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An Arctic voyage: White nights

Three days ago, Simon Calder disembarked from an expedition ship after an astonishing Arctic voyage around Spitsbergen. Polar bears posed for the cameras, the sea ice closed in – and the sun never set

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Captain Valery Beluga moved in for the kill with the kind of forensic precision you expect from an officer trained in the Soviet Baltic Fleet. His 6,000-ton ship crunched across a patch of the Arctic Ocean that was only one-10th open water. Chunks of sea ice the size (and, occasionally, shape) of London buses groaned and squealed as her reinforced hull jostled them aside.

From above, I speculated, this swathe of water in varying degrees of solidity must resemble a gigantic shattered windscreen. Not that anything was flying overhead; at only 600 nautical miles from the North Pole, the north-west coast of Spitsbergen is way off international flightpaths. And while in July a scattering of kittiwakes and gulls usually enlivens the sky, none in the vicinity was airborne. Instead, the local avian community was gathered meekly on a slab of ice that had very recently become the location for carnage. They tiptoed around the remains of a seal, hoping for a few entrails as the Lord of the Arctic feasted on his latest victim.

The first of July was carvery night in the dining room aboard the Akademik Sergey Vavilov. Yet the salvers of red meat stood neglected. Almost all the 102 passengers had forsaken their meal to stand in the bitter breeze with cameras drawn, an Arctic paparazzi massed on the ship's starboard side to witness the polar bear's bloody picnic.

Celebrities are thin on the ground at 80 degrees north and 10 degrees east. Caught in the cross-hairs of some very fancy telephoto lenses, however, was a figure that was getting plumper with every strip of blubber he tore from the carcass of a freshly killed seal. As the on-board buffet was cleared away unseen and uneaten, the time drifted towards 10pm. Not a single camera flash accompanied the staccato of shutters. The day was as bright as it had been at 10am and, indeed, at 4am and 4pm.

Plenty of places are said to have only two seasons. This northern outpost of Norway has only two days. Editing the almanac pertaining to this minuscule fragment of the globe cannot be the most stressful of duties. In the archipelago's capital, the sun clambers above the horizon each year at 10.20am on 16 February – ending the vicious Arctic night that began at 12.39pm the previous 26 October. For a couple of months after sunrise, the Spitsbergen skies make a cursory attempt at maintaining a diurnal cycle. But from mid-April through to late August, the people in the northernmost town in the world can turn off the lights: the sun will not set for a long stretch of the year.

Agreeably, the capital turns out to be called Longyearbyen, though this "city" is named for John Munro Longyear, founder of the Arctic Coal Company. (Only 1,500 souls live here, yet this is more than half the entire population of Spitsbergen – or Svalbard, as the whole archipelago is more properly known.)

Exploitation has been the name of the commercial game ever since the Dutch explorer Barentz discovered the archipelago in 1596. "Nothing more than mountains and pointed peaks," he wrote, "therefore we called it Spitsbergen." Whaling began 16 years later, with Basque seafarers employed for their skills at mercenary mass murder of the largest mammals.

Within a couple of centuries the whale stocks had been almost wiped out, and attention switched to the unmineral wealth. Russian miners still scratch a living from beneath the unforgiving surface of Spitsbergen. But their main town – Barentsburg, as bleak as the hillside to which it clings – has been hit time and again by tragedy: mining disasters, Second World War attacks by both the Royal Navy and the German Navy, and a 1996 plane crash that wiped out more than 100 miners and their families.

As with so many far-flung fragments of the planet, tourism has come to the economic rescue of the islands. Spitsbergen is the almost accidental beneficiary of a phenomenon taking place at the other end of the world. Antarctica has become the dream destination for tens of thousands of wealthy individuals during the short southern summer. For the fleet of specially adapted cruise ships, to hibernate in a dismal South Atlantic port for most of the year would be a waste of resources. So instead they are redeployed to a still quite dismal Arctic port: Longyearbyen, from where they run expeditions around the islands. A weary tern that cannot face the longest migration on the globe – these birds commute between Antarctica and the Arctic – could hitch a ride aboard our ship. She is named after the president of the Soviet Academy of Sciences during the Stalin era, and her name is thankfully abbreviated to Vavilov. She has been chartered by the adventure-travel specialist Exodus for a photographic expedition led by Paul Goldstein, one of Britain's foremost wildlife photographers.

As the crew prepared dinner, he spotted a polar bear behaving oddly about three miles away. Sometimes these expeditions can prove to be frustrating "spot the bear" exercises that involve scouring the horizon for a flicker of beige bear against snow – about as rewarding as a newspaper "spot the ball" competition. Not this time.

"Having spent many years watching predators in Africa and India, I thought the bear's behavioural pattern was unmistakable – ducking its head, moving around the potential carcass," he said. "It wasn't until half an hour later that I could see the unmistakable outline of an unfortunate bearded seal. A polar bear within any field of vision is great; a polar bear feeding is magnificent. But a polar bear feeding on ice is pretty much the grail."

How to capture the moment? Where the altitude is zero and the latitude is 80, every atom of life seems to have been spirited away. The spectrum comprises only black, white and calibrations of grey. The sea is relentlessly gloomy. The clouds range from the faintest band of gauze softening the never-setting sun to stormy surges as dark as the coal that lured men to the land at the very edge of the world.

The bleak mountains that perch on the shore and claw at this sky are naked; the trees ran out perhaps 1,000 miles south of here. Thick veins of snow trickle from the peaks and fuel the glaciers that gouge through the rock in geology's own power struggle.

In these visual circumstances, most of the time a photographer would do just fine with black-and-white film. But a tiny part of this bleached world came to life as the bear's prey died. The sleek black skin of the non-performing seal had been torn away, revealing raw, red flesh that stained the virginal Arctic. A thin red line marked the trail of blood where the bear had dragged the seal to his impromptu ice table.

Behind this tableau of the brutally uncomplicated Arctic food chain – more nature morte than still-life – there lay a eruption of ice in the shape of a crushed crystal. Its colour: the same implausible shade of sapphire blue that is favoured by vodka marketing people and holiday-brochure designers.

You can find this voyage in a brochure; indeed, this week Exodus published next summer's edition. The ship has comfortable cabins, and an excellent kitchen that prepares three full meals a day and is prepared to give some latitude about when you eat. But the Vavilov experience is nothing like a mass-market floating gin palace. Like many cruise ships, she was built in Finland. Yet she was constructed to take people to the sorts of places where humanity has no right to be. Her owner is the Russian Institute of Oceanography, which commissioned her for serious polar studies, complete with laboratories in the lower decks.

To remind you of the ship's provenance, Slavic static occasionally bursts forth from the public-address system; the business end of the bridge is annotated in Cyrillic script; proceedings were put temporarily on hold so the crew of 41 could enjoy the spectacle of Spain beating Russia's old adversary, Germany, in the final of Euro 2008.

"Through the telescope you can see a massive amount of scarring on his head." Jeff Barrett, the Canadian assistant expedition leader, was referring to the bear on a blubber bender rather than one of the longer-serving members of the Russian crew on a Smirnoff bender. Most of the expedition staff, though, are Australian, qualified in everything from medicine to marine mammals. This is one of the world's last great wildernesses, and has to be treated with respect.

When passengers board the ship's flotilla of inflatable Zodiac craft for a closer encounter with a glacier or the tiny, tenacious flowers and lichen that flourish during the brief northern summer, the precautions are elaborate. Emergency food rations are carried, as well as a tent in case the weather closes in – not that it did this week. You might imagine that this part of the planet is at the wrong end of the thermometer, where Celsius and Fahrenheit converge in a frozen arithmetical embrace. Yet, on Monday afternoon I stood in short sleeves on a mountainside and tried to take in a panorama that would defeat the widest of lenses: snow-draped peaks reflected in dazzling water. This, I mused, must be what photographers mean by infinity.

In the corner of every field of vision, though, is a man with a gun, in case a bear attacks: *Ursus maritimus* is the only animal species that will actively hunt humans. "They look upon us as an hors d'oeuvre wrapped in Gore-Tex," said Goldstein.

Captain Beluga's quarry had gone straight for the main course, hungrily tearing the flesh from the carcass and giving every impression of not knowing where his next meal is coming from. He could be right. Sea ice is the most fickle of solids, capable of dwindling rapidly from rock-hard butcher's slab to the consistency of porridge. It is currently in a deeper recession than the global economy, depleting the food stocks of the seals – who themselves represent the staple diet of the polar bear.

At the chronological end of the first day of July the bear finally waddled off, his belly full, for a doze, while the seabirds pounced on their unexpected treat. The calendar showed that the year had just passed the tipping point, from the optimistic ascent towards summer into the creeping melancholy of autumn and winter. By next month, the sun will set over Spitsbergen.

Then something ridiculous happened. A bright red hovercraft hovered into my field of vision and hovered out of it. Britain's 1960s technological triumph might have proved useless as a commercial people-carrier. But for research expeditions on floes above 80 degrees north, the ability to ride on a cushion of air is invaluable, especially when the ice closes in – which it was. An announcement explained: "The ice is increasing to '10-10ths' – the wind is packing it in." Captain Beluga decided it was time to pack it in, too.

The Vavilov crunched her way out through sea ice that gradually eased to a thick broth, and soon attained open water. Everyone headed for the bar: partly because it was open (at this latitude the sun is permanently over the yard-arm), serving gin-and-tonic cooled by 40,000-year-old glacier ice. Partly because, thanks to Captain Beluga, we had had, well, a whale of a time. And partly because Paul Goldstein was about to address the crowd about what they had witnessed in the past few hours: "Days like this are not usual, but they are worked for – proper work, no line-managing, spreadsheets or all-day meetings by coke-fuelled, stripey-shirted consultants – just good, honest graft." He also quoted Malcolm Bradbury's 1932 assertion: "My experience of ships is that on them one makes an interesting discovery about the world: one finds one can do without it completely."

I wandered up to the top deck and wondered briefly about the remaining 350 degrees of the world below this latitude. Then I took in the 360-degree view of a day without limit, a sky beyond bounds and a sea with no

end.

Traveller's Guide

Getting there

The two airlines that will take you to Spitsbergen from the UK are Norwegian (00 47 21 49 00 15; www.norwegian.no) and SAS Scandinavian Airlines (0845 607 2772; www.scandinavian.net); flights go via Oslo and, in some cases, Tromsø. All flights serve Longyearbyen airport. A bus meets flights at the airport, though at a pinch you could walk the short distance into town.

Staying there

Longyearbyen has a surprisingly wide range of accommodation, from the extraordinary Basecamp (00 47 79 02 46 00; www.basecampexplorer.com; doubles from NOK1,660/ £164 with breakfast) – which has been assembled from the remains of mineworkings – to some predictably modern, clean and comfortable blocks.

Getting around

To travel any significant distance around Spitsbergen, you need support – which usually takes the form of an organised tour. Simon Calder was a guest lecturer on a trip arranged by Exodus (0845 330 6013; www.exodus.co.uk). The programme for summer 2009 offers seven 12-day voyages (10 nights aboard), with departure dates from 14 June to 13 August; departures on 14 June and 12 July are led by Paul Goldstein. Prices for a shared twin cabin range from £3,350 to £3,945, including flights from Heathrow via Oslo and full board on ship.

When to go

From the UK, most visitors arrive in the second half of June through to the first half of August, when there is 24-hour daylight and the archipelago is at its warmest – the average minimum temperature stays above freezing for the whole of July. Many Norwegians, however, prefer to visit in March, when temperatures are well below freezing, though there is still more than 12 hours of light per day. Cross-country skiing is popular, as (perhaps surprisingly) is camping.

More information

The definitive travel guide is Bradt's Guide to Spitsbergen. The latest Lonely Planet guide to Norway, which contains a good chapter on Spitsbergen, was published in May.

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