



examiner.com

Leisure

Food & Drink

Travel

Spa & Beauty

Autos & Motorcycles

Bars & Clubs



LEISURE / TRAVEL / INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL

DODGING POLAR BEARS: North to Spitsbergen on Hurtigruten's MS Fram



Next: Singapore Airlines makes emergency landing in Kuala Lumpur

June 21, 2015

3:33 PM MST



Summertime in Svalbard, and coats for MS Fram passengers.

Courtesy of ©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

LONGYEARBYEN, Svalbard- "You may think [polar bears](#) are cute," warned tour Expedition Leader Corinna Skringo before the MS Fram's first shore excursion, fixing a gimlet eye on a couple wearing matching cuddly-bear tee shirts. "But they are lethal," she said, slinging her rifle over her shoulder.



©Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld

It wasn't the first time that the Hurtigruten cruise passengers had been warned. Here on Spitsbergen, where white is the new black, polar bears are the Big Dogs. More numerous than people (3500 to 2670) and a protected species, the ice bears (as they're locally known) have the run of the Svalbard Archipelago's five main islands and more than 24,000 square miles of high arctic wilderness. Curious, stealthy and fast on their feet, they're not fussy about their food.

In fact, if it hadn't been for the red flagged trail to the glacier, some of the Fram's passengers might have jumped the path and bushwhacked across country. But Skringo put the kibosh on that. "If we spot a bear sitting on the beach or even on the next ridge, we won't land," she said. "We skip Plan A and go to Plan B. We're all trained in the use of firearms, but killing a bear is the very last option."

Plan A, on the day in question, sailed to the Hornsund Inlet and Burgerbukta Bay where the captain anchored and after scanning the shore through binoculars, chose a landing site on the beach. The crew, going ashore to reconnoiter, marked a "safe" path uphill and radioed an "all clear" to the Bridge. Then with loaded rifles ready, they scanned the hillsides while the ship's PolarCirkels (six-passenger inflatable landing craft) ferried everyone onto the beach.

As for bushwhacking, who would want to rush through such scenery? Enormous glaciers framed the valley's head, where ice-capped peaks stood out against 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 nearby.

But spotting polar bears, a major goal and the ship's theme, "In the Realm of the Polar Bear," was just one reason to be onboard. For most of the passengers, the goal was to reach the 80th parallel and the edge of the Arctic ice pack. With the planet warming and the polar bears at risk, climate change, species extinctions, extreme weather and rising sea levels were the voyage's larger theme. As the MS Fram reached 80 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 around the PolarCirkels as the crew drove them around to the gangway to load each group of passengers.

The 318-passenger Fram, built in 2007, is Hurtigruten's newest ship. With comfortably public lounges, panoramic windows and a spacious dining room, the interior was light and bright inside, even at night. The standard cabins were small but efficient, meals were hearty, tasty and varied, and the snack bar stocked coffee and cookies all day. The Qilak Observation Lounge and Bar, on Deck 7 forward, was the most popular indoor lounge, where 180 degree windows and lavishly upholstered chairs encouraged passengers to sit back and watch the ship navigate between islands and among the ice. The fitness center, hot tubs and outdoor sun deck were amidships and aft.

With no port stops except one, each day's events depended on chance. As the ship prowled the coast, looking for landing sites, most passengers stood on the outside decks, looking for bears, and finding bird rookeries, reindeer herds, arctic foxes, whales, walrus haul-outs and geologic formations instead. On the third day, however, the first half-dozen polar bears were spotted, white specks on the opposite island. But the next two bears were on the ice pack, close to the ship. For 45 minutes the ship lingered beside the ice, watching them nap, stand up and stretch, lie down again and finally stand up and mosey away across the ice.

Because the cruise sails out of Longyearbyen, pop. 2043, Svalbard's capital, Spitsbergen's only town, and the world's northernmost town, visitors arrive early or stay afterwards to explore. A postcard view? One mighty mountain, ten bars, eight restaurants, two streets, one road, a bank, grocery store, airport, cruise pier, an outstanding Arctic museum and a dozen arctic research stations. But remote doesn't mean Hicksville.

"This is a fantastic place to live," gushed Anika Paust, 30-something, Hurtigruten's Svalbard-based 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 exploring nature all day, hiking or snowmobiling and come back for a night out with friends." But, she added, you have to be self-supporting. Since there's no welfare and no jail, undesirables are simply deported. Since the bears are free to roam, everyone must own a rifle and learn to use it. And one more thing. "If you're not an environmentalist at heart you won't fit in."

Looking for a last-minute booking? Cancellations do happen. "In The Realm of the Polar Bear," sails in July and August. Rates from \$5,365 per person sharing a cabin include meals, snacks, coffee bar, guided hikes, kayaking, glacier walks, entertainment and airport transports. Wine, beer and bar drinks are extra. At www.hurtigruten.com. Come early or stay longer to explore Longyearbyen. Hurtigruten's two client hotels include the Radisson Blu, where the cruise buses pick up and deliver cruise passengers. At radissonblu.com/Longyearbyen. For more, see svalbard@nordicvisitor.com/travelguide/; for the Norwegian Polar Institute), go to <http://cruise-handbook.npolar.no/en/hornsund/geology-and-landscape.html>.

Not pressed for time? Since your plane to Longyearbyen is likely to connect in Oslo, capital of Norway, add a week or long weekend. Four days are enough to see this most beautiful and historic city on the water, home of excellent hotels, fine restaurants, the Viking Museum, shady green parks and hiking and biking trails.

Photos from Anne Z. Cooke, used courtesy of Steve Haggerty/ColorWorld. Anne Z. Cooke, a contributor to the Examiner, is a writer for the Tribune News Service, which publishes her travel and adventure stories in national and international publications. Stories syndicated by Anne Z. Cooke. (c) Anne Z. Cooke. Anne Z. Cooke

Report this content



SUBSCRIBE
TO
AUTHOR