

Svalbard 18th – 23rd July 2019

Trip Report by John Wright. Email: johnpw2@tiscali.co.uk.



Glacier

Photo John Wright

Background

We, being myself, my wife Jane, my friend Tim and his partner Patricia, booked a mini cruise with the Norwegian company Hurtigruten (<https://www.hurtigruten.co.uk/>). The cruise took us along the north west coast of Spitzbergen. Spitzbergen and Svalbard are both official names, Spitzbergen refers to the largest island of the archipelago. The ship was the MS Nordstjernen a fine old ship built in 1956. Next season (2020) is the last time the ship will be in service

doing these tours. Its replacement will be a newer ship, but it is hoped to be of similar size. The MS Nordstjernen has a passenger carrying capacity of 400 but we had a manageable 105 passengers on our cruise which is around the number the company aims for on these cruises. The cruise is billed '*Spitzbergen - Polar Bears and Arctic Adventure*'. The route it took certainly meant we took in some stunning scenery and with 24 hours of daylight you have plenty of time to take it all in. This was my first trip to the Arctic, but Tim did the same cruise in 2015.



The MS Nordstjernen

Photo John Wright

The publicity states you can look for Arctic wildlife including Polar Bears and whales, but it is not sold to the public as a dedicated wildlife watching cruise. In fact, only the four of us were on deck for any length of time looking for wildlife or had the equipment to do it -

binoculars and telescopes. However, from the bridge the officers did look out for and stop for Polar Bears, Walrus (at haul outs) and the 'big' whales if feasible. Passengers came out on deck in mass whenever something of interest was announced over the tannoy.

Apart from the four of us there was one other person from the UK the rest came from various European countries. There was also a group of 50 Chinese school children who took a keen interest in the wildlife which hopefully bodes well for the future of wildlife in China.

When going ashore we were put into small groups, allotted a guide and ferried by Zodiac RIB (Rigid Inflatable Boat) to the shore. Once allocated the group and the guide remained the same throughout. Once ashore the guide would give us a talk on points of interest, history of the settlement, the former whaling outpost or the geology. We usually had time for a short walk around, under the watchful eye of our guide who carried a gun in case of an encounter with a nosy Polar Bear. The guides all had a basic knowledge of Svalbard wildlife as well as the geology and points of historic interest.

Travel/Accommodation

We flew with SAS from London Heathrow to Longyearbyen, via Oslo. Our flight arrived in Longyearbyen the following morning at 00:45. Well we arrived, but my luggage remained in Oslo! Tim and Patricia flew from Gatwick and met us at Oslo airport. They stayed overnight in the Radisson Blu Polar Hotel whilst Jane and I stayed in the Coal Miners Cabins (hotel) - basic but fine.

Weather

Variable. Light rain on arrival but then sunny spells, cloud on the mountain tops, light winds and calm but with one windy period in the early hours that got the ship rolling about somewhat! Temperatures always above freezing and usually around 7 degrees centigrade - on the days I checked that is.

Everyone is aware of the impact climate change is having on the Arctic such as the retreating ice cap and melting glaciers. In Longyearbyen some of the houses are becoming unstable due to the permafrost melting. Reindeer are dying of starvation due to more winter rain which freezes solid on top of the snow. This stops the Reindeer getting to the vegetation underneath the snow. At least 200 Reindeer are known to have died of starvation last winter due to this. We saw a few Reindeer carcasses just outside Longyearbyen.

Itinerary

Starting and finishing in Longyearbyen the itinerary is one that many of the smaller cruise vessels follow:

Thursday. Arrived Longyearbyen. Overnight in hotel.

Friday. Day spent around Longyearbyen, afternoon embarkation, depart Longyearbyen, first stop at Barentsburg.

Saturday. Magdalenefjord and the north west corner,

Sunday. Woodfjord and Liefdefjord, 80 degrees north and Moffen Island.

Monday. Krossfjord, Kongsfjord, New London and Ny-Alesund.

Tuesday. Disembark at Longyearbyen and fly back to the UK.

Daily Log

Thursday 18th. UK to Svalbard travel day, arriving on Svalbard at 00:45 the following day (Friday 19th). Overnight in the Coal Miners Cabins.

Friday 19th. After three hours sleep, we were up, had breakfast and were outside by 07:30. A chilly morning but fortunately Jane had a spare jacket and thick jumper I could put on as my luggage was still in Oslo. Airport and Hurtigruten staff were doing all they could however, and my luggage was due in on an early afternoon flight.

As I didn't want to leave Svalbard without seeing an Arctic Fox, I decided to better my odds on seeing one. Having got information beforehand I'd booked a local guide for a half day tour to look for the foxes. The guide, Oddgeir Sagerup knew of two territories just outside Longyearbyen. He was very nice and an informative naturalist and offers various wildlife tours but be aware if you book his services, he is very expensive - Norway prices! For more information and his contact details: www.seeandexplore.com and post@seeandexplore.com. We looked and looked and looked but unfortunately didn't see any Arctic Foxes. Apparently, this was the first time in three weeks he hadn't seen a fox at the location we spent the most time at. I was very disappointed to say the least but that's the way it goes sometimes! However, we did see eight **Reindeer**.



Photo John Wright

After lunch we met up with Tim and Patricia who had had a wander around Longyearbyen but hadn't seen anything of note. The afternoon was then spent on a Hurtigruten guided tour in and around Longyearbyen where we did see five **Reindeer**. We embarked on the MS Nordstjernen at 16:00 and thankfully my luggage had been delivered to the ship. Departed Longyearbyen at 17:00.

So, the cruise proper began, and we steamed west and then north, stopping at the Russian settlement of Barentsburg for a couple of hours. Viewing from the ship before and after Barentsburg we saw five, maybe seven, **Minke Whales**.

Feeling very tired after travelling and only having three hours sleep the night before we turned in around 22:30.

Saturday 20th. On deck at 06:00, turned in at midnight.

Magdalenefjord, Gullybukta and the north west corner of Spitzbergen - Smeerenburg Fjord and Smeerenburg Glacier.

Throughout the day, all from the ship, we saw: Two **Humpback Whales**, at least 12 **Common Seals**, one **Ringed Seal** - an excellent view from the bow of the ship. It turned out to be the only Ringed Seal of the trip, six **Bearded Seals**, around 58 **Walruses** including 35 at a haul out on the southern point of Amsterdam Island. I also had poor views of at least three seals that went unidentified and could have been Common, Ringed or even Harp Seals.

However, as good as the day was, the highlight began at 21:30 in Raudfjord when a **Polar Bear** was seen walking along the shoreline. The ship was maneuvered into place and came to a stop. We watched the bear strolling along the shore for a few hundred metres before entering the sea and swimming towards a Bearded Seal on an iceberg. The seal was still some way off and so we weren't sure if it was going for it or not. However, when watching the bear, we could

see that every now and again it would stop swimming, lift its head and sniff the air. It got closer and closer to the seal using icebergs as cover and when it was near the seal it dived and came up suddenly and very fast on the other side of the iceberg causing the seal to dive in panic into the sea, swiftly followed by the bear. The bear surfaced with the seal in its jaws, dragged it onto another iceberg and finished it off – the iceberg was soon red with seal blood. The bear eventually swam ashore, dragging the seal with it, where it stamped on it with its fore paws a couple of times and then started eating the seal. But before long, it dragged it off again and became partially obscured behind some boulders. It was time to move off and as we steamed slowly away, I thought to myself that there were worse ways to spend an hour!



Polar Bear

Photo Tim Bourne



Polar Bear with Bearded Seal prey

Photo Tim Bourne

Sunday 21st. On deck at 06:00, turned in at 23:45. Woodfjord, Liefdefjord, Bockfjord, Jotunkjeldane. Went ashore once in the morning and once in the afternoon.



Bearded Seal

Photo Tim Bourne

We had anchored in the early hours at Worsleyhamna, south east of Reinsdyrflya, offshore from an area called the Reindeer Plain, true to its name we saw ten **Reindeer** there. We also had a rather curious **Bearded Seal** loitering around the ship before we moved off at 07:00. Later in the morning we came across a further two **Bearded Seals** and a **Walrus**. Late afternoon as we made our way out of the fjord we slowed and stopped in a wide shallow bay at Mushamna. The crew had seen Polar Bears here a week ago and before long we saw three **Polar Bears** - a female with two well grown cubs. Given the cubs size they would have been born over the 2017/18 winter period. We watched them for 20 minutes before they walked off into the distance.

We steamed on eventually crossing the 80 degrees north parallel at 20:45. A little further we stopped just off Moffen Island where we watched a haul out of around 100 **Walruses**. This was as far north as we were going to go. On our way back south, we crossed paths with five **Blue Whales** all in an eight-minute period beginning at 21:55.



Polar Bears

Photo by Tim Bourne



Walrus on Amsterdam Island

Photos Tim Bourne



Monday 22nd. On deck at 06:45 and stayed up all day. Kongsfjord, Blomstrand Island, New London and Ny-Alesund.

Following a few hours of rough sea, we entered Kongsfjord in the early hours, and had moored in the sheltered north bay of Blomstrand Island close to shore. Tim and I scanned the surrounding land and sea for over an hour and had only come across a solitary **Reindeer** and two **Common Seals**. Tim then spotted an **Arctic Fox** which was soon joined by a second one – an adult and cub. We watched them playing together for the next 40 minutes before they finally wandered off up a slope and out of sight. Shortly after the ship weighed anchor and we moved off, 45 minutes later we dropped anchor off Ny-Alesund. We went ashore first in New London on the southern side of Blomstrand Island. In the early afternoon we visited Ny-Alesund on the opposite side of the fjord. We found a single **Reindeer** and offshore three **Common Seals**. In the late afternoon we were on our way again and heading south. Before we reached Longyearbyen, in the stretch of sea before and after Barentsburg we logged seven **Minke Whales** and four **Humpback Whales** - a single and a pod of three.



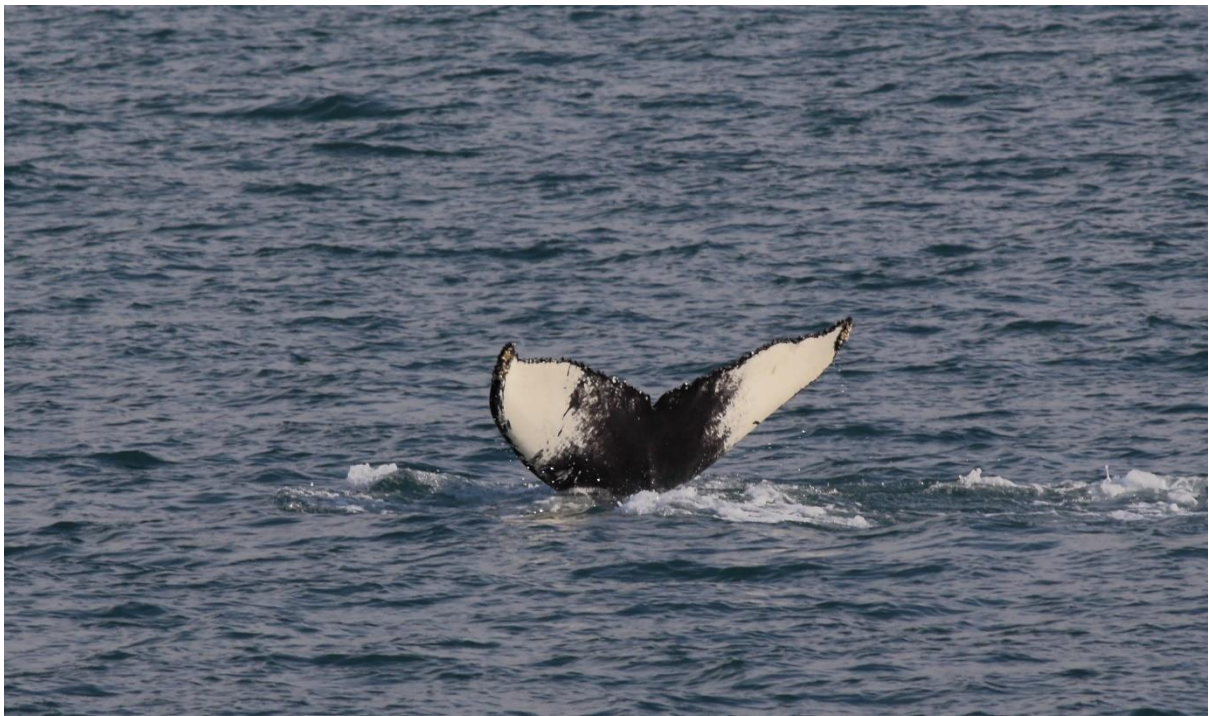
Minke Whale

Photo Tim Bourne



Humpback Whale

Photos Tim Bourne



Tuesday 23rd. We docked in Longyearbyen at around 00:40, disembarked and then boarded a coach that took us to the airport for our 02:20 flight to Oslo and then onto London.



Walruses

Photo Tim Bourne



Iceberg

Photo John Wright

Systematic Lists

Mammals – 10 species:

Arctic Fox

Polar Bear

Walrus

Bearded Seal

Common (Harbour) Seal

Ringed Seal

Reindeer

Common Minke Whale

Blue Whale

Humpback Whale

Birds:

Pink-footed Goose, Barnacle Goose, Ruddy Shelduck, Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Rock Ptarmigan, Red-throated Diver, Fulmar, Ringed Plover, Grey Plover, Purple Sandpiper, Turnstone, Grey Phalarope, Great Skua, Arctic Skua, Long-tailed Skua, Kittiwake, Sabine's Gull, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Little Auk, Puffin, Black Guillemot, Brunnich's Guillemot, Snow Bunting.

The End