

Spitsbergen - Realm of the Polar Bear

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Exclusive charter – MS Quest 2027

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Oslo and overnight.
Day 2	Fly Longyearbyen and begin cruise.
Day 3/10	Spitsbergen voyage.
Day 11	Disembark MS Quest and fly London.

Dates

Thursday 1st July – Sunday 11th July 2027

Cost – Quad Cabin

£7,595 per person

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£7,995 per person

Cost – Twin Cabin

£8,995 per person

Further Cabin upgrades

Twin Plus: extra £1,495 per person

Double Cabin: extra £1,495 per person

Double Superior Cabin: extra £1,795 per person

Owners Suite: extra £2,295 per person

Cruise Only – Minus £750 from the above prices (excludes flights and Oslo pre-cruise hotel).

Highlights:

- An exclusive wildlife charter focusing on Spitsbergen's mammals, birds, flora & scenery
- 9 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



From the top: Walrus, Polar Bear & MS Quest in Spitsbergen. Images courtesy of Paul Stanbury & Shutterstock Ltd



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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 Walrusen laze.



Although, Spitsbergen covers over 63,000 square kilometres, only 3,000 people live on the island and most of these are concentrated in the administrative capital of Longyearbyen, a small arctic town on the southern edge of Isfjord. A few settlements exist elsewhere to service declining coal mining activities, but the long cold arctic winters are a test of human endurance and it is not surprising that the entire archipelago is virtually an undisturbed sanctuary for birds and other hardy wildlife. Harp, Ringed and Bearded Seals share the icy waters with Polar Bears, Walrus and Beluga Whales, whilst on the land Reindeer graze and Arctic Foxes scavenge at the foot of huge seabird colonies. The sheer numbers of birds can be quite overwhelming. An estimated one million pairs of Brünnich's Guillemots breed around the coastline and these are joined by over a million pairs of Little Auks which form mosquito like clouds around the ice-covered mountain tops. Large numbers of Kittiwakes, Fulmars and Black Guillemots add to the coastal spectacle whilst inland the tundra provides a nesting site for three species of goose, Pink-footed, Barnacle and Brent, plus Arctic Skua, Ivory Gull, King Eider, Purple Sandpiper and Grey Phalarope. With such a wild terrain and lack of roads, overland travel is very difficult and the best way to view the abundant wildlife of Svalbard is from the water.

From 2019 we have been exclusively chartering MS Quest, a comfortable ice-strengthened vessel that carries a maximum of only 53 passengers, plus crew and naturalist guides. Our cruise will focus solely on the region's unique natural history and spectacular scenery and will be escorted by three Naturetrek naturalists plus local 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 the fauna, flora and scenery will be the primary focus of our 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 MS Quest in the mid-afternoon our home for the next nine 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. All the



usual facilities of a small Norwegian town can be found here existing in splendid isolation from the mainland of Europe. 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 quay 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 lounge to watch the spectacularly scenery slip past as we leave Longyearbyen, head out into Isfjord and begin our Arctic cruise.

Days 3 – 10

Spitsbergen Voyage

The exact route of our voyage will depend on the prevailing ice conditions. If ice conditions permit, we may attempt to circumnavigate the island of Spitsbergen in a clockwise direction, north out of Isfjorden, round the island of Moffen, through the Hinlopen Strait that separates Spitsbergen and the ice-covered Nordaustlandet (North-east Island) and south around Barentsøya and Edgeøya before heading north once more to Longyearbyen. If the ice is still heavy then we may be prevented from circumnavigating and will instead focus our attention on the natural history and spectacular landscapes of north-western Spitsbergen and Nordaustlandet (arguably the most productive region for wildlife!) or perhaps travel to the east of the archipelago.





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

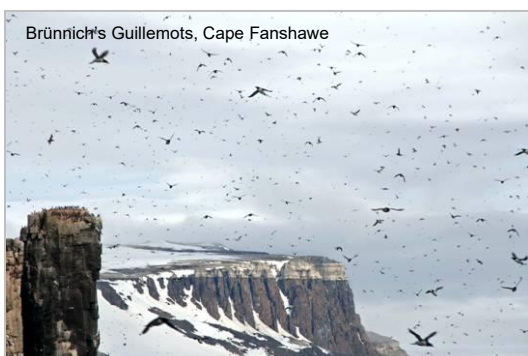
by from the deck of the ship safe in the knowledge that the warmth of the dining room is only a short flight of stairs away should we fancy a warming cup of coffee or a snack!

On other days the ice-strengthened hull of 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. Pack-ice tends to linger longer off the eastern coast of Spitsbergen and north-west coasts of Nordaustlandet so both of these areas are likely sites for Polar Bear encounters.



Arctic Fox

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 Svalbard 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!



Brünnich's Guillemots, Cape Fanshawe

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 that 'mighty atom' of the family, the 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. 'Blue' 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.



Grey Phalarope

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 anxiously shepherd flotillas of gosling out of harms way. Barnacle Geese on the other hand choose to lay their eggs on cliff ledges high above the tundra and their young must first face the hazard of descending the escarpment before reaching the relative safety of the lowland pools. Those

that survive this initiation may later in the year complete the long migration to Scotland as indeed will the flocks of Pinkfoot goslings presently being guarded by the parents against the attentions of Glaucous Gulls and skuas. 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 they begin to disperse from their Siberian breeding grounds.

The quality of the bird and mammal 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!



Little Auks

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 dramatic steep-sided inlet of Raudfjord, or explore the tundra at Alkhornet to view the local Reindeers and Arctic Foxes. Then there are the towering dolerite seabird cliffs of Alkenfjellet, the Little Auks of Bellsund 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 Blue Whale, Fin Whale, Humpback Whale, Minke Whale and even Bowhead Whale on a couple of lucky 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.

It is impossible to visit Spitsbergen, however, and ignore the island's fascinating history so much of which is tied to the very animals and birds we have come to see. Abandoned whaling stations such as the 17th Century Smeerenburg (Blubber Town) stand testament to the impact of early whalers on the islands, whilst the remains of the camps of early explorers such as the Swedish Balloonist Andree show another more adventurous side of Svalbard's past. There may also be the opportunity to visit the settlement of Ny Alesund, home to the most northerly post office in the world and, on occasion, a family of Arctic Foxes!

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 11

Fly London

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 11 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 £120 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.

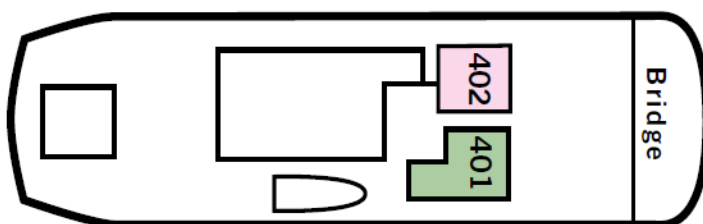


For this cruise Naturetrek has exclusively chartered the ice-strengthened MS Quest (formally called the Sea Endurance). The MS Quest was built in Denmark in 1992 to serve as a passenger ferry along Greenland's west coast. In 2005, however, she was completely refurbished and refitted and is now operated as a small and comfortable expedition ship. MS Quest has an ice-strengthened hull 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.

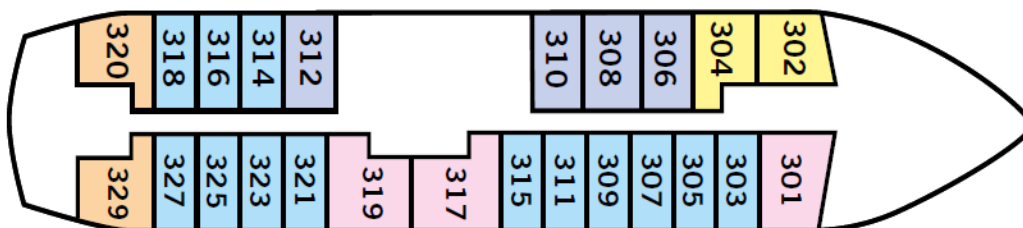
Deck 4



Key

Purple – Triple/Quad Cabin
 Blue – Twin Cabin
 Yellow – Twin Cabin Plus
 Orange – Double Cabin
 Pink – Double Cabin Superior.
 Green – Owners Suite

Deck 3



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 two single lower berths, a window and private toilet and shower (blue on deck plan).

* The 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 two 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 – 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 landings (where a dock or pier is available).

It is also important that you are able to get up and down the steep gangway from the ship to the water level to board the zodiac craft. Please also be aware of the need to climb up and down several 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.

N.B. 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 £100 per person for tips for the ship's staff and 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 significant weakening of the Pound Sterling over the next couple of years. 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 $+8^{\circ}\text{C}$. Winds are generally light, but if a storm does come through, or a wind suddenly blows up, then the principle of 'wind chill' kicks in and the temperature can drop by 10°C in minutes. Sea mists can roll in on occasion too.

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, 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.

N.B. Please also be aware that new wildlife viewing regulations came into force on 1st January 2025 which includes a requirement to keep a minimum distance of 500 metres from Polar Bears up until 30th June and then 300 metres from 1st July. This applies to all ships operating in Svalbard waters and to all operators of tours to the archipelago. Some landing sites also now have a limit of 39 people at a time. At these sites the group will be split with half doing a landing first and a zodiac cruise second and the other half doing the activities in reverse. Unlike the larger vessels, however, nobody will be left onboard the ship waiting their turn to get off! Your guides and expedition leaders will explain more during the course of the cruise.

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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