

Northern Norway & Spitsbergen – An Arctic Adventure

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Fly Helsinki & overnight.
Day 2	Fly Ivalo & transfer Kaamanen.
Day 3	Kirkenes.
Day 4	Vardo.
Day 5/6	Kongsfjord.
Day 7/10	Longyearbyen, Spitsbergen.
Day 11	Fly London.



Departs

May & June.

Dates and Prices

See website (tour code NOR12).

Grading

Grade A. See Page 5 for more information.

Focus

Birds, Mammals & Arctic landscapes.

Highlights

- A rare opportunity to combine north Norway with the Arctic island of Spitsbergen
- Enjoy the birdlife & landscapes of Varanger Fjord
- Long-tailed Skua, King Eider, Red-necked & Grey Phalaropes, Bluethroat & lekking Ruff
- Look for Walrus, Arctic Fox, Svalbard Reindeer & Beluga
- Spectacular polar scenery including huge glaciers & jagged snow-capped mountains
- 24-hour daylight & the 'midnight sun'
- Led by an expert naturalist guide



*From the top: Long-tailed Skua, Walrus & Spitsbergen scenery
(Paul Stanbury & Shutterstock Ltd)*

Introduction

On this polar wildlife holiday, we will travel far north of the Arctic Circle into a land of perpetual summer daylight and dramatic landscapes, populated by some of Europe's most sought-after birds and mammals, including Long-tailed Skua, King Eider, Walrus and the 'King of the Arctic' himself, the Polar Bear! We will split our time between Varangerfjord and Kongsfjord in northernmost Norway and the spectacular Arctic island of Spitsbergen, the largest of the Svalbard Archipelago. From Ivalo in Finland, which sits within the vast taiga forests that encircle the planet – home Pine Grosbeak, Siberian Jay and Waxwing – we drive north into Norway for four nights, split between two nights on the Varanger Peninsula and two nights on the edge of nearby Kongsfjord. The birdlife of this iconic region of Scandinavia needs no introduction and includes such avian gems as Red-necked Phalarope, Long-tailed Skua, Rustic and Little Buntings, Ruff in their breeding finery and much more. A boat trip to Hornøya offers vast numbers of breeding auks – including Brünnich's Guillemot – and the chance of an encounter with a Humpback Whale or pod of White-beaked Dolphins too.

We then fly 600 miles further north to Spitsbergen, enjoying the island's glaciers and jagged mountain views on the way in. Svalbard's administrative capital of Longyearbyen will be our base for the final four nights of the holiday. Snow Buntings flit around the rooftops and Barnacle Geese, Purple Sandpipers and Ptarmigan breed around the edge of town. From here, we will take daily boat trips out into Isfjord, the largest fjord system in Spitsbergen that almost cuts the island in two. We will explore along Isfjord's intricate coastline, marvelling at the huge glaciers and breathtaking scenery, whilst searching for the region's hardy wildlife including King Eider, Grey Phalarope, Brünnich's Guillemot, Little Auk, Walrus, Arctic Fox, Svalbard Reindeer and Beluga. If fortunate, we may find a Polar Bear too! Since the sun will not set for the duration of our holiday, there will be no shortage of daylight hours in which to enjoy the region's exciting wildlife and spectacular landscapes!

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Helsinki

This afternoon we fly from London's Heathrow Airport to Helsinki, the capital of Finland where we overnight at a comfortable airport hotel.

Day 2

Kaamanen

We continue our northward journey this morning with a flight from Helsinki to the small town of Ivalo, located 250 kilometres north of the Arctic Circle in the heart of Finnish Lapland. From there, we drive through the endless Finnish taiga forests to Kaamanen, a journey of around an hour or so. En route we will look for Red-flanked Bluetail, a tricky species to find, but one that is spreading in northern Scandinavia. The quaint village of Kaamanen is now famous in birdwatching circles for the feeding station set up in the woodland. The feeders attract such sought-after species as Siberian Jay, Siberian Tit and Pine Grosbeak, along with Arctic and Common Redpoll, Bullfinch and Brambling. In the evening (this is the 'Land of the Midnight' sun so we will enjoy 24-hour daylight this far north!), we will explore the woodlands and wetlands around our hotel in search of Capercaillie, Black Grouse, Waxwing, Smew, Common Goldeneye, Black-throated Diver and others.

Day 3

Kirkenes

After breakfast, and following an early morning explore around our hotel, we will head north once more through the taiga forests towards the Norwegian border for a 1-night stay in Kirkenes. We will stop en route to look for some of region's key species of bird, such as Arctic Warbler, Rustic and Little Buntings and Parrot Crossbill. We will also visit Ovre-Pasvik National Park, 119 square kilometres of forest, upland and wetland habitats home to Whooper Swan, Taiga Bean Goose, Common Crane, Wood Sandpiper, Little Gull, Siberian Jay, Siberian Tit, Bluethroat and more.

Day 4

Vardo

Today, we move to the small fishing village of Vardo located on the far eastern-most tip of the Varanger Peninsula on the shores of the Barents Sea. Our route will take us along the coast of Varanger Fjord, through a dramatic landscape of rugged upland moors, bogs and stunted birch and willow woodlands in the more sheltered valleys. We will stop at a variety of key spots – including Nesseby, Vadso and Kiberg – in search of breeding waders such as Bar-tailed Godwit, Purple Sandpiper, Knot, Ruff and Red-necked Phalarope, plus Short-eared Owl, White-tailed Eagle, Rough-legged Buzzard, Willow Grouse, Arctic Skua, Red-Throated Pipit and many others. There is even the chance of a lingering Steller's Eider, King Eider or White-billed Diver too!

We will aim to Vardo in time for dinner, where we can enjoy the local seafood delicacies. Those who still have energy remaining can explore the town after dinner where they may find Glaucous Gull, Purple Sandpiper, White-tailed Eagle and, if fortunate, perhaps an Arctic Fox.

Day 5

Kongsfjord

This morning, after breakfast, we will take to the water on a boat trip to the island of Hornøya. The small island is home to over 80,000 breeding seabirds including over 7,500 pairs of Puffins. Both Common and Brunnich's Guillemots also nest here, along with Razorbill, Eider and plenty of Kittiwakes. White-tailed Eagle are regular overhead and the magnificent Gyrfalcon is seen from time to time too. We will land on the island and walk amongst this cacophony of noise and activity, stopping around lunchtime for a picnic.

From Hornøya, we continue by boat to Syltefjord, keeping an eye open for Humpback and Fin Whales, White-beaked Dolphin, Arctic, Great and Pomarine Skuas and other seabirds en route. In Syltefjord, we will visit a bustling colony of Gannets, before heading to the small harbour for a well-deserved cake and warming drink. From here we transfer to Kongsfjord Arctic Lodge on the Veines Peninsula, our comfortable base for the next two nights. Our drive will take us over Varanger's high plateau, summer home to, amongst others, Long-tailed Skua, Lapland Bunting, Ptarmigan, Long-tailed Duck, Red-throated Diver, Ruff, Arctic Redpoll and Bluethroat.

Day 6

Kongsfjord

We wake this morning looking out at the dramatic coastline of the Barents Sea. We will spend the day back up on the moors, bogs and rocky expanses of the Varanger plateau. Here we hope to witness the spectacular lekking behaviour of Ruffs, without doubt Europe's most beautiful wader. In May, the males will be resplendent in their full breeding dress and out to impress the females with their finery.

We will also look for Shorelark, Long-tailed Skua, Dotterel and other breeding waders, before returning to Kongsfjord in time for lunch. In the afternoon we will follow the coast road to Berlevag, looking out for King Eider, Black Guillemot, Glaucous Gull, Merlin, White-tailed Eagle, Ring Ouzel, Twite and colonies of noisy Arctic Terns. Dinner and overnight at Kongsfjord Arctic Lodge.

Days 7 – 10

Longyearbyen, Svalbard

This morning we will fly to Tromsø and then from there we fly north over the Barent's Sea to Longyearbyen, the administrative capital of Svalbard, arriving mid to late afternoon.

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.

Although, Spitsbergen covers over 63,000 square kilometres, only 3,000 people are resident and most of these are concentrated in 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. Ringed and Bearded Seals share the icy waters with Polar Bears, Walrus and Beluga Whales, whilst on the land Svalbard Reindeer graze and Arctic Foxes scavenge at the foot of noisy seabird colonies. 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 and large numbers of Kittiwakes and Fulmars too.

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 harm's 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 (and the attention of the Glaucous Gulls) may later in the year complete the long migration to the Solway Firth in Scotland. Large flocks of Common Eider can be found in the sheltered bays and with them the occasional exotic looking King Eider. Snow Buntings flit around Longyearbyen and Ptarmigan live on the rocky slopes around the town.

With such a wild terrain and lack of roads, overland travel is very difficult and the best way to view the scenery and abundant wildlife of Svalbard is from the water. As such, our excursions from Longyearbyen will be mostly by boat and we will spend our time exploring the coastline of Isfjord, the largest fjord system in Spitsbergen that almost cuts the island in two. Our exact itinerary, however, will be kept flexible to take account of Svalbard's fickle weather, recent wildlife sightings and the advice of our tour leader. During our three boat trips (one on each of our full days in Spitsbergen and each lasting four to five hours) we will enjoy the spectacular landscapes of Svalbard and look for the region's hardy wildlife, including Walrus, surely one of the most bizarre of arctic mammals, Common and Bearded Seals and hopefully Beluga Whale too. Belugas are nervous and wary of boats, but pods of these ghostly-white whales roam the fjords of Svalbard and are often seen in Isfjord.

Although most Polar Bears tend to wander the pack ice and islands in the remoter north and east of the Svalbard archipelago, they are regularly recorded around the northern shores of Isfjord too. Your guides will try their very best to find one of these magnificent mammals – they know the areas to search – but a sighting is by no means guaranteed! Those especially keen on seeing Polar Bears should consider our ‘Spitsbergen – Realm of the Polar Bear’ cruise (NOR05). Arctic Foxes are commoner, however, and can often be seen scavenging around the foot of seabird colonies or around the few settlements that dot this icy land.

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 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!

Day 11

Fly London

After a final breakfast in Longyearbyen we must sadly make our way back to Longyearbyen Airport for our flight back to Oslo and from there home.

Weather

The weather will be cold, and it is not unusual to have snow in late May and early June, both in north Norway and especially in Svalbard. There is likely to be patches of snow remaining in the uplands around Varanger Fjord and average temperatures in Vardo climb to between 5-10 degrees C during the day. It will be colder still in Svalbard, especially when out on the water, although if the Sun’s out and there’s no wind it can feel pleasant. Plenty of warm clothing, plus gloves and hat etc are therefore essential!

Tour Grading

This tour is graded A and consists of mostly short walks of a couple of kilometres or so. The holiday is therefore suitable for anyone who enjoys walking in the countryside and is of an ‘average’ level of fitness. Please be aware, however, that the terrain is often rough, and sometimes icy, underfoot (there are no footpaths in Svalbard!) and as such the trip not suitable for anyone who has any difficulty in walking or is not steady on rough/icy terrain. Your tour leader will also encourage plenty of early starts to make the most of the long hours of daylight.

Food & Accommodation Included in the Price

All food and accommodation are included in the price of this holiday starting from breakfast on Day 2 and ending with breakfast on Day 11. Dinner in Helsinki on Day 1 is not included. We will be staying in a range of comfortable hotels and guesthouses.

Your Transport

For all transfers and excursions in Finland and mainland Norway we will use a 9-seater self-drive minibus (driven by your leader). Please assist our tour leaders (and guides) by ensuring that there is a rotation of seats around the tour vehicle(s) to allow each tour member to enjoy approximately equal time in the front. In order to be fair to all participants, we regret that we are unable to guarantee a permanent front seat to those who might suffer from motion sickness or other concerns.

Boat excursions out of Longyearbyen are mostly on small vessels that take a maximum of 12 guests, although one excursion will be on a larger shared catamaran.

Extra Expenses

Please note that the following expenses are excluded from the cost of the holiday and are paid locally. Any necessary visas (not required for UK citizens), locally paid airport taxes, drinks, tips and all items of a personal nature.

Your Safety & Security

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 prior to travel.

How to Book Your Place

In order to book a place on this holiday, you will need to read our main Naturetrek brochure and complete and return the enclosed booking form together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost. If you do not have a copy of this brochure, please call us now on 01962 733051. Alternatively, you are welcome to book on the internet by visiting www.naturetrek.co.uk, or telephone us and make a booking with a credit or debit card.

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