



LOGBOOK

July 31 - August 7, 2009



In the realm of the Polar Bear

Svalbard, July/ August 2009

FRIDAY, July 31st

Longyearbyen

78°10'N, 015°20'E

Barentsburg

78°00'N, 014°00'E

Weather: Sunny!

After a sightseeing tour to the Svalbard Museum and around Longyearbyen we boarded the Polar Star. 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 Anja, Captain Leszek, 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 and passed the island of Prins Karls Forland on our way north to many anticipated adventures.

SATURDAY, August 1st

Ny-Ålesund

78°50'N, 011°30'E

Magdalenefjorden

79°30'N, 010°30'E

Moffen

80°00'N, 014°26'E

Weather: Sunny, with some fog drifting in and out.

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 Ny-Ålesund, where we divided into different language 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. Watching the young ones tumble around as the adults set their hungry eyes on the nearby barnacle geese was fantastic. Arctic terns, eider ducks, barnacle geese, Arctic skuas, 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 Waggonway 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.

We entered the fjord and lowered the zodiacs in the water in order to have a zodiac cruise in front of the glacier, having the overwhelming mountains looking down on us. We discovered a dead Minke whale on the beach, its swollen pink flesh sprinkled with glaucous gulls and with fulmars swimming around the tail. A polar bear was spotted in the mountain side, having feasted on the beached whale as well. Trying our very best to overlook the smell coming from the whale, we approached it with the zodiacs, being totally ignored by the hungry gulls. Several pictures later, we returned to Polarstar, and during dinner time we headed for Smeerenburgbukta. After dinner we cruised by the large Smeerenburg glacier. Then, Polarstar sailed north, curving around the northwestern tip of Spitsbergen island and heading to the island of Moffen in the north. Right after 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 almost 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 2nd

A day in the ice

Furthest north:

80° 46.6' N, 018° 49.8' E

Weather: Foggy, with some rays of sun finding their way through the mist.

This morning we woke up in the waters above the 80°N parallel, near the islands of Sjuøyene (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. We spent many exciting hours in the ice, enjoying the ever changing scene of ice floes, with melt water pools and pressure ridges, while the captain navigated with a steady hand towards open waters. We reached our furthest north position at 80° 46.6' N, 018° 49.8' E, The second polar bear of the trip was spotted by our wildlife expert Simon, who's second home is on the bridge. It was a big, fat male which was just finishing his meal when we showed up. Not very interested in us, he strolled along his white, flat habitat as we approached; however, we got a quite close view of him and his leftover meal before he took his large belly and disappeared out of sight.

Later in the afternoon we encountered heavy fog and the landing at Phippsøya had to be cancelled. Instead we headed south east in the direction of Hinlopen strait.

MONDAY, August 3rd

Krossøya

79° 57.7' N, 0.18° 03.1' E

Alkefjellet

79° 36.7' N, 018° 20.5' E

Weather: Overcast

Monday morning we woke up very early, at six o'clock! We wanted to do a before breakfast landing at Krossøya, where an authentic cross from the time of the Russian Pomors overlooked the island. A polar bear was spotted on the ice close to the island, and with polar bear guards on the lookout, we landed with zodiacs on the beach. We divided into English and German language groups and walked up to the cross where we told a bit about the Pomors who used to hunt and trap in Svalbard from the early 17 century. While we were ashore, the ice closed in on Polarstar, making us have to shorten down the landing time in order to get out before the ice closed in on us. After everyone was back onboard the ship, Polarstar had to navigate through the ice all morning in order to reach Alkefjellet. But ice is nice! The polar bear from before was still out there and we came pretty close to it.

After lunch we approached Alkefjellet (the Auk Cliff), where weather conditions only permitted a ship cruise next to the bird cliff. Atop the cliffs was a large icecap, and we started the cruise near a vertical ice fall, where the ice cap fell off into the sea over the cliffs. We got 200 meters away from the impressive cliff face of the bird colony – the home to 60,000 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 mountain and Polarstar 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. 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 the base of the mountains, the mist and snowy winds, and the cacophony of birds - it was spectacular.

Two foxes were zigzagging the rocky slopes of the mountain, looking for eggs or fallen chicks. A young polar bear was also seen lying in the rocks by the beach at the base of the colony. He had probably been hunting for the same prey as the foxes. 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.

After lunch we headed south through Hinlopen strait which was filled with ice, making the captain's job a great challenge, finding passages in which Polarstar could manoeuvre through. The rest of the evening and night was spent in the ice, and as we pushed through Bjørnsund in the late evening, five polarbears were seen roaming around us, including a mother and a small cub.

We went to bed Monday night not knowing which side of Hinlopen strait we would wake up to the next morning, only hoping that our fierce icebreaker and brave captain would make it together through the ice during the night.

TUESDAY, August 4th

Ryke Yseøyane

77°48.6' N, 25° 01.4' E

Halvmåneøya

77° 13.2' N, 22° 59.5' E

Weather: Overcast with some rays of sun. Fog coming and drifting.

We were woken up by great news this morning! Thanks to excellent work from the bridge, Polarstar had managed to get through the Hinlopen strait, and was making way east of Barentsøya. However, the ice was still pretty dense and it still took quite some hours to make way through it. But in the ice, two polar bears were spotted, an old male and a younger one as well, both very close to the ship. They positioned around each other with slow graceful

movements, the young one more eager for contact, while the old one less interested. Eventually they passed each other, communicating with body language, and drifted off in different directions, continuing their lonely existence in the cold, white surroundings.

After lunch we anchored up close to the remote island group called Ryke Yseøyane, a part of the Tusenøyene ('thousand islands') on the remote and windswept south-eastern coast of Edgeøya. We went on a zodiac cruise around the islands, every zodiac being a tiny icebreaker, or at least an ice mover, not knowing what to expect in the mist laden islands, which were only partly visible from the ship. The mist made the island swim in a ghost-like light and we spotted lots of eider ducks and even a polar bear. We cruised along the coast of the strange, desolate looking islands, which are only a few meters in height. A thick 'ice-foot' still was clinging to the side of the islands, a combination of freezing sea swells and winter snow which compacts along the beach into thick ice. In places, glacier ice from faroff glaciers was stranded in the shallow waters. We rounded two islands and found the ship again in the fog. During the cruise some people even got to feel the ice under their feet as we did a landing on an ice flow.

After Ryke Ysøyane we headed south towards Halvmåneøya (Half-moon Island). We did a landing by the cabin used by the Norwegian trapper and uncrowned polar bear king, Henry Rudi, who during one season (1935-36) killed 115 polar bears on this island alone. We saw lots of former self-shot polar bear traps outside the hut, boxes with a bate inside that release a bullet from a rifle when the polar bear pulls on the bait. We got to see inside one of the huts as well, as people from the National Geographic stayed there to film polar bears. They were very happy to see our Polarstar family as we brought two snowmobiles to them, for them to use the following winter. The footage will be a film about polar bears that will be released in 2011.

It was midnight when the last group of people left Halvmåneøya, and Polarstar headed south west in full speed in order to round Sørkapp (the south cape of Spitsbergen) so we could spend time on the beautiful south western side of Spitsbergen the last two days of the trip.

WEDNESDAY, August 5th

Hornsund

77° 16'N, 16°00'E

Weather: Foggy, but clearing up in the evening.

We returned to the western side of Spitsbergen today, having rounded the south cape early in the morning. The morning was spent in an educational mode, as we learned about seals. In the meantime Polarstar headed full speed towards Hornsund, the southernmost fjord on the western side of Spitsbergen, and we reached Gåshamna around half past three in the afternoon.

In the afternoon, we took a walk at Gåshamna, where the long hikers saw moon-like landscapes and unusual geological landforms in a foggy and eerily calm atmosphere. Taking a few moments of silence on coast, we absorbed the unique quiet of this place. The medium hikers explored the wide glacial valley and the flowers it contained. At the shore were huge bowhead whale bones and blubber ovens, remnants of the whaling period. The tundra was rich and green surrounding the bones and ovens, indicating that the nutrients added to the ground by the whale blubber had an effect which can still be seen today.

After dinner we had a shipcruise in Hornsund, revealing some of the most stunning landscapes of the trip: tall peaks, among them Hornsundtind (1431m), mirror-like waters filled with deep blue icebergs, and massive glaciers. Orange trickles of rusty iron oxide made long lines down the rocky mountainsides, contrasting with the black stone. The sun finally showed its presence, and one more time Svalbard's stunning nature and landscapes was glowering with thousands of small crystals in water, ice and snow. The picture became perfect when a group of beluga whales appeared in front of the Brepollen glacier.

THURSDAY, August 7th

Trygghamna

78°14.5'N, 013°51.0'E

Skansebukta

78°30.7'N, 016°4.0'E

Weather: Overcast and a little sun

This morning we made an excellent landing at Alkehornet, near Trygghamna (in Norwegian - safe harbour). 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 with calves were seen grazing on this rich vegetation. Two families of glaucous gulls were nesting along the rocky coast, northern fulmars coasted in the winds over the point, and on the cliffs Brunnich's guillemots and kittiwakes were seen nesting.

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 Polarstar 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 95 guests and 8 guides onboard from 12 different countries:

Germany
Great Britain
Norway
Italy
Australia
France
Switzerland
Netherlands
Ireland
Sweden
Belgium
Ireland

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...

***Anja Fleig, Expedition Leader
Gerit Birnbaum
Steffen Biersack
Axel Krack
Samuel Blanc
Simon Cook
Niklas Gerhardsson
Kirsti Lund Vik***

And with help from Dr. Erik!



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.