

Svalbard Sailing Holiday

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<http://stryjski.net/svalbard-sailing-holiday/>

Another guest post. This time my son relation about our holidays in Svalbard 2015 (<http://svalbard.com.pl>) on yacht JoinUs (<http://joinus.eu>).



My experience on Svalbard was not what I was expecting. Before the holiday I had not done a lot of research about Svalbard, but what I had researched gave the image of a load of islands covered in snow with polar bears walking everywhere. I realised I was wrong the second I saw the island.

When you travel to Svalbard the first glimpse you get of the islands is beautiful, the plane slowly descending from the clouds to reveal huge mountains surrounding the little town named Longyearbyen. I was surprised at how many people were on the plane. I thought it was going to be a small jet with 20 odd people but it turned out to be fully packed plane.

When we landed I saw that the airport was pretty big for a small town with a couple planes landing everyday. When we got our baggages we went looking for our accommodation, a camping site. The way to get to the camping site was kind of extreme, for it was very close to the airport, but you had to go down quite a steep hill and then walk through a small bog all while carrying

your baggage. We chose to have our bags on our backs but after we got there my back hurt.

The first night wasn't very eventful but some of the crew was shocked about the sun not going down. This was not so weird to me as I saw it when I went to Iceland.

Next day we decided to go to town which was about 5km away from the campsite. My first experience with Longyearbyen was not what I expected, as a lot of things in the first few days, it felt exotic at some parts but just ugly and industrial at others. We decided to go up to Mine 2 nicknamed "Santa Claus's Workshop" by the locals. The exploration of the abandoned mine was the first time I ever went inside something that was abandoned in the last 100 years. I was pretty scared because we were so high up and the structure did not look that safe. By that I mean place the logs looked as if they are gonna collapse as soon as a feather falls on it. But that did not stop us from not only seeing the whole structure but also going up a half destroyed track taking us even higher.



Something that I definitely will remember is seeing a gun in real life for the first time. At first I just could not believe that people walked around with guns, which never happens in the UK.

Next day was waiting for the rest of the crew and going to Longyearbyen to look around.

It's very hard to write about the next weeks in days, as unless you had a watch you do not know what time it was. This made us arrive in places at 2am and looking around till 6am. So the next paragraphs are gonna not be in chronological order and probably days will be mashed together.

I know for sure that the first main stop after we started sailing was Pyramiden. It is a abandoned Russian mining town. When we got there it had a very scary vibe about it. It looked the sort of place a horror movie would be made or a post apocalypse movie. To be honest most of the time we were in the town I felt a bit scared. It reminded me of Chernobyl as it was had that atmosphere. I remember that day the first "mistake" of the holiday happened; by this I mean that during the holiday we went on long walks that eventually turned out to be pointless, but they were still fun. Well here the locals told us that there was a "blue" lagoon, and it was not that far. But it turned out to be 10km away with the lagoon having metal and concrete remains from one of the buildings.



Next we made our way up North to Ny-Alesund, an old mining town that became a research base. On the way there we stopped at walrus colony where for the first time I saw a wild walrus. The feeling you get when you see them is just amazing, you feel like you are filming a nature documentary, and the best part about it is that they do not flinch when you go up to them. Meaning you can get pretty close to them.

Soon after that we reached Ny-Alesund the last settlement (that is not abandoned) for a while. The actual town was boring as it was more for the scientist that lived there. But one thing we learned there is that everything looks close in Svalbard due to the air being so clean. Unfortunately we learned this the hard way. By that I mean that we wanted to go to a glacier and it looked pretty close, but after 10 km it looked the same distance it did when we started. But one good thing about that trek is that we found out what the tundra really is like. With bogs everywhere and everyone's favourite, small streams. Now when we still wanted to go to the glacier we had to cross these streams by jumping over them, and everyone had wet feet by the end of the day.

Next, the real polar adventure started. We left Ny-Alesund and headed North to get to 80 degrees, but we got a lot more than we expected. First we went into Magdalenefjord where we met a couple of other yachts including a luxury yacht from Malta. Here we decided to go to a small glacier nearby and visit the graves of the whalers that used to live there.



After that we tried to get as much north as we possibly could sail, and to be honest those couple days were a blur. But the first thing that I do remember is when the ice started to get thicker, this is when things got tricky for whoever was steering which usually was my Dad. The ice made for very different type of sailing than every one was used to, as we had to look out for places to get past and at the same time push away ice getting close to the boat using long wooden poles. It was pretty weird sailing through it as I remember hearing stories of people that went into ice and got stuck there for a whole year. Obviously I did not want this to happen. After I went down for a bit I was woken up by our crew saying that we reached 80 degrees North, which was a big milestone. But when we got there we saw that there was no ice around us so we decided to push a bit further and that got us to 81 degrees. Which at the time was very close to the old record, for how far North someone has sailed on a yacht. Anyway we decided to head back and something very bad happened, our engine broke down.



I remember, my point of view of the engine going out was thinking we might have put our sails up, so I thought nothing of it. However most of the crew's point of views where a lot different. Trying to repair an engine so far North was not easy. We later joked that it was the "most Northern engine repair", but at the time they could not think so humorously of the situation. Thankfully the engine got repaired.

A couple days later we got another surprise. It turned out that someone put a box on a sink and nudged the tap on by accident and drained all of our water overboard. This wasn't that bad as we stocked up on a lot of water to cook with, but we had to wash the dishes with salt water. This surprise forced us to stop at Ny-Alesund again later.

After escaping the ice we decided to stop at some hot springs near by, this however proved to be a huge failure. We split into two groups. My group walked 20km and got stopped by a river, and the other group just failed completely and didn't even get close to the hot springs. But they did manage to cause a total panic with the crew as two people remained out of contact because of the radio running out of battery.



On the way back we visited an abandoned Swedish- Swiss research station, which even though it was abandoned a long time ago was still in good condition. This was also very special base as it was the only one which was built on the Northern island of Svalbard called Nordaustlandet. There wasn't much to see there but even though it was abandoned it had a completely different vibe from Pyramiden. As it didn't feel like a horror movie only like a failed colony that humans abandoned and never came back to.

One thing that I learnt on the trip was that a lot of Polish people go on holiday to Svalbard. The best example of this was in the marina in Longyearbyen. Out of 9 yachts 3 of them were Polish. Another example of this was in a little hut in the abandoned Swiss base which had a lot of signatures from visitors. A lot of which were Polish, and some even dated back 40 years when it was first abandoned.

As we neared Ny-Alesund for the second time we stopped at a place called Amsterdamsøya, here were more graves of old whalers and some alive walruses. When we got there we came into contact with other boats for the first time in days. There in the bay was a science boat and a huge cruiser. It was really funny looking at how they had to walk around only where they were allowed and with snipers on rocks looking out for polar bears. On the contrast we were walking about wherever we wanted, getting attacked by birds, in a group of five with one gun.

After we docked in Ny-Alesund for the second time to fill up our water tank and finally take a shower, two weird things happened. One that a huge iceberg hit the place where the big ships stood and the water went red. Now at the time we did not know why it went red but I guessed that it was the water from the mud streams, that we had to cross the first time we were there, flowing down into the sea and not mixing with the water. Upon arriving home to the UK I googled why it did happen and I ended up being right.



A funny thing about Ny-Alesund is that the only internet we can use was in a telephone box on a cable. There is no wifi there so you can only use a laptop or a computer to check the web.

At this point we ran out of ice and had to get more, something I have failed to mention earlier. Basically we would sail up to a piece of ice of any size, chip a bit off and put it in a bowl. This ice would later be used to chill the alcohol/drink of our choice. The ice was also very handy to keep the meat cold in one of the refrigerators.

One of the last stops on our polar adventure was a Polish scientific station. It was the same base that was celebrating its 40th anniversary that year. The weather when we arrived there was the worst it had been all of the holiday. But that didn't stop us. When we arrived we were greeted by the scientists, that where nothing of what I was expecting. Neither was the actual base. I was expecting the classic movie trope, that there are computers and monitors everywhere and the people would be uptight. But I was wrong on both. The base looked on the inside just like a house would and the people there were very chilled and nice. We talked to them for a bit and learned a lot about how it is to live and study there. One surprising thing is that they actually get a lot of visitors from yachts. A funny thing that they asked us is what is happening in the world as they have basically no contact with the world for months and a lot can happen in a couple months. The weather got very bad after there it was the first time it actually happened since we got there. And it was second to last leg of the voyage, to Brandenburg.

When we arrived at Brandenburg we got greeted by a very dodgy looking pontoon like the one in Pyramiden which was surprising as people lived here. The town was very weird it looked as if got stuck in time and now it was being renovated. We looked around most of the town which wasn't much and drank the local beer and ate some Russian dishes. We also learnt about a Russian tradition which was that whatever degrees high you where you had to drink alcohol that was the same percentage, there it was 78. Weirdly someone actually tried it. We looked around the city hall, so to speak, and saw a lot about how locals live there. We also looked at a museum which had so many stuffed polar animals and remains from old whaling bases. When we got back to yacht we found about a concert that was taking place for a cruiser which was coming. We ended up talking about it so long that the cruiser showed up and blocked us in. It was something different for sure, it was like a multi storey building parked next to us. Anyway we decide might as well go to the concert as we weren't going to leave. The concert consisted of traditional Russian music and it was very good. There was two bands both local that done it part time. One of them was a straightforward band and the other was a dancing group. They performed a couple of songs each and after we went to eat some traditional Russian dessert. By the time we got back the cruiser had left and we could set off to the final destination of the voyage.



We arrived at Longyearbyen late at night and went to bed. When we woke up we took showers and did nothing. After a while the skipper from the next crew appeared. So we showed him everything on the boat. We decided that we were going to eat in the town that night as we had eaten freeze dried food for the last couple weeks. In the restaurant (a burger place) we learnt that the local brewery was opening to the public that day which was pretty weird as I had read about them struggling to get permission when we left. Anyway we ended up being one of the first one to drink the most northern brewed beer. Next day was waiting for the other crew to arrive and packing our bags to move to the camping site again so not much happened.

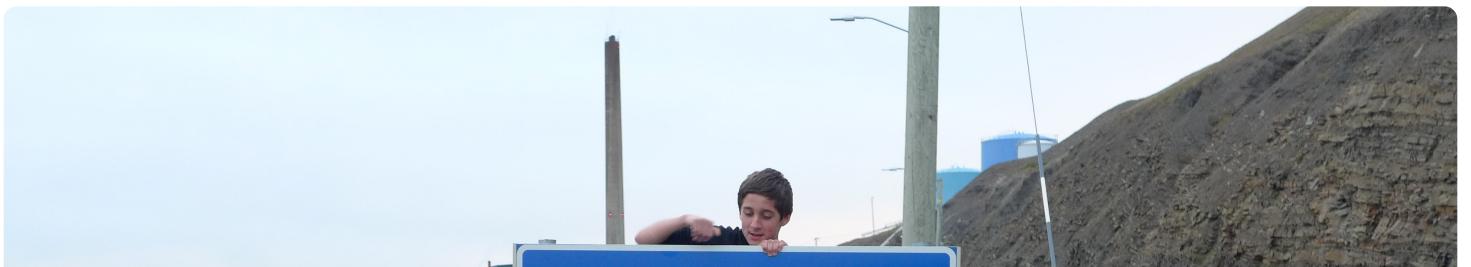
The next few days we did not do much except that we went to Longyearbyen and looked at stuff we did not see the first time. A thing that I realised is that Longyearbyen is the worst place in the whole of Svalbard. This was shock as at the beginning of the holiday it looked so nice and exotic but after everything we saw during the last two weeks, has made the town look very bad. Which is weird since so many tourist just stay there the whole holiday. The last days on Svalbard are a blur I do not know if it was from not sleeping much but I can not remember too much. But what is not a blur I will write about.

At some point in the last days we went to a restaurant that served reindeer which we obviously tried and it tasted good. Also I remember seeing the husky dog shelter which had so many dogs about 200 dogs, it just made me want to get a dog of that breed.

This voyage was one with a lot of new experiences but one I will never forget is shooting a gun for the first time. It just gave me such a thrill and I loved it, shame that you have to be 18 to shoot a gun in the UK. So I'm gonna have to wait a couple years before I will be able to get that feeling again. I know one thing for sure that the most boring part of the holiday was definitely waiting for six hours at the airport in Norway. It just took so long and I could only be looking at stuff on my phone. At this time we found out about another Polish yacht which moored next to us on two occasions. They had beaten the world record for how far north someone has gone on a sailing yacht. A fun fact is that both most southern and most northern records were made by Polish yachts the year of writing this (2015). Its pretty weird looking at it that we could have attempted to beat the record ourselves. But in the end I do not really care, I still had a good time.



In conclusion the holiday was the best I have ever had and probably the best I ever will have. I have already mention earlier that the worst place was Longyearbyen. But the best place would be Pyramiden, I know it is a weird choice but I really enjoyed it. It's not to say that I did not enjoy the rest of the places because I did, but Pyramiden I just really liked for some reason. Maybe it was that it was something I have never seen anything like it before in my life. I was gutted that we did not see a polar bear and like everyone we talked to, did. But in the end I did not go there to see a polar bear. Plus we saw plenty of other polar animals, from birds to foxes and reindeers. And of course the walruses, the animals with the easiest life in my opinion.



Written by Michal Stryjski, 6th September 2015

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