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CRUISING SVALBARD: LAND OF THE ICE BEARS

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Passengers come ashore in Burgerbukta Bay, the MS Fram at rear.

LONGYEARBYEN, Svalbard- As passengers on the Hurtigruten cruise ship MS Fram, sailing out of Spitsbergen we are cautioned, no warned, that the new black bears are not fussy about their food.

More numerous than homo sapiens (3500 to 2670) and a protected species, the Ice bears (as they're locally known) have the run of the islands, 24,209 square miles of high arctic wilderness only 800 miles from the North Pole. Curious, stealthy and fast on their feet, they're not fussy about their food.

"You may think polar bears are cute," warned the Fram's Expedition Leader Corinna Skringo before our first shore excursion, fixing a stern eye on a couple wearing cuddly-bear shirts. "But they are lethal," she said, slinging her rifle over her shoulder. "We're all trained in the use of firearms, but killing a bear is the very last option. If we spot a bear sitting on the beach or even on the next ridge, we skip Plan A and go to Plan B."

That day's Plan A took us south to the Hornsund Inlet and into Burgerbukta Bay, where the ship anchored and the crew went ashore. Reconnoitering with binoculars, they chose a landing site on the beach, marked the "safe" path uphill and radioed an "all clear" to the Bridge. Then with loaded rifles at the ready, they stood guard while the ship's PolarCirkels (six-passenger inflatable landing craft) ferried everyone to shore.

As for bushwhacking, who would want to rush surrounded by such scenery? Enormous glaciers framed the valley's head, its ice-capped peaks silhouetted against the Arctic's luminescent skies. Tiny pink, yellow and white tundra flowers testified to the north-flowing Gulf Stream's warm water, greening the summer-time climate along Spitsbergen's west coast. Polar bear tracks in the mud, shoe size 20, quickly attracted a coterie of admirers, raising everyone's secret hopes that the owner was in the vicinity.

But polar bears weren't the only reason to choose this cruise, themed "In the Realm of the Polar Bear." For most of us, the goal was to reach the 80th parallel where we hoped to see the ice pack in person. With the planet – and the polar bears -- at risk, climate change, species extinctions, extreme weather and rising sea levels were the subtext of the voyage.

"Orange is the new black," quipped Steve, as we struggled into our orange survival suits for a PolarCirkel tour among the bergs. "And to complete the outfit," he added, "here's your orange life vest."

As the MS Fram passed 79 degrees north, the edge of the ice appeared, 26 shades of silver gleaming under the midnight sun. A shifting soup of floating bergs and icy slush, it froze, cracked and refroze as the crew brought the PolarCirkels around to the gangway to pick up the first group of passengers.

The 318-passenger Fram, built in 2007, is Hurtigruten's newest ship. With large public lounges, panoramic windows and a spacious dining room, it felt light and bright inside, even at night. The standard cabins were small but efficient, the meals were varied and delicious and the coffee bar was always piled with cookies. The most popular place for 180 degree views were from the upholstered chairs in the Qilak Observation Lounge and bar, located forward on Deck 7. The fitness center, hot tubs and outdoor sun deck were amidships and aft.

With a single port stop on the cruise, each day's event's depended on chance. Prowling the coast for a place to ferry ashore kept everyone looking for bird rookeries, reindeer herds, arctic foxes, whales, walrus haul-outs and unusual geologic formations. And polar bears.

The first half-dozen bears were white specks in the distance. But the last two were on the ice pack, close to the ship. Still, as thrilling as it was to linger there for 45 minutes to watch them nap, stand up and stretch, and lie down again, it took a long lens to get a good photo.

Since the cruise begins and ends in Longyearbyen, population 2043, the capital of Svalbard, most passengers stay over. A postcard summary? One mighty mountain, two streets, ten bars, eight restaurants, a bank, grocery store, an outstanding Arctic museum and a dozen arctic research stations.

"This is a fantastic place to live," said Anika Paust, Hurtigruten's on-site agent. "We've got 42 nationalities here, great bars and restaurants and almost no retirees because there's no senior housing or low-cost services. You can be out in nature all day, hiking or snowmobiling and come back for a night out with friends."



Visitors to Ny Alesund, a research station, can read; polar bears cannot.



The polar bear's feet, a size 20 shoe, are a clue to his size.



A mighty mountain, one street, bright colors, pre-fab buildings, new cars, kids' bicycles, pubs, a bank and grocery store: This is Longyearbyen, pop. 2100, latitude 78.22 degrees N.

But you have to be self-supporting. There's no welfare and no jail, so undesirables are simply deported. Since bears are free to roam, you have to own a rifle and learn to use it. And, as Paust reminded us, "If you're not an environmentalist at heart you won't fit in."

BOOKING : "In The Realm of the Polar Bear," sails in July and August, 2015. Rates start at \$5,365 per person and include all meals, snacks, coffee bar, guided hikes, kayaking, glacier walks, onboard entertainment and airport transports. Wine, beer and bar drinks not included. At www.hurtigruten.com.

PLANNING : A Spitsbergen cruise is an ideal add-on to a weekend in Norway. See svalbard@nordicvisitor.com/travelguide/; for the Norwegian Polar Institute), go to <http://cruise-handbook.npolar.no/en/hornsund/geology-and-landscape.html>

STAYING : The Radisson Blu Hotel is where Hurtigruten's buses pick up and deliver cruise passengers. Stay overnight and discover Longyearbyen. At www.radissonblu.com/Longyearbyen.

FLYING : Most travelers fly to Oslo, Norway, or to Helsinki, Finland, and on to the Longyearbyen airport.