

Svalbard Travel Journal – Volume 1

Sunday, July 20, 2025 - Longyearbyen, Svalbard

Happy birthday Lori and greetings from Svalbard, a remote Norwegian archipelago nestled between mainland Norway and the North Pole. It's the northernmost place on Earth with a civilian population and airport, so it's the main jumping-off point for North Pole expeditions. However, with just 2,500 people scattered across the region, calling it "inhabited" might be a stretch. It's not quite the North Pole, but we can see it from here, kinda like the way Sarah Palin can see Russia from her porch. We arrived here today after leaving Fort Lauderdale on Friday, spending the day in Oslo, Norway yesterday, then flying to Longyearbyen, Svalbard this morning. Longyearbyen is a quirky Arctic town with more snowmobiles than people and the starting and ending port for our eleven-day expedition cruise aboard the Atlas World Voyager, the same ship we took to Antarctica a couple of years ago. Before boarding the ship, we took a quick tour of Longyearbyen, driving through the town and visiting the outside of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault, a private bank of international seeds stored deep in a mountain.



Svalbard is known (at least by those who've ever heard of it) for its stark, dramatic landscapes: glaciers, frozen tundra, and the wildlife that thrives in this harsh Arctic environment, including polar bears, reindeer, walruses, and Arctic foxes. We hope to see some polar bears, but not up close. Just in case, when you leave the settlement areas, by law you must carry appropriate polar bear protection, and a firearm is basically the required choice.



No Northern Lights this time of year, as the summer "midnight sun" means 24 hours of daylight. It'll be cold but not brutally so this time of year; in the 30s to 40s °F.

This place is remote, and life here is unusual, to say the least. There's no native population. Everyone here is from somewhere else. That's because women aren't allowed to give birth in Svalbard. Due to the isolation and lack of medical facilities, expectant mothers are required to leave a few weeks before their due date and give birth somewhere else. No babies crying here.

As crazy as it sounds, it's also illegal to die here. The permafrost makes traditional burials impossible, and bodies don't decompose, *ever*. If you're terminally ill, you can't stay here. Go die somewhere else!

Monday, July 21, 2025

After being fitted for our parkas, boots and life jackets in the morning, we navigated to Van Mijenfjorden, the third largest fjord in the Svalbard archipelago, in the southern portion of Spitsbergen island. After a lecture on the North Pole and lunch, we loaded our



zodiac boats for a landing on shore and a hike through the tundra with reindeer among us and birds on the mountain above us.

Stay tuned for more.
Love Lori and Stephen



Svalbard Travel Journal – Volume 2

Tuesday, July 22, 2025

Our search for polar bears continued today. Polar bears are native to the Arctic and nearby areas. They are the largest species of bear and land carnivore, with adult males weighing up to 1,760 pounds. That's a big animal and what everyone wants to see. It's a major reason why we're here.

This morning, we rode the zodiacs ashore and hiked up a rocky ridge to take in views of rugged, glacial scenery that a camera can't do justice to. In the afternoon, it was back to the zodiacs for a ride through sea ice and small icebergs to view the glacial fronts up close. The glaciers were spectacular, both in their sheer size and in their cracking sounds that released air trapped hundreds of years ago.

Just when we thought the day was over and were sound asleep, plans changed. At midnight (because time is meaningless when the animals come out), the expedition team leader woke everyone up with the announcement: "Whales!" Naturally, we sprang out of bed, threw on our clothes, and shuffled upstairs to the outside deck. And there they were—whales, swimming alongside and in front of the ship, guiding us along, in broad daylight at midnight. And honestly? Totally worth it.



Wednesday, July 23, 2025

Another zodiac ride ashore this morning to walk on the tundra, through muck, ice, snow and rocks to view birds and native plants. In the afternoon we cruised along the coast to search for more wildlife, finding a large pod of beluga whales.

And then it happened, at the end of dinner. It started as a few people scurrying towards the windows and exits to the open deck. Then more people. Someone spotted a white dot onshore, miles away. Whispers: "polar bear." The ship's engines shifted into reverse to stop us. More people on the move. Everyone dropping their forks and grabbing their binoculars and cameras. An announcement on the speakers: POLAR BEAR ON THE RIDGE ON SHORE! One moment I was

practically falling asleep at the table, the next it was as though I had drunk a six-pack of Red Bull. For at least an hour everyone's binoculars and cameras were trained on the white dot. Some photos were almost good; most were not because it was so far away. One guy got a great video, and even though he was French, he became the most popular guy on board for sharing his video with everyone.

Our plans for tomorrow have changed. Fuck the glacier or tundra or whatever else we had plans to visit. We'll stay here overnight while the captain maneuvers the ship through the shallows so we can chase this holy grail of wildlife in the



Arctic. Regulations state that the closest we can be to a polar bear is 300 meters. So that's the objective, and apparently the captain will risk running aground so we can get a better view of this polar bear. We went to bed as the ship was repositioned for better views of where the bear had disappeared.

Thursday, July 24, 2025

We awoke this morning to not one but three polar bears on the shore, supposedly different bears from last night. We stayed on the ship and were able to view these bears from a distance. Then they announced a fourth bear was spotted. Then more bears were spotted, and we got closer. Enough bears that we lost count. One curious bear wandered into the water and swam right up to our ship, definitely breaking the distance rules, but that was on him. And that was all before lunch. All in all, it was an amazing day for spotting polar bears.

After lunch we took a zodiac ride and encountered a large colony of male walruses lounging on a beach like a giant pile



of overcooked sausages, flopping, grunting, and snuggling together. Word must have gotten out to give us a memorable experience, so a few walruses swim over to our zodiacs to get up close and personal.

More polar bear sightings after that, and even a polar bear movie to end the night. Wow, what a day!

Stay tuned for more.
Love Lori and Stephen

Svalbard Travel Journal – Volume 3

Friday, July 25, 2025

The polar bear sightings started this morning with a 7:05am wakeup call on the in-cabin speakers. We've become expertly conditioned to abandon whatever we're doing, including sleeping, to throw on multiple layers of clothes and sprint to the lounge on the top deck, where someone with binoculars and infinite patience points out tiny white dots in the distance that, upon closer inspection, are actual polar bears. It was practically a polar bear parade until lunchtime, with several bears spotted. We've been very lucky so far, as our polar bear count is way above average.

Unlike their cousin Teddy, polar bears are classified as marine mammals. They spend a significant portion of their lives on sea ice in the Arctic Ocean, relying on it for hunting, breeding, and just chillin'.



We've left the areas of Svalbard exposed to the Gulf Stream, a warm and powerful ocean current which carries warm water from the Gulf of Mexico and the southeastern US coast towards Europe and eventually into the Arctic Ocean, which contributes to relatively milder climates. Now we're in the High Arctic, so the weather has gotten noticeably colder and the landscape is more stark. There's no greenery whatsoever and a lot more snow on the ground. The afternoon was spent cruising through the fjords to tomorrow's expedition location. It was our turn to chill.



Saturday, July 26, 2025

This morning's shore landing took us to a glacier that's retreated enough to leave behind a nice trail of dirt and rocks, perfect for a punishing uphill hike. The view from the top was a great place to admire the scenery and catch our breath. Downhill was easier on the lungs but tougher on the knees.

After lunch we headed to Nordaustlandet, an island with dramatic ice shelves and a walrus colony that we observed from our zodiac. This colony was all females and some calves, lounging in a communal group like a pile of sausages with whiskers.



Sunday,
July 27, 2025



We awoke this morning at 7am, not to a polar bear sighting but to the ship bumping through sea ice. We're officially north of the 81st parallel, which, in nautical terms, is classified as "way the fuck up there." We're now farther north than any landmass, cruising in a world made entirely of ice and sea. The hunt today is for wildlife that lives on sea ice. The first sighting was a bearded seal at

7:30am, but by the time we got to the lounge, we passed it. It was too far away anyway, just a faraway dot that only Superman can



appreciate. We spent the day spotting various seals, including a very rare Hooded seal, and finally a polar bear on a piece of sea ice.



Monday, July 28, 2025

At 1:10am we were awoken by the announcement that the ship was following two blue whales. Tough call, but we opted to stay in bed rather than get dressed and go to the lounge for the slight chance of seeing a blow far in the distance. At least that's how we justified staying in bed at one in the morning. The whale could have jumped on the ship and shook hands with everyone that was awake, and we would have missed it.

More to come.

Love Lori and Stephen

Svalbard Travel Journal – Volume 4



Monday, July 28, 2025

After breakfast we took the zodiacs ashore to Kinnvika, a former scientific station that was built during the International Geophysical Year of 1957/1958. Although the station wasn't used after that year, the buildings are still in relatively good condition. After walking through some of the buildings, we hiked up the elevated beach and along ridges filled with Svalbard's oldest fossils, including Stromatolites, which are layered sedimentary formations created by photosynthetic microorganisms. There's your biology and geology lesson for the day. Who said this journal wasn't educational?

In the afternoon we took a zodiac cruise to Alkefjellet, a towering bird cliff that hosts over 100,000 breeding pairs of Brünnich's guillemots. I've never seen, much less imagined, this many birds in one place. It made Hitchcock's *The Birds* look like a backyard bird feeder. Then towards the end of the ride we finally saw the last animal we hadn't seen yet, an Arctic Fox. Ca-ching!



Tuesday, July 29, 2025

At 6:00am—yes, six—we sailed past Moffen, a small peninsula featuring a large walrus colony. It was a “voluntary” viewing, but since we were awake, we figured “what the hell?” After breakfast, we landed

by zodiac for a two-hour hike along a glacier in Wijdefjord. It was a tough walk over loose rocks, the kind of hike that, about halfway in, makes you question why you did this. Lori was not thrilled, but she powered through.

In the afternoon Lori opted out of joining me on a zodiac ride to view another glacier up close. I think she's still recovering from the morning hike. I was in the first group to go out, and the ride was long, the wind was strong, and the waves were tall. The way back to the ship was particularly rough, and they canceled subsequent trips out due to the conditions. I'm glad I went, and Lori's glad she didn't.



Wednesday, July 30, 2025



Today we visited Ny-Ålesund, a former mining town turned high-latitude research station. It was radio-silence all day, as cell phone and Bluetooth signals can supposedly interfere with the research going on. We walked around the “town” which has an all-year permanent population of 30 to 35 people, with the summer population reaching 114. Every building in the area must keep its doors unlocked in case someone needs to get away from a polar bear that wanders into town. It is the northernmost functional civilian settlement in the world, so

of course it has a gift shop where we bought some souvenirs. It’s the station that Roald Amundsen took off from to become the first person to cross the North Pole by air. Santa Claus was there from the Pole stocking up on provisions, so I took a picture with him.

In the afternoon I had a chance to get my blood flowing by diving into the frigid water of the Arctic Ocean for a “Polar Plunge.” Lori opted out of the 34-degree water, preferring instead a hot shower. Who’s the smart one?



The cruise is over tomorrow morning, after which we’ll fly back to Oslo and make our way home. It was a great trip. We met a lot of interesting, well-traveled people (who’s going to Svalbard if they haven’t been to Italy yet?), viewed wildlife in its natural habitat and saw beautiful scenery. My only regret is not having a better camera.

Thanks for following along with us.
Love, Lori and Stephen

