



LOGBOOK



To the Kingdom of the Polar Bear

Svalbard, August 6th - 12th 2010

Written by Simon Cook

FRIDAY, August 6th 2010

Spitsbergen

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

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

Weather: overcast

Temperature: 8° C/46° 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.

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. 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). We went to bed in anticipation of all the adventures that lay ahead of us.

SATURDAY, August 7th

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

Temperature: 5° C/41° 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 Arctic Tern, which may have spent the winter in Antarctica and may soon be going back there! A few birds were flying around over the town but many have finished breeding so have left the area. 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. Around the lake and on the edge of town were groups of Barnacle Geese. Among the adults were a few surviving goslings; many others have been eaten by the foxes. The most exciting species that we saw was the (Arctic) fox. Underneath two of the old houses there is a den and this year there are three cubs in the family. Today they were not very active but at least one of the cubs and an adult were seen. On the way back to the ship, at the end of the landing, some of us saw a bird of the high Arctic – the pure white Ivory Gull.

Our adventure then took us out of Kongsfjord and northwards, up towards the north-western corner of Spitsbergen. 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 the cloud was low but the sun did come out briefly, later. 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. Their ship was next to us because the cabin was being closed and bags full of rubbish were being taken away. 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!

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. 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 minutes here and then headed away; we then headed away to bed.

Only a short time later those of us who stayed on the bridge were surprised to see some distant whale spouts. Also ahead of us were thousands of fulmars and kittiwakes, which were perhaps feeding on the same thing. It took a long time to

get closer to the whales and they were spending very little time at the surface. However, when we did get ourselves in the right position we found that we were looking at Fin Whales. This is the second largest species of whale, after the mighty Blue. Unfortunately, the whales were moving around so much and so quickly that we couldn't keep up with them so we headed away towards the Seven Islands.

SUNDAY, August 8th

Nelsonøya - 80° 37' N, 020° 30' E

Phippsøya - 80° 40.4' N, 020° 45' E

And our furthest north position!

Weather: overcast, snowy & stormy later!

Temperature: 7° C/45° F

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 and found a small beach for us to land on. It was a steep but short climb up to the bird cliff but it was well worth it. There were several bird species here but the most numerous were Brunnich's Guillemot and Kittiwake. Other kinds included close Puffins, a few Black Guillemots, one or two Snow Buntings and some predatory Glaucous Gulls. The noise from the cliff was tremendous and the birds were flying to and from the nesting sites constantly. In addition to algae and moss, there were some flowering plants too. The commonest was vitamin C-rich Scurvy Grass (white flowers) and Brook Saxifrage, which also had white flowers but with red centres.

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 calm 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. Luckily the group came down before the cloud came down and blotted out visibility. Once at the bottom there was 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 still in flower and the nearby Svalbard Poppies had just bloomed. The poppies were seen in large clumps in two different areas and their delicate nature and colour contrasted strongly with the stone desert all around. 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.

The trip back to the ship was quite exciting! While we were ashore the wind increased to 7 on the Beaufort scale – a near-gale! The waves were quite high, we were quite wet and getting back onto the ship (for the first boats) was quite tricky! During dinner we sailed north. Not too far away 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 'northernmost' list.

It was just to the north of Ross Island where we touched the line of latitude at 81° north (80° 52.2' N, 020° 12.7' E). This was another notable achievement as we were only 548 nautical miles or 630 statute miles or 1,014 kilometres from the North Pole. To celebrate this milestone we gathered out of the weather in the observation lounge with the captain for a special toast. We each had a glass of "delicious" Norwegian aquavit..... Soon afterwards the ship headed into a small ice field for some 'ice navigation'. Over the course of the next few minutes there was a mixture of driving snow and sunshine and, combined with the undulating, blue ice floes, a wonderful scene was created. Having turned towards the south again it was time to head off towards Sorgfjord, at the northern end of the Hinlopen Strait.

MONDAY, August 9th

Eolusneset - 79° 56.5' N, 016° 43' E

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

Bråsvellbreen - 79° 17' N, 020° 20' E

Weather: overcast & stormy

Temperature: 2° C/36° F

This morning there was quite a long boat ride to our landing site at Eolusneset, in Sorgfjord. Just behind the beach was a lagoon and off to the right was a low, rocky hill, which had a cross on top of it. There is a lot of history here – various expeditions, whaling, graves and the trapping and killing of wildlife. Perhaps the most interesting historical story was the one about the sea battle in 1693. Forty Dutch whaling vessels were at the southern end of the fjord and they were attacked by three French warships. During the battle that followed, 27 of the Dutchmen escaped but the rest were captured.

After having climbed up to the cross and contemplated the graves, there was time to sit and appreciate the views across the tundra to the snowy mountains beyond. Way off, in the far, far distance, there were some reindeer but the only sign in our area were droppings. Just down below us there was a big lagoon and a powerful, fast-flowing stream rushed out into the sea.

After lunch it was time for presentations from Gro (reindeer) and Martin (glaciers) but they had hardly started when they had to stop – a bear had been spotted! Due to shallow water the ship could not get close at all so the bear was only visible as a pale spot on the distant beach for many of us. The strong wind made things difficult for the captain so we soon had to resume our southerly course.

Soon there was a call on the speakers saying that there were whales! 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 the Hinlopen Strait so we were very lucky. They were feeding in the deep water not far from the bird cliffs and were spending about four minutes underwater at a time. There were at least seven and 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!

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 family 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 single 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.

From the bird colony we continued in a southerly direction, heading for Bear Sound (Bjornsundet). It was here that we hoped to see a bear or two but there were none at home so we sailed on to the large island of Nordaustlandet. It is mostly covered by two huge icecaps and we were sailing towards the southern edge of one of them - Bråsvellbreen. During the transit there was a surprise event in the lounge. The catering crew had made a huge quantity of hot chocolate, which, together with some rum, was eagerly consumed.

When we arrived at Bråsvellbreen all we could see was ice. 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 waves were breaking under the lip at the bottom of the wall and at one point the upward pressure of water broke off a large chunk of ice. 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 10th

Edgeøya

Kapp Leestasjonen - 78° 04.9' N, 020° 49' E

Habenichbukta - 77° 30' N, 020° 30' E

Weather: sunny early, cloudy later

Temperature: 6° C/43° F

At Kapp Leestasjonen (Dolerittneset) there was a surprise waiting for us on the beach – a Polar Bear! All plans for a landing had to be cancelled and, after a very quick breakfast, we set off in the boats. The bear was just behind the beach, near the old sheds but was very inactive. Each boat dropped its anchor and settled down to watch the bear. After the very distant one yesterday, which not everybody saw, it was good to see one at close range. Although it was lying down it was not facing away from us so we could see the head and the face. During all the time we watched it the bear only lifted its head a few times. This was real life – not like television, where there is seemingly action all the time! Just along the coast a little way there were some reindeer but they weren't doing much either!

At Disko Bay (bukta) we had another surprise waiting for us – more bears! There was one in the entrance to the kittiwake canyon and two more were nearby. With no other choice (the sea was quite rough too) we headed south and went to a new place for the guides. Habenich Bay was a long, narrow one and we landed at the end. The water was quite shallow and one (female) driver found that she had parked on what quickly turned into dry land..... In the watery part of the bay there were Pink-footed geese and some Beluga, which were there for a long time.

The walk across the tundra was very interesting because much of the willow had already turned golden-brown, which created a beautiful effect. One of the few flowers still in bloom was the yellow Bog Saxifrage. There were some lakes and pools close by and on one of them was a flock of Barnacle Geese and a pair of Red-throated Divers with a single chick. The long walkers got right out to the old shed on Svarttangen. Once we were back aboard there was dinner and an illustrated voyage recap.

WEDNESDAY, August 11th

Hyttevika - 77° 00' N, 015° 00' E

Hornsund

Brepollen - 77° 04' N, 016° 24' E

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

Weather: overcast, sunny later

Temperature: 5° C/41° F

Just outside the entrance to Hornsund was Hyttevika, our morning destination. We landed on a gravel beach near a hut and we were given some historical facts about the famous Norwegian former occupant. Not far away there were some reindeer with very impressive antlers so we went over to look at them. They were not concerned about our presence and continued to eat, in readiness for the winter. Here there was a choice – stay around the hut and explore the beach or walk up a rocky hill for an overview of the area. On the way up the hill we encountered another group of reindeer; this time mostly females with calves.

Flying around in small groups were the last few Little Auks from the adjacent colony. They breed early and leave early too. They are Spitsbergen's most numerous (and smallest) seabird and there are estimated to be one million pairs on 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. Some of the few birds that we saw sitting on the rocks had bulges, indicating that they have a chick somewhere nearby. Also in the area were Glaucous Gulls, which are predators of the auks.

Soon after leaving Hyttevika the ship turned into Hornsund and passed a Polish research 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.

The afternoon was spent in Hornsund and there was plenty to do and see! We went east to Brepollen, home to huge glaciers. On the way the ship stopped suddenly, when a bear was spotted swimming in the sea not far from the ship. It was not easy to see at first because it was swimming away from us but the wake behind it gave it away. As it swam it constantly looked from side to side – always on the lookout for a seal or two to eat! When we arrived at the glacier 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.

We went out in the zodiacs later on near the entrance to Vestre Burgerbukta. Conditions were a little breezy as we headed towards the glacier but the scenery was stunning. The sun was out and there was a lot of ice in the water. Above us towered mountains that still had quite a lot of snow on them. 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. Other highlights included sitting at the bottom of the high waterfall, seeing the glacier at close quarters and, for some boats, making an expedition landing in the sunshine on rocks with a good view of the glacier.

Well, once dinner had been consumed there were fascinating presentations by Martin (glaciers, in German) and Victoria (photographs from our trip). However it was not just what we had seen so far that we were interested in. 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 partial 'yes'. There were a few Fin Whales in the area through which we sailed but, due to the big waves that hid the surfacing animals, the most any of us saw was the column of spray when they spouted. Some White-beaked dolphins appeared too, quite close to the ship but, due to the many whitecaps, they were equally difficult to see!

THURSDAY, August 12th

Isfjord area

Alkhornet - 78° 12.8' N, 013° 52.4' E

Skansbukta - 78° 31.6' N, 016° 02.9' E

Weather: overcast, windy

Temperature: 8° C/46° F

After breakfast the zodiacs shuttled us to the beach near the 1,000-foot high bird cliffs at Alkhornet. 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. The local reindeer were here too and we got extremely good and close views of them. Several males had fine sets of antlers and there was also a female with a large calf.

Birds in the area included Snow Bunting, two pairs of Arctic Skua (both pairs had a chick) and Glaucous Gulls. High up on the spectacular, 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 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.

Some of us spotted a fox up on the slopes behind the hut and just before the last boat left the beach two were seen there. The adult was dark chocolate brown and the cub was all-brown too, but lighter. 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 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 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 99 guests and guides onboard from 12 different countries:

Great Britain	8
Sweden	2
Norway	39
Belgium	2
France	3
Germany	28
Switzerland	3
Italy	5
Bulgaria	1
USA	2
Canada	4
Australia	2

And the total distance that we sailed during our expedition cruise was 1,067 nautical miles/1,227 statute miles/1,976 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
Little Mo, Ice Pilot
Martin Machiedo
Ingrid Kårstad
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.