

Spitsbergen

Land & Sea

A Greentours Itinerary

Day 1 To Oslo

We'll convene in Oslo during the evening at a hotel close to the Airport in preparation for our flight next morning up to Longyearbyen.

Day 2 To 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 another 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. 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.

Days 3 & 6

Longyearbyen - Larsbreen glacier, Airport Flats, and Hiorthamn

Arctic tundra reaches right up to the back door of the hotel. *Braya purpurascens*, bright yellow *Draba alpina*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia* in some fine colour forms from white to deep pink, *Saxifraga cespitosa*, golden-yellow *Ranunculus nivalis* burst from the damp mossy areas and delicate palest yellow *Papaver dahlianum* decorates shingle ridges. Further down the road we found *Draba daurica* and *Draba arcticum*, *Cochlearia* and *Saxifraga cernua* in bud. Arctic Tern and Arctic Skua hawk over the flowers as we enjoy *Cassiope tetragona*, pretty pink *Pedicularis hirsuta* and *Potentilla hyparctica*.

Accompanied by our local armed guide (an essential precaution anywhere outside of the town as Polar Bears can turn up anywhere) we'll head up the valley towards the Larsbreen glacier. *Draba pauciflora* and *Draba micropetala* grow together and nearing the glacier we'll find *Draba subcapitata* growing on exposed areas. We'll pass recently melted flushes of vivid green moss and gravelly areas spattered with lovely mats of *Saxifraga oppositifolia*.

Near the airport are sandy flats and shingle bars (a product of ice being crushed up against the shore) and here we find fine cushions of Moss Campion *Silene acaulis*, *Silene furcata*, *Potentilla pulchella*, *Ranunculus sulphurous* and *Minuartia rubella*. Eider are abundant and we may well see Red Phalarope feeding in the pools. There is a magnificent arctic panorama stretching across the Isfjorden bay with rows of snow-streaked peaks and immense glaciers. Around the pools are colonies of yellow *Saxifraga platysepala* a curious species with long bright red stolons. Also common are *Dryas octopetala* and *Draba alpina*.

We'll head across the bay to the old mining settlement of Hiorthamn. On the foreshore were Oysterplant *Mertensia maritima* and among the tundra *Saxifraga platysepala*, *Saxifraga cespitosa* and *Saxifraga oppositifolia*. A boardwalk takes us across soggy tundra and thence to drier slopes dotted with superb Woolly Lousewort *Pedicularis dasyantha* a lovely species with pale pink flowers. Reindeer graze on the plateau where we will find a small colony of *Saxifraga hirculus*.

We'll visit an innocuous-looking slope where there's a colony of gorgeous Boreal Jacob's Ladder *Polemonium borealis*, a refined blue-flowered plant with pinnate leaves. Alongside were many superb Mountain Avens *Dryas octopetala* in full flower, *Potentilla nivea* and fine reddish forms of *Saxifraga cespitosa*. Another specialty here is the Polar Dandelion *Taraxacum brachyceras* a species with appropriately white flowers.

Day 4 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!

The road up towards Gruve has no less than eight species of saxifrage, with *Saxifraga cespitosa*, *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, *Saxifraga nivalis*, *Saxifraga cernua*, *Saxifraga platysepala*, *Saxifraga hirculus*, *Saxifraga heiracifolia* and tiny *Saxifraga foliolosa* all present. At the top of road is Spitsbergen's forest. It may be only one-inch tall, but this small colony of Dwarf Birch *Betula nana* is the closest thing there is to a forest on Spitsbergen.

Day 5 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. Tiny *Cardamine bellidifolia* flowers among grey and green mosses and lichen-encrusted stones and there's also *Draba norvegica*, *Saxifraga cernua* in flower and the tiny *Ranunculus pygmaeus*.

Days 7 – 15(am)

Clockwise Circumnavigation of West Spitsbergen Cruise visiting* Krossfjorden and Ny Ålesund, The massive Monaco Glacier, Nordaustlandet, Chermisøya, and Phippsøya in the Seven Islands (80° north), the Hinlopen Strait, through Freemansundet to Storfjorden, the Pointed Mountains of Hornsund, and Bell Sund

A Clockwise Circumnavigation of West Spitsbergen 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 alcid.

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 Ortelius right under them! They are the favoured haunt of Arctic Foxes - we have seen the 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 'berg 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. Though nothing is guaranteed we have always encountered Polar Bears on our previous trips to Spitsbergen and you can expect multiple sightings – we have even reached double figures on occasion. 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.

The northernmost point of our voyage may be north of Nordaustlandet, at Chermisøya, and Phippsøya in the Seven Islands. Here you reach 80° north, just 870 km (540 miles) from the geographic North Pole. Polar Bears inhabit this region, so the ship may park for several hours among the pack ice before wheeling around west again. Walrus regularly haul out on atoll-like Møffen Island. Møffen is a strict nature reserve so we have to stay 300m offshore but we'll visit other haul-outs near Eolusneset 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 one of our recent groups 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. We'll visit Ny Alesund, the northernmost settlement on Earth, and now a research station. Close to the community is a breeding ground for Barnacle Geese, Pink-footed Geese, and Arctic Terns. Depending on the weather, we might sail into Liefdefjorden, land at Texas Bar,

and cruise within sight of the 5-kilometer-long (3.1 miles) face of the precipitous Monaco Glacier. The waters in front of this glacier are a favorite feeding spot for thousands of kittiwakes, and the base of the ice is a popular polar bear hunting ground. We'll encounter 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.

The plan is to sail through Freemansundet, the strait between Barentsøya and Edgeøya, with a stop on Barentsøya at Sundneset with the small Würzburgerhytta and lakes with waterfowl. Later in the day we may land at the mouth of the valley Skjolddalen on West Spitsbergen four kilometers from an Ivory Gull colony. A landing at Diskobukta on Edgeøya, near a canyon with a large Kittiwake colony is also an option. Other landings like at Kvalhovden near mighty glacier fronts are also possible.

The Hornsund area of southern Spitsbergen will be a highlight. The spire-like peaks culminate in the exceptionally beautiful Hornsundtind which rises 1,431 meters (4,695 feet) above seal level, and Bautaen is a perfect illustration of why early Dutch explorers named this island Spitsbergen, meaning "pointed mountains." There are 14 sizable glaciers in this area as well as opportunities for spotting seals, beluga whales, and polar bears. Bell Sund is one of the largest fjord systems in Svalbard. The ocean currents make this area slightly warmer than other areas in the archipelago, which shows in the relatively lush vegetation. Here there are excellent opportunities to enjoy both history and wildlife. A possibility is Ahlstrandhalvøya, at the mouth of Van Keulenfjorden, where piles of beluga skeletons can be found. These remains of 19th-century whale slaughter are a haunting reminder of the consequences of rampant exploitation. Fortunately, belugas were not hunted into extinction, and you have a good chance of coming across a pod. Alternately, while cruising the side fjords of Bellsund, you can explore tundra where reindeer like to feed as well as rocky slopes where little auks are breeding, near Vaarsolbukta.

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.

We'll return into Longyearbyen morning of Day 15.

Day 15(pm) Longyearbyen

We'll have a further chance to enjoy the flora and fauna as well as the spectacular scenery around Spitsbergen's tiny capital.

Day 16 Return to UK

*The chances that we can complete a full Spitsbergen circumnavigation (based on our experiences from 1992 to 2019) are about 30% in the first half of July. In case we cannot complete a full circumnavigation, we may devise a program in northeast or southeast Spitsbergen. Flexibility is paramount for expedition cruises.

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