

# Spitsbergen - Realm of the Polar Bear

Naturetrek Tour Report

11 - 21 July 2011



Walrus



Polar Bear



Brunnich's Gullmots



Reindeer

Report extract and images courtesy of Oceanwide Expeditions



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## Introduction

The *Antarctic Dream* was built in Holland in 1961 for the Chilean navy. Six years ago the present Chilean owners bought the ship and refurbished her as a passenger ship for the polar regions. She takes a maximum of 84 passengers, 5 expedition staff, 13 hotel staff and 20 nautical crew members. She is 81 metres long and 12 metres wide.

### Day 1

Monday 11th July

Travel from the UK

### Day 2

Tuesday 12th July

Longyearbyen; Embarkation Day

*GPS position at 16.00: 78° 03.3'N, 013° 12.0'E*

*Weather at 16.00: 6°C, sunny, scattered clouds*

Our journey began at 78° north: 720 miles from the Pole. Then we turned again, north, and slipped from the dock at Longyearbyen, past the schooner Northern Light. It would be a cruise without darkness. The low cloud which had hung over the hills around the principal town lightened and we were followed by fulmars out off the western shore of Svalbard. We met the Captain, Expedition Leader and staff, and performed our lifeboat drill. Guillemots and auks, broke from the sea. The pantomime beaks of puffins were bright in the levelling sun. The *Antarctic Dream* veered starboard.

### Day 3

Wednesday 13th July

Kongsfjorden – Blomstrandhalvøya;

Krossfjorden – Tinayrebukta

*GPS noon position: 78°57.3'N, 012°2.9'E*

*Weather at 12.00: 12°C, overcast, low clouds, calm*

The fjord lay in simple beauty: calm and nearly windless. We rehearsed our training while entering the Zodiacs to cross to Blomstrandhalvøya, Flower Beach Peninsula (although retreating glaciers have revealed it is a true island not a peninsula). In warm, sunny weather we landed at a small cove and split into two parties. Philipp and Mathias led a longer walk and Rinie and John a shorter stroll lower down on the shore.

The island showed us Red-throated Divers, Arctic Terns clipping the air with their sharp-winged flutterings and stone-chip cries. Snow Buntings, the most northerly songbird, were seen in the air. Mauve and purple Arctic plants were found; like woolly lousewort, and the cushions of moss campion and purple saxifrage nestled by the slender stems of knotweed - flourishing among the shelter of stone clumps, beneath the delicate fairy-hats of Arctic bell-heather. Above the beach, Long-tailed and Arctic Skuas nested among ruins. Up on the hills small groups of reindeer grazed, including mothers and calves. Opposite us, across the fjord was Ny Ålesund, a small settlement and scientific base where we could see the mast that launched the famous Norge balloon flight of Amundsen; they became the first men to see the North Pole on 11 May 1926.

In the afternoon we wound north into Krossfjord and made a Zodiac landing in Tinayrebukta. We split into two groups. One headed up the hill, gazing at fine views and checking out reindeer on the way. The others observed an Arctic Skua nesting, and spotted a group of Eider Ducks, with a pair of King Eiders among the common ones. We found gelifluction-lobes and sorted stripes on the slopes and got an introduction on the permafrost topic.

Back on our Antarctic Dream, we enjoyed dinner and relaxed in the bar, while the great Svalbard scenery was passing by the restaurants windows.

## Day 4

Thursday 14th July

Liefdefjorden – Andyøane, Monacobreen;

80° North – Mofsen Island

*GPS noon position: 79° 39.9'N, 013° 11'E*

*Weather at 12.00: 5°C, overcast, little rain, calm*

The morning was more typical of Spitsbergen weather than the day before, with cloud hiding the mountain tops and a cool light breeze. The vessel of the Sysselmannen, the islands' administration was in our intended destination so we continued to the Andøyane (Duck Islands) looking for Polar Bears, which feed on the duck eggs. The shore rocks were very different from yesterday, evenly bedded Old Red Sandstone from the Lower Devonian period some 390 million years ago. Walking over the rocks were a mother and her two cubs: amazing luck - helped along by Rinie's knowledge of changing scavenging habits of the bears over 25 years! They roamed the shore with a halo of complaining Arctic Terns above. In cold light rain with hints of snow we explored the shores and bays, finding Common and King Eider, Grey Phalaropes, more Red-throated Divers and stands of Kittiwakes decorating the small bergs of glacier ice.

After lunch, the Captain took us deeper into Liefdefjord and up to the face of the Monaco Glacier, named for the first Prince Albert of that state. A small island 700 metres from the face only emerged from the glacier 8 years ago: a rapid rate of retreat. Glaciers are the main agent of landscape change in Spitsbergen. Returning east we paused at Texas Bar, a hut built by the Norwegian hunter Hilmar Nøis in 1927, to pick up fuel unused by a BBC crew filming bears and foxes. The weather did not allow us to leave the ship again, but it could not stop us turning north past Mofsen and over the line of 80° North latitude, where, on the foredeck, we toasted being just 600 nautical miles, 690 statute miles, or 1,111 kilometres from the North Pole.

## Day 5

Friday 15th July

### Lågøya

*GPS noon position: 80° 40.7'N, 020° 22.3'E*

*Weather at 12.00: 3 °C, overcast, low clouds, partly foggy, calm*

At 06:30 sea swells were amplified by shallow seas around our intended destination of Lågøya. We decided to continue to Seven Islands (Sjuøyane in Norwegian). Meanwhile Philipp gave a talk on glaciers, explaining the complex workings of these mountain-eaters. As the lecture finished we were approaching the Seven Islands. On the pack ice we could see two bears. The captain expertly slid the Antarctic Dream through the pack with the minimum of disturbance and we were able to observe the two separate animals wandering to and fro. The larger was male, the smaller animal was difficult to sex with certainty. The occasional Ivory Gull added to our enjoyment.

During lunch we saw Harp Seals and the air was full of small auks, Fulmars, some Glaucous Gulls, and many Kittiwakes, which flocked to the hull when we began turning over ice to serve up invertebrates and small fish. Rinie spoke to another cruise vessel in the area, and they let us know that the favoured bay for Walrus on Phippsøya still had fast ice (ice fixed to the shore) and so none had come ashore. Once again we had to plan on our feet. We saw Harp Seals bobbing their heads to look at us, swimming a few strokes, typically on their back, then swiftly vanishing, but it was a quiet wildlife day; they sometimes happen despite our searching until early evening. So we headed back south and found conditions at Lågøya more favourable.

After dinner we made a late landing after a long Zodiac run to a gravel shore. A short walk took us to a shallow lagoon where we found Purple Sandpipers, and a pair of Sabine's Gulls, named after its discoverer Edward Sabine, an officer on the 1818 attempt under Captain John Ross to find the North West Passage. Two graves, or probably a grave and a cairn, lay on the low ridge, bare eroded planks covered the skull of someone, probably a trapper, of whom we can say only one thing with certainty, he died a long way from home. Closer to home was the skeleton of a walrus on the beach. The bones are much more massive than a big seal; these are immensely strong animals.

## Day 6

Saturday 16th July

### Lomfjord – Faksevågen;

### Hinlopenstretet – Alkefjellet; Torellneset

*GPS noon position: 79° 32.9'N, 017° 40.9'E*

*Weather at 12.00: 7 °C, scattered clouds & later sunny, calm*

We dared not look too hard at the hints of blue sky over Faksevågen, in case it went away. It was the site of our morning landing in a side fjord. Opposite our landing, on the eastern side, were sandstones and limestones from the Upper Permian period and the Lower Carboniferous, while we stood, separated by a major fault, on a moraine lying on older rocks from before the Caledonian Orogeny of 400 million years ago. A long hike for the energetic with Matthias and Philipp, took us up steep, then gentle slopes. Some muddy ground was to cross and we got lots of morphology explained. The landscape became like a picture book to us: gelifluction, braided rivers, moraines, alluvial fans, kettle lakes V and U-shaped valleys, it was all there.

Reindeers, a Ptarmigan and many flowering plants were a juicy mixture for the biologists in us. After a steady hike, we had spectacular views from the top. Fog was playing over the glacier and began to cling on the mountaintops. Matthias and Philipp asked us to put our cameras down for a while, to find a comfortable spot and do...nothing. Doing this, nature became huge – and with a warm feeling in our hearts we made our way back to the landing site.

A leisurely hike for those who went with Tom, John and Rinie up the side of the moraine found tiny Arctic and Alpine plants nestling between the stones. Many specimens brought us to our knees to distinguish between different species of Whitlow-grass (*Draba* species) or the yellow saxifrages. Reindeer grazed, ripping rich morsels of Mountain Avena. On the shore we found Purple Sandpipers and many tree trunks which float in from Siberia. John found curls of birch bark which the whalers used as tinder to light their stoves.

After lunch we cruised in warm sunshine to Alkefjellet, a three-kilometre length of nesting cliffs rising 100 metres high straight from deep sea – up over 200 metres deep in places, with a 384 metre peak above the headland. As we approached, through rafts of Brünnich's Guillemots (there are estimates of up to 100,000 of them on this site), we could see the edge of the dark, lens-shaped Dolerite intrusion which forms the island. Magma intruded some 100-150 million years ago into the paler Permo-Carboniferous measures still visible above and below.

On small ice we saw Guillemots standing like penguins, but with rather less confidence about their footing. The late afternoon is a busy time for small auks and the sky was frantic with birds coming and going. The fishy guano smell and the variety of noises made it a multi-sensory experience. The presence of nests on exposed rocks, and large broods of Barnacle Geese signalled there were no Arctic Foxes this year. A Glaucous Gull was seen killing a Guillemot on the water, another's beak bore an egg to its nest.

After dinner we made our final excursion, anticipating that we might be ship-bound in the ice the following day. At Torrelneset we went ashore at the base of a shingle spit. Two groups of Walruses were hauled out, each tightly packed together. Some showed the characteristic areas of pink skin where they flush blood to the surface to lose heat. After they have fed well, Walruses can spend days ashore, sleeping and resting. They seem very good at it. There was also an opportunity to walk up to the bare stony landscape above: an Arctic desert. Just west of north, our ship lay with a box of light behind it, lidded by cloud. The luminous wings of an Ivory Gull caught the light. Back on board, at three minutes past midnight, the sun broke through, still sailing high over the cold horizon.

## Day 7

Sunday 17th July

### Hinlopenstretet

*GPS noon position: 78° 54.8'N, 020° 38.7'E*

*Weather at 12.00: 4 °C, overcast, good visibility, calm, partially sunny*

It was a day for cruising south and seeking animals among the ice as we went. As we passed an unnamed bay beneath the Hochstetterbreen on the north-east corner of Barentsøya, bears were spotted. We turned hard to starboard and entered the edge of the multi-year pack. Ringed Seals were scattered over it like black tadpoles, and stalking them were two bear families, each comprising a mother and two cubs. We tend to assume the fearsome top-predator has an easy life, but the seals slid easily into the water and the bears fasted.

It was mid afternoon when we saw a single bear on the ice. After observing it for some time, the Captain took the ship away then entered a closer channel. We were closer, but it didn't do much. Then suddenly there was a ripple of excitement through the ship as the bear approached the Antarctic Dream. It surveyed us from 20 metres away, its flanks were thin, but not overly so, but maybe hunger may have been the spur to its curiosity. It walked along our starboard side then away across the strong multi-year pack ice, returning to its own world, leaving us to ours. We felt a little richer for its coming, and a small hole in our hearts for its going. We stopped several times more for similar experiences. We were truly in the land of the bear.

## Day 8

Monday 18th July

Freemansund;

Storfjorden

*GPS noon position: 78° 9.2' N, 020° 59.3' E*

*Weather at 12.00: 4 °C, sunny, calm, zero wind*

We planned a day exploring the sea ice as we cruised south. Our Friday ice chart showed some compact ice around Freemansund but we hoped to pass through this channel, which is susceptible to blockage by ice drawn in by tidal currents and the wind. First we were treated, just as lunch was announced, to a pair of Walruses on a small floe, sleeping. The larger animal, a male had the tip of one tusk broken which can affect their breeding status, but as the other animal looked like a female, perhaps things were not so bad. Their skin was pale suggesting they had been out of the water some time. We draw alongside and drifted in.

Over lunch a Pomerine Skua obligingly made circuits of the ship. They are visitors but do not breed in Spitsbergen. We continued through Freemansund with little resistance. The ice shown on the satellite images had gone, but where? We had a sighting of a Bearded Seal, with its characteristic small head on a fat body, lying where they like to be, on ice floes. They are general feeders and use their whiskery beards to locate prey at depths of up to 200 metres. They spend the whole year in Svalbard waters. We had hot chocolate with rum on the fore-deck to keep us going until Rinie gave us an update on a very different Monday ice chart. The ice that had been on the east coast had blown south and gathered over the entrance to our planned destination for tomorrow: Hornsund. We would instead push on farther north to Bellsund. Tom then gave a talk on the Brown Bears he works with and we then enjoyed a salmon supper while the tranquil waters rippled in the light. By the end of the evening the sky was largely clear and the northern sun lit the peaks ranging all down the coast.

## Day 9

Tuesday 19th July

Southwest Spitsbergen;

Bellsund - Reinodden

*GPS noon position: 77° 13' N, 013° 11.6' E*

*Weather at 12.00: 12 °C, foggy, calm, partly good visibility*

We met in the Lecture Room at 08:30 to discuss the change of plan. The ice-chart had under-estimated the size of the ice pack, or maybe it had dispersed due to the falling wind. Instead of passing 5 nautical miles from the southern tip of Spitsbergen we had been driven south seeking more open water until we passed it 24 miles off.

Mathias gave a talk, Living in Longyearbyen - describing life in a small remote community. Rinie talked about the Arctic Food Chain and put us off swimming in the sea with our mouths open.

After lunch, there was bright fog, the sun was obviously trying to burn it off, but the sea ice was chilling the air. The ice extended farther north, up to the mouth of Bellsund, and dense patches reduced our speed to less than 5 knots. Late in the afternoon we edged into Bellsund and burst out of the fog into bright sunshine. The ice had not entered the sound, but a Polar Bear had. A very heavy male was lying on a small ice floe. Although we came up in the usual way, very slowly and quietly, he was in cautious mood and swam away.

At last we left the ship and went ashore at Ahlstrandodden and climbed up a short slope onto a tundra plain rich with wild flowers. Reindeer could be seen on the lower slopes of the mountains. When everyone was ashore we walked to the lake, where Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese ran in clockwork streams along the shore. Long-tailed Ducks and Red-throated Divers were also there. In the distance we saw a very timid Arctic Fox. A BBQ waited for us at 20:30 and we left the shore, weaving our way through rocks revealed by the lowering tide. The weather held breathless and sunny for as long as we wanted it, a welcome reward for our struggles through the ice.

## Day 10

Wednesday 20th July

### Forlandsund - Tordenskjøldbukta

*GPS noon position: 77° 54.5' N, 013° 02.9' E*

*Weather at 12:00: 7°C, sunny, scattered clouds, windy*

The promised stable high pressure had fallen away south leaving us with a stiff wind from the NNE. We headed towards our planned landing for Little Auks at Ingeborgfjellet but were greeted by a female bear and cubs, it's a nice reason to change plan. We turned around for another well-known site: Midterhuken where, for a change we found a large male sleeping on the ridge above our landing. Bears have right of way so we switched to plan H while observing a third bear sighting on the ice. After a briefing or two Rinie came up with a plan to bring forward lunch then land on a low tundra site which he promised was flat even by Dutch standards. To compensate for missing nesting Little Auks, Rinie and Paul would lead a mini-bus expedition so a small colony outside Longyearbyen.

To clear the decks for the rest of the day we settled our accounts. A walrus then appeared ahead of us and we slowed to take a look before it slipped into the water. Around 14:30 we made away ashore at Tordenskjøldbukta in a sheltered bay behind a line of skerries. Just above the shore was an old trapper's fox trap. Long walkers headed off into the interior with Rinie and Tom, searching the softly undulating Tundra for wildlife. Sightings of Arctic Foxes and Reindeer were topped by three Snow Geese, two in the blue morph and one in the white. Polar Champion was also a star find. Mathias and John found reindeer very close, and much easier to see, some with magnificent antlers. They looked very well fed on the lush meadows. The chill wind dropped to make the Zodiac ride back to the ship much more comfortable.

We enjoyed the Captain's Farewell Party and Dinner before preparing for packing and departure, as always, assisted by 24 hour daylight.

## Day 11

Thursday 21st July

### Longyearbyen

*GPS position at 06.00: 78° 03.3'N, 013° 12.0'E*

We all met for a last breakfast on board. We had already packed yesterday and with a tear in our eyes we disembarked our Antarctic Dream after a fantastic trip. Many of us took a flight back home today, some stayed for some more days in the high arctic village of Longyearbyen. All of us were bitten by the arctic bug and will eventually/hopefully return... Total distance travelled: 1104 Nautical Miles (2045 km)

As for you - you have been such an enthusiastic and interesting group – it has been a pleasure to share this voyage with you all. On behalf of Captain Barria and his crew, the expedition staff and hotel team of the Antarctic Dream, we look forward to sailing with you again – in the far north, the deep south, or somewhere in between.

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Faksevågen

## Species Seen

### Birds

Red-throated diver	Northern fulmar	Common eider	Long-tailed duck
Pink-footed goose	Barnacle goose	Brent goose	Rock ptarmigan
Purple sandpiper	Ruddy turnstone	Snow bunting	Grey phalarope
Arctic tern	Great skua	Pomarine skua	Arctic skua
Long-tailed skua	Sabine's gull	Ivory gull	Glaucous gull
Great black-backed gull	Black-legged Kittiwake	Atlantic Puffin	Brunnich's guillemot
Little auk	Black guillemot	Snow goose	

### Mammals

Walrus	<i>Odobenus rosmarus</i>	Minke Whale	<i>Balaenoptera acutorostrata</i>
Bearded seal	<i>Erignathus barbatus</i>	Polar Bear	<i>Ursus maritimus</i>
Ringed seal	<i>Phoca hispida</i>	Arctic Fox	<i>Alopex lagopus</i>
Harp seal	<i>Pagophilus groenlandicus</i>	Spitsbergen Reindeer	<i>Rangifer tarandus platyrhynchus</i>



Antarctic Dream