

GLACIAL PACE:
Cruising around the
Monaco Glacier

Changes in Latitudes

On the island of Spitsbergen, a 'day at the beach' takes on new meaning.

By Leslie Gilbert Elman

PHOTOS: LESLIE GILBERT ELMAN

SOME PEOPLE GO TO THE BEACH in July. I went looking for polar bears. Thus I found myself in Oslo for an overnight stay before a flight north to Tromsø for a connection, even farther north, to the island of Spitsbergen in the Svalbard archipelago.

Technically, Svalbard is Norway, but on most maps of the country it's shown in a small inset box, much like Hawaii on maps of the United States — part of the nation, yet too remote to fit within the confines of a conventional map. Look for it about halfway between Norway and Greenland, but don't be surprised if you never noticed it before, let alone the town of Longyearbyen, where I spent my first night in the archipelago, at 78 degrees 13 minutes north latitude.

For perspective, consider that

Oslo sits at 59 degrees 55 minutes north latitude; Nuuk, Greenland, at 64 degrees 10 minutes and the North Pole at 90 degrees north latitude.

Historical records indicate that the islands were discovered, and soon abandoned, by Icelanders in the late 12th century. Dutch explorer Willem Barents rediscovered them in 1596 and the area became a no-man's-land for trappers, fishermen and whalers until coal and other minerals were discovered there, making it necessary to determine who actually owned the land. In 1920, the Svalbard Treaty gave Norway sovereignty over the islands.

Longyearbyen — approximately 831 miles from the North Pole — was named for Michigan mining engineer John Munro Longyear who opened a mining camp there in

1905. Coal mining is still done there, although the yield is small — the nearby community of Svea produces in one day what Longyearbyen does in a year. Nevertheless, today Longyearbyen is the largest settlement in Svalbard, home to 1,800 people — or about two-thirds of the entire population of the 24,324-square-mile archipelago. It has a university, an airport, two hotels, a hospital, a local history museum, a gallery and a “cultural house” that shows first-run films once a week. All except the airport must be entered in stocking feet (you park your boots at the door) to avoid tracking in dirt and moisture.

Longyearbyen is also the starting point for the four-day Spitsbergen cruise aboard Hurtigruten's *MS Nordstjernen*, a 75-passenger coastal steamer. The route dates back to when



NORTHERN EXPOSURE:
Houses in Longyearbyen



such ships served as mail boats. Nordstjernen, or North Star, still carries a Norwegian Post flag although its primary cargo these days is tourists.

Built in the 1950s and updated in 2000, Nordstjernen's cabins are quite small. Mine had upper and lower bunks and was comfortable for one person, although it would have been a tight squeeze for two with luggage. Even in summer, a trip to the Arctic demands woolen socks, boots, turtle-necks and a down jacket. (You'll also need a bathing suit, but we'll get to that later.)

Departing from Longyearbyen with the pure white sunlight beaming down on the deck of the ship, I wasn't sure if the tingle I felt was from the cold air snapping across my skin or simply from the sense of embarking on a bona fide adventure. Not that

I'd ever harbored fantasies of following in the footsteps of the great Norwegian Arctic explorers such as Roald Amundsen or Fridtjof Nansen, but I'm certain that some of my fellow passengers did. Some were even intimately familiar with the endeavors of one Salomon August Andrée, whose 1897 attempt to reach the North Pole in a hydrogen-filled airship ended in tragedy — the remains of the explorer and his two colleagues and, astoundingly, Andrée's diary were recovered by Norwegian fishermen in 1930.

The exploits of Andrée, as well as Nansen — who proposed to reach the North Pole by ship, got as far as 86 degrees 14 minutes north and had to turn back — and Amundsen — who reached the South Pole by land in 1911 and crossed the North Pole by air in 1926, but perished two years later in a plane crash somewhere between Tromsø and Svalbard — are covered in depth at the Svalbard Museum in Longyearbyen.

Such grim reminders go with the territory. While it is the stuff of explorer fantasy, this is an inhospitable place; beautiful to behold yet potentially lethal, like the polar bears that everyone aboard ship was hoping to spot.

Our first stop was Barentsburg, a Russian coal-mining settlement that

is home to some 550 Russians and Ukrainians about 300 of whom are miners working to support families back home. Although the town was not without its charms, it was hard to imagine living there all year long, especially when the polar winter plunged it into perpetual darkness.

In July, I faced the opposite problem. The "midnight sun" seemed to hold its position directly overhead 24 hours a day, and the temptation to stay up round-the-clock, just to make sure the sun did too, was hard to resist.

The following morning took us to Magdalenefjord where we tromped over a beach of stones the size of ostrich eggs lapped by water filled with chunks of ice. A seal did a few tricks for us in the bay as we tried to avoid attacks — for that is indeed what they were — by Arctic terns.

Our guides, most of whom were graduate students in the natural sciences, accompanied us everywhere armed with rifles to protect us from polar bears, an attack that would be infinitely more dangerous than the terns' aggressive swooping, squawking and pecking.

Later that day, the captain drew the ship as close as he could to a bit of rock in the sea where four or five creamy white dots huddled together.

“Polar bears!” cried the passengers, grabbing for binoculars and scurrying to the bow for a closer look. The fact that the bears were visible, but not quite discernable, dissuaded no one, and set the tone for the aft-deck celebration later that evening when we crossed the 80th parallel.

Back down at 79 degrees 35 minutes, the next day we cruised alongside the Monaco Glacier and embarked on flexible watercraft excursions around the bay, plying the ice-filled water as if it were a giant turquoise cocktail, then we headed for Texas Bar, a one-time trappers’ camp.

The arctic desert terrain was rocky and solid; the vegetation limited to moss, tiny purple and white flowers that require three years to germinate and bloom, and a tiny species of tree related to the willow that grows as a stiff, green ground cover at low elevations.

If we had ventured farther up the rocky hills, even that much green would have disappeared. But we didn’t go up; we went down to the beach, where we plunged into the icy Arctic water just to say we’d done it (and to earn a certificate, signed by the captain, attesting to the fact).

The sun was strong and the air felt warm when we emerged from the water, dried ourselves, and pulled on our turtlenecks, sweaters and jeans, lounging on the rocks and tossing snowballs. The air smelled of nothing at all, with no manmade fumes to taint it and no flora to perfume it, merely the ice to cool it.

Amid the rocks, we found whitened bones of seals and, near them, animal droppings. Were they polar bear droppings? I certainly couldn’t tell. But our guides stood watch just in case, their lightweight Ruger rifles at the ready. The old, spent shell casing I found on the beach reminded me that polar bears were always a hazard, and I wondered whether that shot had been fired at a bear ambling out to take a swim as I had just done.

Back on board, dinner was put on temporary hold between entrée and dessert when two fin whales made



SHIP SHAPE:
Hurtigruten's MS
Nordstjernen

PHOTO: LESLIE GILBERT ELMAN

INFO TO GO

Hurtigruten, formerly Norwegian Coastal Voyage, offers Spitsbergen adventure cruises of varying lengths, including the Ultimate Trek program, which drops you off for three days of camping on the glaciers (tel 800 323 7436, www.hurtigruten.us). Spitsbergen Travel, the local tourism authority, offers packages and suggestions for individual trips to the archipelago (tel 47 79 026 100, www.spitsbergentravel.no).

an appearance on the starboard side. Even the captain sounded impressed when he announced their presence. It’s rare to spot them at all and this pair seemed enamored of our ship, traveling alongside and breaking the surface of the water to spout. They didn’t dive and breach like the beluga whales that had played around the Monaco Glacier at lunchtime. (Animal acts seemed to be the preferred mealtime entertainment.) Then again, the fin whales were much larger than the belugas, measuring more than 65 feet on average; we couldn’t expect them to be acrobats, too.

On deck after dinner — maybe

after midnight; I couldn’t tell anymore — I spotted a puffin in flight. Another entry on my growing Arctic fauna-spotting list: reindeer in Longyearbyen, walrus beside the Moffen lagoon, seals and arctic terns; and before the ship docked for the final time in Longyearbyen I would add arctic fox and kittywakes spotted at the scientific research colony of Ny Ålesund, and a blue whale that bid us farewell on our last night at sea.

As for polar bears: I couldn’t honestly say I’d seen them in any significant way. But for days at the beach, this particular July was in a class all its own. ■■