



# **LOGBOOK**

**July 25-31, 2009**



**In the realm of the Polar Bear**

**Svalbard, July 2009**

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

### **Longyearbyen**

78°10'N, 015°20'E

### **Barentsburg**

78°00'N, 014°00'E

**Weather:** Sunny and calm.

After a sightseeing tour to the Svalbard Museum and around Longyearbyen we boarded the Polar Star, being ferried by zodiac to the gangway. Our first zodiac ride! After checking-in, welcome cocktails and snacks were served in the observation lounge. This was followed by an introduction and a presentation by Expedition Leader Steffen Biersack, the Captain Jacek Majer, the Hotel Manager Florin and the guide-team. We received practical information and had a lifeboat drill as we sailed away from the town. Dinner was served while we sailed south-west along Isfjorden to the Russian settlement of Barentsburg.

Barentsburg is located in Grønfjorden (Green Fjord) and is a Russian coal mining community with 400 inhabitants from Russia and Ukraine. It is a family community with 15 children. We had a guided tour around the city with two local guides and were entertained by an enchanting folklore show in the theatre. Calm, mild weather gave the town a quiet summer-evening feeling, as we looked out over the expansive, shimmering Isfjorden.

At 22.30, the Polar Star sailed out of Isfjorden in smooth waters and passed the island of Prins Karls Forland on our way north to many anticipated adventures.

## SATURDAY, July 26<sup>th</sup>

### **Ny-Ålesund**

78°50'N, 011°30'E

### **Magdalenefjorden**

79°30'N, 010°30'E

### **Moffen**

80°00'N, 014°26'E

**Weather:** Sunny, blue sky. No wind.

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 guided walking tours in town, where we divided into different groups and some went bird hunting (armed with a telescope only!). The rest of us 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 here holding the title "northernmost", this train is 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 the many people starting their expeditions from this remote settlement. But the most interesting story is the one of the Norwegian Roald Amundsen and the Italian Umberto Nobile making the first successful flight over the North Pole in a zeppelin airship in 1926. Some of us walked over to the airship-mast which still remains. After that we enjoyed some time for ourselves and some shopping in this peaceful place. A family of polar foxes was spotted living beneath the Dutch research cabins- two adults and two small black furry cubs. They peeked out briefly from their den. Arctic terns, eider ducks, barnacle geese, Arctic skuas, an ivory gull, and snow buntings were all seen, in addition to the Greenlandic dogs owned by researchers living in Ny Ålesund.

From the dock the ship headed north, past high alpine mountains characteristic of the northwest

of Svalbard, passing the 'seven glaciers', towards Magdalenefjorden. This is the most well known fjord in Spitsbergen and is also one of the few places where big cruise ships are allowed to come due to its deep waters. It is a lovely fjord with peaked mountains on both sides and an impressive glacier at the end, the Wagonway glacier. These are supposed to be the mountains that the Dutchman Willem Barents first saw when he discovered Svalbard in 1596, naming the biggest island, Spitsbergen, (meaning pointy mountains) after them.

Entering the fjord, we landed by Zodiac on a peninsula on the southern shore, which boasts one of Svalbard's only sand beaches, complete with clear blue glacier water. This beautiful place is called Gravneset ("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 140 men buried here, in coffins placed atop the permafrost and covered with stones. Down on the beach there are remains from two blubber ovens where blubber from whales was rendered. At the end of the beach lay a small cabin where the Sysselmannen (Governor) has officers during the summer, two of which came by the Sysselmannen zodiac, checking on one of the most important historical sights on Svalbard. We walked a ways inland, seeing the little auks soaring in the skies above us as they went to and from their nests on the mountain which towered above us.

Then it was back to ship, to cruise by the scenic front of the Smeerenburg glacier in fjord to the north of Magdalenefjorden, which glowed blue in the midnight sun. After dinner, Polar Star sailed further north, curving around the northwestern tip of Spitsbergen and heading to the island of Moffen. As we had our nightly recap, we passed Smeerenburg, the site of an important whaling town from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and Virgohamna, where many expeditions to the North Pole were launched.

Right before 1am, we crossed the 80°N, and many of us were awake to witness it. Arriving at Moffen shortly thereafter, we were greeted by the sight of over 100 walrus, hauled out on the beach of the atoll-shaped island and swimming in the water. Walrus were nearly extinct on Svalbard after extensive hunting, but their population has been rising since their protection in 1952. Therefore, we kept our distance from this popular haul out site, and after spending some time observing, went to bed as the ship

steamed north in search of the pack ice of the Arctic Ocean.

## SUNDAY, July 27<sup>th</sup>

### **Pack Ice North of Sjuoyene** 81° 00.5' N, 019° 37.8' E

**Weather:** Slightly overcast, sun midday. Calm waters.

This morning we woke up in the waters above the 80°N parallel, near the islands of Sjuoyene (meaning seven islands). The northernmost island of this group, Rossoya, is the northernmost point of the whole archipelago of Svalbard, and as such, is the northernmost point in all of Europe! Soon we met the ice edge, and steamed right into it, getting deeper and deeper into the world of sea ice. The ship broke through large floes and kittiwakes followed the boat excitedly looking for the fish that were revealed as the floes turned over. The thin sunlight reflected in aqua colored melt water ponds on top of the ice- formed from snow melting on the surface of the sea ice. The first polar bear was spotted at 11:06am, but kept its distance. After a morning of reveling in this unique landscape of ice and the sounds of the ice as it broke under our way, we learned that we had made it past the 81°N parallel- and that we were possibly the most northernmost people on the planet at that time! Nearly the same time, we spotted another bear, and the ship's engines were shut down in order to see if the bear would come closer. As it made its way over the ice to us, the Capitan invited us out on the bow for an aquavit toast with Expedition leader Steffen to celebrate the achievement of being at the 81<sup>st</sup> parallel and savor the moment. The 2<sup>nd</sup> mate sounded the horn as we enjoyed the aquavit, a very traditional Norwegian liquor. Despite the horn, the bear was curious about this big ship that had entered his flat, white world, and came yet closer. It zigzagged upwind in our direction, keeping his nose in the air, and eventually almost loping in our direction. It approached the boat, investigating and ambling through meltwater ponds, coming as close as only 5m on the port side. Guards were placed on the back of the boat to scare away the bear if it tried to board the ship from the aft. The bear was likely quite young, perhaps four years old, which was

evident from its build and its white glossy fur, less yellow than the darker older bears.

Unnoticeable to the eye, as the Polar Star was silently resting in the pack ice without engine, the ice was moving at a velocity of 1 knot, taking the ship with it. This southward movement of the ice is part of the circulation of the sea ice in the whole Arctic basin, and meant that lots of sea ice was currently being pushed southwards towards the northeastern parts of Svalbard. After lunch, we navigated southwards with this moving ice, finding it in increasingly dense in areas to the south were it hadn't been earlier in the day. Though our afternoon destination, Phippsøya, was free of ice when we passed it on the way north in the morning, in the afternoon it was fully packed in with dense drift ice when we returned from the north. Unfortunately, this eliminated the chance to make a landing on the island by zodiac. On our way through the ice to the south, we saw more bears, including a family of four at a distance, and one extremely fat male quite close to the ship- his stomach so full that it almost touched the ice as he walked languidly by us.

The going was slow due to the dense pack ice, but the light was beautiful, and the ice was magic, so we cruised until dinner time. After dinner, we had a recap, with pictures from our young bear visitor and a prize for the two who guessed the closest time for sighting our first polar bear. Then we watched a BBC Blue Planet special on the Frozen Seas, comparing the Arctic and Antarctic sea ice ecosystems, with stunning footage of bears and foxes, whales and penguins. It was all the more interesting having just seen the world of the sea ice – and its majestic inhabitants- all day from the ship.



## MONDAY, July 28<sup>th</sup>

### **Alkefjellet**

79° 36.7' N, 018° 20.5' E

**Weather:** Sunny, calm.

After breakfast we approached Alkefjellet (the Auk Cliff), and sunny, calm weather conditions were favourable for a zodiac cruise beneath the bird cliff. We started the cruise near a small bay, where ice from the immense icecap sitting above the cliffs fell vertically into the sea.

Then we got closer to the impressive cliff face of the bird colony – the home to 60-80,000 pairs of nesting Brünnich's guillemots—densely populated as such colonies usually are, with black-and-white birds shoulder-to-shoulder on every ledge. There was a constant whirr of birds around the zodiacs as adults came to and fro, some visibly ferrying fish back to the cliff. Here and there were kittiwakes nesting in niches and corners. Glaucous gulls were patrolling the colony, looking for chances to take eggs from the colony.

A young polar bear was seen cautiously traversing the grassy slopes at the base of the colony, hoping for eggs or fallen chicks. It was obvious that it was not as at home on these rocky slopes as out on the sea ice, where it has a liquid grace. Here, it spread its limbs to keep steady as it climbed up t where the birds were nesting. This was the first time any of the guides had witnessed a bear hunting at Alkefjellet! With foxes and bears patrolling the lower parts of the colony, we understood why the guillemots were forced to nest on such small ledges on vertical cliffs. We also saw black guillemots and black legged kittiwakes nesting, as well as the regal northern fulmar. The cliffs themselves are very impressive – vertical columns of basalt, intruded into an area of sedimentary rock, stained white and pink with the accumulated generations of guano. With the waves crashing at their base and the cacophony of birds - it was a spectacular start of the day.

After lunch, Polar Star headed through Hinlopen Strait towards Torellneset on Nordaustlandet. However, in the southeastern section of Hinlopen strait we ran into thick, continuous sheets of packed fast ice, which effectively stopped our way due to their size and solidity. Thinking that this ice was packed around islands in the center of the strait (Wahlbergøya), we

tried to find open water in the lee of the islands. This was successful, and we continued south to avoid being closed into the Hinlopen Strait by the ice coming from the east, as this would prevent our circumnavigation. As we found our way in the fog and the ice in the afternoon, Simon gave a beautiful slideshow of seabirds of the North Atlantic, giving us much more information about the species we'd already seen here on Svalbard.

Before dinner, we had hot chocolate and rum as we watched icebergs slip in and out of sight in the fog. After dinner, there was a recap where we saw pictures of the polar bear we had seen on the Alkefjellet bird cliffs in the morning. Then there was a movie about the Arctic, after which the fog lifted, and we could gain perspective on our successful passage south through Hinlopen and along Barentsoya, where we were looking for a route to the west through Freemansundet (Freeman strait), which was one of two possibilities for circumnavigating Svalbard. In the midnight glow of soft yellow tones, the horizon held snowy mountains and glaciers moving down into the sea, and we cruised through smooth waters with calmly floating ice floes.

## **TUESDAY July 29<sup>th</sup>**

### **Freemansundet**

78° 13'N, 21° 54'E

### **Bird Canyon, Barentsøya**

78° 15.7'N, 21°57.1'E

### **Kapp Lee, Edgeøya**

78° 13'N, 20°30'E

**Weather:** Sun, with some light rainfall in the afternoon. Light wind.

This morning we awoke in the Freeman strait, which had, until recently, been filled with pack ice, blocking passage for all ships wanting to get west into Storfjorden (meaning 'large fjord') which lies between Spitsbergen and Edgeøya. Today, however, it was open, and we made a morning landing near a canyon filled with nesting kittiwakes. On shore we saw our first spider saxifrage (*Saxifrage platysepala*) which has a deep red rosette of leaves from which beautiful, fragile looking tendrils extend outward like the legs of a spider, with little buds at the end. Each

of these asexual buds can create its own plant, an Arctic adaptation to the unpredictability of insect pollination and fertilization. Passing through surprisingly rich tundra vegetation, the long hikers walked into the canyon, where thousands of kittiwakes screeched overhead. The nests, which are made of a combination of soil and plant material, held together with excrement, clung to the sides of the cliffs. Some even saw a polar fox and her two cubs, playing around their den.

When the long hikers were in the canyon, and the shirt hikers on their way towards it, a large polar bear was spotted on the beach to the west, moving in our direction. Therefore, the two groups nearest to the beach were gathered immediately and evacuated by zodiac as the bear walked just inland of the group, beginning to trot after passing the group. The long hiking group remained in the canyon so as not to cross paths with the bear, and moved out and around the bear once it had passed. They were picked up by zodiac at another site along the beach where they came down from the canyon, father from the bear. The bear, a large, old male, was quite thin and potentially hungry, and though he moved with relaxed-looking movements, he covered ground quickly. Luckily, he continued along the sloping tundra to the east, possibly in search of more sea ice in the north east, where his true prey, seals, are found.

After lunch, we arrived at Kapp Lee, on the northwestern side of Edgeøya, which has both a rich history, beautiful surroundings, and is a favourite walrus haul out site. As far back as the 1700's, Russian Pomor hunters used this site as a base camp, and ruins of their huts are still in evidence. Additionally, there was an octagonal cabin made in 1904 from the Norwegian hunting period. Still standing and protected with a thick layer of peat at the base, the beautifully situated cabin will be restored by the Sysselmannen (Governor) this summer. Two small cabins nearby were built in the 1960's and have been used for research almost continuously ever since, for sea ice measurements and meteorological recordings from the weather mast on the point, among other things. The polar bear in the Svalbard museum in Longyearbyen was shot here, as the bear charged at a small group of researchers.

This whole area was subject to intensive exploration by CALTEX in the late 1960s, which was looking for oil and gas. Shortly thereafter, however, it was entirely protected by the Norwegian government, stopping any

potential drilling. Standing on this pristine point, with the colourful tundra stretching out along the bay, the ancient cabins resting quietly, it is hard to imagine the oil platforms and infrastructure that could have been standing here today had the area not been protected. What a blessing!

After the landing, we had dinner and then a slideshow and talk by Kirsti, who gave us a wonderfully charming and funny insight into the mining life in Longyearbyen in the 1970s, and her childhood, when her family lived in Longyearbyen for the first 13 years of her life.

## WEDNESDAY, July 30<sup>th</sup>

### **Hornsund**

77° 16'N, 16°00'E

**Weather:** High clouds; windy in the morning and calming down in the afternoon.

We returned to the western side of Spitsbergen today, having rounded the south cape in the middle of the night. As we ate breakfast, the Polar Star steamed into Hornsund, the southernmost fjord on the western side of Spitsbergen, revealing some of the most stunning landscapes of the trip: tall peaks, among them Hornsundtind (1431m), waters filled with deep blue icebergs, and massive glaciers. Catching a glimpse of the huge blocks of blue glacier ice that had recently been calving off the glacier in Vestre Borgerbukta (west Borger bay), we decided to take a zodiac cruise in the fjord. We cruised for two hours among the crackling and popping ice bergs, which glowed blue in the slightly grey light. Icebergs towered above us with amazing scalloped patterns where the wind and the waves had eroded their surfaces. Orange trickles of rusty iron oxide made long lines down the rocky mountainsides, contrasting with the black stone. Near the western shore of the fjord, a polar bear was spotted swimming. We approached, shut off our engines, and watched him calmly swimming-almost without a ripple- in the ice filled waters. Little auks, black guillemots and Brünnich's guillemots were seen feeding in the fjord, and the little auks visibly had full gular pouches (under their tongue) of plankton, which they will bring back to their chicks.

In the afternoon, we landed at Gnalodden, which was situated at a point, with a towering bird cliff of Brünnich's guillemots and kittiwakes, little coves filled with sculpted glacier ice, and beautiful tundra with large patches of the brilliantly yellow *Saxifraga hirculus*. A trapper's cabin at the base of the bird cliff was once the hunting cabin of the most famous woman hunters on Svalbard, the Norwegian Wanny Wolstad, who shot polar bears, reindeer, and seal and trapped foxes for many seasons in the Hornsund area from 1932-1937. We had the amazing good luck to visit the cliff on the one day of the year when all the guillemot chicks jump, escorted by their fathers, from their ledges high on the cliff and parachute to the sea. They cannot yet fly, but they hold their wings out and do their best to land on the sea, where they can swim with their fathers south for winter, learning to dive for food and growing their flight feathers along the way. We watched many pairs careen in the air to the water, many meeting up with a growing group of guillemots assembling on water, but some being picked up by the patrolling glaucous gulls.

Leaving Hornsund after dinner, we headed west, out to the continental shelf dropoff, where the deep, cold water is forced upwards, bringing nutrients to the surface and causing a rich bloom of life and krill, the food of whales. Dense fog and poor visibility meant that we didn't spot any, however, so we steamed north along the coast of Spitsbergen.

## THURSDAY, July 31<sup>st</sup>

### **Trygghamna**

78°14.5'N, 013°51.0'E

### **Skansebukta**

78°30.7'N, 016°4.0'E

**Weather:** Cloudy and rainy, light wind. Afternoon clearing into sun.

In the morning, we made a landing at Alkehornet, near Trygghamna (in Norwegian - safe harbour) in foggy rain. Coming up onto the tundra from the coast, we explored the birdcliff and the lush green slopes below, which had a much more diverse flora than any other place we had seen thus far. Many reindeer, some with calves, were seen grazing on this rich vegetation.

Two families of glaucous gulls were nesting along the rocky coast, and on the cliffs above we could hear the cries of the Brunnich's guillemots and kittiwakes which nesting in the fog laden cliffs above.

Back onboard, we sailed southwards back into Isfjorden and around the corner eastwards to the entrance of Billefjorden. On the way, other activities to keep us busy included more information on packing and disembarkation. 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 between guides placed out in the landscape. Of interest were the beached boat, the old gypsum mine with its railway track still to be seen, lots of flowers (including the rare boreal Jacob's ladder) and an old trappers hut now used by a local hunting and fishing club. On the way back to Polar Star we detoured round the corner to a small cliff where puffins could be seen at breeding sites where they are sheltered by a roof over their heads; there were also a few black guillemots and Brunnich'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!

In all we were 92 guests and 8 guides onboard from 10 different countries:

Germany	29
France	24
Switzerland	12
Norway	13
Great Britain	7
America	6
Netherlands	4
Ireland	2
Spain	2
Italy	1

***On behalf of Spitsbergen Travel, the guide team and lecturers, ship's crew and officers would like to 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...***

***Steffen Biersack, Expedition Leader  
Arne Liaklev  
Allison Bailey  
Kirsti Lund Vik  
Simon Cook  
Stefane Hautier  
Ingunn Løyning***



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](http://www.spitsbergentravel.com) or in our catalogue.