

North Spitsbergen

with Oceanwide aboard *MV Plancius*



Expedition Log
29 June – 8th July 2011

With

Captain Evgeny Levakov

and his Dutch, Russian, German, Polish and Filipino Crew

Including:

First Officer: Francois David Kwekkeboom (Netherlands)

Second Officer: Artur Iakolev (Russian)

Third Officer: Franz Doomen (Belgian)

Chief Engineer: Erwin Vermeulen (Netherlands)

Bosun: Ronald Allan Donguines

And the *MV Plancius* Expedition Staff:

Expedition Leader: Rinie van Muers (Netherlands)

Assistant Expedition Leader: Brent Houston (USA)

Kayak Guide: Peter Gwatkin (UK)

Guide: Jim Mayer (UK)

Guide: Andrey Volkov (Russia)

Guide: Michelle van Dijk (Netherlands)

Guide: Andreas Umbriet (Germany)

Guide: Christian Katlein (Germany)

Photo Guide: Paul Hobson (Sheffield, UK!)

Zodiac Drivers: Neil Apwan, Yury Sabol, Vitaly Zuev, Dmitry Ivanov.

Chef: Ralf Barthel (Germany)

Sous Chef: Mathias Schmitt (Germany)

Hotel and Restaurant Manager: Alan Hogan (Canadian)

Asst. Hotel & Restaurant Manager: Lilian van Muers (Polland)

Bartender Extraordinaire: Rosireen Avillon (Philippines)

Doctor: Eric Tan

29th June – Day 1

Longyearbyen

GPS 0730 position: 78°13'N, 15°36'E

Weather: 10°C Sunny, calm water, no wind

Embarkation Day. All passengers were aboard by 5pm. Many of us earlier had the opportunity to explore Spitsbergen's capital, including the local souvenir shops, café, and excellent Svalbard Museum.

Longyearbyen (population 1800) is situated in Adventfjord which lies within Spitsbergen's largest fjord, Isfjord. Its location at 78° 13'N makes it one of the most northerly towns in the world. The mountains were brilliant white in the strong sunlight but the dark colours where the snow had melted around Longyearbyen reminded us of the coal mines, the town's original industry.

Hotel manager Alan and his team were on-hand to meet all new arrivals to the ship. With the assistance of the friendly crew we gradually found our way around the ship. Our first general get-together was announced over the loud-speaker – an invitation to appear in the observation lounge for a welcoming glass of champagne. Here the Captain greeted us all and the Expedition staff was introduced.

As *Plancius* gently manoeuvred out to sea the mandatory safety briefing and lifeboat drill took place. The formalities completed, we enjoyed the sight of Fulmars swooping past the ship, awed as we floated past glaciers and mountains, and revelling in the feeling of leaving civilisation behind. Our adventure was beginning!



30th June – Day 2

Fjortende Julibukta, Tinayrebukta and the Lilliehöökfjord

GPS 0800 position: 79°06'N, 011°37'E (12 nautical miles to Ny Alesund)
Weather: 10°C, Overcast but feeling warm as there was very little wind.

Our first breakfast of the trip was at 7:30am in a packed dining room. After collecting our boots, all passengers attended a mandatory polar bear and zodiac boats briefing.

We then put theory into practice with a scenic Zodiac shuttle to our landings in Forjtende Julibukta. First ashore was the hiking group, who were keen to stretch their legs after several days of travel in planes, trains and buses. They stomped up the mountain on the northern side of the fjord and were rewarded with good views just below the cloud level. On the way they were able to spot reindeer and ptarmigan.



The rest of the group landed at the foot of the mountain and enjoyed walks to the glacier front in the east and west to the tundra, beautifully covered in flowers.

This was an ideal opportunity to sharpen our eyes and we spotted Svalbard reindeer, Pink-footed geese, Snow

buntings, Puffins and many other birds. Heading closer to the ice front on our return we marvelled at the towering seraks from a safe distance, lest they should fall!

After lunch our long walkers started their hike at Camp Zoe, a small hut built by Ernest Mansfield of the Northern Exploration Company in 1911 and named after his daughter. Mansfield, literally lost his marbles, and tons of money (his own and other peoples), when it was discovered that the material he was quarrying – marble - was disastrously affected by frost. The cabin was used by their winter watch-man, Henri Rudi, as a hunting base. Rudi went on claim the title of “Polar Bear King” as a result of killing over 700 bears in his career. A dubious honour!

Being a little kinder to the wildlife our walkers were treated to views of Reindeer, Arctic Skua and Red-throated Divers.

Meanwhile the ship repositioned and any everyone else had the chance to go ashore and have a look at the many flowers on the tundra. The kayakers had a lovely paddle in the calm conditions to the bottom of the fjord.

After dinner, we a ships cruise to the huge Lilliehöökbrean, a glacier with a six mile wide calving front. What a way to finish a fabulous first day!

1st July – Day 3

Raudfjorden & Fuglesangen

GPS 0800 position: 79°47'N 011°59'E

Weather: 5,°C - overcast, windforce 1-2

At 7 o' clock in the morning we got a wake-up call from Rinie, promising us fine weather. So when we got up and looked outside on our way to the breakfast buffet, we found out what fine weather means. No rain, no waves & no snowstorm but calm weather with low clouds that creates a very atmospheric scene.

Raudfjorden means 'Red fjord' but it was still covered by snow and also the fjord was partly frozen.



Is would be a great habitat for polar bears, so everyone was on the lookout for them.

After we had seen some bearded seals it was time for a Zodiac-cruise in Hamiltonbukta between ice floes and bergy-bits to experience the real Arctic feeling.

As we stopped the engine of our Zodiac to enjoy the Arctic silence five curious Black Guillemots

swam towards us and we could almost touch them. Also Kittiwakes sitting on top of beautiful ice sculptures made by mother Nature, were not shy at all. Near the bird cliffs hundreds of Kittiwakes, Common, Black & Brünich's Guillemots were seen. And last but not least a Puffin.

Right after lunch it was time for the 'multi-day-hiking-group' to go ashore. Led by Andreas & Christian the group will be trekking and camping two nights out.

In the afternoon there was a recap where Rinie, Jim & Michelle tried to get us confused about the name giving of Spitsbergen/Svalbard and Andrey told about seals.

The following landing was at Fuglesangen, a rocky place with colonies of Little Auks. Little Auks have their nests under large boulders on steep slopes. Trying to get a closer look on them it seemed they were laughing at us. Being calm and quiet all birds came and sat quite close, but every time a Glaucous Gull came near they all took off.

In the evening the ship cruised through the Smeerenburg Fjord where the old whaling station Smeerenburg was pointed out. In the seventeenth century approx. 200 men were living here over summer to hunt whales. It was here in 1633 that the first intentional overwintering on Spitsbergen took place. Seven Dutch overwintered to avoid theft of equipment and tools by other nations. Even from the ship we could see the remains of blubber ovens.

Also the Smeerenburg-glacier was worth seeing, very atmospheric with some low hanging clouds in the evening light.

The icing on the cake was our first Polar bear in the far distance.

2nd July - Day 4

Andoyane in Liefdefjord

GPS 0800 position: 79°45'N 013°55'E

Weather: 5°C – some clouds, wind force 1

At seven in the morning the rays of sunlight welcomed us to another beautiful day in the Arctic.

We were near Andøyane in Liefdefjorden, which means 'Fjord of love'. Although it was only 5°C, you could stand on the bow without getting cold, because there was hardly any wind. Enjoying the sun and view, soon a Polar bear was spotted. During breakfast the ship moved closer so we could have a zodiac-cruise to get a good look at the bear.

The bear was very friendly to us, not shy at all. We could watch it for hours. She walked along the coast preying on Eider duck nests. The white bear walked over the red rocks which were once desert sand when Spitsbergen was situated near the equator 450 million years ago.

We spend the whole morning watching the bear and didn't get bored at all!

After lunch we went back to get a closer look at the birds. Common Eider



duck, King Eider, Long tailed duck, Red/Grey Phalarope, Red throated diver, Brent goose, Pink footed Goose, Ivory Gull, Glaucous Gull, Skua, Kittiwake & Arctic tern, it seemed bird paradise and it was clear why these islands are called Andøyane which is Norwegian for 'Duck islands'.

Brent called all Zodiacs because he had found a mother with two cubs and a bear alone. All people in his Zodiac witnessed how one of the cubs could not follow its mother and start crying at her when the other bear came close. Then the mother turned around to get her cub and chase the other bear away.



Because of the stressful situation we left mother and cubs alone and focussed on the single bear, which was walking on the fast-ice. Again this was a great photo opportunity.

But not only birds and bears were seen also two Minke whales swam around.

Michelle's group saw a green fishing net at the beach, so in order to clean up Spitsbergen everyone helped to get it from the beach into the Zodiac. It had already one reindeer antler stuck in it.

After dinner our photography-guide Paul explained the basics about photography in the Arctic. Useful tips that people were talking about for days: "Have you done your thirds?"

Sunday 3rd July 2011 – Day 5

Moffen to Sorgfjord

Position at Moffen – 80°00.7'N 014° 29.3'E

Weather: Bright and sunny with a strong Northerly breeze



After an incredible day amongst the bears, Plancius headed West during the night to pick up the trekking expedition. A full report on the trekking trip is found on the CD. This picture shows the happy team as they were collected in the early sunshine.

With the trekkers successfully back on board at 04.30 that morning the ship then headed north to Moffen Island. At approximately 08.40 the ship crossed the 80th parallel (80 degrees of latitude

North). Moffen is a specially protected area that does not allow shore landings. The expedition hoped to observe some Walrus from the ship at the 300m minimum distance set out for all visitors to observe. Some of the keen birders kept a watchful eye on the horizon as we passed Moffen in the hope of also observing the illusive Sabine's Gull.

From this position the ship was now on a heading for Sorgfjorden (Bay of Sorrow). In this bay the most northerly naval battle in history took place. On this particular occasion the argument was between 42 Dutch whaling vessels and two French naval ships. 13 of the Dutch ships were sunk and the others fled.

With a few hours before the ship arrived in Sorgfjorden the expedition leader made good use of the time available by programming some educational talks. Rinie van Muers EL from the Netherlands spent some time recapping on some of what people had observed on the previous day with the 3 bears and the 2 cubs. Rinie linked this into some information regarding the lifecycle, reproduction and sexual dimorphism of the polar bear. After a coffee break Andrey Volkov from Russia also spoke to everyone about his specialist area of scientific research/interest, the breeding cycle and changing habitat of the Ivory gull.

During lunchtime the ship arrived in a breezy Sorgfjorden with the prospect of a number of activity options. A long trek and a medium walk would start from a point close to Eolusneset on the western side of the fjord. The kayakers would start on the opposite and more sheltered side of the bay. The kayakers set off south towards the southern end of the fjord in search of the Ivory gull that had been spotted there a few days earlier. The kayakers

were today joined by the youngest passengers aboard. This brother sister combinations paddled their double kayak at such a speed that the guide had to work very hard to keep up.



The evenings programme was initially set back by a lack of Walrus at the colony, the few that were on site immediately left the beach when Plancius arrived. The expedition hoped for better luck the following day.

One of the passengers in the lounge was heard to ask for his drink to be served “on the rocks” and then got more than he bargained for!

4th July – Day 6

Torellneset and Ice-edge cruising

GPS 1000 position: 79°22.4'N 020° 42.3'E

Weather: 1°C Overcast with a cold wind from the north east.

It felt truly arctic today as we approached the seemingly barren shores of Nordaustlandet. Ice bergs fringed our landing beach, but the zodiac drivers found a way through to Torellneset. The noise of the first two boats drew in some curious visitors.



Soon 6 Walrus were swimming towards the shuttling boats; each time getting a little closer. Eventually they blocked the route through the ice and the zodiacs had to wait a little while – always give way to wild life! Cameras clicked each time a leathery, scratched head broke the surface, loudly announcing his arrival with a snort that sprayed sea water. Once or twice the walrus would get spooked, diving backwards away from the boats with flippers flying. So they would return, however, looking all around with their red eyes to see what the next zodiac would bring.

After a time they realised we were not at all interesting to them, so they eventually returned to the sleeping, snorting and smelling mound of around 20 of these two-tonne animals resting on the point. We wandered over too, marvelling at the upturned tusks, pink flesh radiating heat and of course the smell!

After one last look and one last photo it was time to return to the ship and then throughout the afternoon we cruised along the ice edge in search of polar bears. No luck on this occasion.

For dinner we attempted an Arctic Barbeque! As with all of our activities we are at the mercy of the weather and on this occasion, it did not oblige! So we ate indoors, saving the dancing on deck for the next cruise!

5th July – Day 7

Alkenfjellet and Pack Ice North of Spitsbergen

Position at 08.00hrs: 79°42.1'N 18°15.7'E

Weather: 1°C, strong wind, low clouds and some snow.



In the early morning the ship slowed down on its way north through Hinlopenstrait for a visit to the spectacular bird cliffs of Alkefjellet. Unluckily the weather was not too pleasant and the scheduled zodiac-cruise below the bird cliffs had to be cancelled due to big waves and strong winds. However, our Captain was able to manoeuvre the ship close to the sheer cliffs, and we lingered for almost an hour.

With this weather many of us enjoyed a look at the bird colony from the warm interior of the observation lounge, while the brave stayed outside for some good shots of the Brunich's Guillemots living there.

The ship afterwards continued its course towards the pack ice in the north and after breakfast Brent gave us a lecture about life connected to the sea ice, including the animals living there and how the different sorts of sea ice influence the life cycle in the arctic. We learnt how Phytoplankton, the basis of the food chain mostly grows under first year sea ice and how the more evolved species have need of multi-year sea ice as a habitat. In this lecture he provided us with some essential knowledge to face future problems that will arise with the diminishing sea ice cover of the polar oceans.

After lunch we arrived at the edge of the pack-ice north of Spitsbergen, where we reached the most northerly point of our voyage at 80°40.56' N 15°06.49' E. After an intense time of search through many binoculars, we finally found what we were looking for. The king of the arctic in its natural surrounding! Two big males were making their way along the ice edge in search of seals and offered great photo opportunities for us.



6th July – Day 8

Kongsfjord: Blomstrandhalvøya & Ny Ålesund

Position at 08.00hrs: 78°57.9'N 11°52.6'E

Weather: 6°C, sunshine and few clouds.

Like every morning, we were woken up by Rinie. Overnight we had sailed south to Kongsfjorden where beautiful weather was welcoming us. After several days on the ship it was time for some land excursions again. The group was divided into three parts and Jim gave a short introduction about the name of the place we were supposed to visit: Blomstrandhalvøya means literally “Flowerbeach-Peninsula”. Due to the retreat of a glacier it is not any longer a peninsula but an island. After landing, the hiking group climbed to the top of the island to have a look at the glacier that formerly connected the island to the mainland. The two other groups stayed further down observing Svalbard Reindeer, Rock Ptarmigans, Red-throated Divers and lots of flowers.



In the end all groups reached Camp Mansfield also known as New London. In New London we could visit the traces of an attempt of marble mining by the Northern Exploration Company in the beginning of the century. The highlight was the observation of a breeding pair of long tailed skuas directly at the historical site. This is thought to be the only breeding place of that species in whole Spitsbergen. The hiking group took a bit longer but still came in time for lunch, before we moved to the other side of Kongsfjorden, to Ny Ålesund.

We visited Ny Ålesund in the afternoon after the big cruise ships had left. Rinie gave us an introduction to the strict rules for a landing in the international research community and the history of the settlement. The souvenir shop was open and many of us took the chance to send letters from the northernmost post office in the world. At the old mast where airships started their expeditions towards the pole Jim told of the history of polar flights. Another

group went for a little walk through the landscape with Andreas. Back at the ship, we set sail southwards and hit some waves, shaking the ship for the first time this voyage.

7th July – Day 9

Poolepynten and Alkhornet

Position at 08.00hrs: 78°25.7'N 012°02'E

Weather: 4°C, cloudy, drizzle and a light northerly wind.

Our original intention was to land on the coast of Prince Karl's Foreland, at Poolepynten, named for a pioneering English whaler, Jonas Poole, who first ventured to these islands in 1610. He was the first person to have been recorded killing a polar bear in Spitsbergen. However the walrus we were hoping to see were absent. Instead, we turned a little to the east and towards Tordenskjoldbukta, on the main island of Spitsbergen.

In drizzle and low cloud the landing looked uninspiring but turned out to be a fertile paradise. We quickly found Reindeer, and with a slow and measured approach we were able to get with 30m of these animals. The reindeer here are adapted to their environment, with thick coats and short legs. Barnacle geese, Pink-footed geese with young and Arctic Skuas were spotted amongst the lush tundra.



During the afternoon passage to Alkhornet, a unique event took place on the bridge. Stephan Blieweis and Andrea Romanek were married by the Captain! This is the first wedding to have taken place on *Plancius*.

The cloud lifted a little as we sail in close under the huge bird cliff of Alkhornet, named for the Brünichs Guillemots who nest there and the horn shape of the mountain. There are

a few buildings on the point, some in better repair than others. Pomors, amongst the earliest settlers of Spitsbergen are known to have four hunting cabins in the area. During the cold war of the 1980s a different sort of hunting took place. From a modern looking cabin the Norwegian authorities were able to keep an eye on the Russian activities across the fjord in Barentsburg.

Here at our last landing of the cruise we hoped to find an Arctic Fox. Treading carefully across the soft tundra we found plenty of Reindeer, saw some Pink-footed geese flying over and watched a

Skua mark her territory. Our botanists even found a new species on the last outing – Horsetail. However, the fox eluded us again – so we'll just have to come back next year for another try!

After the landing it was time to turn the bow of *Plancius*, our comfortable home for the last 9 days, towards the east and into Isfjord to our final destination.

Thank you for sharing the journey with us, and we hope one day to travel with you again.

Trip statistics

Total distance travelled:	1060 nautical miles
Total landings/cruises:	16
Total photographs taken:	far too many to count! But at a guess, the same as the number of Little Auks at Fuglesagen!!!

Your expedition team

