

Spitsbergen

A Greentours Itinerary

North Spitsbergen Cruise

Days 1 & 2 Longyearbyen

It is a measure of just how far north Spitsbergen (Svalbard) is that having spent more than an hour flying up Norway, it still takes more than an hour to reach these high Arctic islands. And what an arrival. Spitsbergen is famous for its incredible Arctic scenery and you'll get a fantastic introduction to this as the aircraft descends between the dark peaks that erupt from dazzling white snowfields and glaciers. The waters of Isfjorden appear as we land amongst the colourful buildings of Longyearbyen. Mounds of pink line the runway as we taxi to the airport terminal - our first encounter with pretty *Silene acaulis*.

Most of Spitsbergen's 2,800 permanent inhabitants reside in Longyearbyen and facilities and shopping are good there. Our very comfortable hotel has wonderful views over the town and fjord, and of the high-walled valley in which it stands. A glacier snout is visible just two kilometres up the valley! The diminutive Svalbard race of Reindeer graze contentedly between buildings and you'll likely soon catch sight of an Arctic Fox scurrying past the hotel. Immaculate Snow Buntings sing from the hotel gables and flocks of Little Auks hurtle back and forth along the ridgetops. We'll steam out of Longyearbyen accompanied by Glaucous Gulls and Fulmars and head out of Isfjorden passing numerous spectacular glaciers which descend from the giant snowfields of Oscar II Land. Dinner will be our first chance to enjoy the Callisto's excellent cuisine - and perhaps a glass from the bar to be taken on deck in late evening sunshine. For this is of course the land of 24 hour daylight - it doesn't even dim so high in the sky is the sun at 'night'!

Days 3-8 North Spitsbergen Cruise

The scenery will continue in breath-taking fashion throughout but of course what we can't be sure of is the itinerary. This has to be at the discretion of the ship's captain and expedition leader as weather and in particular ice conditions will dictate where and how far we can go. Normally the west of Spitsbergen is clear of ice and so too the northern

shore eastwards towards Nordaustlandet. After that the extent of the pack ice will vary and it may be that ice conditions will cause us to concentrate our efforts in the northwestern fjords or even south towards Hornsund. What we can guarantee is that the ship will go where we'll have the best opportunity to see and enjoy fabulous Arctic wildlife and scenery.

The next six days will see us visiting spectacular fjords and islands, taking zodiac rides by the snouts of awesome glaciers, cruising leads through pack ice and seeing a whole stack of Arctic wildlife. Abundance rather than species richness is the hallmark of the high Arctic summer. You'll quickly see your first Brünnich's Guillemot and soon you'll have seen your millionth! Little Auks are abundant too and we'll visit a breeding colony on the little island of Fuglesangen which literally means 'bird song' and refers to the laughing calls of these tiny alcids. We'll sit at the edge of the colony with birds coming and going just yards away - they are too busy bringing food to their young to worry about us! We'll visit several 'bird cliffs' by zodiac or by mooring the Callisto's right under them! They are the favoured haunt of Arctic Foxes - two years ago we saw a rare blue phase fox on bird cliffs at Krossfjorden. Guano produces a green flush of plant growth below the breeding ledges, these decorated with Sulphur-coloured Buttercups and bright pink mounds of *Silene acaulis*. Pink-footed and Barnacle Geese nest on these slopes and Black Guillemots at the bottom. Kittiwakes and Fulmars are photogenic as they perch on blue 'bergy bits' released from their glacial origins. Great, Pomarine and Arctic Skuas keep the Kittiwakes on their toes as they harry them for choicest morsels.

Of course there's one mammal that we all want to see - the Polar Bear. A complete ban on hunting and plenty of seals mean that the Spitsbergen population now numbers in excess of 6000 bears. On the reconnaissance trip in 2004 we saw no less than 11 Polar Bears in Raudfjorden and Liefdefjorden in the far north of Spitsbergen! In 2005 two were seen, and on the 2007 tour seven of these amazing animals were admired. Ringed Seals, their main prey, follow the pack ice as it retreats northwards and eastwards and so the bears have to move too. The males and yearlings move out on to the pack ice where there is an abundance of prey but young cubs can't swim that far so they and their mothers patrol the ice at the head of glaciers in these beautiful fjords. As well as Ringed Seals we'll also encounter the larger Bearded Seal and maybe Common and Harp Seals too. Walruses regularly haul out on atoll-like Møffen Islands, over 80°N. Møffen is a strict nature reserve so we have to stay 300m offshore but we'll visit other haul-outs where closer approach is allowed and photography an unforgettable experience.

The second biggest island in the archipelago is Nordaustlandet, almost covered by an ice-cap and separated from the main island by the Hinlopen Strait. Hinlopen is often filled with pack-ice so how far we'll be able to penetrate is an open question but where-ever the pack-ice lies we'll cruise slowly through open leads looking for seals and bears. Beautiful adult Ivory Gulls are searching for them too as Polar Bear kills provide them with easy pickings. It is here we'll hope to get close to majestic male Polar Bears. A wonderful surprise awaited our 2007 group on the edge of this pack-ice - a group of Narwhal!

Perhaps surprisingly there's plenty of cultural interest too from old Russian fur trapper's shacks to the Russian mining community at Barentsburg and from Ny Alesund's research station to the remains of 17th century whaling communities. Sadly there are now few whales in these waters though there is one species that still does rather well - the Beluga. Groups characteristically travel close inshore where we'll be able to pick out the dark grey youngsters surfacing next to their pure white mothers. 'Over sleep time' on Day 8 we'll return to Longyearbyen arriving in the small hours to be ready for the early morning departure on Day 9.

Day 9

Return to the UK

or...

Land-based Tour

Days 8, 9, 10 and 13

Longyearbyen

Those joining the land-based tour will have departed the UK on 'Day 8' and spent the night in the Spitsbergen Hotel in Longyearbyen. A glacier snout is visible just two kilometres up the valley! The diminutive Svalbard race of Reindeer graze contentedly between buildings and you'll likely soon catch sight of an Arctic Fox scurrying past the hotel. Immaculate Snow Buntings sing from the hotel gables and flocks of Little Auks hurtle back and forth along the ridgetops. At the furthest extent of the Gulf Stream's influence Spitsbergen has a surprising 165 species of flowering plant and virtually all can be found around Longyearbyen. Abundant Mountain Avens looks superb amidst the barren landscape. Another popular 'townie' is the beautiful endemic Svalbard Poppy *Papaver dahlianum* whose creamy-yellow flowers decorate lichen and sedge dotted turf throughout. Another beauty is the White Arctic Bell Heather *Cassiope tetragona* and this flowers prolifically by the hotel.

Mounds of creamy *Saxifraga cespitosa* mixes with *Saxifraga cernua* and pretty *Pedicularis hirsuta*. In fact saxifrages are the most diverse genus here with fourteen species and we'll encounter yellow *hirculus* and *aizoides*, tall *hieracifolia*, and tiny *hyperborea*. The endemic *Saxifraga svalbardensis* flowers with Dwarf Golden Saxifrage and Pygmy and Tundra Buttercups. In sheltered spots Boreal Jacob's Ladder puts forth its exquisite blue blooms. Stunning King Eiders and pure white Ivory Gulls inhabit Isfjorden's coasts and out in the fjord there's Black-throated Diver and Long-tailed Duck.

Day 11 Adventdalen

The braided channels and marshes that descend Adventdalen are home to some fabulous plants. *Saxifraga platysepala* has pretty yellow flowers hardly noticed because of the brilliant red runners that loop out from the leaf rosettes. The gorgeous white woolly red-flowered *Pedicularis dasyantha* blooms with Lapland, Snow and Sulphur-coloured Buttercups as well as the sweetly-scented creamy Svalbard Buttercup. Beautiful Red (we call them Grey, but here they really are red) Phalaropes feed along streams and we'll encounter Arctic and possibly Long-tailed Skuas. Purple *Braya* flowers on dry flats with *Saxifraga oppositifolia* - the latter is quite possibly the commonest flowering plant on Spitsbergen and colours whole areas purple!

Day 12 Fuglefjella

It is Little Auks that give this hill its name - tens of thousands of them fly back and forth to a breeding colony amid a huge boulder field. A dozen species of *Draba* occur on Spitsbergen and here we'll encounter many of them - white *daurica*, *subcapitata*, *nivalis* and *lactea* and yellow *alpina*, *micropetala*, *corymbosa* and *oxycarpa*. There's also the delightful little campion *Silene uralensis* with its pink-veined inflated calyx.

Day 14 Return to the UK

Call 01298 83563 or visit www.greentours.co.uk for the latest trip report from our tours to Spitsbergen. If you would like to ask about any other aspect of this holiday, please call 01298 83563 or email us at enquiries@greentours.co.uk.