Outline itinerary

Day 1  Fly Oslo and overnight.
Day 2  Fly Longyearbyen and begin cruise.
Day 3/8 Spitsbergen voyage.
Day 9  Disembark MS Quest and fly London.

Dates
Sunday 20th June – Monday 28th June 2021

Cost - Quad Cabin
£5,295 per person

Cost - Triple Cabin
£5,595 per person

Cost - Twin Cabin
£5,995 per person

Further Cabin upgrades
Twin Plus: extra £795 per person
Double Cabin: extra £795 per person
Double Superior Cabin: extra £995 per person
Owners Suite: Extra £1,595 per person

Cruise Only – Minus £500 from the above prices (excludes flights and Oslo pre-cruise hotel).

Highlights:
- An exclusive wildlife charter focusing on Spitsbergen’s mammals, birds, flora & scenery
- 7 nights on board the 53-berth, ice-strengthened, MS Quest, one of the smallest vessels in Svalbard
- Look for Polar Bears on the pack ice
- Spectacular Arctic scenery
- Visit colonies of Little Auks & Brünnich’s Guillemots
- Arctic Fox, Walrus & Beluga Whale
- Birds including Ivory Gull, Grey Phalarope, King Eider & Long-tailed Skua
Introduction

Spitsbergen is the largest of the five islands that make up the Svalbard Archipelago. It is a dramatic land of huge glaciers, snow-covered mountains and steep sided fjords, separated from the North Pole by a mere 600 miles of frozen ocean. This is the true ‘High Arctic’, an extreme land gripped by ice for over eight months of the year and by darkness for over four. It is also an island of contrast, however, for once winter loosens its grip and the brief Arctic summer takes hold, Spitsbergen is transformed into a land of perpetual daylight, covered by flower-filled tundra, edged by huge glaciers and towering sea-cliffs and surrounded by a crazy paving of pack-ice upon which Polar Bears hunt and Walruses laze.

To complement our annual 9-night expedition cruises around the Arctic islands of Svalbard (which always fill far in advance), we are offering an additional 7-night cruise in the summer of 2021 which – ice and weather permitting – will spend its time exploring Svalbard’s icy north. The exact route of our voyage will depend on the prevailing ice conditions, which vary dramatically from year to year, but the intention will be to head north and explore the north-western coastline of Spitsbergen and Nordaustlandet (North-east Island) in search of Polar Bears and other wildlife. Although we will make a special effort to find and enjoy the ‘King of the Arctic’ on this cruise, we will not ignore the wonderful variety of other wildlife that journeys here to exploit the short, but bountiful, Svalbard summer. Arctic Foxes scavenge around the base of huge seabird colonies, whilst Walruses laze on ice floes and Ivory Gulls glide serenely overhead. Grey Phalaropes, Purple Sandpipers and Barnacle Geese all breed on the tundra which will be awash with flowers at the time of our visit … something you will miss if you travel much earlier in the season!

For this cruise we have exclusively chartered MS Quest, a comfortable ice-strengthened vessel that carries a maximum of only 53 passengers, plus crew and naturalist guides. This cruise will focus solely on the region’s unique natural history and spectacular scenery and will be escorted by two Naturetrek naturalists plus expedition staff. On a Naturetrek wildlife charter there is no need to compromise by joining a ‘please all’ vessel trying to satisfy a range of differing interests. You can be assured that fauna, flora and scenery will be primary focus of the cruise and that all your fellow passengers will have the same passion for wildlife as you!
Itinerary

Please note that the following itinerary should be treated as a guide only, not an exact program. Flexibility is the key to all Arctic voyages and our exact route and program will depend on ice and weather conditions, wildlife encounters, the experience of the expedition leader and the advice of the ship’s captain and crew.

Day 1

Fly Oslo

This afternoon we fly from London to Oslo where we transfer to a comfortable hotel near the airport for a one night stay.

Day 2

Fly Longyearbyen, embark MS Quest

We now take a mid-morning flight to Longyearbyen and, after a couple of free hours exploring the town, we board the MS Quest in the mid-afternoon our home for the next 7 nights. Over half of the population of Svalbard live in Longyearbyen, a pretty little town overlooked by snow capped mountains on the shores of Advent Fjord. Hardy little Snow Buntings will be feeding on the brief summer crop of seeds as we explore the seafront and a scan of the waters will no doubt reveal Arctic Terns bickering noisily on their favourite rocks and Glaucous Gulls loafing about the quayside looking for scraps. For the birds that nest in the Arctic, it is crucial for them to raise their families as quickly as possible before the few short months of summer come to an end and as a consequence the seabird cliffs and tundra are scenes of frantic activity as parents toil to supply their offspring with food. In the somewhat more relaxed world of the cruise passenger, however, we will be escorted to our cabins and can then venture up on deck, or into the panorama lounge to watch the spectacularly scenery slip past as we leave Longyearbyen, head out into Isfjord and begin our Arctic cruise.

Days 3 – 8

Spitsbergen Voyage

The exact route of our voyage will depend on the prevailing ice conditions, but ice and weather permitting we plan to head north along Spitsbergen western coastline and then focus our attention on the natural history and spectacular landscapes of north-western Spitsbergen and Nordaustlandet. On most days we will also board inflatable zodiacs to go ashore and explore the tundra or steer to the foot of towering cliffs crowded with nesting seabirds. At other times when shore excursions are not planned we can watch the magnificent coastline slip by from the deck of the ship safe in the knowledge that the warmth of the dining room is only a short flight of stairs away should we fancy a warming cup of coffee or a hot snack!
On other days the ice-strengthened hull of the MS Quest will allow us to head into the pack-ice. Here we have our best chance of encountering the true ‘king of the Arctic’, the magnificent Polar Bear. A meeting with a Polar Bear is one of those heart-stopping experiences you never forget, an experience made all the more memorable by seeing them in their own realm wandering over the ice floes with a crazy-paving of pack-ice stretching to the horizon.

We will also look for Walrus on their resting beaches or lazing on ice-floes, surely one of the most bizarre of Arctic mammals. Adult males disputing territories can present a fearsome sight with each combatant weighing over two thousand kilos and perhaps four metres in length, but their appearance belies a placid trusting nature which made them easy prey for hunters in earlier times. Other mammal inhabitants live on the narrow strip of tundra which extends from the shoreline to the mountainous interior and these include herds of Reindeer, which somehow find enough lichens and plants to sustain them through the harsh arctic winters, and charming little Arctic Foxes which act as scavengers and predators around the bird colonies. The pack-ice is also home to three species of seal; Harp, Bearded and Ringed, the single most important factor in the distribution of the Polar Bears which like nothing better than a plump seal to dine on!

Spitsbergen also supports a wealth of birdlife and perhaps some of the most indelible memories of the cruise will be the moments spent in the vicinity of the seabird breeding colonies. The seas below the cliffs are full of auks constantly diving to capture fish then flying on rapidly whirring wings to deliver their catch to youngsters balanced precariously on the ledges. Brünnich's Guillemots, such a rarity in Britain, form huge colonies numbering in the hundreds of thousands, but adding to the scene of bustling activity will be Common Guillemots, Puffins, Black Guillemots and the smallest North Atlantic auk, the aptly-named Little Auk. In global terms the Little Auk is one of the most numerous of all species and whilst in Britain we know it mostly as a storm driven winter visitor, here in its summer haunt it is easier to appreciate its true status as thousands of birds hurtle like starlings towards their concealed nests on the boulder strewn scree slopes high on the mountain sides. Fulmars effortlessly glide on stiff wings over the waves or sheer along the cliff faces, and the eponymous wailing of countless Kittiwakes is an evocative sound that will serve to always remind us of our privileged time at these great Arctic seabird colonies.
Further inland the boggy tundra is home to a different variety of species, the larger pools supporting Red-throated Divers, Long-tailed Ducks, Grey Phalaropes and Purple Sandpipers. Arctic and the rarer Long-tailed Skuas angrily mob intruders whilst Pink-footed Geese and Barnacle Geese anxiously shepherd flotillas of gosling out of harm’s way. Large flocks of Common Eider can be found in the sheltered bays and with them the occasional exotic looking King Eider. With the moulting season approaching, many of the males will be forming bachelor flocks, but the brown coloured females will be busy with the demands of protecting the next generation as broods of ducklings explore their new world. Colonies of Arctic Tern dot the shingle beaches and we should also meet one or two Ptarmigan during our onshore excursions, a bird with a remarkable ability to survive in the most hostile of places and the only species to remain in Spitsbergen for the winter.

Other rarer species may be found as our voyage continues, paddle-tailed Pomarine Skuas harass passing Kittiwakes whilst that true Arctic gull, the Ivory Gull is often seen out in the pack ice following that other great denizen of the north, the Polar Bear. If we are very fortunate we may even find a delicate Ross’s Gull as non-breeders begin to disperse from their Siberian nesting grounds.

The quality of the mammal and bird watching is matched only by the grandeur of the scenery; photographers must ensure that they bring a large number of memory cards! The clear unpolluted atmosphere gives a sharp definition to every picture-book scene and one of the delights of the voyage is the opportunity to admire the spectacle of mighty glaciers, such as the Monaco and Hamilton Glaciers, which snake their way down from the high mountain valleys. The relentless pressure of the moving body of ice causes large sections to periodically break away from the leading edge resulting in huge splashes in the waters below. The ice contained in the glacier acts like millions of tiny prisms making the surface glimmer white and then blue as the sky and clouds are reflected, a subtle change of colour that is mirrored in the waters of the fjord and creates the perfect subject for a photograph!
As our voyage continues we will venture ashore to explore a variety of beautiful valleys and bays each of which is sure to be completely devoid of human life! Depending on our exact route and the prevailing ice conditions we may stop off at the polar deserts of Nordaustlandet, the small islands of Andøyan or explore the flower-dotted tundra at Alkhornet to view the local Reindeers and Arctic Foxes. Then there are the towering dolerite seabird cliffs of Alkenfjellet, the Little Auks on Fugelsangen and the Walrus beaches on Prince Karls Foreland. No matter where our cruise takes us, however, you can be assured of a breathtaking variety of landscapes to explore and wildlife to enjoy.

Before the whaling fleets moved in back in the 17th and 18th Centuries, whales were abundant in Svalbard waters. Sadly these gentle giants were almost exterminated through years of relentless hunting and it is only now that cetaceans are moving back into these cold seas in any numbers. Although any whale sighting in Spitsbergen should be considered a treat, sightings are increasing over the years and past Naturetrek groups have seen Fin Whale, Humpback Whale, Minke Whale and even Blue Whale on few occasions! The ghostly-white Beluga Whale is also possible and we will keep a keen look-out for these timid creatures whenever we are exploring the deep glacial fjords.

No matter what the exact itinerary turns out to be, however, this is without doubt a holiday of a lifetime and a privileged opportunity to see one of the last unspoilt places on Earth!

Day 9

Once back at Longyearbyen a spectacular flight over huge glaciers, braided river valleys and snow capped peaks will bring us back to mainland Norway, from where we must continue our journey south away from the roof of the world and back to London's Heathrow Airport.

NB: Please note that the departure time of the SAS flight from Longyearbyen to Oslo varies from early afternoon to 0400 hours. Schedules will be available approximately 11 months prior to departure. Please also note that SAS’s Longyearbyen/Oslo schedule usually permits a direct connection through Oslo and back to London on Day 9 of the tour. If this is not possible we may have to overnight in Oslo on our return and fly from Oslo to London the following morning. This would incur an additional cost of approximately £100 per person (in a twin room).
Food & accommodation

All food and accommodation is included in the cost except for evening meals and lunches in Oslo and Longyearbyen. For the night in Oslo we use a comfortable airport hotel.

For this cruise Naturetrek has exclusively chartered the ice-strengthened MS Quest. The MS Quest was built in Denmark in 1992 to serve as a passenger ferry along Greenland’s west coast. In 2005, however, she was completely refurbished and refitted and is now operated as a small and comfortable expedition ship. MS Quest has an ice-strengthened hull – registered Ice Class 1D (1B hull) – and carries a maximum of 53 passengers in 26 comfortable cabins all of which feature a private toilet and shower. The vessel comes equipped with a full complement of zodiac landing craft and has plenty of outside deck space for wildlife viewing.

In the dining room you are treated to delicious meals in between landings and in the panorama lounge you can enjoy breathtaking views of the surrounding landscape. Here you can also listen to interesting talks on Spitsbergen’s flora, fauna and history. In the lounge you also find a bar and a small library. Passengers are welcome on the bridge around the clock and there is always something to see or search for. The local staff and crew will be joined by two Naturetrek naturalist guides.

Key
- Purple – Triple/Quad Cabin
- Blue – Twin Cabin
- Yellow – Twin Cabin Plus
- Orange – Double Cabin
- Pink – Double Cabin Superior
- Green – Owners Suite
Cabins:
The MS Quest offers the following cabin grades. The photographs below show a typical cabin of that grade. Please be aware, however, that cabins of a particular grade are not uniform in shape and size and the exact layout of each may vary a little from those illustrated below. All cabins come equipped with a desk and chair, mirror and ample storage space. All are ensuite and offer complimentary shower gel, shampoo and soap. The size and shape of each cabin is outlined on the deck plan outlined above.

**Twin Cabin**
Twelve ensuite cabins with 2 single lower berths, a window and private toilet and shower (blue on deck plan).

* The three triple/quad cabins follow a similar design to the twins but they are a little wider and the third/fourth berths are upper bunks (purple on deck plan).

**Twin Plus Cabin**
Two ensuite cabins with 2 single lower berths, a window and private toilet and shower (yellow on deck plan).

**Double Cabin (with double bed)**
Two ensuite cabins with a double bed, a window and private toilet and shower (orange on deck plan).

**Double Superior Cabin (with double bed)**
Four spacious ensuite cabins with a double bed, windows TV, DVD player, armchairs and private toilet and shower (pink on deck plan).
**Owner’s Suite**

One spacious ensuite cabin with a double bed, windows TV, DVD player, armchairs and private toilet and shower (green on deck plan).

**Tour grading**

Grade A/B – Optional morning and afternoon walks on shore, plus zodiac cruising. Entering and leaving the zodiac craft can present a few difficulties on occasion, but there are always plenty of crew to lend a hand if necessary. Longer walks are occasionally offered for those who wish to stretch their legs. Please also be aware that there are no footpaths on Spitsbergen and the terrain can be steep and rough. Excursions will be mostly by zodiacs – rubber, inflatable landing craft – and a mix of wet landings (directly onto a beach) and the very occasional dry landing (where a dock or pier is available).

Please also be aware of the need to climb up and down several short stairways/steps when moving around the deck of the ship. Should you require additional information on the above please give the Naturetrek office a call on 01962 733051.

Please remember that you are travelling in remote areas without access to sophisticated medical facilities, so we would ask you not to join the tour if you have a life-threatening condition, need daily medical treatment or have difficulty walking.

**Extra expenses**

Lunches and dinners in Oslo and Longyearbyen are not included in the tour cost along with drinks, laundry and all items of a personal nature. Although solely at your discretion, you might like to allow approximately £80 per person for tips for local expedition staff and the ships crew.

NB - Please note that due to the volatile nature of fuel prices and currency exchange rates at the moment Naturetrek reserves the right to impose a surcharge on this cruise should fuel prices increase significantly (and the boat operators request an additional payment) or if there is a further weakening of the Pound Sterling over the coming months. As always, however, we will do our very best to avoid such increases in costs.
Climate

The warming influence of the Gulf Stream keeps temperatures surprisingly mild for the Arctic and mean summer temperatures range between -4°C and +4°C. Although it is often clear and calm, if a storm does come through or a wind suddenly picks up then the principle of ‘wind chill’ kicks in and the temperature can drop by 10°C in a matter of minutes. Sea mists can roll in on occasion. Plenty of layers are essential and more information on clothing will be provided on booking.

Focus

This is a general natural history holiday focusing on the abundant wildlife that lives around Spitsbergen’s spectacular coastline. Whilst, we will certainly make a special effort to see Polar Bears during our stay (and have a very good chance of finding this magnificent mammal!), please be aware that bears are not the sole focus of this cruise! We will also spend time ashore, in search of the other mammals, birds and flora, cruise amidst dramatic Polar scenery and just enjoy the unique peace and solitude of being in the Arctic realm.

Your safety & security

You have chosen to travel to Spitsbergen. Risks to your safety and security are an unavoidable aspect of all travel and the best current advice on such risks is provided for you by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. In order to assess and protect against any risks in your chosen destination, it is essential that you refer to the Foreign Office website – www.gov.uk/foreign-travel-advice/norway or telephone 0870 6060290 prior to travel.

How to book your place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read the Naturetrek terms and conditions in the back of our brochure or on our website, and then book either online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, by calling us on 01962 733051, or by completing and returning the booking form in the brochure together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us on 01962 733051.

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