

SVALBARD – AN ARCTIC VOYAGE

IN THE DOMAIN OF THE POLAR BEAR

MID-JUNE 2028 (precise dates to be confirmed)

TOUR OVERVIEW: Sitting halfway between mainland Norway and the North Pole, Svalbard's pristine polar landscapes are the foremost destination for Arctic wildlife enthusiasts. This remote archipelago, with Spitsbergen as the main island, boasts majestic fjords, vast glaciers, dramatic mountains and ice-filled seas. Officially discovered in 1596 by Dutch explorer Willem Barentsz, it was considered *terra nullius* (no man's land) with several nations pursuing hunting, fishing and mining activities, until a century ago when Norway was granted sovereignty. Protected by strict environmental regulations, much of Svalbard and its surrounding seas are designated as national park, allowing iconic wildlife including Polar Bears, Walrus, Reindeer and millions of seabirds to thrive largely undisturbed.

With only a handful of isolated coastal settlements and no interconnecting road network, our journey begins in Longyearbyen, from where we embark on a seven-night voyage aboard a comfortable, polar-adapted expedition vessel. Sailing along the archipelago's wild north-west coast and then deep into the drifting pack ice, the voyage is punctuated by carefully selected landings. This is the only way one can truly experience the sublime natural beauty of the High Arctic, and it offers a rare opportunity to witness this remarkable region in its purest, most awe-inspiring form.



The voyage is organised by a highly rated polar expedition company, very experienced in searching out the wildlife of the region and sailing in the oceans and pack ice. As such we will be joining other tourist groups on board for the voyage, some specifically interested in wildlife, others global travellers keen to see the splendours of the Arctic.



Our prime quest is to encounter the Arctic's most iconic resident, the Polar Bear. Any sighting of this apex predator would sit high on the wish list of anyone travelling here, though perhaps a solitary male hunting seals along the pack ice would be especially memorable. The voyage will be equally rewarding for the remarkable diversity of other wildlife it reveals: the chance to witness Walrus hauled out on the rocks, a variety of different seal species in the ice-strewn seas, whale species surfacing and blowing nearby and Arctic Foxes scavenging along the shoreline to provision their dens. An exceptional cast of birds includes Ivory Gull, Little Auk, Brünnich's Guillemot and Grey Phalarope (in stunning brick-red summer plumage!) – all true Arctic breeding specialities that bring this high-latitude, untamed wilderness vividly to life.

WILDLIFE AND BIRDLIFE: Nature can be unpredictable and no sightings guaranteed, but we have good chances of seeing Polar Bear, Arctic Fox, Reindeer (Svalbard sub-species *platyrhynchus*), Walrus, Bearded Seal, Ringed Seal, Harp Seal, Common Seal, with cetaceans including Beluga Whale and perhaps one or more of Humpback, Blue, Fin, and Minke Whale. For botanists Svalbard has a surprisingly diverse array of rare, hardy, low-growing wildflowers.

Birds breeding, summering or passing around Svalbard include Rock Ptarmigan, Brent Goose (pale-bellied *hrota* sub-species), Pink-footed Goose, Barnacle Goose, King Eider, Common Eider, Long-tailed Duck, Red-throated Diver, Northern Fulmar, Purple Sandpiper, Grey Phalarope, Ivory Gull, Black-legged Kittiwake, Glaucous Gull, Arctic Tern, Long-tailed Skua, Arctic Skua, Pomarine Skua, Atlantic Puffin, Black Guillemot, Little Auk, Brünnich's Guillemot and Snow Bunting.



The fur of the Arctic Fox is the warmest of any Arctic land animal, insulating to minus 50 C



Reindeer (Svalbard sub-species *platyrhynchus*) is the smallest race and endemic to Svalbard

PHOTOGRAPHIC OPPORTUNITIES: June is an excellent time for photography when the return of the midnight sun becomes a major advantage. Photographers are not limited to short shooting windows; instead, long periods of light slowly circle the horizon, creating long periods of low-angle illumination, ideal for dramatic compositions. Cool temperatures reduce

heat haze, and the clear Arctic air delivers exceptional sharpness and contrast, light conditions that are difficult to experience anywhere else on Earth.

As we cruise the coastal waters, we draw alongside major seabird colonies providing close-range, high-energy subjects. Marine mammals are regularly seen in fjords and along the ice edge, while Polar Bears are often active on pack ice or coastal areas, hunting seals or moving between habitats. The presence of sea ice increases the chances of classic Arctic wildlife scenes.



It would be a privilege to witness a Grey Phalarope in its striking breeding plumage

TOUR ITINERARY & DESCRIPTION IN BRIEF:

Day 1: We assemble at the start of the tour in Longyearbyen, reached by flights via Norway. Set on the shores of Isfjorden, Longyearbyen is the administrative heart of Svalbard, serving as the centre for governance, research and essential services. Depending on the time of flights, we can enjoy a relaxing stroll around town, acclimatising to the Arctic environment and enjoying some local birding. Grey Phalarope sometimes breeds near town and Little Auks regularly overfly. Later in the afternoon, we board our comfortable expedition vessel, purpose-built for polar exploration, but equally comfortable as a cruise ship. Supported by experienced and attentive expedition staff, we set sail out of Isfjorden. The colourful rooftops of the world's northernmost town will soon fade as the fjord opens wide and calm, its steel-blue waters flanked by steep, flat-topped mountains where we might spot the first Minke Whale of the voyage. Night aboard the expedition ship.

Days 2-7: Our voyage takes us first along Svalbard's wild north-west coast. We navigate close to towering glaciers that calve into icebergs in glass-calm fjords. Vast breeding colonies of seabirds are located on the cliffs including clouds of Little Auk and Brünnich's Guillemot which

swirl around. Glaucous Gulls gather in noisy gangs, while Arctic Terns slice effortlessly through the air, chasing the brief polar summer.



Where conditions allow, we make occasional landings by zodiac, giving the opportunity to explore the tundra at close quarters. Delicate mosses, lichens, and tiny Arctic flowers peek through the permafrost, painting subtle swathes of green, ochre, and soft violet against the stark rock. Here we can watch for breeding geese, ducks, waders, gulls and skuas.



Then comes the moment many travellers dream of, entering the pack ice. A quietly thrilling experience where the rhythm of the journey slows and where the Arctic's true character reveals itself. We glide into a luminous seascape of fractured ice, a vast and shifting mosaic that stretches to the horizon. The air grows crisper, the silence deeper, broken only by the sound of the ship as it advances with care. This is prime Polar Bear habitat, and with patience we hope to encounter one or more of these extraordinary animals, moving across the ice or resting near seal hunting grounds. Ivory Gulls often accompany them, searching for signs of a successful bear hunt - a fleeting, unforgettable moment for those able to witness the scene. We spend several days immersed in this awe-inspiring realm, an experience that inspires both exhilaration and humility, and leaves a lasting impression of the Arctic's beauty, fragility, and immense scale.

After our time on the ice, we will begin our return journey to Longyearbyen sailing along the coast west of Spitsbergen, perhaps spotting a pod of elusive Humpback, Fin or Minke Whales which forage in the nutrient-rich of the upwelling zones. All nights aboard our expedition vessel.

Day 8: Return into Longyearbyen

Eventually, our voyage and quest complete, we cruise steadily back into Longyearbyen in the early morning, where the tour concludes. Depending on the flight schedule back to the UK we

may fly out of Longyearbyen later this same day. If this is not possible, we will need to stay an extra night in Longyearbyen before flying home the following day.



We will watch for whales, here a close Minke, which surface for air in a blow or spout

PLACES OF INTEREST ON OUR VOYAGE:

Isfjord

One of the largest fjords in the Arctic, Isfjord holds several of Svalbard's largest settlements positioned around its shores including Longyearbyen, Barentsburg and Pyramiden, the latter of which is now abandoned. In the early seventeenth century, Isfjord was a popular location for whaling ships operated by Basque, French, Dutch and later English whalers.

Kongsfjorden and Ny-Alesund

Kongsfjorden is home to the international research settlement of Ny-Ålesund, one of the world's northernmost permanent communities dedicated entirely to Arctic science. Here, scientists from across the globe conduct pioneering research on climate change, glaciology, oceanography, atmospheric studies, and Arctic ecosystems. High-precision instruments monitor everything from the shifting ice and rising temperatures to migratory patterns of seabirds and the health of marine life, providing critical data that informs our understanding of the planet. Ny-Ålesund also supports long-term studies of the aurora, solar radiation, and permafrost dynamics, making it a unique global hub for environmental stewardship and scientific discovery. Barnacle and Pink-footed Geese breed close to the community.

Amsterdamøya & Smeerenburg

As the voyage continues, we may pass the remains of Smeerenburg on the small island of Amsterdamøya, a stark reminder of 17th-century Arctic ambition. Here are the remains of a

Dutch whaling station, with the stone and brick foundations of its massive blubber-boiling ovens, along with numerous whalers' graves and scattered timbers and even with some clothing remnants preserved by the permafrost.

Raudfjord

On the north coast of Spitsbergen, you can enjoy this expansive fjord spilling with glaciers and sometimes visited by Ringed and Bearded Seals. The cliffs and shoreline also support thriving seabird colonies, rich vegetation, and the possibility of Polar Bears. Depending on the state of sea ice, it is sometimes possible to land at Alicehamna or Buchananhalvøya.



Liefdefjorden & Monaco Glacier

Depending on the weather and sea ice, we could sail into Liefdefjorden and land at Texas Bar and cruise within sight of the 5-kilometer-long (3.1 miles) face of Monaco Glacier. The waters in front of this precipitous glacier are a favorite feeding spot for thousands of Black-legged Kittiwakes, and the base of the ice is a popular Polar Bear hunting ground. If ice conditions prevent us from sailing here early in the season, we may sail along the west coast of Spitsbergen. The island of Moffen at the entrance to Liefdefjorden is worth a check for Ivory Gulls.

The Seven Islands

The northernmost point of the voyage is likely to be Nordaustlandet, in the Seven Islands. Here we may reach 80° north, just 870 km (540 miles) from the geographic North Pole. At Phippsøya there is a Walrus haul-out site, while Rossøya is the northernmost landmass in Spitsbergen. The vessel may sail deeper into the pack ice when wheeling around west again.

Forlandsundet

Walrus sometimes haul out in Forlandsundet, at Poolepynten on Prince Charles Foreland. But if we cannot go there, we might sail to the mouth of Isfjorden, where we may see different species of rorqual whales. If weather permits, an intended landing site is Alkhornet, where seabirds nest on the cliffs, Arctic Foxes search below for fallen eggs and chicks, and Reindeer graze the sparse vegetation. Another possibility is the glacier front in Ymerbukta, where there can be congregations of various eider duck species.



Sailing in the pack ice

As we wheel around off northern Svalbard, we will sail into the pack ice watching for polar bears and other wildlife and birds. Our voyage through the pack ice may be a multi-day affair, depending on the position of the ice and local sea and weather conditions. Regardless of how long we spend in the ice, these days at sea will be a highlight of the trip.

The pack ice appears, first as a distant shimmer before resolving into a vast, ever-changing mosaic of floes and pressure ridges stretching to the horizon, constantly reshaped by wind and current. The ice, once locked and silent over the winter, is now shifting and breathing, its surface softened by meltwater. For several days we will be immersed in one of Earth's last great wildernesses, where subtle yet striking colours transform with the arc of the sun: alabaster whites, glacial blues, and flashes of turquoise and jade.

Note that while the ship navigates the pack ice, we will not make any shore landings or excursions from the ship. However, wildlife encounters are the main draw here, with chances

to encounter many species that thrive in this icy habitat, including Polar Bears, seals, and whales. From the observation decks, warmed by hot drinks and guided by expert wildlife spotters among the crew, we watch this luminous seascape unfold, alert for encounters with the Arctic's remarkable natural world around us.



Please note that the ship's captain retains full authority for passenger safety and the actual route taken. We may deviate from the planned route as conditions dictate.

ACCOMMODATION & FOOD: Our seven-night sea voyage we will be aboard a stable, well-equipped, ice strengthened vessel built for oceanographic voyages: either the M/V Ortelius or the M/V Plancius. Built to cruise through both Antarctic and Arctic Oceans, these ships are used for polar cruises in both hemispheres depending on the season. The ships can accommodate up to 108 passengers in comfortable and well-appointed rooms with en-suite facilities. Both have an abundance of open-deck spaces. Manned by 24 highly experienced nautical crew members, there are also 20 hotel staff, eight expedition specialists, six lecturer-guides, one expedition leader, one assistant, and even a doctor. The ships offer all the comforts of a standard hotel, along with a bar and lecture room. Wildlife opportunities ashore are provided by the carriage of 10 inflatable zodiacs. All meals on board are included and all diets catered for with a good choice available. Breakfast and lunch are usually buffets, and there is a well-stocked bar.



Cabins are available in a variety of configurations including twin bedded for couples and cabins for three and four persons sharing. All have at least port hole views. Upgrades on cabin quality and views are available.

WEATHER & CLOTHING: Early summer in the High Arctic is defined more by light than by warmth. Daytime temperatures typically range from around 0°C to 7°C, though it can feel much cooler in wind, and milder in sheltered fjords under sunshine. Snow still lingers on mountains and tundra, while lower ground and shorelines will have begun to thaw.

The midnight sun will have returned, bathing the landscape in continuous daylight. The weather is generally stable but changeable: calm, clear days can quickly give way to low cloud, mist, or light snow or rain showers. A sea fret can develop over the ocean and pack ice at

times, hopefully clearing quickly. Winds are often light to moderate, especially within fjords, though more exposed waters it can feel brisk.

Casual, comfortable and warm clothing and being able to layer up and down will be our rule of thumb as we move between the deck and inside the boat. We will advise more on this and the footwear to bring nearer the time.



HEALTH, PACE & DAILY ROUTINE: The tour is primarily ship-based and physically not very demanding, so an average level of fitness will suffice. With daylight being extensive there will be no need to rise early, so we will simply keep ship hours for breakfast, lunch and evening meal. There is no need to leave the ship at all if you don't want to. However, if you want to partake in ventures ashore, you should be reasonably fit.

Staff will offer assistance getting from the ship to the zodiacs at water level below, and 'Muck Boots' are provided. Staff will assist you in and out of the boats of course, and boarding will become progressively easier with practice. There are no lifts on board, though if you are mobile enough to manage the stairs you can enjoy all aspects of the holiday. Conditions on shore can be slippery and rocky. Remember, you will be traveling in remote areas without access to sophisticated medical facilities, so you should not join the tour if you need regular medical treatment.

It is important to remember that at all times, the voyage will be under the supervision of a resident on-board expedition leader alongside their experienced staff of a high standard. Landings are subject to weather, ice and permissions being granted. A flexible attitude to the daily routine is therefore important.



To see Little Auk at their breeding colonies is a delight for British birders

INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS: Scandinavian Airlines and Norwegian Air offer flights from Manchester and London to Longyearbyen, both routes being indirect via Oslo or Copenhagen. We will monitor airline schedules for the 2028 timetables and provide more information on the most suitable flights as soon as they become available.

TOUR DATES AND PRICE: The exact dates and price for this seven-night Arctic voyage in 2028 will be made known to us by the cruise company in late in 2026. We anticipate the dates will be either side of mid-June, and our current best estimate of the price to share a twin-berth port hole cabin is of the order of £5600 pp. Cabins of a higher grade for two persons are also available. If you are prepared to share a bunk in a quadruple room, we envisage the price will drop to around £4000pp.

To book your place on this exciting tour we initially require a completed booking form. When the tour dates and prices are officially released, we will then require a 20 % deposit of the full tour price for each member of the group. This will then secure your place on the voyage.

Included is all food, breakfast, lunch and evening meals, plus snacks, coffee and tea at intervals between main meals. Also included are shore excursions and activities, a program of lectures by noted on board naturalists and leadership by experienced expedition staff. Complimentary Wi-Fi connectivity is provided.

Not included are your international flights, and any items of a personal nature such alcoholic drinks. There is a customary gratuity at the end of the voyage for ship personnel.



Twin porthole cabin

Depending on flight schedules it is sometimes necessary to stay overnight in Oslo or Copenhagen on the outward and/or return journey. The tour can also be extended by additional nights in Longyearbyen before or after the voyage. We can assist with these arrangements which fall outside of the tour price. Lance and Nick intend to arrive in Longyearbyen one day prior to the cruise starting, to relax and enjoy an extra day birding around the town.





The Bearded Seal is largest of the Arctic seals

Please note that cabin availability is limited and demand for this tour is high each year. Please feel free to contact us for further information and to discuss your accommodation and travel requirements and plans, including whether you would like any additional nights.

Special thanks go to Oceanwide Expeditions and Simon Davies for use of their excellent photographs.

For a booking form, please see the booking page on www.birdingabroad.com

e-mail: lance@birdingabroad.com mobile telephone 07891 734731

e-mail: nickwhitehouse@btinternet.com mobile telephone 07894 050069

Copyright Birding Abroad Limited





