

## **SPITSBERGEN: BOWHEAD WHALES & POLAR BEARS**

With Naturalist Journeys - Oceanwide Expeditions

(20 June – 1 July 2022)

You've heard the quote "Getting there is half the fun". Well not on this trip. Traveling during the years of COVID has been a challenge for everyone. To start our flight out of Detroit was cancelled right before we were to go in a few days. Luckily a very early morning flight was secured for us. After arriving at the DTW to check in the agent told us she could not find our information. After 20 mins we got it straighten out and were on our way. When getting to EWR we saw lots of people and not much staff. This caused a bit problem for everyone. Then the trains stopped running and we took our luggage to Terminal B to find long lines to get processed, no one to staff the entrances. Anyway after getting out of EWR after a 6 hr. layover we were on to Oslo. After leaving Oslo we had to land in Tromso for customs as we were leaving the Schengen Area. Passengers are required to disembark and retrieve their luggage, go through customs and wait to board the plane. On the last leg of our trip to Spitsbergen on Svalbard. We thought 'we are finally here'. But we were surprised with NO luggage. Where is the luggage? Newark still has it! With no luggage we located the bus to Longyearbyen a small coal-mining town known for its views of the Northern Lights on Spitsbergen and excursions to look for wildlife.

Svalbard (also known as Spitsbergen), constitutes the westernmost bulk of the archipelago, it borders the Arctic Ocean, the Norwegian Sea, and the Greenland Sea. Spitsbergen is the largest and only permanently populated island of the Svalbard archipelago in northern Norway. The island was first used as a whaling base in the 17th and 18th centuries, after which it was abandoned. Coal mining started at the end of the 19th century, and several permanent communities were established. The Svalbard Treaty of 1920 recognized Norwegian sovereignty and established Svalbard as a free economic zone and a demilitarized zone. The island has an Arctic climate, although with significantly higher temperatures than other places at the same latitude. The flora benefits from the long period of midnight sun, which compensates for the polar night. Svalbard is a breeding ground for many seabirds, and also supports polar bears, arctic foxes, reindeer and marine mammals. Six national parks protect the largely untouched, yet fragile environment. The island has many glaciers, mountains, and fjords. The Northern Lights are visible during winter, and summer brings the "midnight sun"—sunlight 24 hours a day.

Without our checked luggage, we did have our backpacks and one carry-on suitcase. In the carry-on suitcase I had packed our boots and warmest winter jackets purchased previous with this trip in mind. I had all the other things suggested to bring in our checked luggage. We checked into Hotel Polfareren. Found our guide, Gerard Gorman whose luggage was also lost in transit. He told us where to go shopping to get some essential clothing and a co-op with other items we would need for the trip.

(Wednesday, 22 June 2022) We saw part of our group with our guide outside the hotel. We grabbed our coats and boots and caught up with them. Gerard was taking a small

group on a hike. We are glad we went for the hike as we got accustomed to the town and saw some nice wildflowers and birds. We watched an arctic fox (also known as the snow fox) stealing eggs out the Common Elders nests. The eider's nest is lined with eiderdown, plucked from the female's breast. This soft and warm lining has long been harvested for filling pillows and quilts, but in more recent years has been largely replaced by down from domestic farm-geese and synthetic alternatives. Although eiderdown pillows or quilts are now a rarity, eiderdown harvesting continues and is sustainable, as it can be done after the ducklings leave the nest with no harm to the birds. Near the dog yard was a colony of nesting Common Elders. Around 250 Elder's can be found around the dog yard every year. The huskies start howling when an arctic fox is around. We saw the fox grab a egg and run up into the hills and later come back for more.

Snow buntings were everywhere and you could walk close to them. Snow buntings like many Arctic species have perfectly adapted plumage in white and black. For many people in Longyearbyen the snow bunting is a true sign of summer in the high Arctic. It has its own alarm call for arctic fox that warns other buntings that this is an arctic fox approaching. We saw many of these birds in town and on the roadway. We also saw Pink-footed Geese, Barnacle Geese, Arctic Tern, Ringed Plover, Black Guillemot and others. We saw wildflowers blooming like the Arctic Poppy, Polar White Cotton grass and others.

The wind was very strong enough to almost knock you over. That did not stop the adults and kids from riding their bikes around town and to stores. We saw the Svalbard Museum a museum of natural and cultural history that we would visit the next day. We went shopping for clothes and gear for our trip on Hondius the latest most advanced polar vessel of Oceanwide Expeditions. The town had many shops loaded with warm clothes and we purchased plenty and a duffle bag. After shopping we stopped for lunch in 'Kroa.' next to our hotel. We were in a place that had WiFi and Mike got a call from the airport in Longyearbyen that our luggage arrived! Well we were speechless. We were stuck with all the stuff we brought because no returns. Good warm clothing so no problem just have to get it back home. Now I had lots of toiletries, cosmetics and replacements. I did like that now I had my PJ's as they only sell them in Longyearbyen at Christmas time. Had a good night sleep and ready for tomorrow.

(Thursday, 23 June 2022) Today we went to the visit the Svalbard Museum a museum of natural and cultural history. Aimed to provide broad and comprehensive knowledge about Svalbard's 400 year long history, as well as present the natural resources that is the basis for all life in the archipelago. Svalbard's discovery in 1596 marked the start of centuries with human activities in this archipelago far, far north. The development in continental Europe generated a need for resources that could be found in Svalbard. Whaling, for the sake of the whale oil, was of importance for several nations. Russian Pomors established in Svalbard for hunting for furs, followed by the Norwegians. The geology of Svalbard is particular and valuable in many ways. Geology reveals to us that what today is Svalbard once was located far further south in the world than today. Learn about where the thick layers of coal came from, what secrets they may reveal, how the coal mining industry

was established and how societies were formed around it. Great expeditions with the main mission to explore this part of the world became of big importance. The explorers were hunting for records, for the North Pole – and later, the expeditions shifted to scientific expeditions. The flora and fauna of Svalbard is presented as you walk through the exhibition hall. You will encounter all the animals of Svalbard and some of the birds and plant life.

We walked around in the stores to see their displays and goods. Shared a cinnamon muffin and coffee at a nice shop. Saw our ship the Hondius in the bay. The wild winds were still present as we walk around to view the wild flowers in the fields. Our Arctic adventure was due to begin today but extremely high winds meant that Oceanwide Expeditions had to take unprecedented decision to postpone embarkation until tomorrow. The conditions made it impossible to embark guests. Their usual operating limit for zodiacs is 25 knots with gust up to 30 knots. As we could see from shore, the storm was affecting all the operations in Longyearbyen harbor. Prioritizing the safety of their guests, they reluctantly conceded that embarkation would not be possible. We stayed for the night at the Radisson. We had a nice room facing the museum and the open areas where reindeer were grazing.

(Friday, 24 June 2022) Today was embarkation in Longyearbyen, and exploring Skansbukta. By 7:00 a.m. we were taken by zodiacs to board the Hondius. The first priority, after boarding, was breakfast and having a little time to settle into cabins and unpack. After this, later in the morning, Expedition Leader, Florence (Flo), and Hotel Manager and William, gave the introductory briefing and ship safety. We were informed of correct behavior towards the environment, people and wildlife of the Arctic. AEL George gave the final briefing regarding zodiac operations and safety which would come in useful later for our afternoon activities, getting ashore to explore.

The location of our afternoon shore landing was Skansbukta, named after the nearby mountain Skansen (a Norwegian word for ‘sloping’ which refers to the shape of the wide plateau that tops the mountain). This fantastic location full of interest, from great views of Svalbard Reindeer to a wide variety of plant life to fascinating historical features. A twisted, rusting railway, remains of mining operations for Anhydrite, desiccated version of Gypsum, (which ran from 1918 – 1930’s by the Dalen Portland Cement Works), and a small wrecked ship were items of significance at this site. Additionally, there was a trapper’s hut, built in the early 1900’s but well maintained and still in use by locals today. Many wildflowers were in bloom listed by name in the ship log. The towering mountains surrounding the landing area were an impressive sight and host to large numbers of nesting seabird. At the end of the afternoon guests enjoyed returning to Hondius in zodiacs via the seabird nesting cliffs and viewing numerous Atlantic Puffins.

(Saturday, 25 June 2022) Magdalenafjord, Gullybukta, Gravnesodden and the Waggonwaybreen Glacier. This morning, we were in Magdalenafjorden and the next site scheduled for exploration was Gullybukta. This shore landing provided us with the opportunity to take a short walk to enjoy incredible views of Walrus at their haul out site.

Walrus are quite particular when it comes to their preferred haul out locations; they like sandy shores with plenty of food, mainly mussels and clams, available in the surrounding shallow waters. We saw many walrus while crewing in zodiacs and walking on the beach. Most were resting on the shore, a big pile of blubber, tusks and flippers, whilst others wallowed in water, and a few were seen swimming together, heading offshore. Another wildlife highlight of this site was a Red-throated Diver (aka Red-throated Loon) which appeared to be sitting on its nest. There were also numerous Arctic Terns busily catching small fish. We were careful not to walk too close to any terns on the ground as they may already be incubating eggs.

In the afternoon we went ashore just across the bay in Gravnesodden and took a zodiac cruise to the impressive Waggonwaybreen glacier. During the zodiac cruise guests were delighted by views of Harbour Seals (aka Common Seals), many of whom were hauled out resting in their curved 'banana' pose. For the birders, King Eiders were the highlight of the zodiac cruise. The males have pale blue-green plumage on their heads with a red beak complete with large yellow 'crown' patch – they are real stunners! Gravnesodden gets its name from the many whalers' graves located there. These are protected and inaccessible to visitors, but we could still see the memorial stones and crosses marking the final resting place of these seafarers from outside the surrounding railings. Some guests returned to the sandy shore at Gravnesodden to undertake the Polar Plunge for a dip in the Arctic Ocean. We had BBQ for dinner on the outside decks followed by music and dancing.

(Sunday, 26 June 2022) The plan was a split landing between visiting Smeerenburg, the 'blubber town', and a zodiac cruise toward Virgohamna a small bay on the northern coast of Dames Island. This area was full of history with some remains of the whaling era. Around 1630's, around 200 persons were living on this little piece of land to work for the whale's hunt business. Seven Dutch companies were based there, and you still saw the leftovers of blubber ovens and whale bones on the beach. On the other side of the landing, we spent a nice time admiring Walrus' haul on the beach. The afternoon activity started around 14:30 with a zodiac cruise around Indre and Intre Norskoya looking for polar bears. In between the different birds populating the region, we admired the wild landscape of the area. We could feel that we were getting more north as the wind from the Arctic Ocean was blowing in our face. To warm us up, William and the hotel team were waiting on the water in a zodiac to serve us a delicious hot chocolate, topped with some rum and whipped cream. As we got back to the ship Flo announced that we were having one last special evening activity. In fact, a female bear and her two cubs have been spotted a few miles away from our position. We jumped into our jackets and gear and life jackets and raced back to the zodiac dock area. We got on one of the first to leave zodiacs and was lucky as the mother polar bear and her cubs were walking around the rocky shore looking for a place to take a nap. The mother laid down and the two cubs snuggled around her. After an hour of quietly moving toward them, where we saw them stretching, moving, sleeping and having a good time, we headed back to the ship for a well-deserved dinner. The dinner was wonderful thanks to Ralf and his team who kept the dinner ready for the guests after an 2 hour delay so we could all go see the polar bears.

(Sunday, 26 June 2022) Day at Sea-Heading West. As we thought we will have a little sleep in, Flo's voice woke us up at 6:15 am, to tell us that a bear was spotted on the ice. The polar bear just caught breakfast and was having a feast on a seal. Captain Arthur placed the ship in the perfect position to enjoy the sighting. As we spent an hour looking at it, we spotted a few Ivory Gulls waiting for a share of the feast. Around 9:00 am, it started moving as he was done with the seal. You could see his full belly, as it was almost touching the sea ice while it was walking... It slowly made his way toward the ship, and we could enjoy the view of the bear trying to find the best place to digest. As we were getting out of the sea ice, which was too thick to keep navigating in it, we started to follow the edge of the sea ice. It was time for Sara's lecture who talked about polar bears and the faith of these majestic beast in a changing environment. That made us realized how fragile their survivals were. During the lecture, we got called on the PA system because two Bowhead whales had been spotted. It surfaced 1-2 times before diving again. Mike did get a photo of the Bowhead whale's fluke. The afternoon went slowly with the ship sailing along the packed ice looking for polar bears and the mystical bowhead whale. Szimon gave a lecture about sea ice and the way it is formed. He also talked about the impact of climate change and how the sea ice is going to be affected. This was followed by Herman, our onboard Bowhead whale's specialist. He covered everything to do about this majestic whale, from their ecology to their behavior and historic hunting to modern day threats.

(Monday, 27 June 2022) Day at Sea-Heading West. As we thought we will have a little sleep in, Flo's voice woke us up at 6:15 am, to tell us that a bear was spotted on the ice. The polar bear just caught breakfast and was having a feast on a seal. Captain Arthur placed the ship in the perfect position to enjoy the sighting. As we spent an hour looking at it, we spotted a few Ivory Gulls waiting for a share of the feast. Around 9:00 am, it started moving as he was done with the seal. You could see his full belly, as it was almost touching the sea ice while it was walking... It slowly made his way toward the ship, and we could enjoy the view of the bear trying to find the best place to digest. As we were getting out of the sea ice, which was too thick to keep navigating in it, we started to follow the edge of the sea ice. It was time for Sara's lecture who talked about polar bears and the faith of these majestic beast in a changing environment. That made us realized how fragile their survivals were. During the lecture, we got called on the PA system because two Bowhead whales had been spotted. It surfaced 1-2 times before diving again. Mike did get a photo of the Bowhead whale's fluke. The afternoon went slowly with the ship sailing along the packed ice looking for polar bears and the mystical bowhead whale. Szimon gave a lecture about sea ice and the way it is formed. He also talked about the impact of climate change and how the sea ice is going to be affected. This was followed by Herman, our onboard Bowhead whale's specialist. He covered everything to do about this majestic whale, from their ecology to their behavior and historic hunting to modern day threats.

(Tuesday, 28 June 2022) Our second day in the ice was another full schedule of lectures, alongside looking out for wildlife. After breakfast Expedition Guide Mikhail got the programme off to a fascinating start with his lecture called 'Arctic Awhaleability: The Past, Present and Future of Cetaceans in Arctic', going into detail about the threats

whales, dolphins and porpoises face and some of the efforts to protect them. Hazel was scheduled to follow this with her talk on 'Arctic Pinnipeds: Seals and the Walrus' but this was delayed by the sighting of a real seal hauled out resting on the ice. After some debate among the Expedition Team this was identified as an immature Hooded Seal. The talk on commenced with Hazel. Our guides Szymon and Laura spotted a huge gathering of Harp Seals hauled out on the ice in the distance. At first these were tiny dark dots in the distance, but as the bridge team cautiously and carefully maneuvered Hondius closer a spectacular vision appeared before our eyes after we finished lunch. An estimated 1,500+ seals. This was truly an unforgettable, once in a lifetime sighting. The animals were a variety of ages; some were well-marked with their characteristic dark face and harp marking on their backs, other younger animals were sandy coloured with spots and there were also some pups from this year still with their bright white lanugo fur. Sperm Whales and Dolphins were spotted by some people. We missed seeing them. We had a splendid dinner. The food on the ship was fantastic as was the desserts.

(Wednesday, 29 June 2022) Our day began with a landing at Ingeborgfjellet, specifically the area of Camp Millar. Whilst making their way to the landing site to scout for Polar Bears the Expedition Team were very excited to spot some Beluga Whales! These bright white whales (their name comes from the Russian word for white) were in two separate groups, totaling fourteen animals. This area is highly tidal with rocky outcrops and sandy shallows; the Belugas were socializing together near the shore. On our zodiac on the way around the landing we did see some Beluga Whales.

Once ashore Mike enjoyed walking around this beautiful area of tundra. I did not go on this landing because it seemed rainy and took the time to relax in my cabin and pack up all of our belongings. Arctic summer was in full flow now with lots of flora blooming, including Svalbard Poppy. A large herd of Svalbard Reindeer were also present and providing interest alongside the historical huts. These were built by the Northern Exploration Company (NEC) in 1910 as part of their project mining for gold. They did find this precious metal but their efforts to cash in on it were unsuccessful and unprofitable. Mike took some beautiful photos of the flora and reindeers. As the time at this site was drawing to a close heavy rain was falling, meaning that everyone was keen to board zodiacs to return to the ship for a hot drink. As the first zodiac returned from Hondius back to the shore, Expedition Leader Flo (who was in the aforementioned zodiac) spotted a Polar Bear heading for the landing site! An evacuation was ordered immediately. Everybody calmly made their way to the waiting zodiacs and safely journeyed back to our ship whilst the bear diverted its course and began sauntering away up the hillside. Mike told me that he had just arrived at the landing site to get in a zodiac when the driver told Mike to get in a boat that already had the usual amount of people. He said but the boat is full. The driver said there is still room that it could fit at the most 15. The reason Mike realized is that a polar bear was heading for the landing site. Mike saw the bear running down the hill. With people still at the landing site in mass the bear decided it was a animal bigger than him and diverted its course. After lunch we headed to Calypsobyen, named after HMS Calypso, a British Navy ship which surveyed the area in 1895. The huts here are used as a Polish research base and have been for over twenty years, occupied only in the summer months.

(Thursday, 30 June 2022) Our Arctic adventure was over. Time for our last breakfast on board M/V Hondius. We disembarked via the gangway and were reunited with our luggage and now extra luggage before boarding the awaiting coaches and went into town to catch our bus to the airport. Everyone said goodbye to the friendly Expedition Team and departed, smiling and reflecting upon a wonderful expedition cruise.

Total distance sailed on our voyage: 831.1 nautical miles

Furthest North: 81°22.08' N, 014°09.90' E

On behalf of Oceanwide Expeditions, Captain Artur Iakovlev, Expedition Leader Florence Kuyper, Hotel Manager William Barnes and all the crew and staff of M/V Hondius, it has been a pleasure travelling with you.

Great trip we have thought of about taking for a long time.

Audrey & Mike Lambert

*(This report was taken from the HDS-22, trip log, North Spitsbergen-Bowhead Whales & Polar Bears in the sea ice-Birding by Oceanwide Expedition and information from the internet, Wiki and first hand experiences of Mike and Audrey Lambert)*

