

Spitsbergen & Lapland

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 light 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 sulphureus* 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 *aurica*, *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*.

Day 7

To Tromsø

We'll have time in the morning to further explore around Longyearbyen before taking a flight across Arctic waters where the Barents Sea and the Norwegian Sea meet. We may even see remote Bear Island below us before descending into Tromsø's spectacular landscapes.

Day 8

To Abisko

Our journey today takes us through some magnificent fjord country as we follow the long arm of Balsfjord southwards from Norway's 'capital of the north' and thence

through the mountains to the Swedish border east of Narvik. Just a few minutes later we'll find ourselves following the shoreline of Lake Torneträsk – a huge and very picturesque lake. The blue water mirrors green yet snow-streaked tundra that cloaks the high mountains of Abisko National Park. Famed as a stunning example of Arctic landscapes, Abisko also gets the vote from botanists and birders as one of the very best locations in Arctic Europe. Settling into our sublimely situated hotel we'll soon have chance to taste the hotel's excellent cuisine. The restaurant windows offers superb viewz out over the lake. The panorama is breathtaking including the summit of Njulla, the incomparable U-shaped hanging valley of Lapporten, and the snow-covered mountains along the Norwegian border. After dinner the sun will show no sign of setting....

Day 9

Björkliden & Abisko National Park

We'll spend the morning right outside the hotel! Here are wet flushes with massed displays of pink Fragrant Orchids and the lovely yellow *Saxifraga aizoides*. Globeflowers shine in the evening sunlight which illuminates white and yellow Alpine Butterwort with an unearthly glow. Fieldfares and Redwings are common, and several pairs of lovely Bluethroats rear their young here. Lesser Redpolls and the less common Arctic Redpolls are both breeding species and we'll see Bramblings in their lovely summer attire. Under the trees is a glorious show of that most beautiful of boreal flowers, the Twinflower. The tiny leaves and little bells are joined by Chickweed Wintergreen, wonderful little Dwarf Cornel in massed displays, and the beautiful yellow *Viola biflora*. The diminutive Lesser Twayblade is difficult to spot amongst the mosses and clubmosses but once your eye is 'in' you'll find them to be locally common. A track will take us through meadows abloom with Wood Cranesbill and Globeflower and above these we'll find lovely *Campanula uniflora* and the tiny Snow Gentian. There's two beautiful milk-vetches; violet-tinged white *Astragalus alpinus* and fine yellow *Astragalus frigidus*. We'll see the local version of the Small White Orchid, though *Gymnadenia straminea* is now considered a separate more northern species also found in Canada and Greenland.

We'll also seek the tiny green *Platanthera oligantha* which is known to flower in just one or two spots in the Abisko area and nowhere else on mainland Europe. Indeed its location on the side of Njulla Mountain in Abisko National Park should keep it hidden from most – the steep gully where it resides will not be for all! Below though there is some wonderful damp contorted birch forest with large stands of *Cicerbita*, masses of the delicate *Cystopteris montana* growing in mosses, and quite a population of Herb Paris. Bluethroat and Arctic Redpoll breed here.

Day 10

Abisko National Park: Njulla Mountain

What seems to be the entire northern Swedish flora jostles for space on Njolta Mountain rising above our hotel. It looks a long way to the top so it's a fine thing to have a working ski lift whisk us to 900m above sea level. Mats of white-flowered Windflower and pink domes of Moss Campion greet us with a spectacular show. Both species of White Arctic Bell Heathers adorn slopes where Willow Grouse and Lapland Bunting breed. *Cassiope hypnoides* is much the commoner of the two but Njolta has a significant population of *Cassiope tetragona* too. In fact the heather family forms a major component of these montane Arctic tundras with mats of pink Creeping Azalea and Alpine Bearberry on dry heaths at the top, and in boggy areas Bog Whortleberry and Small Cranberry are abundant. Lapland Rhododendron will have finished flowering now but not the beautiful lilac-pink Mountain Heath which flowers prolifically amongst Crowberries and Bilberries. There's red *Rubus arcticus*, quite a lot of *Pedicularis lapponica*, and large patches of Roseroot, *Rhodiola rosea*. Needless to say there are more sedges. *Carex lachenalia*, *Carex norvegica* and *Carex bigelowii* are common and we'll see the rarer *Carex fuliginosa* subspecies *misandra*. Pink Alpine Catchfly and mats of lovely *Diapensia lapponica* adorns high dry ridges over which hunt Merlin and Rough-legged Buzzard. Ptarmigan enjoy the dry bluffs and we'll likely see several on our day up the mountain. The highest areas will still have some snow and near these we find the beautiful *Ranunculus nivalis* and on rocks both *Saxifraga cespitosa* and *Saxifraga oppositifolia*, the grand purple show from the latter now going over. Around snow we find a heavenly show of *Ranunculus glacialis*, the blooms varying from pure white to deep reddish-pink. Below the snow is a fine show of *Micranthes stellaris* whilst above is *Micranthes tenuis*, *Micranthes foliolosa*, and the lovely little *Saxifraga rivularis*.

Day 11

Abisko National Park: Abisko Gorge. Also Stordalen Nature Reserve

Abisko gorge is not so deep, maybe only twenty metres, but is still impressive as is the force of the water that rushes through the tunnel blasted by engineers a century ago so that the train at the top didn't have to go through the waterfall that was there! The widespread but local *Woodsia alpina* is rather common here, and we'll also find the diminutive and altogether rarer *Woodsia glabella*, a species generally only found north of the Arctic Circle. There are beautiful clumps of *Campanula uniflora*. Dippers feed in the gorge. The lovely little gentian relative *Comastoma tenella* grows where people have trodden down the trails! Nearby lakeshore has pretty *Cardamine nymannii* and the impressive Kings-spear *Pedicularis sceptrum-carolinum*, the pale yellow blooms each tipped with magenta.

The afternoon we'll visit the bog boardwalk at Stordalen. Here we'll find plenty of Bog Rosemary and also Cranberry amongst patches of the sundew *Drosera rotundifolia*. Having already seen twenty species of sedge in the morning we'll still be adding new

ones such as *Carex rostrata*, *Carex rotundata* and the newly minted *Carex x saamica* which is stabilized hybrid between the two. *Rubus chamaemorus* is just wonderful, the bright orange berries decorating the bog's surface. We'll find diminutive Lesser Twayblade here too. In places the cotton grasses *Eriophorum vaginatum* and *Eriophorum angustifolium* are dominant. A highlight will be the extraordinary moss *Splachnum luteum* whose yellow fairy umbrellas stand on long stalks above the fine green 'moss' below. *Splachnum* grows in decomposing moose dung or decaying animal matter and as if this isn't remarkable enough the sporophytes which give it such an attractive and distinctive appearance give off an odour similar to dung! Arctic Terns dance gracefully above us as we walk back along the walkway.

Day 12

Norwegian Fjords

The Norwegian coast is hardly more than an hour to the west of Abisko and today will provide an extraordinary contrast to Swedish Lapland. We descend towards the coast passing cute little wooden houses perched on picturesque knolls overlooking little lakes before reaching Fjordland. Impressive steep-sided mountains drop precipitously into still dark waters. The slopes lower down are cloaked in something much more akin to what we think of as forest rather than the stunted birches of Abisko. The coastal plant communities here are very different. Amongst a host of ferns flower *Saussurea alpina* and lovely *Lysimachia maritima*. Sedges include *Carex maritima* and *Carex glareosa*. We'll visit Skjomen Fjord, a hugely scenic landscape with 1700m mountains and glaciers as a backdrop and plentiful waterfalls cascading down the cliffs. Harbour Porpoise cruise past. On the rocks are *Gentianella aurea* and *Carex viridula*. The bay at Nordre Håkvik has abundant birdlife, with large numbers of Velvet Scoter and Common Eider, and here we are likely to also see Black Guillemot, Red-breasted Mergansers, and Great Northern Divers. Under pines by Rombaken, a fjord just north of Narvik, is a fine show of Creeping Ladies Tresses, growing with lovely One-flowered Wintergreen, and with the distinctive and unusual Oyster Plant in flower on the shore too.

Day 13

Trollsjön

On one day we'll take a walk into the magnificent glaciated valley of Trollsjön where we'll see all sorts of evidence of glaciation such as various moraine types, erratics and a truly spectacular U-shaped valley which ends in a deep blue corrie lake. Along the way we'll see Frog Orchids and wet areas have lots of *Saxifraga stellaris*. birch forest is literally carpeted with abundant *Cornus suecica*. Globeflowers, Red Campions and Wood Cranesbills make an amazing show and change to *Viola biflora* by the acre as we get higher. We'll find uncommon species such as *Oxytropis lapponica*, *Micranthes nivalis* and *Pyrola media*. Pale Arctic Clouded Yellow, Cranberry Blue and Bog Fritillary inhabit areas of boggy pools where we'll also encounter some fine dragonflies such

as Azure Hawker, the lovely Alpine Emerald and both Ruby Whiteface and Small Whiteface. We'll walk through the territories of several pairs of Long-tailed Skuas and Rough-legged Buzzards soar overhead. On the surrounding crags are Snow Buntings and we'll hope to see some Reindeer here. Up by the turquoise tarn cliffs have *Minuartia stricta*, the delicate *Euphrasia salisburgensis*, and the lovely little orchid *Chamorchis alpina*.

Day 14

Vassijaure & Låktatjåkko Trail

Along the valley towards Norway there's a fabulous mosaic of habitats from birchwoods to marshes and from bogs to lakes. Black-throated Divers in their immaculate breeding plumage are a stylish sight and the improbably bright plumes of Slavonian Grebes will attract the attention of photographers on the tour. Red-necked Phalaropes spin on rush-fringed waters at Vassijaure and Wood Sandpipers and Goldeneyes inhabit birchwood ponds.

The Låktatjåkko Trail takes us into the hills behind the hotel. The scenery is fabulous. We'll find *Erigeron humilis* with its velvety black phyllaries, wonderful patches of *Saxifraga aizoides*, *Pinguicula alpina* with its yellow-spotted white flowers, and stands of the almond-scented *Cystopteris montana*. *Veronica alpina* is particularly fine up here and as we reach snow patches we find fabulous *Ranunculus nivalis* and white and pink *Ranunculus glacialis*. There are nice *Diapensia lapponica* and more saxifrages – *cernua*, *tenuis*, *rivularis* and lots of lovely *stellaris*.

Day 15

Aptasvare Nature Reserve and return to the UK

Either today, or on the arrival day, or if neither offer enough time, we'll make time sometime during the week to visit Aptasvare Nature Reserve, a huge tract of some 130 square kilometres of protected old-growth montane tundra forest interface. Here the rolling hills are covered in an open forest dominated by Scots Pine and Spruce, with Birches relegated to third. The Scots Pines are tiny but clearly quite old. The plant life is dominated by common *Ericaceae* but the birdlife is exceptional. We can find parties of Siberian Jays and Siberian Tits are frequently observed. Bohemian Waxwings add colour and Bramblings are quite common. The airport is just fifteen minutes away so we're sure to arrive just on time...

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