



# LOGBOOK



*In the realm of the Polar Bear*

*Svalbard, June 2010*

Written by Simon Cook

**FRIDAY**, June 11<sup>th</sup> 2010

**Longyearbyen** - 78° 10' North, 015° 20' East  
**Barentsburg** - 78° 00' N, 014° 00' E

**Weather:** Sunny, blue sky, no wind.

**Temperature:** 12° C/45° F

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 Steffen Biersack, the Captain Leszek Slawski, the Hotel Manager Natasha and the guide team. We received a lot of 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 town of Barentsburg.

It is located in Grønfjorden (Green Fjord) and is a Russian coal mining community with 400 inhabitants from Russia and Ukraine. It is also a family community with 22 children and 100 pigs. We had a guided tour around the city with two local guides and were entertained by an enchanting folklore show in the theatre.

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**, June 12<sup>th</sup>

**Ny-Alesund** - 78° 50' N, 011° 30', E  
**Magdalenefjorden** - 79° 30' N, 010° 30' E

**Weather:** overcast, no wind.

**Temperature:** 6° C/43° F

In the early morning we came into Kongsfjord and arrived at Ny Ålesund, said to be the worlds northern-most community. It is a former coal mining settlement that has become an important international research centre. Work is 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 town, where we divided into different 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 was the one about the Norwegian Roald Amundsen and the Italian, Umberto Nobile. They flew over the North Pole in an airship in 1926. Some of us walked over to the airship-mast that is still there. After that we enjoyed some time for ourselves and some shopping, in this peaceful place.

Underneath one of the old houses there is often a family of Arctic foxes and they are here this year too. Many of us saw the male at very close range. He was very active – running around, sniffing the ground, digging in the soil and coming very close to us. At the end of our time ashore some of us were surprised to see an Arctic Tern fall onto the ground next to the fox. The fox saw it and soon picked it up in its mouth before disappearing under the house, which is where the cubs are born. Other interesting wildlife included Reindeer, Arctic Terns, Red-throated Divers, Snow Buntings and Arctic Skuas.

From the dock the ship headed north, past 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. It is a lovely fjord with peaked mountains on both sides and an impressive glacier at the end. These are the mountains Willem Barents first saw when he discovered Svalbard in 1596, naming the biggest island Spitsbergen (peaked mountains) after them.

Entering the fjord, a snow-covered peninsula stuck out from the southern shore; this is where we landed with the Zodiacs. This is Graveneset (“the grave-yard peninsula”) where Dutch and English whalers from northwestern Spitsbergen came to bury their dead in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. There are 150 men buried here. Down on the beach there are remains from two blubber ovens where blubber from whales was rendered or boiled down. At the end of the beach lies a small cabin where the Sysselmannen (Governor) has officers during the summer.

After dinner we went close to the spectacular front of the Smeerenburg glacier. All around were dramatic, snow-covered mountains smaller glaciers and small bays. In some of them there was still ice attached to the land but it is melting rapidly. Sailing northwards out of Smeerenburg Fjord, Polar Star turned to the east.

### SUNDAY, June 13<sup>th</sup>

**Moffen:** 80° 00' N, 014° 27.8' E

**Our furthest north:** 81° 06' N

**Phippsoya** – 80° 40' N, 021° 00' E

**Weather:** foggy early, overcast later, calm

**Temperature:** 6° C/43° F

We reached the walrus haul-out on the island of Moffen at approximately 01.30 in the morning. The island is very unusual because it resembles a tropical atoll – it is low-lying and made of shingle with a large lagoon in the middle, which was still frozen over. From some distance away we could see that there were many walrus. In addition to some in the water there were three groups on land; the total number was estimated at 140-150. Despite their huge size walrus eat mainly shellfish and crabs. The most exciting bird was one of the very rarely-seen Sabine's Gulls. Only a few pairs of this species nest in Svalbard and Moffen is one of the regular places to see them. After flying along the beach it flew out towards us and gave some of us excellent views. After spending more than 30 minutes at the island the ship moved away and those of us who had got up went back to bed.

During breakfast it was a little foggy but by the time we had finished eating viewing conditions had improved and we could see our first drift ice. We were right on the edge of the ice field and it was broken into many floes. Most were quite small but there were a lot of larger sheets too. All eyes were looking for wildlife and although there were plenty of birds the only sign of bears were some old footprints in the snow. Another highlight of the voyage, in addition to pushing through the ice, was crossing an invisible line – 81° 06.71' North (and 019° 39.48' E). The captain sounded the horn in recognition of our achievement and we celebrated with some Norwegian liquor (not as nice as Scotch whisky!).

After lunch we were again in open water but as we approached Seven Islands more ice came into view. Soon our first Polar Bear was spotted

from the bridge but it was a long, long way away. Luckily, as we turned around to get closer to the bear, another one was seen in front of us; it was a big male. The ship slowed down and stopped and the bear very slowly started to come towards us. This was very exciting and the bear kept coming! Eventually it was only a few metres behind us and then it slowly walked away. It was a marvellous chance to see, photograph and video the "King of the Arctic" at close range.

Leaving the bear behind, we sailed the short distance to Phipps Island, one of the Seven Islands. On the way we saw Ross Island, the northernmost point in Europe. Once the ship was at anchor we set off in a fleet of zodiacs to explore the bay between Phipps, Martens and Parry Islands. There was still winter ice in one of the bay and some people had the chance to get out of the boats and set foot on the floating mass. There was even time for a snowball fight, during which the English beat the French! Another highlight was to get very close to a group of Walrus; some were on ice and some were in the water. One of them had very long tusks and others came closer to have a look at us.

Once we were all aback aboard the ship weighed anchor and turned southwest, towards the Hinlopen Strait.

### MONDAY, June 14<sup>th</sup>

**Alkefjellet** 79° 36.7' N, 018° 20.5' E

**Murchison Fjord** 79° 59.7' N, 018° 27' E

**Weather:** overcast but bright, windy

**Temperature:** 5° C/41° F

After breakfast we approached Alkefjellet (the Auk Cliff) and got a big surprise! We were planning to go out in the zodiacs for a cruise but the cliffs were blocked off by big sheets of ice. However, the captain took the ship through the ice and we stopped close to the seabird colony. It is home to perhaps 100,000 nesting Brünnich's Guillemots. They are members of the same family as puffins and, being black-and-white look just like penguins; they are not related though. The nesting ledges were packed with birds, which were standing shoulder-to-shoulder. Some of the winter snow remained so inexperienced birds were waiting for it to melt before they could start nesting. The other very numerous nesting bird here was the Black-legged Kittiwake. 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.



Despite the birds and the geology the biggest attraction at the cliffs was the bear. It was spotted as we approached and the ship stopped close to it. The red-faced bear had killed a seal (probably a Bearded Seal) and was busy eating it on the ice. The bear was already fat and, as it ate, it panted a lot. After a while it walked away and cleaned the blood off its fur by rubbing itself in the snow. This gave the waiting Glaucous Gulls their opportunity to feed as well; there was also a single, pure white Ivory Gull in attendance.

During our stay at the cliffs the northerly wind had increased and packed the ice together. After a lot of going backwards and forwards we finally made it out into open water. Many of the meltwater pools in the ice that we saw on the way were covered with resting and bathing guillemots.

Our next destination was some way to the north – Murchison Fjord. It was far too windy to attempt a landing on one of the small, exposed islands at the entrance so the *Polar Star* continued past them. In the distance there was muchfast ice (winter ice attached to the land), which the ship headed into. Eventually we found what we were looking for – ice strong enough for us to walk on! The ship was stopped, the gangway was dropped and some of the guides tested the strength of the ice for us. They decided that it was safe so we dressed for the weather, descended the gangway and stepped onto the frozen surface of the sea! From the ice we had a very different perspective of the ship and there were numerous photographic opportunities, especially when it started to snow. Keeping to the flagged route, we were able to walk around in a large circle. This was, without doubt, the experience of a lifetime for us and one that will be remembered for many years to come.

## TUESDAY, June 15<sup>th</sup>

**Hamilton Bay:** 79° 40' N, 011° 30' E

**Sallyhamna:** 79° 49.9' N, 011° 35.8' E

**Weather:** overcast but bright, windy

**Temperature:** 3° C/39° F

When we awoke this morning the sun was shining from a clear, blue sky – wonderful! Our outing was by zodiac into the spectacular Hamilton Bay, on the west side of Raudfjorden. There were mountains and glaciers all around plus small islands in the bay to explore. Bear footprints were everywhere but the only animal seen was a small, dead cub near the water's edge. Arctic Terns, Common Eider and Black Guillemots were the commonest birds at our level but up on the neighbouring cliffs there was a large colony of Brunnich's Guillemots and Kittiwakes. At the western end of the bay there was still some fast ice and one or two boats went a little way into it. At times it was good to have the engines off so that the wilderness could be better appreciated. The adventurous explorers amongst us also made a spontaneous landing on a very small, snow-capped rock in the middle of the bay!

It was only a short distance to Sallyhamna so we arrived shortly after lunch. Close to us was an old, dilapidated hut and it was here that we landed. The snow was pretty deep but we were able to hike around the bay to the newer hut, which is used by the Governor's officers in summertime. It was impossible to get lost – all we had to do was to follow the bear footprints around the bay!

Later on, as we headed south, there was a lecture about the wildlife of Spitsbergen; this followed previous ones about ice. After dinner we had the chance to watch a preview of the superb voyage video, courtesy of Dominic and Ashley.

## WEDNESDAY, June 16<sup>th</sup>

### Bellsund area

**Kapp Toscana:** 77° 33.3' N, 015° 04.8' E

**Recherchefjorden:** 77° 28.9' N, 014° 45.3' E

**Weather:** overcast but bright, light wind

**Temperature:** 3° C/35° F

Kapp Toscana lay just inside Van Keulenfjorden and when we looked from the ship the landing place, close to the old hut, was clearly visible.

Nearby were some old, wooden boats and several large piles of whale bones. These dated from the time, in the early twentieth century, when Beluga, the white whale, was hunted and killed here.

Once ashore, we set off on an easy hike towards a distant beach, where there were two more huts. The cloud was quite low and the hills were still streaked with snow patches. Around us the low-lying tundra was carpeted with one of the commonest flowers of Spitsbergen – Purple Saxifrage. Another species of saxifrage was also seen, this was Tufted. At the end of the relaxed hike was a dramatic, shingle beach and when we arrived there our fleet of rubber sea taxis was waiting for us.

During lunch the ship moved to nearby Recherchefjorden for our afternoon excursion. The plan was to use all the boats for a cruise, with a landing, if possible at any interesting places we came across. The boats split up to do their own thing and most of us made a landing at some point. However, the two most adventurous drivers (from Wales and France) found something extra-special to do so the others followed!

In front of the distant glacier was a moraine, which seemed to stretch from one side to the other. Beyond the moraine was open water and extensive fast ice, with some seals on it. Leading from the sea to the lagoon was a hidden channel and because the level of the lagoon was low and the tide was rising, water was rushing in at great speed. The channel was deep so the two boats were steered expertly through the gap into calmer waters inside. There was a long strip of open water leading towards the glacier so the zodiacs drifted with the wind towards the ice wall. Two kinds of seal were seen here – Bearded and the smaller Ringed.

This was an excellent ‘expeditionary’ way to end our outdoor activities for the day. Once we were all back on the ship we were treated to a presentation on the geology of Svalbard. The next adventure was out at sea. With plenty of time available, the ship headed out to Bellsund Bank. Sometimes whales are seen here during the summer, having come from further south to feed. Before long one was spotted! It was a Fin Whale, which is the second largest of the whales. During the next few hours more were seen; sometimes just a distant spout, other times the head, back and distinctive dorsal fin. The whales would surface, breathe several times and dive

again in search of food. They spent 5-6 minutes underwater. The time spent away from the surface depends on how much food there is and how deep it is. Some people were so keen to see more whales that they were still on the bridge at midnight but most of us were already in bed by then. Our sightings were unexpected and very exciting!

## **THURSDAY, June 17<sup>th</sup>**

### **Isfjorden**

**Trygghamna** - 78 12.8' N, 013 52.4' E

**Skansbukta** - 78 31.5' N, 016 03' E

**Weather:** overcast, calm

**Temperature:** 5° C/40° F

Today was our last day on the ship but we were still very busy! After breakfast the zodiacs shuttled us to the beach near the 1,000-foot high bird cliffs. The triangular rock face was very impressive and there were both kittiwakes and guillemots flying to and fro.

There was a choice of a long, strong hike, a medium, moderate hike and a short, easy hike. There were still many snow patches and the tundra was very wet. The first flowers had just emerged – purple saxifrage and yellow buttercups. The local reindeer were still in their white winter coats and there was even a fox seen too. Birds seen in the area included Snow Bunting, Arctic Skua and Glaucous Gull. Most of us climbed a little way up the hill and got sweeping views across the fjord towards the first landing of our expedition – Barentsburg. The power station was still pouring black smoke into the air!

During lunch the ship headed towards Skansbukta for our afternoon landing. Here too there were very high cliffs but the nesting fulmars were almost invisible. On the flat plain around the abandoned gypsum mine and on the slopes above it there was much plant life. At one end of the beach was an old, wooden boat and in the middle was a hut, which is still used today. When we were ready there was a chance to go around the corner of the cliff to search for Puffins and other seabirds.

From here we returned to the ship for the captain's farewell cocktail party and the excellent end-of-cruise barbecue, which was served outside the observation lounge. Some of us even ate outside too!

In all we were 81 guests and guides onboard from 13 different countries:

Great Britain	8
France	6
Netherlands	3
Belgium	2
Liechtenstein	2
Luxembourg	2
Switzerland	3
Austria	1
Sweden	3
Norway	5
Australia	2
New Zealand	1
and Germany	43

And the total distance that we sailed during our expedition cruise was 1,010 nautical miles/1,163 statute miles/1,871 kilometres.

*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...*

*Steffen Biersack, Expedition Leader  
Heiko Kuhr  
Niklas Gerhardsson  
Gerit 'Bingbong' Birnbaum  
Ingunn Loyning  
Samuel Blanc  
Simon Cook*

*& with help from Dr. Robert Sweeney!*



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!

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