

Norway's reluctance to create a class of people with birthright citizenship claims in a place that has no citizens.

Internet lore holds that it's illegal to die in Svalbard. That's an exaggeration, though you'll also be sent away when you're old or ready to pass on. Svalbard has no nursing homes. The only graves are historic sites — about 1,000 whalers, trappers and explorers, by one count, before burials were halted in the 1950s. Permafrost makes digging difficult and tends to push bodies out of the ground.

As our ship makes its way along Svalbard's spectacular west coast, we nose into narrow fjords, one after another, that terminate in ever-more-spectacular glaciers. The only way to get off the ship is aboard its fleet of rubber Zodiac rafts, and we quickly settle into a routine of daily cruises — usually past the front of a glacier — and wet landings on gravel beaches, from which we can explore abandoned mining settlements, check out enormous bird colonies of kittiwakes, guillemots and puffins nesting on cliff faces, or simply hike straight up the nearest ridge to stand on a local peak.

On a shore excursion one afternoon, our trip leader John Rodsted stops our small group of hikers at a weathered wooden cross that toppled years ago onto the spongy tundra; next to the cross, among stones placed on the grave, you can just see part of a human thighbone sticking out. The owner's name has long since weathered away from the cross. A trio of short, plump Svalbard reindeer watches from 50 feet away with the dull indifference of cows. Reindeer, reindeer antlers, reindeer poop and clumps of white reindeer fur are everywhere we walk.

After becoming bored with a commercial photography business he ran in Australia, Rodsted headed for Bosnia in 1986 and became a freelance conflict photographer. He and his Norwegian wife, Mette Eliseussen, whom he met while they were both working in Kabul, now guide polar tourists here and in Antarctica on adventure cruise ships like the Nova.

As our group strolls up a rocky path toward a glacial moraine, Rodsted keeps us walking by telling endless

entertaining stories of arctic exploration, always promising a new installment at the next stop. He carries a bolt-action rifle slung over his shoulder and a flare gun in a holster on his hip. On Svalbard you're not allowed to venture outside settlements like Longyearbyen without serious polar bear deterrent. Most people take rifles, and the Nova maintains a small onboard armory.

One morning after breakfast Rodsted announces on the ship's address system that we are going ashore to see walrus — lots of walrus. We take to the boats as usual and land on a windy beach, where the 60 of us walk in silent single file for a quarter mile along the water's edge toward a distant noisy brown blob, our rifle-toting guides spread out alongside us. For a moment I feel like we're prisoners of war being marched to camp in a World War II movie.

When we finally get within a long stone's throw of the blob, we can hear — and smell! — about 40 walrus, all lying in the sun more or less on top of one another, burping and farting and grumbling and occasionally laying into each other with their ivory tusks, sometimes drawing blood. We fan out and spend 45 minutes looking at, listening to and



photographing the compelling spectacle before returning to the ship for lunch.

Finally we see bears. A planned afternoon beach landing suddenly becomes a Zodiac cruise instead when a guide making a safety check from the ship spots a mother and two cubs ambling along the gravel beach near our planned landing site. Moments later another guide spots an enormous male following them half a mile behind.

That begins an extraordinary hour-long bear encounter, with the Zodiacs carrying us just offshore from the bears, who seem unafraid of and even mildly fascinated by our presence. The female and cubs — the crowd favorite — eventually reach a stretch of beach behind rocky outcrops that stop us from following, so we circle back to the male for an orgy of bear watching and photography.

Our last full day on Svalbard we land at the Russian town of Barentsburg. A short boat ride from Longyearbyen, the town was built in the 1930s by a Soviet mining company that still operates a coal mine there. Named for a Dutch explorer, Barentsburg is home to one of two giant Soviet-era heroic statues of Lenin on the archipelago.

Barentsburg is also home to the only known house cat on Svalbard, a big ball of orange fur. Cats are banned everywhere on the archipelago — as are, curiously, ferrets — and so people tell you with a straight face that it's a fox.

With a population of about 500, Barentsburg boasts an art museum, an old Eastern Orthodox church, a large brick school, a hospital, a restaurant and bar — where several of us stop for a morning beer — and a community center with a sports arena and a performance hall the size of Springfield's Wildish Theater.

There we see a sweet show put on by eight local women who dress in traditional costumes and sing Ukrainian folk songs in front of a painted backdrop. Our passengers don't come close to filling the hall, but cheer enthusiastically when the emcee asks, again and again in his rich accent, "Let's have some applause for these bee-YOU-tee-ful ladies of the Arctic Show!"

PHOTOS BY BOB KEEFER

