



LOGBOOK



In the realm of the Polar Bear

Svalbard, June 2009

Logbook written by Tim Walker

FRIDAY, June 19th

Longyearbyen, 78° 10' North, 015° 20' East & Barentsburg, 78° 00' N, 014° 00' E

Weather: High Clouds!

Temperature: 7° C/45° F

Our day started with an introductory meeting and briefing at the Spitsbergen Hotel. After that we were well-placed to visit the Svalbard Museum, where the history of Svalbard and its resources—coal, furs, and whale-oil—was displayed, or could spend the middle of the day sightseeing around Longyearbyen, with signs of its history of coal-mining visible around us. In mid-afternoon we boarded the *Polar Star*, lying at the Coal Pier. Once we were aboard and had found our cabins, we watched our luggage swayed up in cargo nets.

After settling in, welcoming cocktails and snacks were served in the observation lounge. This was followed by an introduction by Expedition Leader Anja Fleig, the Captain Jacek Majer, the Hotel Manager Natasha Hansen and all the guides. There was also a lifeboat drill as we sailed away from the town and dinner was served while we cruised towards the Russian mining town of Barentsburg.

It is located in Green Fjord and is a coal mining community with around 500 inhabitants (including 14 children) from Russia and Ukraine and is the only place in Svalbard where you find some farming; they have pigs and a greenhouse. Cattle, which they had for a long time, are no longer held in the little farm because they have all been eaten. We had a guided tour around the town with two local guides and were entertained by an entrancing folklore show in the theatre. Later on, after everyone had embarked *Polar Star* we sailed out of Isfjorden and passed the island of Prins Karls Forland on our way north to many anticipated adventures.

SATURDAY, June 20th

Ny-Alesund, 78° 50' N, 011° 30' E, Magdalenefjorden, 79° 30' N, 010° 30' E

Weather: Sea fog, then clear and sunny again

Temperature: 4° C/39° F,

In the early morning we came into Kongsfjord and arrived at Ny Ålesund, the world's northernmost community. It is a former mining settlement that has become an important international research centre - mainly on the atmosphere and ozone layer, but geological, biological and glacial research is also carried out here by many different countries.

We had guides in town, where we divided into different groups and had a cultural and historical overview; during our time here we looked at the old train that was in use in the mining period. Among everything else “northernmost” here, this was the northernmost railway in the world. We walked through this small town, 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 all those 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 flying over the North Pole in an airship in 1926. Some of us walked over the snow to the airship-mast that is still there. After that we enjoyed some time for ourselves and some shopping, in this peaceful place.

From the dock the ship headed north, sighting the first drift ice shortly after lunch, past the seven glaciers and many pointed peaks. These are the mountains Willem Barents first saw when he discovered Svalbard in 1596, naming the biggest island Spitsbergen (peaked mountains) after them. After lunch, we received a thorough briefing on Zodiac techniques and where to find our life-vests, and were informed on the appropriate behaviour for respecting wildlife and cultural remains in the fragile Arctic environment. Our guides displayed the multiplicity of their talents by becoming shoe-shop assistants and fitting us out with rubber

boots of (very nearly) the right size to use for 'wet landings'.

Magdalenefjorden is the most well known fjord in Spitsbergen and also one of the few places where big cruise ships are allowed to come. It is a beautiful place with peaked mountains on both sides and an impressive glacier at the eastern end.

Entering the fjord, a snow-covered peninsula stuck out from the southern shore; this is where we saw Delphin Voyager, a cruise ship at anchor. This was Gravnaset ("the grave-yard peninsula") where Dutch and English whalers from northwestern Spitsbergen came to bury their dead in the 17th and 18th centuries. There are 150 men buried here. Down on the beach but hidden under snow there are remains from two blubber ovens where blubber from whales was rendered. At the end of the beach lies a small cabin where the Sysselmannen (Governor) has field officers during the summer.

Once we had sailed past, the captain took us to the edge of the fast ice on the Waggonway Glacier at the head of the fjord. The sun was out again and there was a lot of blue ice to be seen – a breathtaking sight.

We then moved north-east through Sorgattet, a narrow strait, into Smeerenburgfjorden. While on the look out for bears, we saw four walrus basking in the sun on an ice floe. Arne K. gave an excellent talk on the history of the whaling industry as we steamed for our next destination.

The fine weather stayed with us as we headed north-east toward the low atoll of Mofsen, with our first, sparse, sea-ice scattered around us. As we cruised past, we counted a herd of over 20 walrus hauled out near the southern tip of the island, which is a nature reserve and part of the Northwest Spitsbergen National Park, as well as five in a smaller group on the eastern side as we passed.

SUNDAY, June 21st

Hinlopenstretet:

Alkefjellet, Svartberget

79°33.2'N 019°15.2'E

Wahlenbergfjorden and a Bear!

79°42.6'N 020°13.5'E

Weather: windy and overcast, then sunny

Temperature: 3° C/37.5° F

We woke to find the *Polar Star* in Hinlopen Strait and closing on the Alkefjellet (the Auk Cliff). The weather was not friendly—low and overcast not much over 300 feet, and a stiff northerly breeze setting a moderate sea running in Hinlopen. But even so it was all Zodiacs in the water for a tour along the nesting colony of Brünnich's Guillemots—densely populated as such colonies usually are, with black-and-white birds shoulder-to-shoulder on every ledge. Although it was difficult to see due to blocking sea ice at the base of the cliff, many of them were sitting tight on eggs from their position, belly pressed against the cliff at the back of the narrow ledge. Chicks were impossible to see, and few adults were seen ferrying fish back to the cliff, which would be an indication of hungry offspring waiting. The weather being rough there were fewer birds than usual in the water at the foot of the cliff. There were some, however, and many were so close to the boats that we could easily see the fine white line along the gape that is a mark of this species. In the air above there was a non-stop traffic of birds going out to feed or returning; and all the time the din of their cries. Here and there were kittiwakes nesting in niches and corners. There were nests of glaucous gulls, with active chicks, and the adults were patrolling the colony, looking for chances to make away with eggs or chicks of the nesting guillemots and kittiwakes.

In the afternoon, we landed on a steep shingle beach near the northern end of the shallow bay of Augustabukten and split into groups of long and short hikers. The 'long hikers' lost no time in heading off, with the local mountain of Svartberget in sight, and heard about the astronomical triangulation points installed for the Swedish-Russian Arc-of-Meridian study of 1899–1902. The other groups were more restrained, getting no further than the margin of the Glitnefossa—the local icecap—but taking time to watch a few reindeer, and look for plants including saxifrage, chickweed, and a miniature willow species. Ground patterned by permafrost was in evidence: we saw ice-wedge polygons in gravelly flats, and patterned ground where basalt rocks had been displaced from the clayey frost-boils and lined up in ditches. We also found fossils of marine plants and shellfish. Before embarking on the Zodiacs, Anja spotted some Beluga in the water and Grey Phalarope at the shore. Once back at the ship Olof gave a

fascinating talk on the adventures of the Swedish explorers Nordenskiöld and Andree.

In the late evening we sailed north into Wahlenbergfjorden. There was a large amount of fast ice in the Fjord, and we did considerable ice breaking while keeping a keen look out for polar bears. At last Anja spotted one for us, while we were having dinner. The polar bear was on a huge ice floe, and looking down at a seal breathing hole. We parked the ship in the thick ice, and watched the King of the Arctic till he made his way out into the pack ice.

MONDAY, June 22nd

Brennevinsfjorden, 80° 24.4' N, 019° 29.0' E & Sorgfjorden, 79° 55.6' N, 016° 48.0' E

Weather: Sunny with occasional fog banks
Temperature: 8° C/47° F

Anja and the Captain had decided to sail as far north as the benevolent ice conditions would allow, and made it to a place that *Polar Star* had never visited before. True exploration! The sea fog lifted from time to time to reveal truly wild country. We decided to cruise the edge of the Fjord ice in our zodiacs. We made an ice landing as it was thick enough to hold the boats. Once on the ice we explored and looked for further evidence of bears and seals. After enjoying walking on the ice, we jumped back in the zodiacs to cruise through the ice floes. On the way we saw Brünnich's Guillemots and a Puffin which got quite close. After a while we switched off the engines and enjoyed the sun and silence of this remote world. Once back on board, Kirsti did a slideshow on 'growing up in Longyearbyen'.

It was time to head back West after our adventures in the remote North East. Our destination was Sorgfjorden, the base camp of the Swedish part of the Arc-of-Meridian survey and where the Schröder-Stranz expedition became trapped by the ice. We sailed through the pack ice, and observed some beautiful rainbows and 'heiligeschein' halos from the bridge.

When we reached Sorgfjorden, it was not long before we started to see a variety of wildlife including walruses, and a young reindeer on the

shore. Not long before we reached the pack ice, we could make out the shape of another polar bear lying on a pressure ridge. A large, well fed male. The captain skillfully maneuvered the boat so we could get a good look, but the bear was not curious about us and eventually wandered off.

TUESDAY, June 23rd

Ytre Norskoya, 79° 50' N, 011° 30' E & Smeerenburgfjorden, 79° 41' N, 011° 29' E

Weather: overcast then bright
Temperature: 4° C/39° F

Our destination for the morning was the nearby small island of Ytre Norskoya. We had an easy landing on a cobble beach, climbed up the snow staircase and split up into different groups for different hikes. The moderate hikers walked a short distance through the snow to visit the blubber ovens and whalers graves that are situated on the southern shore. The others were more adventurous and some even reached the top of the island! The snow made things a little difficult and slow but it was good to be off the ship and on "dry" land.

After leaving the safe anchorage known as to Whalers as 'Fair Haven' in the early maps of Svalbard, we sailed down Smeerenburgfjorden to cruise along the Glacier front in Zodiacs. The weather got better and better, and we were presented with a fantastic panorama of glaciers, small icebergs from the glacier front, and stunning jagged peaks. Once the glacier front was reached, we stilled the outboards and appreciated the sun and silence for a while. On the way back we spotted bear tracks not far from the shore and another group saw Walrus in the water.

After the Zodiac cruise, Tim gave a lecture on the environment and ecosystems of the Arctic.

WEDNESDAY, June 24th

Van Keulenfjorden, Ahlstrandodden & Ingeborgfjellet 76° 59.0' N, 015° 50.0'E

Weather: low cloud with sunny spells, windy
Temperature: 7° C/45° F

The ship was already at anchor so immediately after breakfast we boarded the zodiacs for the short ride ashore. Awaiting us was an old trappers hut, now only used for recreational purposes. However, close by was a reminder of days gone by – thousands of bones from Belugas, who were heavily exploited until the 1930's. Enough of the snow had melted to allow us to set off across the tundra on a variety of walks. The energetic had a long walk, the moderately-inclined had a medium walk and the pleased-to-be-off-the-ship group pottered around in the area of the hut.

Walking conditions were very good so everyone was able to do as much or as little as they liked. The people on the long and medium walk saw some bones and the massive jaw from a Sperm Whale that washed up on the beach in 2006. We also found remains of several old fox-traps, with the heavy stones of the deadfall still in place on top of the wooden frame that was half-buried in the ground.

Notable bird species included a flock of Barnacle Geese, a pair of Arctic Skuas, a pair of Grey Phalaropes and several Purple Sandpipers.

During lunch we drew up the anchor and motored across the mouth of Bellsund to Ingeborgfjellet. This imposing cliff face is usually the nesting site of huge numbers of Little Auks. Today many of them were out at sea feeding, but we were still treated to some magnificent displays of flocking, as the birds flew over our heads. As in other bird cliffs that we visited, lush tundra vegetation was much in evidence, as were good numbers of Barnacle Geese. The Doctor spotted an Arctic Fox and several Reindeer were grazing below the cliff. After we returned to the ship, Arne K. gave a lecture on 'getting to the Pole the comfortable way'!

THURSDAY, June 25th

Trygghamna, Isfjorden, 78° 14.5' N, 013° 51.0' E Skansabukta, Isfjorden, 78°37.8' N, 014°34.4' E

Weather: overcast and very windy
Temperature: 5° C/37° F

During the night, *Polar Star* sailed back to Isfjorden and Trygghamna (Safe Harbour in Norwegian). Landing on a narrow shingle beach, we scrambled up a little cliff to reach the Pomor graves at the top. We learnt about the history of these early settlers of Svalbard, including their way of life, reasons for coming to Svalbard, and the archaeological attempts to find out more about them. We also learnt about the Soviet era helicopter base at Kapp Heer, built in response to the Norwegians building Longyearbyen airport. We observed that the geology of the area was very different on the east and west sides of the Fjord. On the west side it was strongly metamorphic, with clearly visible planes of limestone, slate and quartzite. On the east side was much younger sedimentary rock which had been preferentially eroded into more rounded shallower slopes. This was a fairly short walk, and after jumping back in the Zodiacs we were soon back aboard to head further up Isfjorden to Skansebukta.

There were yet more snowy mountains to watch as we sailed deeper into Isfjorden. Soon we arrived at Skansebukta, with its immense fortress-like cliff where fulmars nest by the thousand. Here we had the opportunity to just wander around on our own. Of interest were the beached boat, the old gypsum mine with its railway track still to be seen between the beach and the entrance to the mine, lots of flowers including an early display of the Boreal Jacob's Ladder, and an old trappers hut now used by a local club. On the way back to the *Polar Star* we detoured round the corner to a small cliff where puffins were standing at attention at breeding sites where they were sheltered by a roof over their heads; there were also a few Black Guillemots and Brünnich's Guillemots, and further down a colony of Kittiwakes. Time on our last landing flew by and before we knew it we were back aboard for the Captain's farewell cocktail party, a slide-show of our voyage and a

splendid Arctic barbecue on the stern deck outside the observation lounge. Then it was time to pack! From here it was but a short sail to town and the end of our voyage.

In all we were 80 guests onboard from 7 different countries:

FRANCE - 10 people
GERMANY - 38 people
ITALY - 2 people
NORWAY - 8 people
UK - 12 people
CHINA - 6 people
HOLLAND - 4 people

During the cruise we saw polar bears, walrus, seals, dolphins and foxes plus colonies of kittiwakes, Brunnich's guillemots, puffins and little auks. In addition we broke through ice with the ship and sailed past stunning and dramatic scenery.

On behalf of Spitsbergen Travel, the guide team and lecturers, ships crew and officers we thank you for choosing us as your companions throughout this adventurous journey in the most beautiful parts of Spitsbergen.

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

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Tim Walker MSc. FRGS
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Olof Selander
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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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