



CRUISING THE *Top* OF THE *World*

ELEVEN DAYS LOOKING FOR BEARS IN THE NORWEGIAN ARCTIC
BY BOB KEEFER

From three decks up, the sea ice surrounding our ship looks like so many Styrofoam picnic plates bobbing on a dark blue pool.

Some plates are big enough to contain a suburban house and yard; others have barely enough space to park a bicycle. Many are almost perfectly round from jostling against their neighbors in the wind. Tiny tracks crossing one plate look birdlike from my perch, until I check them out with binoculars and realize that this is the trail of a polar bear.

I'm standing aboard the *Ocean Nova*, a converted ocean-going ferry that's home to me and 60 other passengers for 11 days while we explore the coast of Svalbard, one of the most remote — and northerly — places in the world.

Svalbard lies due north of Tromsø, Norway. At the archipelago's far-northern end, where we're exploring the sea ice in hopes of spotting a polar bear, we're less than 700 miles from the North Pole. The *Nova* noses slowly but steadily along the rocky coast, its reinforced steel hull reverberating like a gong as it pounds the pack ice.

It was from this barren collection of islands that hopeful adventurers set off a century ago — sometimes never to return — to be first to reach the North Pole. In that golden age of exploration, Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, who in 1911 had become the first human to reach the South Pole, disappeared in a plane in 1928 while searching for six members of an Italian expedition that had headed north from Svalbard in a dirigible.

In 1893 Norwegian Fritjof Nansen allowed his ship, the *Fram*, to freeze into the ice pack north of Siberia. Drifting, according to his radical plan, in a northwestern arc, it wound up nearly three years later — both ship and crew intact — near Svalbard, propelled by currents in the ice. Add in some tough overland sledding and Nansen came within 350 miles of the pole.

Today Svalbard is populated by a different kind of adventurer — high-end tourists.

Driven by baby-boomer bucket lists, cheap airfare and



GUIDE ALICE YANG DRIVES PASSENGERS IN A ZODIAC

an urgency engendered by climate change, polar tourism — almost unheard of half a century ago — has grown immensely in the past decade. Virtually unvisited in the recent past, Svalbard now gets more than 40,000 cruise ship visitors a year.

You once had to organize your own expedition to see places like this. Now you can buy a ticket, assuming you have the \$10,000 per person it takes to book a cabin on this cruise. (Our trip was heavily discounted because our son, Noah Strycker, works on the ship as an onboard bird guide for Quark Expeditions.)

Champagne flowed on the *Nova* the afternoon we crossed 80 degrees of latitude — 690 miles from the North Pole. That evening, when we reached 80 degrees, 12 minutes and 3 seconds north of the equator, John Rodsted, the trip leader, decided the sea ice was too tight to keep grinding our way north and turned us south again.

We were nearly two full days in the ice and hadn't seen a single polar bear.

Getting to Svalbard usually means flying to the tiny town of Longyearbyen, where our jet from Oslo touched

down just past midnight on a bright, drizzly June night — all of Svalbard is above the Arctic Circle, meaning 24-hour summer daylight. The Longyearbyen airport is better appointed than Eugene's; you can actually buy a sandwich and a latte there at 1 a.m. A taxidermied polar bear stands guard over the baggage carousel, the first of several such bears we would see in town, all with signs reading "Do Not Touch!" in English and Norwegian.

Inside the bustling Fruene Kaffe & Vinbar in a shopping mall downtown the next day I joined Mark Sabbatini, editor of *icepeople*, which advertises itself as the most northerly alt-weekly (circulation 500) on the planet. He reads *Eugene Weekly* online each Saturday, he says. A journalistic roustabout — he's worked at the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Juneau Empire* and once ran a newsletter at Antarctica's McMurdo Station — Sabbatini has lived on Svalbard for nearly nine years.

He handed me his most recent issue, a photocopied 16-page newsletter. Its top story was about the town's new library; headlines inside include "Employment in Longyearbyen drops 12 percent" and "Polar bears shift from seals to bird eggs as Arctic ice melts."

Like everyone here, Sabbatini is from elsewhere. No evidence has ever been found of indigenous people on Svalbard, whose islands constitute a 24,000-square mile outcropping of barren rock, windswept tundra and glacial ice populated today by roughly as many polar bears as people (about 3,000 in each case). The current human population comes mostly from Norway and Russia with a large Thai community thrown in.

Svalbard, a Norwegian territory, exists in a legal loophole: If you get there and can make a living, you don't need papers to stay, Sabbatini says. The islanders don't even pay taxes to Norway.

That might sound like a libertarian paradise, but only up to a point. Get pregnant and you'll be flown elsewhere (usually Tromsø) to have your baby. This is explained in terms of Tromsø's better medical facilities but also reflects