

Wild times upon the straits and narrows

A trip around Spitsbergen gives *Adrian van der Lee* the chance to see flatulent walrus, alien-like whales, curious Arctic foxes - and to do his bit for the planet.



LONGYEARBYEN: A LAW UNTO ITSELF

Longyearbyen, Svalbard's capital, has around 2,200 inhabitants and at 78° North, is the world's most northerly settlement. Its remote location has given it some rather unusual laws:

- To protect the abundant migratory birdlife, cats are banned.
- There is a restriction on how much alcohol an individual can purchase on a monthly basis – however this restriction only applies to beer and spirits, not wine, as the mine bosses who made the laws 100 years ago considered this their drink of choice!
- Any individual venturing outside the settlement must carry a rifle for protection against Polar bears.
- Until quite recently it was possible to walk in to the bank in Longyearbyen to carry out your business wearing a balaclava with a loaded rifle over your shoulder! These days there is a polite sign at the door requesting customers to leave their weapons in the gun-lockers provided!
- At these latitudes the sun never sets during the summer months and the constant brightness plays tricks with your mind – so settling in to the watch system you find yourself coming up on deck at midnight or 4.00am to find the sun is almost as high in the sky as it was at midday!

The words no sailor ever wants to hear - “Mayday, Mayday, Mayday”! Luckily, we’re safely in harbor in Longyearbyen, Svalbard, and I’m reading the last entry in the open logbook aboard the 70ft expedition yacht ‘Valiente’

The walrus at Prins Karls Forland, below. Drift-ice in the Hinlopen Strait, below right, begins to release its grip.

The skipper explains how a few days earlier, the pump for the water-maker (which converts salt water in to fresh water) had overheated causing the cabin to fill with smoke. Fire of any kind on a boat is a serious danger, so the order was given to abandon ship and take to the life-rafts.

‘Valiente’ was only a few hours from Longyearbyen at the time, which meant the crew were quickly picked up by rescue helicopter and the boat was towed back to harbor – by which time the fire had extinguished itself without further damage.

For now though, it’s a race against time to get the life-rafts replaced and the boat prepared - the water-maker won’t be working but we’ll manage with a few extra jerry-cans. A few hours later, ‘Valiente’ passes her safety inspection and we set off at around 6.00pm.

This time, I’ve brought my son Max with me, an experienced sailor and sailing instructor. Our plan is to sail a 1,500 km circumnavigation of Spitsbergen, the largest island of the Svalbard archipelago, high in the Arctic Ocean.

But, there’s another problem: the ice charts show drift-ice blanketing the north and east of the archipelago, blocking any passage through the Hinlopen Strait which separates Spitsbergen from the outlying islands.

So far this year circumnavigation has been impossible!

Our first stop is a remote walrus colony at Prins Karls Forland off the west coast of Spitsbergen. Svalbard has two types of walrus colony: mixed male & female, and male only. In the case of mixed colonies, the Governor of Svalbard does not permit anyone to approach closer than 300 meters as the males will attempt to defend their harem which can lead to calves getting injured beneath a ton of fully grown, agitated male blubber!

Fortunately, this colony is male only, so we are allowed to approach up to 30 meters. It’s truly wonderful to watch these huge animals from such close range as they scratch, roll and fart! Occasionally one rolls too close to his neighbour and there is a snort and a raising of tusks - but like kids on a long car journey, these squabbles don’t last long and they soon settle down again, sink their tusks in to the sand and doze, scratch & fart some more.

It’s a long stretch over the top of Spitsbergen as we cross above 80° North – just one hour north of here is the Arctic pack-ice. We are now less than 700 miles from the North Pole but,

because we’ve been ‘off-grid’ for the previous few days, we still have no idea if the drift-ice in the Hinlopen Strait has broken up enough to allow us through. We may well be returning this way in a few days.

Sailing close to the shore of Nordaustlandet the next morning, we hear the shout: “Bear”! Four days in to our trip and finally we spot one – judging from the size, it’s most likely a female - fully grown males can weigh as much as 600kg - females are usually only half that. Every pair of binoculars on board is trained on this apex predator as she sniffs her way along the shoreline looking for bird eggs and carrion. There really is nothing that lifts the heart quite like seeing one of these magnificent beasts in their natural habitat.

Later we take a cautious hike up to a ridge overlooking the bay where we’re anchored – bears can be anywhere here so the rules are very simple, everyone stays together and we carry loaded firearms. Arctic Terns, who object to anyone coming anywhere within range of their nests, chatter and squawk, swoop and peck above our heads - so we tread carefully as their eggs are laid on open ground.

Most of the Svalbard is designated as Nature Reserves and the Governor encourages all boats to collect synthetic material from its beaches. Each time we go ashore we collect discarded fishing net and floats, nylon rope, plastic bottles,



crates and glass and bring them back to the boat. Our contribution to the ‘Clean Ocean’ bank back in Longyearbyen is only a drop in the ocean, but it’s a start.

After our hike, we have a swim at 80° North and build a campfire on the beach from Siberian driftwood that has washed up along the shore - it’s time for a BBQ.

High on the cliff above us, there’s a colony of noisy Kittiwakes. Generations of bird droppings have created a fertile green slope down to the shore in an otherwise barren landscape. Here Svalbard Reindeer graze on the low tufts of vegetation, fattening up in preparation for the long harsh winter ahead. An Arctic Fox, who has been rummaging amongst the rocks looking for injured birds or eggs, comes by to check us out.

Just then someone says, “We have company”!

A mile down the rocky coast, a polar bear makes its way slowly but steadily in our direction. Time to pack away the food and take the first dinghy-load of people back to ‘Valiente’ while the others douse the fire and sweep the beach for any evidence of our visit. The bear covers the distance remarkably quickly but appears to be heading uphill toward the bird cliffs – someone mentions spotting the remains of a Reindeer carcass near the foot of the cliff, it looks like it’s this rather than our burgers that has piqued the his interest.

Meanwhile the grazing Reindeer pay little attention as the bear approaches to

within 20m of them, only then do they stop grazing and move away – bears are fast over a short distance, but Reindeer are faster.

You might think it would be impossible to get distracted from watching an apex predator in his natural habitat surrounded by all this wildlife, but just then between us and the shore, a pod of maybe 40 Beluga whales swim past on a hunt, their distinctive white skin breaking the dark reflections on the surface. Every so often they would stop and a couple of cartoon-like like heads would pop out of the water to check us out. These shy, alien looking creatures are just mesmerizing to watch.

Meanwhile the Polar Bear has moved on and no one saw him go. What a day!

Waking the next morning, the boat is still and quiet – we’re at anchor. In the galley, a handful of people sit around reading, drinking coffee and listening to the mellow sounds of my now infamous ‘Dad Rock’ collection (it seems I was the only one to remember to load a playlist). Today is a slow day but later that afternoon, we pass the mighty Alkefjellet bird cliffs, one of the largest bird colonies in Svalbard. These basalt towers rise like skyscrapers 350 meters vertically out of the sea. It’s estimated that there are 120,000 Brünnich’s Guillemots along with colonies of Little Auks & Northern Fulmars – the noise is incredible!

But we must keep moving – today we

find out if the drift-ice will let us through or force us to turn around.

As we approach the southern end of the Hinlopen Strait, the ice starts to thicken. From our eyeline a few feet above sea level, it’s impossible to spot the channels of open water through the ice so the skipper goes to the top of the mast with a walkie-talkie where he’ll have a better view.

I’m on the helm for the first hour as the instructions crackle through the radio: “Hard to port now!”. “Straight for 200m, then 20° to starboard”!

Our progress is painfully slow, what look like open channels of water quickly close up again with the drifting ice. Hour after hour we meander through the ice but gradually it begins to loosen its grip and it looks like we’re going to make it.

We are elated now knowing we will be the first boat to circumnavigate Spitsbergen this year, but there’s one more navigational challenge to overcome!

The Heley Strait is a very narrow channel with a violent tidal current. Our delayed passage through the ice means we have reached the channel at too late to catch the tide and are faced with a turbulent 9 knot current against us. With no option other than to gun the motor, we struggle in to the oncoming torrent.

Viscous whirlpools either side of us try to drag the bow off course, steering is incredibly difficult. To add

Adrian’s son Max paddleboards next to the Brasvellbreen Glacier in the Hinlopen Strait, above; collected plastic and nylon on the beach at 80° North, top right; Arctic Tern eggs, left, are laid on the open ground, so visitors must tread carefully.

to the mayhem, large lumps of ice are catapulted towards us on the tide – it’s like a real-life video game trying to avoid the ice and not get sucked in to the whirlpools!

Gradually as the channel begins to widen, the current against us begins to releases its grip and we sail in to Stor Fjord on the south east side of Spitsbergen. After all the excitement of the previous 24 hours, it’s time to go ashore to stretch our legs and enjoy a wash in clear fresh glacial water.

In these remote locations, navigational charts are notoriously unreliable and the next morning we are woken by the most enormous bang and crunch – we’ve run aground!

The sound reverberates through the steel hull and within seconds we’re out of the bunks lifting floorboards to check for water. Thankfully the steel hull has done its job, but definitely the most dramatic alarm clock I’ve ever heard!

Later the skipper tells me he has recorded the position of the rock, which he’ll submit to the chart publishers for their next update – he’s named it ‘Dad Rock’!

We’re close to completing our circumnavigation now and the tiny Russian mining settlement of Barentsburg will be our last stop before returning to Longyearbyen.

Barentsburg is home to around 400 people and only exists to mine coal, yet none is exported – it just feeds the power station that heats and powers the town, causing many to question the reason for this Russian foothold in such a remote outpost.

We’ve arrange to go for a sauna in the local hotel but really it’s the showers we are looking forward to.

Climbing the 267 steps that lead from the port up to the main street, the first thing we meet is a large statue of Vladimir Illyich Ulyanov - better known as Lenin - this is ‘Little Russia’.

Refreshed after our sauna, we cross the road to a bar called ‘The Red Bear’ for a few beers and a bite to eat to

celebrate our circumnavigation. The place is packed with young adventurers laughing and talking loudly over their beer and vodkas while thumping western music reverberates around the bar. Barentsburg has become a popular day-trip from Longyearbyen and now has a thriving tourist industry.

The first bottle of vodka goes down in record time. The second gets dispatched in similar fashion. We certainly didn’t need the third and probably should have waited until the food arrived before tucking in to the fourth! I don’t remember much about the 267 steps back down to the boat – it was daylight though - but then again, it always is!

Next day, after a hearty breakfast with lots of coffee and some mellow Dad Rock, we coast in to the pontoon at Longyearbyen harbour and tie up.

We made it – the first boat to circumnavigate Spitsbergen in 2019.

Svalbard has served up some breath-taking scenery and an incredible abundance of wildlife - a truly memorable experience for the adventurous traveller. But the overwhelming sense here is one of fragility – this is a land at the very coal-face of global warming - in these extreme latitudes the rate of climate change is twice as fast as anywhere else on earth. Simply being aware of this fact is no longer sufficient!



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The sailing trip (around €3,620 pp) was booked through Kraken Travel who offer a wide variety of adventure sailing holidays all over the world:

www.kraken.travel
Adrian traveled to Longyearbyen via Oslo with Norwegian Airlines:
www.norwegian.com

Accommodation in Longyearbyen was provided by Mary-Ann’s Polariggen:
www.polariggen.com

See more of Adrian van der Lee’s photography on Instagram:
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