



LOGBOOK



To the Kingdom of the Polar Bear

Svalbard, June 25 – July 1st 2010

Written by Simon Cook

FRIDAY, June 25th 2010

Spitsbergen

Longyearbyen - 78° 10' North, 015° 20' East

Barentsburg - 78° 00' N, 014° 00' E

Weather: overcast, some wind

Temperature: 3° C/37° F

After a sightseeing tour to the Svalbard Museum and around Longyearbyen we boarded our new home for the next few days, 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 the coast 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.

After disembarking onto the dock there was a guided tour around the town with two local guides. Afterwards we were entertained by an enchanting folklore show in the theatre. It was a dazzling display and all done by people from the community, rather than a professional troupe.

At 22.30, the Polar Star sailed out of Greenfjorden and passed the island of Prins Karls Forland on the way north to many anticipated adventures.

SATURDAY, June 26th

Kongsfjorden, Spitsbergen

London - 78° 50' N, 012° 00' E

Ny-Alesund - 78° 50' N, 011° 30', E

Weather: sunny, no wind

Temperature: 7° C/45° F

In the early morning we awoke and found that the sun was shining down from a cloudless sky. Our landing site was on the north shore of Kongsfjord, at a place called New London. It is the site of an old marble mine, which dates from early in the twentieth century. The marble was said, after its discovery in 1906, to be extremely beautiful and of high quality, consequently, a lot

of time and money was invested to extract it. Efforts were led by an Englishman called Mansfield whose Northern Exploration Company was behind the scheme. However, due to frost damage the marble crumbled after being extracted so the whole enterprise was abandoned. What we see today are the remains, which include buildings and much rusting machinery.

The zodiacs dropped us to the east of the site so that we could hike across the tundra towards it. The ground was wet in places and there were still patches of snow around. On the way some of the history of the area was explained to us and we were surrounded by natural history. This included reindeer, geese and a pair of Red-throated Divers, which were on a small lake. The most exciting bird species was Long-tailed Skua, which are rarely seen on land in Svalbard. There were at least four and the two near the old buildings were very approachable. Down at the waters edge, by the old crane, there was a profusion of flowers. Most of them were pale yellow Mountain Avens but there were also some pink Woolly Lousewort.

During lunch the ship repositioned to Ny Ålesund, said to be the world's 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. During our time here we first headed for the shop, which was just about to close for the day! We then 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.

There was then time to look at the old train that was in use in the mining period. Among everything else here holding the title "northernmost", this train worked on 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 mooring mast that is still there.

There was some wildlife here too. The most obvious species was Arctic Tern, which may have spent the winter in Antarctica! The first spotted, greeny-brown eggs are just being laid in scrapes in the ground, which seem to suit the birds just fine. Scattered around on the sea were quite a few eider ducks, which mostly nest on nearby islands to avoid predation by the local foxes. Other interesting wildlife included Reindeer, Red-throated Divers, Snow Buntings and Arctic Skuas.

Our route now took us out of the Kongsfjord and northwards, up towards the northwestern corner of Spitsbergen. Passing towering, jagged, snow-capped mountains, the captain soon turned into a narrow and spectacular channel. The ship had to weave through the narrows of South Gate before coming out into Smeerenburgfjoden. A surprise lay just around the corner – we were going out in the zodiacs, despite the late hour.

Once all the boats were loaded we set off in a convoy and headed for land. Before rounding a corner we could smell our destination – the remains of a long-dead whale. Some of the guides had last seen it nine months earlier but there was still plenty of food for hungry Polar Bears. Boats were able to choose their own bears, which were on fast ice a short distance away. The smell was dreadful but to be so close to the animals without disturbing them was astounding. With the motors off the boats settled down to watch the different kinds of behaviour – feeding, conflict, resting, playing and walking.

Altogether, 13 bears were counted: 4 lying down on snowy slopes (including one big male), 3 females with very small cubs and another female with 2 cubs just over a year old. Some of us were lucky enough to see one of the small cubs climb up onto its mother's back and close its eyes, sleepily. When she got up and started walking, the little one soon lost its grip and fell off onto the ice! Two of the adults were fitted with satellite-tracking collars and one of the older cubs came close to the ice-edge to get a better look at us. Our "surprise" lasted until just after midnight, when we finally returned, elated, to the ship.

SUNDAY, June 27th

Our furthest north - 81° 01' N, 016° 53.8' E
Phippsoya - 80° 40' N, 021° 00' E

Weather: flat calm, sun, cloud & some snow

Temperature: 6° C/43° F

Our first drift ice was in sight before breakfast but most of us were still asleep in bed! 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° 01' North. The captain sounded the horn in recognition of our achievement and we celebrated with some Norwegian aquavit liquor (not as nice as Scotch whisky though!).

Shortly afterwards a bear was seen as it swam among ice floes. It climbed briefly onto a small piece of ice but re-entered the water, heading for a large sheet. It hauled itself out at one end while we stopped the ship at the other end. It showed no interest in us so we continued on our way. During lunch another swimming bear was spotted but it was at least a mile away.

Passing the small Ross Island (the northernmost point in Europe) the ship carried us through some snow to an anchorage beside Phipps Island. Here the zodiacs were dropped and they set off to see what could be found. A nearby bay was still full of fast ice and along the edge was a group of large Walrus, including a one-tusked animal. They were curious and came over to check us out. The boats then split up to do their own thing.

Several more groups of walrus were found and two guides found a perfect ice floe to land on. The zodiacs were driven enthusiastically up onto the ice, which was then safety-checked. A green light meant that we were all soon standing on a piece of the Arctic pack ice – another surprise for us! On the way back to the ship those two boats had another surprise with the first group of Walrus. The animals were swimming steadily along the shore and allowed the zodiacs to cruise along with them. At times some of the animals came for a much closer look. The encounter lasted for some time over a distance of, perhaps, half-a-mile.

Near the ship there were some Little Auks; most were flying by but some allowed one boat to approach very closely. After dinner there was a special recap in the lounge. A comfy chair was put on the stage for Heiko, our bear expert. The floor was then free to ask questions about bears, many of us were thirsty for more information after our encounter with the bears at the dead whale.

After just a few questions, one of the guides suddenly jumped up and ran out of the room! A few minutes later we found ourselves looking at the fattest bear imaginable! It was on a large sheet of ice and, going by the bones nearby, had just finished eating a whole seal. In the area were big Glaucous Gulls several smaller, pure-white Ivory Gulls, which often feed on the leftovers. The bear was so heavy that, as it walked, it continually broke through the soft ice into the water below. The ship was steered into the ice and we had very close views for quite a while. Eventually it was time to resume our course for the Hinlopen Strait

MONDAY, June 28th

Hinlopen Strait

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

Wahlenbergfjorden - 79° 42.9' N, 020° 35.1' E

Weather: overcast, calm, sea like a mirror

Temperature: 2° C/36° F

First thing this morning the world outside was a black-and-white one. What little land there was appeared black, the ice on the water was white and the low cloud was grey. We were at Torrelneset (79° 21' N, 020° 41' E) and hoping to go ashore. However, there was a lot of ice in the area, which is known to have strong currents so the decision was made to not take a chance on getting the zodiacs stuck. Turning around, the ship headed north again for the bird cliffs of Alkefjellet, navigating through lots of ice on the way.

Soon we approached Alkefjellet (the Auk Cliff) and got ready as we stopped close to the seabird colony. It is home to perhaps 100,000 nesting Brünnich's Guillemots and a similar number of Black-legged Kittiwakes. The guillemots 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 and subordinate birds were waiting for it to melt before they could start nesting. The sky near the cliffs was full of birds and looked like clouds of swarming insects. 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.



Lunch was almost ready when we arrived back aboard and the ship soon turned its nose towards Wahlenberg Fjord. The *Polar Star* sailed into it and passed the Golden Islands. There was much ice on the water and distant glaciers too; far-off hills were bathed in sunshine. Not long afterwards two more bears were spotted and one came fairly close to us before heading off.

Deeper into the fjord there was fast ice and as we approached it three more bears were seen. There was one by itself and a very distant female with a small cub. The ship was taken into the ice and stopped; we then had some hot chocolate outside the observation lounge. All eyes were on the closer animal, which had seemed to be coming closer and closer to us. After walking steadily for many minutes in our direction it was aiming right for the bow of the ship. There was a rush to get clothes, cameras, binoculars and a prime spot at the pointy end of *Polar Star*. The bear was quite curious and kept stopping to look up at us from the ice. There were lots of cameras pointing its way and lots of pictures were taken! Once its curiosity was satisfied it wandered slowly away towards the edge of the ice. This was yet another memorable encounter on a voyage filled with them!

Shortly before dinner we set off, followed again by lots of kittiwakes. They were after small, black fish that were brought to the surface as the ship turned over ice in its path. Hovering just over the ice and often close to the ship, the birds would swoop down whenever they spotted potential prey. The birds were very quick to grab and eat but they still weren't nearly as fast as we are in the dining room! After dinner our very

own 'Ice Queen' (Gerit) gave a presentation on her favourite subject – ice!

TUESDAY, June 29th

Moffen - 80° 00' N, 014° 27.8' E

Fuglesangen - 79° 50.2' N, 011° 23.4' E

Magdalenefjorden - 79° 30' N, 010° 30' E

Weather: overcast, low cloud, windy

Temperature: 3° C/39° F

We reached the walrus haul-out on the island of Moffen at approximately 02.00 in the morning. Moffen 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. It was very windy and from some distance away we could see that there were only five walrus present. Since we had seen more from the zodiacs at Phipps Island there was no bing-bong and we were able to sleep, uninterrupted.

This morning's landing on the island of Fuglesangen was a true expedition one. The zodiac ride was short but bouncy, the beach consisted of large stones, the slope away from it was covered in seaweed and snow and the route to the edge of the Little Auk colony was snowy and rocky. However, once we had gone the short distance to the birds we weren't disappointed because they were so close to us.

The Little Auk is the smallest member of the family in the North Atlantic (there are equally small relatives in the North Pacific) and is very numerous. In the Barent's Sea area there are several million pairs and on Spitsbergen they are found mainly on the mountainous west coast. When the single chick has been raised the birds go back out to the open sea, where they spend the winter.

The larger members of the auk family eat fish but Little Auks specialise on minute, planktonic crustaceans. When the adults return to the chick they can carry up to 500 food items in their throat pouches. Due to their small size the birds are vulnerable to predators such as gulls and foxes. Consequently they lay their single egg in a cavity below rocks and stones on steep scree slopes. The birds that we saw this morning were frequently scared by gulls and flew out over the sea in flocks. Very soon though they landed again and provided us with exceptionally close views.

From the island the ship headed south, past the site of the Dutch whaling station at Smeerenburg and towards Magdalenefjorden. This is the most well known fjord in Spitsbergen and it 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 the islands in 1596, naming the biggest island Spitsbergen (peaked mountains) after them.

Entering the fjord, we continued right to the end and the ship stopped in front of the impressive Waggonway Glacier. After pausing for a while we moved off towards a small peninsula that stuck out from the southern shore; this is where we landed with the zodiacs. Gravneset (the grave-yard peninsula) is where Dutch and English whalers based in northwestern Spitsbergen came to bury their dead in the 17th and 18th centuries. There are 150 men buried here. Down on the beach there are remains of three 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.

Once we were ashore there was a lot of information from the guides about the history of the area. Then there was a chance to walk along the beach towards the glacial moraine or, for the hikers, towards the glacier in the nearby side fjord. Being out in the fresh air and sunshine was a real pleasure. Some other people had real pleasure of a different kind when they saw a male King Eider, a very close Bearded Seal and a distant Arctic Fox. During dinner the *Polar Star* moved out of the fjord and turned to the south. Those of us on the starboard side of the ship had the bright sun shining right into our cabins. After a long day and before bed, there was just time to go to the Ice King's (Steffen) lecture on ice.

WEDNESDAY, June 30th

Van Keulen Fjord

Nadhorst Glacier - 77° 29' N, 015° 59' E

Kapp Toscana - 77° 33.3' N, 015° 04.8' E

Weather: overcast but bright, light wind

Temperature: 5° C/41° F

From the ship the Nadhorst Glacier looked very impressive. The front of it was several

kilometres across, whilst the glacier itself was heavily splintered and fractured. This was due to a recent surge or forward movement of the ice, which resulted in the glacier front advancing 10.5 km in only 18 months. The water in front of the glacier was covered with a huge amount of ice that had calved from the glacier as it surged. This barrier prevented us from approaching the ice wall but there were some leads of open water that allowed some boats to advance for a mile or so. Before this, some boats had also landed us onto the ice itself, on a nice, stable sheet. Cruising along the edge of the ice with the huge glacier beyond was quite an experience.

Kapp Toscana lay just inside Van Keulenfjorden and when we looked from the ship the landing place, at Bamsebu (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 a variety of hikes – short, medium and long. 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 Saxifrage. There were few birds to be seen but the long hikers had very close views of a species of grouse (Ptarmigan) and the medium walkers came across the nests of Purple Sandpipers. Their nests were merely hollows in the tundra vegetation and each contained four green eggs with darker blotches. The adults tried to lead us away from the nests by pretending to have broken wings, which is a useful strategy if they have been discovered by a fox.

There was a lot of water on the tundra from melting snow and some of us wished that we had ignored the advice to wear hiking boots and kept on our rubber boots. One or two ladies were carried across streams by a kindly “St. Christopher” but most of us had to struggle along unaided. Only one or two got really stuck or fell over but what an adventure! After dinner there was a talk about the birds of Svalbard.

The next adventure took us by surprise because it 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. The sea was flat calm and viewing conditions were excellent. However, it was a very long time before anything that was possible to get close to was seen and we had to wait until tomorrow, in fact!

THURSDAY, July 1st

Bellsund Bank - 77° 12.6' N, 011° 29' E

Isfjorden

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

Skansbukta - 78° 31.5' N, 016° 03' E

Weather: sunny, calm

Temperature: 10° C/50° F

Today was our last day on the ship but we were still very busy! Just as the new day started at midnight some whales were spotted in front of us. The extreme range, however, made them impossible to see by all but the sharpest of eyes. Slowly, slowly, we drew closer until it was possible to recognise the outlines of three big Humpback Whales. Nearby were two even bigger Fin Whales, the second largest whale species. These 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 far down it is.

The Fins were impressive but it was the humpbacks that stole the show. The ship had already been slowed to walking speed and by jiggling the throttles we kept close to the action for well over an hour. The animals were feeding continuously and their behaviour (driving the prey towards the surface) had attracted several hundred kittiwakes, which also shared the feast. Other birds that came by included Puffins, a Great Black-backed Gull, a Pomarine Skua and three Great Skuas.

But back to the humpbacks, which synchronised their diving and surfacing. Once underwater they were presumably corralling their prey and then lunging towards the surface with their huge mouths wide open. After a few breaths of air they would dive together again and, nearly every time, would throw their tail flukes high up into the air. It was an astonishing performance that was repeated time after time. It was also taking place right next to us as well, which made it even more exciting!

There were other things in the area to look at too. In addition to the close Fin Whales there

were also some others that were further away. There were some dolphins too but they were elusive and not very helpful and we could not even get close enough to identify them. However, early in the humpback encounter something even less frequently seen was spotted – a Sperm Whale! This was the first live one that any of the guides had seen in the islands. It was lying still on the surface (logging) and spouting at regular intervals. The blowhole of these whales is on the left side of the head and the low, bushy spout comes out at an angle, which makes it very distinctive.

Another distinctive feature is the rounded, triangular dorsal fin. Both of these features were noted, as were the tail flukes, which emerged from the water as the whale dived. Sperm Whales are usually found in deep water (it was only 600m here) and stay underwater for a long time. The record for a single dive (in search of large squid) is 2 hours 18 minutes. Our whale soon disappeared into the mysterious depths and was not seen again. At 02.00 the humpbacks *were* still to be seen but most of us were either in bed or heading for it. What a way to start the day!

After breakfast the zodiacs shuttled us to the beach near the 1,000-foot high bird cliffs at Trygghamna. The triangular rock face was very impressive and there were both kittiwakes and guillemots flying to and fro. The sunshine made things very warm and some of us discovered that we had put too many clothes on.

We had a choice of a long, strong hike, a medium, moderate walk or a short, easy stroll. There were still some snow patches around and the tundra was very wet in places. The first flowers had just emerged – Purple and Tufted Saxifrage, Pygmy Buttercups and some yellow Whitlow-Grass. The local reindeer were still in their white winter coats and there was even a fox seen too. Birds included Snow Bunting, Arctic Skua, Glaucous Gull and Pink-footed Goose. High up on the bird cliff there were thousands of Brunnich's Guillemots and Black-legged Kittiwakes. Most of us climbed a little way up the hill and got sweeping views across the fjord.

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 a voyage slide show. Then there was the excellent end-of-cruise barbecue, which was served outside the observation lounge. Some of us even ate outside too!

In all we were 80 guests and guides onboard from 13 different countries:

Great Britain	14
Sweden	1
Norway	4
Denmark	3
Belgium	4
Netherlands	3
France	1
Germany	33
Italy	4
Switzerland	6
Austria	3
Israel	2
and New Zealand	2

And the total distance that we sailed during our expedition cruise was 1,100 nautical miles/1,265 statute miles/2,037 kilometres.

On behalf of Spitsbergen Travel, the guide team and the ship's crew would like to thank you for choosing us as your companions for this adventurous journey to some of 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, Assistant EL
Niklas Gerhardsson, Deputy Asst. EL
Gerit 'Bingbong' Birnbaum
Ingunn Loyning
Ingrid Kärstad
Samuel Blanc
Simon Cook***

& with help from Dr.Suzy Newton and her young assistant, Gary!



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!

Are you sad to leave Svalbard? Interested in knowing more about trips during the winter? You can find more information on our website www.spitsbergentravel.com or in our catalogue.