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Cruising to see the ice pack and a land of polar bears

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Tribune News Service March 16, 2015



LONGYEARBYEN, SVALBARD — If it weren't for the red flags marking the tundra trail to the glacier, some of us - passengers on the Hurtigruten cruise ship MS Fram, sailing out of Spitsbergen - might have been tempted to leave the slowpokes behind and bushwhack across country.

But as newcomers are relentlessly reminded here in Svalbard Archipelago, where white is the new black, that polar bears are the Big Dogs. More numerous than humans (3,500 to 2,750) and a protected species, the bears have the run of the islands, 24,209 square miles of wilderness, just 800 miles from the North Pole. Curious, stealthy and fast on their feet, they're not fussy about their food.

"You may think polar bears are cute," warned the Fram's expedition leader Corinna Skringo before our first shore excursion, fixing a stern eye on a couple wearing cuddly-bear shirts. "But they are lethal," she said, slinging her rifle over her shoulder. "We're all trained in the use of firearms, but killing a bear is the very last option. If we spot a bear sitting on the beach or even on the next ridge, we go to Plan B."

Plan A, our first shore excursion, began when the 318-passenger Fram sailed into the Hornsund Inlet and the crew landed in Burgerbukta Bay to reconnoiter. Scanning the slopes with binoculars, they flagged the safest trails, chose a landing site on the beach and radioed the "all clear" to the bridge. Then with rifles slung on their backs, they stood guard while the ship's PolarCirkels (six-passenger inflatable landing craft) ferried everyone to shore.

As for bushwhacking, who would want to rush surrounded by such scenery? Climbing uphill we stopped, started, looked and stopped again, taking in the enormous glacier flows, the raw, ice-capped peaks at the head of the valley and the Arctic's famously luminescent skies. Tiny pink, yellow and white flowers underfoot, the tundra's cleverest adaptation, testified to the north-flowing

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Gulf Stream, its temperate waters moderating Spitsbergen's west coast climate.

A set of bear tracks pressed into the mud, shoe size 20, quickly attracted a coterie of admirers, raising everyone's hopes that the owner was in the vicinity. But polar bears weren't the only reason many of us had chosen this "circumnavigation" cruise around Spitsbergen. Themed "In the Realm of the Polar Bear," it would take us north to the 80th parallel and the polar ice pack in person.

Melting ice is an abstraction, something you can't wrap your head around. But a sea of broken chunks viewed at eye level is real. With the planet at risk - global warming, species extinctions, extreme weather and rising sea levels - climate change was the subtext of the voyage. Struggling into our orange survival suits for a tour among the bergs, we were elated but a trifle somber. When you're wearing a survival suit you'd rather not imagine why you'd need it.

"Orange is the new black," quipped my husband, Steve, as we zipped up, tightened buckles, snapped snaps and shoved our feet into waterproof boots. "And to complete the outfit," he added, "your orange life vest."

As the MS Fram passed the 79th latitude, the edge of the ice appeared, 26 shades of silver under the midnight sun. A shifting soup of floating bergs and icy slush, it froze, cracked and refroze as the crew brought the PolarCirkels around to the gangway to pick up the afternoon's first passengers.

In a remote location such as Svalbard, where miles of tundra are uninhabited, it's easy to think you're on virgin territory. But people have anchored offshore since the late 16th century, explorers, whalers, miners and more recently, research vessels. But with interest in the polar regions currently at historic highs, cruise companies poring over maps have discovered Spitsbergen, adding it to their itineraries.

The MS Fram, built in 2007, is Hurtigruten's newest ship, with eight decks, small but efficient cabins, an inviting restaurant, a snack bar, two lecture rooms, and adjacent lounges with big windows. When the outside decks are too cold, passengers retreat to the Qilak Observation Lounge on Deck 7, where upholstered chairs and panoramic windows bring outside in. Also on this deck the bar, fitness center, hot tubs and the outdoor sun deck.

Since the Spitsbergen cruise's port stops are limited, each day's activities depend more on chance than on the clock. Prowling the sea for sights might yield a bird rookery, a reindeer herd, arctic foxes, whales, scenic glaciers or unusual geologic formations. Meals are regular, but shore excursions are always flexible.

Our first bear sightings were nothing more than white specks in the distance. But the trip's last two bears were on the ice pack, close to the ship. Still, as exciting as it was to watch them nap in the snow, stand up and stretch, lie down again and finally walk away, it took a long lens to take a good photo. In fact, the only passengers disappointed with the cruise were a half-dozen semi-professional photographers who'd expected to book a special photographers-only excursion.

"It's my fault for not checking more carefully," said Keith Pointon, from England, an award-winning photographer. "I'm having a good time and it's a pleasant vacation. But it's billed as an expedition cruise when it's really a small-ship cruise. With 300 passengers onboard, seven PolarCirkels aren't half enough to take us on and off or to make one available to guests willing to pay."

Since the cruise begins and ends in Longyearbyen, population 2,100, the capital of Svalbard, the town deserves a second look. A postcard might say: One mighty mountain, two streets, red and green pre-fab buildings, countless new cars, 10 bars, eight restaurants, a bank, grocery store, lots of bikes, kids' toys, dead grass and the world's best Arctic museum.

But we arrived a day early and discovered that as bare though it looks, Longyearbyen - and Svalbard - are more utopia than outlier. Administered by Norway, Svalbard is an international territory where citizens whose countries signed the 1920 Treaty of Versailles can live and work.

Thus there is a global seed bank, numerous research stations, a concentration on the Arctic and related sciences - climate change, geology, astrophysics and biology.

"This is a fantastic place to live," said Anika Paust, with Hurtigruten International Sales, who sat down with us for a cup of coffee. "We've got 42 nationalities represented, and people are interesting because they're doing science. Everyone's between 25 and 40 so businesses cater to a younger crowd. There are lots of great bars and restaurants and no retirees because there's no senior housing or low-cost services for the elderly. You can be out playing in nature all day, hiking or snowmobiling, and come back for a party night out with your friends."

But there are rules, she explained. To stay here you have to be self-supporting. There's no welfare and no jail, so undesirables are simply deported. Since bears roam everywhere, you have to own a rifle and learn to use it. And if you're not an environmentalist at heart you won't fit in.

Saying goodbye to Paust, we spent the rest of the day sampling the Spitsbergian dream. We hiked along the beach, walked to the museum and the cemetery, checked out the bars in town, changed money at the bank and had dinner at a restaurant. It was the perfect send-off for a trip to the ice.

BOOKING IT: Hurtigruten's MS Fram sails the nine-day (seven-night) cruise, "In the Realm of the Polar Bear," on five dates in July and August, 2015: July 22 and 29 and August 5, 12 and 19. Cabin prices start at \$5,365 per person and include all meals, snacks, coffee bar, guided hikes, kayaking, glacier walks, onboard entertainment and airport transports. Wine, beer and bar drinks not included. At www.hurtigruten.com.

PLANNING IT: For Europeans who like snow sports, romance under the northern lights and lively pub crawls, Spitsbergen is close enough for a long winter weekend. For Americans and the rest of the world, a Spitsbergen cruise makes a perfect add-on to a weekend in Oslo, or to any other European vacation. For more, see svalbard@nordicvisitor.com/travelguide/; or (for the Norwegian Polar Institute), go to <http://cruise-handbook.npolar.no/en/hornsund/geology-and-landscape.html>

STAYING IT: The Radisson Blu Hotel, with small but comfortable guest rooms, a nice gift shop and a wonderful dining room, is where Hurtigruten's buses pick up and deliver cruise passengers. Stay overnight here and discover Longyearbyen. At <http://www.radissonblu.com/hotel-spitsbergen>.

FLYING IT: Most travelers fly to Oslo, Norway, or to Helsinki, Finland, and on to the Longyearbyen airport.

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