrate southwards but only as far as northwestern Europe. The most exciting species that we saw was Arctic Fox. Underneath two of the old houses there is a den and this year there are three cubs in the family. It was some time before they appeared but once they did we got fantastic views. At first just two came out but then the smaller one, a female with red 'earrings' emerged as well. In addition to chewing what was left of a goose the cubs spent a lot of time playing with each other, jumping up and down and running around. Their mother was out too but she soon went off across the tundra towards the Barnacle Geese, which still had a few goslings left. Soon we had left the young foxes too, to return to the ship to continue our voyage up the west coast of Spitsbergen.

Our adventure then took us out of Kongsfjord and northwards, up towards the north-western 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. When we arrived the sun was shining and the landscape looked stunning. 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. Graveneset (the grave-yard peninsula) is where Dutch and English whalers based in northwestern Spitsbergen came to bury their dead in the 17th and 18th 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.

Our first Polar Bear had been seen from the ship just before we went ashore so the telescope was taken with us for us to use. None of us expected to see a bear so early in the trip! At the end of our landing the bear went into the water but it soon came out again. Once we were all back on the ship the Polar Star moved towards the north shore for closer looks at the bear. The light was very good and the bear was moving about. It was eating but we were surprised to see that it was grazing on the plants, just like a cow! During the summer, when there is no ice to hunt seals on, bears will eat whatever they can find, such as seaweed and grass. The bear took no notice of us so after a while we left it behind and sailed away. 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.

SUNDAY, August 1st

Moffen - 80° 00' N, 014° 27.8' E

Nelsonøya - 80° 37' N, 020° 30' E

Phippsøya - 80° 40.4' N, 020° 45' E

And our furthest north position!

Weather: overcast but bright with some sun

Temperature: 7° C/45° F

We reached the walrus haul-out on the island of Moffen in the early hours of 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 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 minutes here and then headed away; we then headed away to bed.

After breakfast we found ourselves at small Nelson Island. Admiral Horatio Nelson was in this part of Spitsbergen as a 14-year old naval midshipman. He served on *H.M.S. Carvass* under Captain Lutwidge, who was second in command of the 1773 Phipps expedition to Spitsbergen. It was during his time here that Nelson was almost killed by a bear, after sneaking off his ship without permission. Soon after we arrived, a scout boat went out from our ship and had a surprise – they found that a bear was waiting for *them!* It was near the bird cliff and came down towards the water. Instead of a landing we had a zodiac cruise instead! The bear was a young one and was very curious so we were all able to see it very well from the boats. Sometimes it walked about a little and at other times it decided to lie down, rest its head on a paw and simply look at us. Yesterday's bear was very good but today's was much closer and much more exciting!

There were several bird species on the island but the most numerous were Brunnich's Guillemot and Kittiwake; others included Puffin, Black Guillemot and Snow Bunting. The noise was tremendous and the birds were flying to and from the nesting sites constantly. Once the bear had decided to leave us and go higher up, most of us went right around the small, flat-topped island before returning to the ship. Shortly afterwards 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!

Our afternoon excursion was at Phipps Island, named after the Royal Navy captain who led the

1773 expedition here. The plan was to offer a series of different walks, once we had all landed. The weather was very good and there were walrus further along the beach. We had three choices – long, short or medium walks. The ‘longs’ climbed up to the top of Hogberget (1,338 ft/408 m) and got terrific views of the surrounding area, in addition to seeing nesting Ivory Gulls on the cliffs. They were also silent for four minutes, to appreciate the sounds of nature. Afterwards, they had time to see the walrus on the beach. The ‘shorts’ strolled along the water’s edge; also to see the walrus and the mediums went on quite a long walk. Shortly after commenting on the lack of flowers two species were seen. The Purple Saxifrage was actually in flower but the nearby Svalbard Poppy was yet to bloom. Although it is August there was still snow on the ground, which explained why the saxifrage had only just flowered. The ‘mediums’ went round in a big circle and got close views of the walrus too.

Not too far to the north lay Ross Island, another place named after a well-known English naval captain. 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.

Immediately after dinner was announced a bear was seen on an ice floe ahead of the ship. So while we ate our food the ship circled and another bear was spotted nearby! The easiest one to see was on a floe with lots of seal bones scattered around. Having had a big meal the bear was asleep so, very carefully, the ship was drifted past the bear. At first it could hardly raise its head but after we had passed it the bear stood up and very slowly started to move around. When we left it was lying down, chewing at the seals rib cage. Not long afterwards a third bear was seen but this one was nervous and started swimming away when we were still several hundred yards from it. The ship was stopped and we went the other way; towards another trip highlight!

It was just to the north of Ross Island where we touched the line of latitude at 81° north (81° 00’ N, 020° 43.3’ E). This was another notable achievement as we were only 540 nautical miles or 620 statute miles or 1,000 kilometres from the

North Pole. To celebrate this milestone we gathered out on the bow (in the snow!) with the captain for a special toast. We each had a glass of “delicious” Norwegian aquavit..... Soon but not soon enough for some, it was time to head off southeast, towards the northeastern corner of Nordaustlandet and the venue for our morning landing, Storøya.

MONDAY, August 2nd

Storøya - 80 08.5’ N, 028 00’ E

Isisøya - 79° 43’ N, 026° 42’ E

Austfonna - 79° 45’ N, 024° 30’ E

Weather: overcast, bright, breezy

Temperature: 2° C/36° F

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 it took the boats a while to get to the landing beach. The terrain was open here with a few outcrops of rocks so after some scouting for bears, we were split into different groups for different walks. There was little in the way of soil in most of the area – the ground was covered with small to medium-sized stones. The Arctic terns had young ones in the air and every now and then a large flock would fly up from the ground. On a nearby lake there were several Red-throated Divers and a couple of Ivory Gulls flew along the beach. However, it was not so much a place for us to see wildlife, more a new island to land on and another chance to stretch our legs.

In the late afternoon we arrived (off Nordaustlandet) at Isispynnten, 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. Two bears had been seen from the ship and they were seen from the zodiacs too. Not far away were two walrus and they were quite curious and allowed a close approach. Not far away from them another bear was spotted but when the first boat got closer it was found that there were three! It was a female with two big cubs and they were on top of a small, rocky island. Many of us got really nice pictures of them against the sky. There was still time to glide over the mercurial water to the ice wall before returning to the ship. It was a magical afternoon.

In the evening the ship approached another section 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 quite a long way. We are used to seeing cliffs of rock so to see one composed of glistening ice was a little "Harry Potter-ish". In addition, we were also surprised to see several waterfalls at one section of the ice wall. Melting ice forms streams, which, flowing down the slope, then cascade over the cliff and into the sea. To celebrate this unique event the catering crew had earlier made a huge quantity of hot chocolate, which, together with some rum, was eagerly consumed. There was a lot of sun in the sky, a lot of ice in the water, including some distant icebergs and the sea was flat calm.

Many pairs of eyes had been on the lookout for large forms of wildlife and, finally, one was found on a small bergy bit. The ship was slowed so that we could get a better look at the bear that was curled up on top of the ice. In the sun and with the ice cliff behind it, the scene was very atmospheric. By now it was getting late and when the ship finally turned towards the south, most of us were in bed. However, one guide had noticed that our new course was taking us towards three distant, spectacular, tabular icebergs that were glowing in the sun.....

TUESDAY, August 3rd

Edgeøya

Kapp Leestasjonen - 78° 04.9' N, 020° 49' E
Diskobukta - 77° 50' N, 021° 30' E

Weather: foggy early, cool

Temperature: 4° C/39° F

It was after midnight (00.26) when the bear was spotted. The three big icebergs had been very impressive but there was nothing on them apart from a few birds. However, a little further away, a cream-coloured spot could be seen on a smaller iceberg. The bear was walking around and, as we approached, it climbed right up to the pointed top of the iceberg. It soon found a more comfortable place lower down and lay there with its head on the ice. It looked wet and tired, as if it had been swimming for a long time and had only just climbed up onto the ice. The colour of the bear in the sunlight made a nice contrast

with the colours in the ice and there was a background of distant, misty, snowy mountains. What a way to start the day!

At Kapp Leestasjonen (Dolerittneset) it was a little foggy and breezy but we were soon ashore on the beach near the old huts and the group of approximately 45 Walrus. Soon after landing a distant bear was seen so the long and medium walks were cancelled. Instead we were able to walk in the vicinity of the landing beach to admire and to be told about a number of different things: the Russian Pomor hunters, the 1898 Arc of the Meridian expedition, modern trappers and killers, the flowers, the walrus bones, a small, strange wooden structure (self-shot bear trap or a dog house or an old toilet?) and the walrus themselves. They were in a big group and made lots of rude-sounding noises but it was impossible to tell from which end they came. The end of summer was indicated by the Arctic Willow, which was already turning orange.

At Diskobukta we were so far away from land that, with the low cloud, we couldn't even see it! While we waited to go ashore we had the opportunity to listen to a former governor of the islands talk about their history. Visibility slowly got better and we were landed at the old huts by the beach. The walk to the canyon was a short one and there were two things to see. The first was a huge colony of kittiwakes, which occupied the vertical walls of the large and deep canyon. The noise, even from the beach, was terrific and was amplified by the rock. Every ledge had nesting birds on it, birds were constantly arriving and departing and many birds were in the air above our heads.

The second thing to see was the foxes, which were easy! During our time around the canyon the large cubs were running in and out continuously and almost completely ignored us. The 'bear' guide had seen an adult but the two the rest of us saw were large, active cubs. One of them spotted a dead kittiwake chick and grabbed it to eat. This made it easy for those of us who were nearby to get some exciting pictures. Back at the beach there was time to have a look at the bones from the long-dead whales (probably Bowhead) before returning to the ship for dinner, a picture and video show and a voyage recap.

WEDNESDAY, August 4th

Hornsund

Vestre Burgerbukta - 77° 03' N, 015° 51' E
Brepollen - 77° 04' N, 016° 24' E
Hyttevika - 77° 00' N, 015° 00' E

Weather: hot & sunny, overcast later
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 near Gnålodden, on the north coast, near the entrance to Vestre Burgerbukta. As the ship approached the anchorage a distant bear was spotted but it was not seen from the zodiacs during our morning cruise. Conditions were perfect – no wind, sea like a mirror, fantastic reflections of the ice and mountains, a huge amount of ice in the water and sun that made us hot! The boats paired up and went off in search of peace, solitude and wildlife. One of the best things was sitting silently, listening to the ice cracking and popping.

When we lifted the anchor back on the ship 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 weeks ago. Towards the end of lunch 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.

Near the entrance of Hornsund there is a Polish scientific station, which was established in 1957. At that time the glacier front in Hornsund was very close, now it has retreated several miles. Since 1957 the ice has retreated (on average) 180 metres per annum. Just around the corner from the Polish station was Hyttevika, our afternoon destination. We landed on a gravel beach near a hut and we given some historical information about the famous, former occupant.

For many of us the main interest lay upwards so it wasn't long before we climbed up the grassy slope or went around the side to an area of large and small boulders and rocks. Flying around in groups were hundreds of Little Auks; Spitsbergen's most numerous seabird. There are

estimated to be one million pairs and they are also the smallest seabird in the islands. Small they may be but they certainly make a lot of noise – cackling and laughing for much of the time. Although related to the puffin they eat animal plankton, rather than fish. When they have a chick under the rocks the adults can carry 500 minute crustaceans in a pouch in their throat. Many of the birds that we saw had bulges, indicating that they have a chick somewhere nearby. As soon as the first group of us got up to the top the auks stopped landing in the area but after quite a long time, for no apparent reason, they started to return. It may have been to do with all the Glaucous Gulls, which are predators of the auks. There were also some reindeer around and some of them ran at high speed along the beach.

Well, once dinner had been consumed there was a fascinating presentation about the reindeer of the islands, by Gro, in Norwegian. However, it was not just land mammals 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 a qualified yes. During the course of the evening, once we had emerged from the fog, there were a few sightings. Unfortunately, none of them lasted longer than a few seconds. There was a single Fin Whale, a few White-beaked Dolphins and, seen from the lounge, a pod of about eight impressive and fast-moving Killer Whales. The ship was immediately turned but, since the whales were swimming in the opposite direction to us, they were not seen again.

THURSDAY, August 5th

Isfjord area

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

Weather: overcast, drizzly
Temperature: 8° C/46° F

After breakfast the zodiacs shuttled us to the beach near the 1,000-foot high bird cliffs at Alkhorneret. The cloud was quite low and there were times when we could not see the top at all. 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 Polar Cress. The Bog Saxifrage was the most distinctive because the flowers were deep yellow in colour. 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 foxes, which were seen by most of us. Up on the hill one had been sleeping behind a small rock and got a surprise when it woke up and saw a crowd of people, who had been looking at reindeer! The fox wasn't disturbed and spent a long time beside the group. Lower down the hill some more large cubs were seen by their den and they too came very close to us. This exciting encounter lasted for nearly an hour and, briefly, four different foxes were in view at the same time.

Birds in the area included Snow Bunting, two pairs of Arctic Skua (one pair had a chick) and Glaucous Gulls. 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. 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 some were seen on the water too. They made a fitting end to the spectacular 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 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 surprise finale and some of us even ate outside too!

In all we were 95 guests and guides onboard from 13 different countries:

Great Britain	6
Sweden	2
Norway	22
Denmark	6
France	7
Germany	9
Switzerland	12
Austria	2
Italy	9
USA	5
China	3
Japan	9
Australia	3

And the total distance that we sailed during our expedition cruise was 1,084 nautical miles/1,247 statute miles/2,007 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
Linda Drake, Photographer
Niklas Gerhardsson
Little Mo, Ice Pilot
Stephane Hautier
Susanne Strøm
Allison Bailey
Silje Mordal
Simon Cook***

AND with help from Dr. Meredith Webb & little sister Bronwyn!



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.