

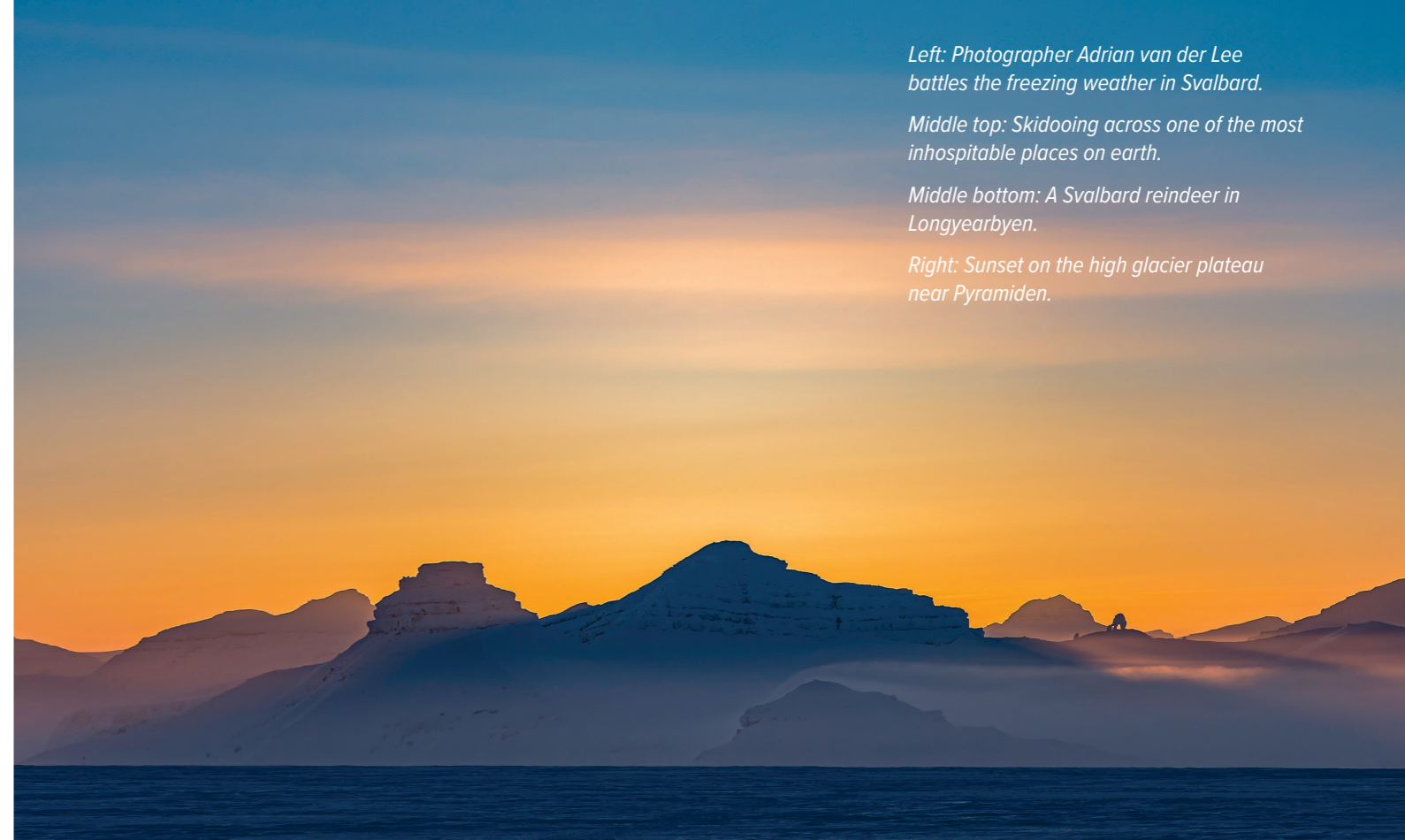
EXPLORING

SVALBARD

Words & Photos:
Adrian van der Lee

SKIDOO SAFARI

Bleak, icy and home to abandoned mines and polar bears, Svalbard is a remote and formidable archipelago found between Norway and the North Pole. Better known for his photographs of the Irish mountain biking scene, Adrian van der Lee swaps two wheels for a skidoo to explore its wild terrain travelling from Longyearbyen to the abandoned, frozen-in-time Russian settlement of Pyramiden.



Left: Photographer Adrian van der Lee battles the freezing weather in Svalbard.

Middle top: Skidooning across one of the most inhospitable places on earth.

Middle bottom: A Svalbard reindeer in Longyearbyen.

Right: Sunset on the high glacier plateau near Pyramiden.

A hundred years of coal mining has not been kind to the tiny settlement of Longyearbyen. It has an unattractive, industrial look. The valley walls above the town are scarred by weathered wooden pylons that once carried coal from the mines to the port. An ugly network of service pipes, drains and cables sit above the permafrost. Located halfway between the top of Norway & the North Pole, this is one of the most inhospitable environments on earth.

These days, just one Norwegian coal mine remains active, providing enough coal to feed the local power station. But 50km southwest lies the Russian settlement of Barentsburg. Here coal is still mined but the amount they extract is minimal - causing many to question the real reason for such an established Russian presence on Svalbard.

Given the strategic geopolitical position of the archipelago (although demilitarised under the Svalbard Treaty), there may well be ulterior motives. Who doesn't love a gripping spy story set in the frozen tundra?

Since 1922, Svalbard has been administered under Norwegian law and regulated by the Svalbard Treaty which provides citizens of the 45 signatory

states with specific rights to residence and commercial activity. Ireland signed the Svalbard Treaty in 1925. The most recent country to sign in 2016 was North Korea!

Outside the settlement there are few roads as environmental protection is paramount. Here on Svalbard, the flowers have more rights than people!

I've signed up for a two-day snowmobile trip to Pyramiden, an abandoned Russian mining town 200km to the north. This is a tough trip across the frozen tundra; if something goes wrong, we need to be entirely self-sufficient.

We set off in bright clear conditions. The air temperature is -27°C. But these snowmobiles are capable of considerable speed and with the added wind chill, temperatures drop below -40°C as we make our way along the flat, open Adventalen valley that runs from Longyearbyen towards the glacier system.

My companions for this expedition are a Scottish couple, Lorne and Claire from Oban, both very experienced snowmobile drivers - or as they call them, skidoos (which sounds so much better with a thick west-highland accent). For the past 15 years, they've spent a

couple of months each year in the Yukon, Canada, and have covered thousands of miles by skidoo. Our Russian guide is Daniil, who has been guiding for five years. I'm by far the least experienced of the group, so I'm very grateful for such an expert company.

OTHER WORLDLY

Within minutes of leaving the settlement we are in another world. An extraordinary world of pure white. Beneath the crystal clear blue sky everything is white, the valleys, the ground, the distant peaks and of course, one of the greatest predators on earth, the polar bear.

They say there are more Polar Bears than people on Svalbard. The schools in Longyearbyen are caged by 4 meter high metal fences and from a very early age, the kids take part in weekly Polar Bear drills. Out on the ice, the threat is very real.

Each time we stop and dismount our skidoos, our guide automatically moves the rifle from where it's slung over his shoulder to carried in both hands - reassuring momentarily, until the penny drops! You really don't want to get too close to one of these beasts that can weigh over 500kg and stand more than 3 meters high!

After an hour of high-speed driving we reach the glacier system and snake our way through the moraine and incredible ice statues. Then we begin the long climb up onto the enormous glacier plateau that stretches north for hundreds of kilometres. For the next six or seven hours we face rock-hard 'sastrugi', wave-like ridges caused by winds on the surface of hard snow. They slow our progress significantly.

The scenery is breath-taking and there is absolute silence when we stop. But it's bitterly cold. I've been warned by local photographer Kai Müller not to take off my inner gloves when taking photos as it only takes a moment before you start to lose feeling in your fingers.

SLOW WHITE PROGRESS

We spend hour after hour of slow back-jarring skidooning progressing through this white wilderness, before we eventually begin the descent down off the glacier system towards Pyramiden as the sun begins to set.

Suddenly the weather conditions change. A vicious katabatic wind whips up out of nowhere, kicking up a blizzard of loose powder snow. Reducing visibility to just a few meters.

In these conditions, I struggle to keep sight of the tail-light in front of me. The golden rule is that if you get separated, you stop and stay exactly where you are. The guide will use his GPS to retrace his track to find you. Not wanting to put this theory to the test, I'm in no need of motivation to keep up!

On the flat sea-ice below we have less than 20km to go to Pyramiden, so we pick up speed again. But after only a few kilometres our guide turns sharply towards the shore as the edge of the sea-ice and the cold Arctic water loom in to view. At this time of year, the sea-ice should have taken us all the way to Pyramiden, but it has melted much sooner than usual, so now we have to pick our way along the rocky shore.

A steep snow-covered slope rises up sharply to our right with the open sea immediately to our left. We pick a very tight, twisting path among the rocks and ice. But suddenly we encounter a major problem! A recent avalanche has deposited thousands of tons of snow and rock in our path. We are less than 5 km from our destination - but there's no way through!

Not wanting to wait around in the path of a recent avalanche, Daniil signals for

us to turn our skidoos around and we retrace our path along the shore. We will have to take an alternative route through the mountains to approach Pyramiden from the west. This will add 60km to our journey - it's almost dark.

After more than an hour slowly climbing up through a wide valley, we reach a steep, snowy pass between two peaks and Daniil signals for us to wait as he tackles the slope with the sledge carrying spare fuel cans and supplies. Halfway up he gets stuck, the sledge is too heavy. The track of his skidoo has dug deep into the Svalbard snow; it takes us half an hour to dig it out before he tries again, same result. So we reduce the weight on the sledge by re-fueling our four skidoos and leave the other four full cans of fuel in the snow to be collected tomorrow.

Next attempt, he makes it. With a bit of coaching and encouragement from Lorne and Claire, I also make it. It's surely it's all downhill from here? Wrong!

We descend for a kilometre or two then Daniil stops and is looking up at a huge steep snow wall to our right, several times higher than the one we just climbed - but much, much steeper. We've got to get over this one too?

We watch Daniil as he makes several attempts, but the sledge is still too heavy. He deposits more equipment and finally makes it to the top at the third attempt. Claire makes short work of the steep slope and I marvel at the agility of these machines which seem to be able to climb a vertical wall if you have the right technique – I don't. It's my turn now and I'm crapping myself!

Things start to go wrong from the outset with a heavy camera bag on my back I don't transfer my weight enough to the hill side and less than a quarter of the way up the skidoo starts pulling to the left. I'm powerless to stop it. In a flash the machine rolls towards the valley and I throw myself clear. Fortunately the skidoo settles after just one roll rather than crashing to the valley. The only damage appears to be a smashed windscreen.

STEEP LEARNING CURVE

Lorne arrives to check I'm OK, then he and Daniil right the stricken skidoo and get it started. I climb on hands and knees to a small plateau about 100 meters further up and Daniil drives the skidoo up to me.

Attempt number two, same thing happens only this time when the skidoo rolls, I my leg gets trapped underneath. But Daniil and Lorne are there quickly and manage to lift the skidoo enough to let me roll free.

I'm not happy, way out of my comfort zone. But out here in the wilderness, giving up is not an option. You can't just press the pause button and go and put the kettle on - you complete your journey or you die!

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, another skidoo appears over the top of the hill. The other guides had been following our progress on the satellite spot tracker and realised that something must be wrong as we had been stationary too long. They have sent a guide to investigate,

Physically and mentally drained.

At this point I'm physically and mentally drained, so when the new guide offers to drive me to the top of the snow slope, I'm very happy to accept. Daniil follows with my damaged skidoo then runs

back down the slope for his. When he and Lorne arrive at the top, we continue our way down to Pyramiden. This time it is all downhill! 14 hours after leaving Longyearbyen, we arrive in Pyramiden.

The next morning we are treated to an hearty breakfast after a very good night's sleep and are offered a tour of the old mining town.

Our guide Yevgeny is Georgian, so his take on the Cold War days of the Soviet Union is perhaps a little jaundiced. Even so, we get the feeling we're not being told the real story; probing questions are brushed off with humorous quips.

The truth, we suspect, was a bit more sinister. I point out a small office building overlooking the main square and ask what it was used for. Yevgeny tells us that this was the KGB quarters where dossiers were kept on every employee (and their families back home). The strict Communist regime insisted that you were an active, functioning member of the community and that you joined in with every activity. If you didn't play football, they put you on a football team. If you didn't play music, they gave you an instrument and you had to learn how to play. Spending time by yourself was simply not acceptable.

Because Pyramiden was outside the 'Iron Curtain', there were no restrictions on Westerners visiting the settlement. In fact, they were actively encouraged to do so. At the time, the Soviet Union was very keen for the west to see just how idyllic life was in this 'typical' Russian settlement.

THE LAND THAT TIME FORGOT

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 90s and a tragic plane crash near a few years later at Longyearbyen, that killed 142 residents of Pyramiden, the mine was permanently closed in 1998. Now, nearly 20 years later, it remains almost exactly as it was left - school books in the classrooms, personal possessions in the dormitory buildings and the most northerly bust of Lenin still surveying the abandoned settlement. Nowadays, Pyramiden is being slowly reborn as a tourist attraction - a window into perhaps a forgotten or

overlooked history and it's well worth a visit. One of the dormitory buildings is being developed in to a hotel, it's very comfortable and the Russian staff are very welcoming.

During the winter months, only a few hardy souls make the trip here by shidoo. In summer though, there is a ship that runs from Longyearbyen to Pyramiden every second day.

After our tour, it's time for us to leave and start our 200km journey back to Longyearbyen. The weather has closed in and the light is flat, so reading the terrain is more difficult. Photo opportunities are minimal so we press on. We stop every 50km or so to stretch the legs and seven hours later, under cover of darkness, we arrive back in Longyearbyen, exhausted.

Lorne and Claire tell me afterwards that this was one of the toughest skidoo expeditions they had ever undertaken - and they've been at it a long time.

SVALBARD - THE LOW-DOWN:

Getting there: Norwegian Air (norwegian.com) flies from Dublin to Oslo direct and then from Oslo to Longyearbyen direct.

Accommodation: Gjesthuset 102, Longyearbyen; (gjesthuset102.no)

Pyramiden Hotel, Pyramiden (visitsvalbard.com/en/tulpan-hotel-pyramiden)

Skimobile safari to Pyramiden: I travelled with Arctic Travel Company Grumant (goartica.com)

With special thanks to:

Dakine Ireland and Bermingham Cameras, Dublin.



Top: The most Northerly bust of Lenin keeps watch over the abandoned settlement of Pyramiden.



Middle: An ice statue on the Sassendalen Glacier.

Below: Spring sunshine in the Arctic settlement of Longyearbyen.

