


Steve Haggerty - Special Contributor

J U N
T R A 2 V O E 1 L 5

In search of polar bears

 Anne Z. Cooke 



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Learning about climate change, species extinction, extreme weather and rising sea levels was the subtext of the voyage. (Steve Haggerty - @Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld)

For many of the passengers on the MS Fram, the goal was to reach the 80th parallel, where they hoped to see the ice pack in person. (Photos by Steve Haggerty - Special Contributor)

Expedition leader Corinna Skringdo, armed for bear, points out the trail. "Killing a bear is the very last option," she says. (Steve Haggerty - @Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld)

If you want to live in Longyearbyen, where polar bears are free to roam, you have to own a rifle and learn to use it. (Steve Haggerty - @Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld)

LONGYEARBYEN, Svalbard, Norway — If it weren't for the red flags marking the tundra trail to the glacier, some of us — passengers on the Hurtigruten cruise ship MS Fram, sailing out of Spitsbergen — might have been tempted to bushwhack across country.

As newcomers are relentlessly reminded here in the Svalbard Archipelago, where white is the new black, polar bears are the Big Dogs. More numerous than humans (3,500 to 2,670) and a protected species, the Ice Bears (as they're known locally) have the run of the islands, 24,209 square miles of high arctic wilderness just 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 Skrindo, 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 summertime climate along Spitsbergen’s west coast.

Polar bear tracks in the mud quickly attracted a coterie of admirers, raising everyone’s secret hopes that the owner was in the vicinity.

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 photographer Steve Haggerty, 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 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.

Upholstered chairs in the Qilak Observation Lounge and bar, located forward on Deck 7, are the most popular place for 180-degree views.

With a single port stop on the cruise, each day’s events 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. 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 2,043, the capital of Svalbard, most passengers stay over.

A postcard summary? One mighty mountain, two streets, 10 bars, eight restaurants, a bank, grocery store, an outstanding arctic museum and a dozen 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.”

You have to be self-supporting. There’s no jail, so undesirables are simply deported. Since bears are free to roam, you have to own a rifle and learn to use it.

She also reminded us, “If you’re not an environmentalist at heart you won’t fit in.”

Anne Z. Cooke is a freelance writer in California.

When you go

“In The Realm of the Polar Bear” sails in July and August. 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. hurtigruten.com.

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

The Radisson Blu Polar Hotel is where Hurtigruten’s buses pick up and deliver cruise passengers. radissonblu.com/hotel-spitsbergen

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