

THANK YOU FOR JOINING OUR

Svalbard Polar Bear Explorer

With Benjamin Hardman



TRIP LOG // 29.04 - 07.05 2023

Expedition Leaders: Bob Gilmore & Lisa LaPointe



POLAR BEAR EXPLORER



NORSKØYA

5

DANSKEGATTET
MAGDALENEFJORDEN

6

4

LILLIEHÖÖKFJORDEN

NORDFJORDEN

7

SKANSBUKTA

2 ISFJORDEN

1

8
LONGYEARBYEN

3 BELLSUND



DAY 1

29.04.23

Isfjorden

We throw off lines at 16:30 on a sunny and clear afternoon with calm winds. An introduction by Captain Jesper and team follows, with champagne toasts to successful adventures and new friends.

We immediately act on a report of a polar bear at Kapp Thordsen heading towards Billefjorden. Finding her quickly, we follow her for nearly 5 hours as she meanders along the black-sand shoreline and over snowy ridges. Occasionally the bear encounters small herds of reindeer that scatter away in alarm. The scenery is impressive, with eroded ridges on the mountains highlighted by a light dusting of snow. Everyone is out on the bow and along the ship's beam, taking advantage of the glorious spring weather. There are many fulmars that accompany the ship as the golden light across the water contrasts with the deep blue.

Anchoring in Skansbukta on a cool, clear and windless night with the sun low in the sky, skirting the neighboring ridge and a waxing half moon. Everyone enjoys a good sleep in the calm anchorage.



DAY 2

30. 04 . 23

Isfjorden-Nordfjorden

A delicious breakfast is followed by pulling anchor and heading east through Isfjorden. Winds have picked up to over 20 knots and small whitecaps are forming on the ocean's surface. Low, dark clouds hanging on the horizon give the morning a somber feel as the abundant fulmars swirl around the ship. Bob gives his introduction to zodiac cruising and fittings begin for immersion suits. Around 10:30 we locate a polar bear up a valley feeding on a reindeer carcass. It's about a kilometer away, but we are able to watch the bear finish it's meal through binoculars. Eventually the bear wanders behind a ridge for a nap, and we continue on our journey.

After lunch, Lisa gives an informative talk on polar bears. Later, we slip into our survival suits and head out for our first zodiac cruise. Lots of sea ice distributed across the Yoldiabreen glacier front, and a crisp 15kn wind is creating some whitecaps. We head towards a trio of icebergs for a closer look, finding intricate ice patterns and icicles along their edges. We then cruise towards the glacier face, and meander into some sea ice. Kinfish picks us up just in time for dinner, and we warm up with chef's delicious mushroom soup. After dinner, Ben demonstrates use of Lightroom editing tools in his photography.



DAY 3

01 . 05 . 23

Bellsund

This morning we cruise into vast Van Mijenfjorden, passing the bar around 07:30. It's a bright, clear morning with a crisp breeze and sunlight glinting off the wavelets. Considerable wave action over the bow the night before means everything forward is coated in a rim of ice. Around 10:30 we suit up and walk off the ship directly onto the sea ice! Everyone is on alert for polar bears in the jumbled ice and none are spotted, but we do see a curious walrus push its head up through a break. We also see a young bearded seal pup being attended by its mother. After an hour walk and lots of photo poses—and even a wrestling match—we board the ship again. Blueberry soup, a Swedish tradition, for the warm up!

This afternoon, Bob gives an excellent presentation on sea ice as we enter Van Keulenfjorden in search of polar bears. None are found, but we make a stop at the cabin Bamsebu for a historic visit. Several sets of polar bear tracks are seen, as well as evidence of fox and reindeer. After a wonderful steak dinner and some Lightroom lessons by Ben, we pull anchor and cruise deeper into Van Keulenfjorden in search of wildlife. We encounter flocks of black and Brünnich's guillemots along the ice edge, as well as an elusive pair of walrus. Later, we find a trio of walrus on an ice flow—mom and a rare set of twins. The sun hangs low in the sky, imparting the walrus with a golden glow against the ice and dramatic mountain behind.



DAY 4

02 . 05 . 23

Lilliehöökfjorden

A calm, clear, sunny day with numerous avalanche tracks down the mountains. There are plenty of tracks trailing from one rock outcropping to another: reindeer in search of scarce vegetation. No bears are spotted despite diligent glassing, but we do spot several groups of skiers skinning their way up the steep slopes. Lisa gives a talk on the birds of Svalbard, and we discuss which early-season species we've already spotted.

This afternoon, we cruise into Lilliehöökfjorden towards Lilliehöökbrean. The glacier has clearly been actively calving and the area in front of the face is filled with large bergs. We get into zodiacs to cruise around the ice, photographing the sun illuminating the blue from within and the sculptural icicles. The captain calls us mid cruise to alert us to walrus near the ship, and we head over. A group of 5 animals are clustered on a small plate of ice, and we get some wonderful images backlit by evening sun. We see a trio of king eiders pass by the zodiacs as we make a close approach to the glacier face with the ship, and marvel at the striping in the green glacial "scar" revealed from a recent calving. It's a late night by the time we get underway again, but spirits are high.



Magdalenefjorden

This morning we enter Magdalenefjorden and quickly encounter several walrus on ice: lone males and mothers with calves. In the zodiacs we visit each of them, including one group that engages in a brief—and photogenic!—scuffle.

We also visit a large iceberg covered in icicles, another treat for the photographers. Following our reembarkation onto the ship, we move northeast into Bjørnefjorden. Sea ice has clustered near the glacier face, and deep within we discover a polar bear. While it doesn't approach closely, we watch through binoculars as it traverses across the dense ice. This afternoon we exit Bjørnefjorden, heading north towards the Norskøya islands where we hope to encounter another polar bear. The sunny, clear morning has transitioned to light fog, and snow has begun to fall.

Bob presents a talk on glaciology, and many settle in afterwards for some photo editing and naps. Around 17:45 we arrive at the Norskøya Islands but find them largely socked in by ice and fog. Turning northwest, we follow the ice edge late into the night. Plenty of walrus and a handful of ivory gulls are spotted.



DAY 6

04 . 05 . 23

Magdalenefjorden

This morning we wake up deep within the sea ice and spend a few hours meandering in that awe-inspiring environment. As we begin to reach open water Lisa gives a talk on Svalbard's marine mammals. Aptly following that, we encounter a single, very photogenic walrus at the entry to Danskegattet, south of Amsterdamøya. We also find perhaps 200 common eider, and a handful of king eider, in among ice floes.

Our path forward into Danskegattet is blocked with sea ice, so we shift southward through Sørgattet into Bjornefjorden, and then further south still into Magdalenefjorden. We remain vigilant for polar bear and on approach to the glacier, we spot some walrus on ice and decide to drop zodiacs for a closer approach. We also get a surprise visit by a lone harbor seal.

After our cruise, we begin heading south towards Isfjorden, where we'll spend the remainder of the voyage. On returning to the ship we decide its the perfect opportunity for a polar plunge! Much festivity ensues as nearly all jump into the below-freezing sea.





Isfjorden

This morning we are very focused looking for polar bears. While we've had three already, we're still in search of that elusive "photo bear." Our strategy is to work up the various small fjords in the Isfjorden system, glassing as we go. Along the way we encounter yet another walrus on ice, this one doing an endearing pose with flipper over face. We also pass through some extraordinary sea ice clusters and get a glimpse of various glacier faces glowing blue in the high overcast light. Eventually we get a call from another ship that a polar bear is in the vicinity, so we head that way. The polar bear is finally sighted (!) feeding on a reindeer kill just south of Skansbukta, at the mouth of Billefjorden. We quickly put zodiacs into the water and make our way over. The bear has dragged the carcass a bit uphill but we still have an excellent view from our close approach. She's a beautiful bear: fit and healthy with a clean white coat. We watch her for about an hour from zodiacs until the falling tide forces us back. After dinner we make another attempt to see her again, but she's now dragged the carcass up the hill and out of range, so we adventure into Skansbukta to photograph ice and birds and a trapper cottage.



DAY 8

06 . 05 . 23

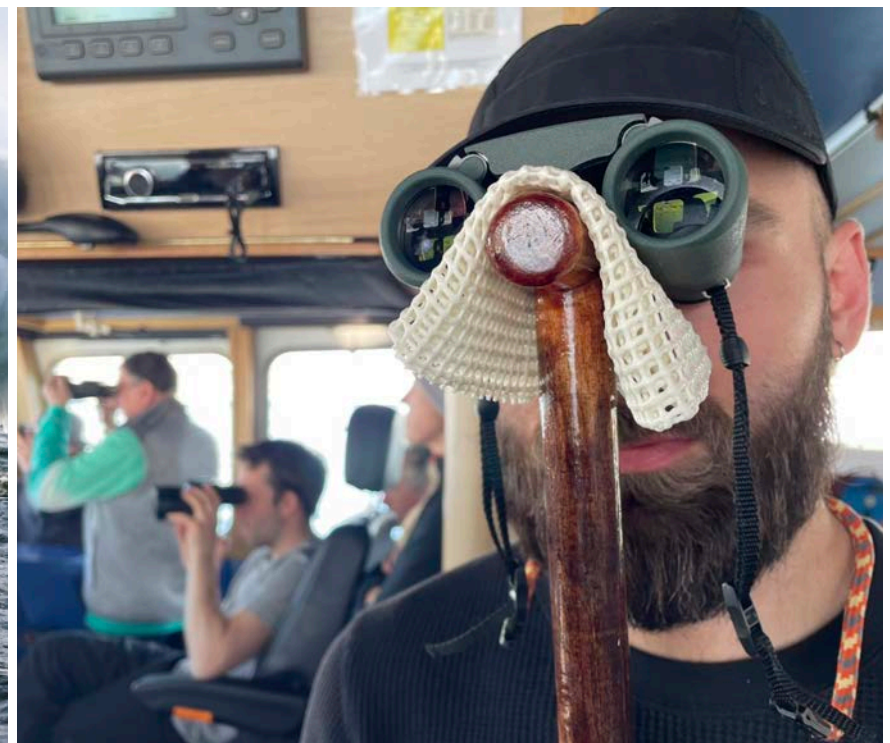
Isfjorden

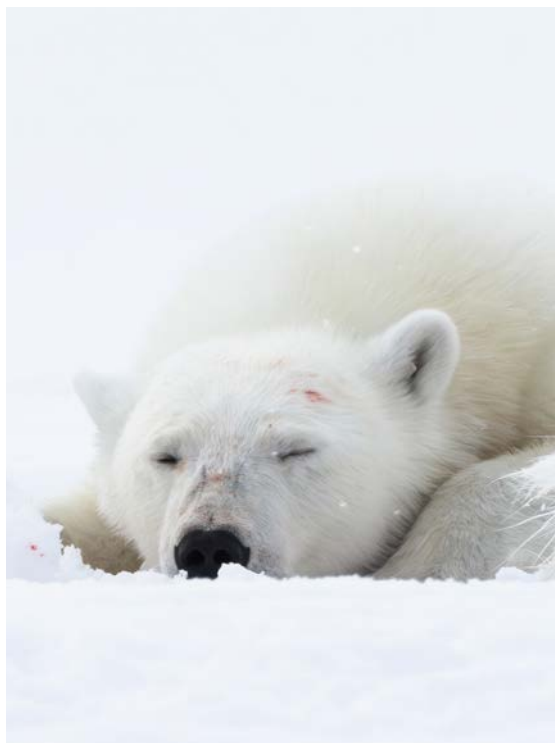
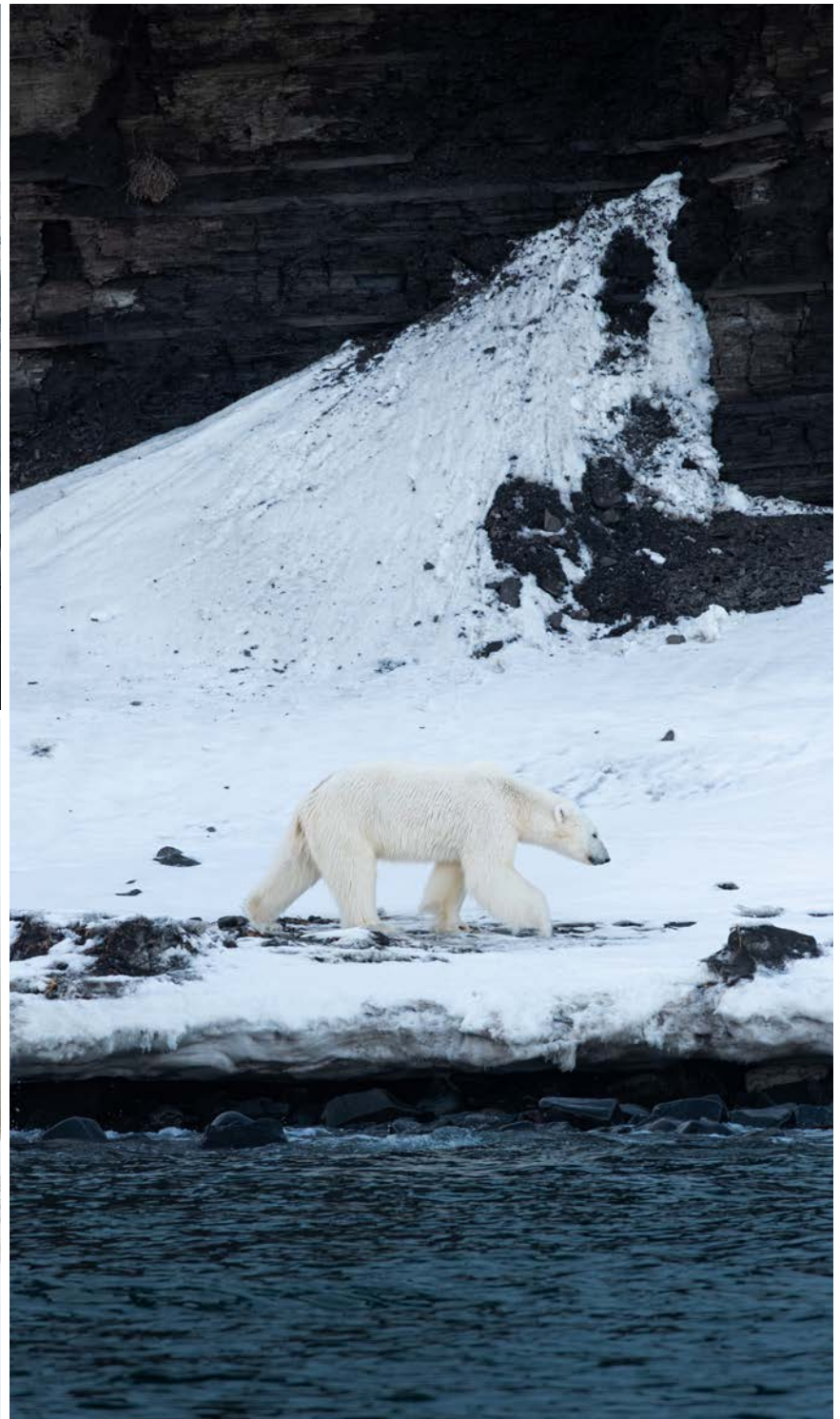
This morning we cruise up Billefjorden towards Pyramiden. While the Russian settlement is thoroughly iced in, we are able to peruse it through binos. The ice itself is beautiful too: large, fractured plates criss-crossed in polar bear tracks. Blue glow of Nordenskold glacier. Fog hangs low over the cliffs and coast as we continue our way through Isfjorden's many inlets. Fulmars and kittiwakes swirl around the ship, and breaking waves against the shore create frozen sculptures on the rocks.

Onboard, we've all begun to contemplate the trip as a whole, with reminiscing on events and sightings. Many have settled into the cozy lounge to edit photos, while others still glass the shore for some final wildlife.

As evening approaches, we arrive back into the "big city" of Longyearbyen and our captain's dinner. Much storytelling follows, then laughter and dancing. It's a fitting happy ending to a very successful voyage!

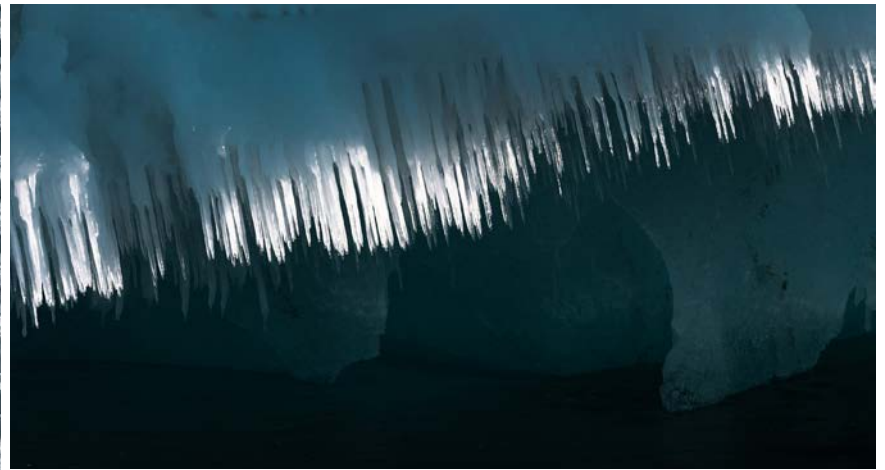












Natural World Safaris are a niche travel outfitter specialising purely in the natural world, incredible habitats, and the wildlife that calls these remote corners of the planet home. We hope you enjoyed your time in the Arctic and that this trip log serves as a reminder of your journey.

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